

Appendix A

Electoral Cycles Briefing Report

1. Introduction

- 1.1. Plymouth City Council has operated its current electoral cycle of 'election by thirds' since 2003, before which a cycle of 'all out' elections every four years was in place.
- 1.2. The current administration has requested that the Council seeks feedback from the public and other city stakeholders as to whether the current electoral cycle best serves the Council and the city.
- 1.3. Legislative change introduced under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and amended by the Localism Act 2011 provided Local Authorities with the option of changing their electoral cycle.
- 1.4. This briefing sets out the policy, financial and legal context relating to local government electoral cycles and arrangements for consultation.
- 1.5. The Local Government Boundary Commission for England has informed the Council that it wishes to carry out an electoral review of Plymouth City Council. The process and implication of this are covered in section seven of this report.

2. Cycles of local government elections in England

- 2.1. Plymouth City Council has 57 Councillors and currently elects by thirds. This means that one third of the Councillors are elected to office in three years out of four, and in the fourth year there are no elections, which is known as a fallow year.
- 2.2. Election by halves is where half of the Councillors are elected every 2 years. Whole council (all out) elections are where all Councillors are elected to office once every four years.
- 2.3. Currently 333 councils in England hold all out elections. 103 councils elect by thirds. Seven (7) councils elect by halves.¹
- 2.4. Plymouth City Council is one of 16 out of 55 Unitary Authorities in England which elects by thirds. The remaining 39 hold all out elections every fourth year. No unitary authority holds elections by halves. Amongst metropolitan districts, 33 of 36 elect by thirds.

¹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/920186/Election_Timetable_in_England_2019.pdf (updated to take account of Derby City Council's recent adoption of all out elections).

2.5. Of the 29 local authorities in the South West Region, 26 councils hold all out elections, two (2) by thirds and one (1) by halves.

3. Policy context and comparisons

- 3.1. The Electoral Commission, the independent body which oversees elections, recommended in its publication '[The cycle of local government elections' \(2004\)](#) that local authorities 'in England should hold whole council elections, with all councillors elected simultaneously, once every four years'.²
- 3.2. The Electoral Commission recommended a move back to whole council elections in order to provide "stronger local democracy", "greater clarity" for the electorate and to encourage "greater understanding" of elections.
- 3.3. Various studies have been carried out on the impact of different electoral cycles on voter turnout in local elections in England. Because there are a number of other factors affecting turnout in any given year, such as combined local and parliamentary elections, it is difficult to draw strong conclusions. Research commissioned by the Electoral Commission shows that turnout is marginally greater among Councils who conduct all out elections than among those who elect by thirds, based on a comparison between districts, London Boroughs and metropolitan districts.
- 3.4. The table below sets out some of the advantages and disadvantages of each cycle. This includes learning from the Electoral Commission and research from other authorities who have reviewed their election cycle.

	Election by thirds	All out elections
Advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Process known and understood. • More opportunities for voters. • Councillors and political parties held to account by voters more regularly • Local issues not confused with national issues. • Allows for gradual change at the Council • Can ensure that the political composition of authorities more accurately reflects the local political context. • Continuity of Councillors. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Electorate can vote on four-year manifestos and long-term commitments. • Clearer opportunity for the electorate to change the political composition of the Council • Significant cost savings. • Electors more likely to understand the election cycle. • Same electoral cycle as Police and Crime Commissioner and Combined Authority Mayoral elections which take place every four years.

²https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/electoral_commission_pdf_file/cycleoflocalelectfinal_11595-9056__E__N__S__W__.pdf

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less elections may mean less election fatigue and voter apathy.
Dis-advantages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less stability – regular changes of political control can affect local businesses and Council services. • Confusing for the electorate as to which candidate is to be elected and what the process is. • It is difficult to see through major policy decisions, or large infrastructure or regeneration projects in a single year. • Difficult or unpopular decisions can be put off for future years, rather than taken when needed. • Constant year on year campaigning by Councillors and political parties may lead to voter fatigue and a lack of interest. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk that some electors will disengage. • Risk that such a change would be perceived as less democratic. • A large turnover of Councillors may lead to disruption, particular if the direction of the council is changed significantly. • Political complacency. • May lead to more by-elections taking place and an increase in costs. • Loss of experienced Councillors. • Less frequent elections could be detrimental to encouraging candidates to stand for election as the opportunity to serve on the Council will be less frequent.

4. Election Cycle Financial Implications

4.1. To continue with elections by thirds over a ten year period would cost an estimated £2.66 million. Should the Council to move to whole council elections by 2023 it is estimated that this would cost £1.26 million across a 10 year period and save £1.4 million.

4.2. It is important to note that were the Council to move to whole council elections, costs for each individual election will rise marginally. Additional costs could include:

- printing costs (ballots papers are likely to be longer);
- postal vote opening costs;
- costs at the count (no change for time spent on verification but longer time in sorting and counting of votes) to include additional counting assistants, count supervisors etc.

4.3. The estimated revenue cost of running a single all-out election is **£420K**.

4.4. The table below provides estimated costs under whole council and election by thirds cycles. It should be noted that the costs in these tables are estimates. Actual

costs and savings may vary depending on the number of by-elections, general elections and Police and Crime Commissioner Elections.

Year	Election/s	All out elections every four years	Elections in thirds
2021	Local		
2022	Local		
2023	Local	£420,000	£380,000
2024	Local, Police & Crime Commissioner, UKPGE?	£0	£200,000
2025	Fallow Year	£0	£0
2026	Local	£0	£380,000
2027	Local	£420,000	£380,000
2028	Local, Police & Crime Commissioner	£0	£280,000
2029	UKPGE?	£0	£0
2030	Local	£0	£380,000
2031	Local	£420,000	£380,000
2032	Local, Police & Crime Commissioner	£0	£280,000
	Total Costs	£1,260,000	£2,660,000

5. Legal Context

- 5.1. Legislative change introduced under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and amended by the Localism Act 2011 provides Local Authorities with the option of changing their electoral cycle.
- 5.2. To move to whole council elections, the council must fulfil the requirements of sections 32 – 36 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 which relate to consultation and resolution of council.
- 5.3. This requires that the council must not pass any resolution to change its electoral cycle unless it has taken reasonable steps to consult such persons as it thinks appropriate on the proposed change; this is not further prescribed in legislation.

Consultation

- 5.4. The Council must take reasonable steps to engage/consult with those it thinks appropriate on any proposed change. This will include, but is not limited to –
 - the general public / electorate
 - serving Councillors
 - Members of Parliament
 - key city partners

Public Opinion

- 5.5. Section 116 of the Local Government Act 2003 provides a specific power for local authorities to hold local “advisory polls”.
- 5.6. The result of a Section 116 poll is not binding on the council or any other entity. It is purely advisory. It does however provide clear evidence of the public views on the matter being put before them.
- 5.7. Proceeding with a public engagement/consultation does not in any way bind the authority to seeking a resolution to amend the election cycle.
- 5.8. Under Section 116 it is a Council function to determine who to engage/consult and how the engagement/consultation is to be conducted. The Council will need to agree:
 - Whether a public engagement/consultation is required?

And if it is:

- the participant/s
- the question; and
- how the public engagement/consultation is to be conducted

6. Decision-Making Process

- 6.1. Following the engagement/consultation process, should councillors be minded to propose a change to the electoral cycle, an extraordinary meeting of the council would be called to consider a report and vote on a resolution.
- 6.2. The resolution must specify the year for the first ordinary elections of the council at which all councillors are to be elected. A two thirds majority would be required, to resolve to move to whole-Council elections.
- 6.3. If the resolution is passed, then the council must produce an explanatory document available for public inspection and give the Local Government Boundary Commission for England notice that it has passed the resolution.
- 6.4. There is then a detailed process for the implementation of the change to the electoral cycle that is detailed through the Act and related guidance.

7. Local Government Boundary Commission for England: Plymouth electoral review

- 7.1. The Council was informed in November 2021 that the Boundary Commission for England intends to undertake an electoral review in Plymouth. This is in line with its duties in law to carry out such a review ‘from time to time’. The last review of this type in Plymouth was in 2001.
- 7.2. The purpose of an electoral review is to consider the number of councillors elected to the council, the names, number and boundaries of the wards and the number of councillors to be elected to each ward.

- 7.3. After the review, the Council will be required to have an 'all out' election, where every seat is contested. The Council has a choice as to whether the review is implemented by an 'all out' election in 2026 or 2027.
- 7.4. The law has changed since the last review took place with the result that, in Councils that elect by thirds, the Commission will seek to return a uniform pattern of three member wards rather than retain the option of two member wards that the Council currently has in Plympton and Drake.
- 7.5. If, before the electoral review starts, the Council resolves to change its electoral cycle to elect 'all out', the Commission will be able to retain a mixture of two and three member wards as currently is the case.