

Audit and Governance Committee



Date of meeting:	16 January 2024
Title of Report:	Electoral Cycle Consultation
Lead Member:	Sarah Allen (Chair of Audit and Governance Committee)
Lead Strategic Director:	Giles Perritt (Assistant Chief Executive)
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Your Reference:	
Key Decision:	No
Confidentiality:	Part I - Official

Purpose of Report

- 1.1. The Council agreed at its meeting of 21 November 2022 that the Audit and Governance Committee would oversee and agree the design and implementation of a public engagement consultation exercise on the issue of moving from the current electoral cycle (of electing by 'thirds') to 'whole council' elections once every four years.
- 1.2. This report describes the progress made in this work, and proposes a recommendation to Council about the timing of the consultation in relation to the upcoming Local Government Boundary Commission for England electoral review.

Recommendations and Reasons

That Audit and Governance Committee recommends to full council: –

1. That a consultation exercise on the Council's electoral cycle is undertaken to run concurrently with Local Government Boundary Commission for England proposals for revised ward names, numbers and boundaries between July and September 2024
2. Confirms the consultation questions agreed by the Audit and Governance Committee of 20 March 2023

Reason: The overall number of Councillors and any revised Ward boundaries will be a consideration when deciding the frequency of elections. Public awareness and interest in electoral issues will be heightened by the publicity and profile of the electoral review, which may result in more representative and informed engagement.

Alternative options considered and rejected:

Carrying out a consultation exercise in advance of the electoral review: this would either have to take place prior to the beginning of the pre-election period in March, or immediately after the local elections in May 2024. Both of these periods clash with other key activities, the former with budget and Council tax setting, and the latter with post-election administration.

Relevance to the Corporate Plan and/or the Plymouth Plan:

Sign off:

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Originating Senior Leadership Team member: Giles Perritt, Assistant Chief Executive											
Please confirm the Strategic Director(s) has agreed the report? Yes Date agreed: 11/01/2024											

Plymouth City Council Electoral Cycle Briefing Report

1. Chronology and context

The Council, at its meeting of 21 November 2022, agreed that a public consultation be undertaken using powers under Section 116 of the Local Government Act 2002 between June and August 2023 on the issue of moving from the current electoral cycle of elections to 'whole council' elections once every four years. The Audit and Governance Committee was tasked with overseeing and agreeing the design and implementation of the consultation.

In January 2023, the Audit and Governance Committee established a Task and Finish group to undertake the design and implementation of the consultation. The group reported back to the Audit and Governance Committee in March 2023, and a methodology was developed agreed, along with the following question:

Which option would you prefer for Plymouth residents to elect their councillors?

- Change to 'whole Council elections'
- Keep the current system
- I have no preference

Final approval of the communications approach was delegated to the task and finish group ahead of the launch of the consultation.

At its meeting of 25 July 2023, the Audit and Governance Committee decided that it would be beneficial to liaise with colleagues at Southampton City Council, which had recently undergone an Electoral Review, and had also considered its electoral cycle, prior to agreeing the timetable for Plymouth's consultation. A series of meetings then took place with the team at Southampton, which have informed the Council's approach to the upcoming electoral review.

2. Engagement timing and implications

The timing of the consultation is the remaining issue to be resolved. The Local Government Boundary Commission for England has expressed a preference that this is resolved prior to the beginning of the electoral review, but this is not a requirement. In the absence of a resolved position, the Commission would be likely to propose a uniform pattern of three member wards for Plymouth, allowing for elections by thirds to continue. Legislation dictates that, except in exceptional circumstances, Councils who elect by thirds will have numbers of Councillors per electoral ward that are divisible by three. It is likely that the only circumstances in which Plymouth would retain two member wards, would be to resolve to change its electoral cycle to all out elections every four years, and to confirm this prior to the electoral review.

Benefits of undertaking an engagement exercise about electoral cycles during rather than prior to the electoral review include:

- The overall number of Councillors proposed for Plymouth will be known, which will inform overall consideration of the implications of electoral cycle choices.
- Public awareness of democratic arrangements will be raised by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's consultation proposals regarding electoral ward boundaries, names and sizes.

It is important to understand that, in the absence of a Council decision (which will need a 'two thirds' majority) to change the city's electoral cycle to all out elections every four years, the Local

Government Boundary Commission for England is likely to recommend a uniform pattern of three member electoral wards for the city.