

18 March 2014

Local elections and the LGA's change of control support offer

Purpose

For information.

Summary

Local elections are taking place on 22 May 2014. This report reminds members about the LGA's support offer for councils facing a possible change in political control as a result of the local elections. This includes our forthcoming revised and updated guide for leading council members and their chief executives who face the possibility of a political administration without a majority.

Recommendation

Members are asked to note the report.

Action

To publish and promote the forthcoming revised guide on councils without a majority administration as part of the LGA's wider change of control support offer.

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Background

1. Following consultation by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), the local elections this year will take place on 22 May 2014. This is to enable them to be combined with the 2014 European Parliamentary elections, which were previously due to take place in June. Similar dual arrangements took place in 2004 and 2009.
2. The DCLG consultation identified key benefits in combining local and European elections:
 - 2.1 being more cost effective for councils and central government than running two stand-alone polls, saving 'some £10 million';
 - 2.2 being more convenient for voters to visit the polling station once, increasing the likelihood of more voters participating in the elections; and
 - 2.3 enabling those responsible for voter awareness campaigns, particularly councils and the Electoral Commission, to concentrate their efforts in increasing awareness of one single election day.
3. The following local elections are therefore due to be taking place on 22 May:
 - 3.1 67 district councils electing by thirds, 1 of which holding elections for the directly elected mayor (Watford);
 - 3.2 7 district councils electing by halves;
 - 3.3 18 unitary councils electing by thirds;
 - 3.4 36 metropolitan district councils electing by thirds; and
 - 3.5 32 London Boroughs electing by whole council, 4 of which holding elections for the directly elected mayor (Hackney, Lewisham, Newham, Tower Hamlets).

The LGA's change of control support offer

4. LGA support is available to all councils that change political control whether to a single party administration or no overall control. This includes up to five days free support per council from our experienced member peers, and free support for members in opposition who are likely to form administrations. This can typically involve facilitating workshops and away days to build relationships, clarifying strategic priorities and mentoring for leaders or portfolio holders.
5. The LGA encourages councils facing the possibility of a change of political control to discuss their circumstances with us, e.g. via their regional Principal Adviser and/or national/regional member peer. In turn, the LGA's Principal Advisers and Political Group Offices ensure that councils facing a change of political control receive the best support to enable the smoothest and most efficient transition to their new arrangements.
6. As part of this support, ahead of the 2013 local elections, the LGA also published its guide *No overall control The experience of chief executives in councils without a majority administration*.¹ This included lessons by and for chief executives before, immediately and sometime after local elections, and case studies of their councils' experiences.

7. Recognising that leading members might also benefit from such lessons, we are due to publish a revised and updated guide *No overall control: learning the lessons from leading members and chief executives in councils without a majority administration*, with political leaders as the focus. This guide captures learning from discussions with political leaders from a wider range of councils, whilst also revising the lessons for chief executives and refreshing some of the original case studies.
8. Council leaders we spoke to advised on issues to consider before, immediately and in the longer term after elections. Before the elections for example, leading members could:
 - 8.1 make manifestos realistic so that promises will be viable regardless of the outcome;
 - 8.2 consider all possible political outcomes of elections and responses;
 - 8.3 review other political groups' manifestos to establish shared and differing views;
 - 8.4 check party rules regarding working in a no overall control or coalition situation;
 - 8.5 explore local members' views about what no overall control could mean locally;
 - 8.6 ensure negotiation teams can start discussions straight after election results;
 - 8.7 get to grips with key issues, e.g. who could become the leader, deputy, cabinet or lead members;
 - 8.8 consider talking to other parties in case further formal discussions are needed; and
 - 8.9 ask other leaders, who have experience of such issues, for advice.
9. Immediately after the election, advice from leading members is then to:
 - 9.1 consider all possible options for their party – big or small – e.g. a minority administration, a formal or informal coalition or agreement;
 - 9.2 secure their own group leader positions by canvassing support;
 - 9.3 get to know the priorities of the other parties to identify shared and differing views;
 - 9.4 talk to other parties and group leaders to see who could work together on what issues;
 - 9.5 ask their chief executive for advice, information and support;
 - 9.6 keep their members briefed and prepared for possible cabinet or executive roles;
 - 9.7 take sufficient time to make the best decisions;
 - 9.8 consider the detail, e.g. how groups in the administration will share information and make decisions; and
 - 9.9 key positions, e.g. cabinet places and committee chairs, and other parties' requests.
10. In the longer term, leading members then advise to:
 - 10.1 consider written and/or spoken agreements to facilitate new arrangements;
 - 10.2 get up to speed on key issues – arrange briefings with the chief executive and others;
 - 10.3 be patient, to get everyone on board and understanding the new political structure;
 - 10.4 take the lead, hold arrangements together, agree shared policy lines and identify tensions;
 - 10.5 be clear who owns what, e.g. officers' and members' roles;
 - 10.6 not expect to always reach agreement with other groups but ensure they understand why decisions made can help get business through the council;
 - 10.7 accept that trial and error may be needed to set up systems and processes; and

¹ which can be found at <http://tinyurl.com/pwq9stn>

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- 10.8 maintain constructive, open and inclusive dialogue to ensure the advice, support and consensus of others whilst remaining strong and decisive as necessary.

Next steps

11. The guide has been signed off by lead members and is currently in production with a view to circulating it as soon as possible so that it is of maximum benefit to leading members and chief executives.

Financial Implications

12. The costs of the LGA support offer, including the original and revised guides, have and continue to be met through the LGA's improvement support budget.