

ELECTORAL CYCLE CONSULTATION APPROACH

Audit and Governance Committee 23 July 2024: Appendix A



BACKGROUND

Currently, the council has an 'elections by thirds' system, meaning a third of its 57 councillors are elected every year in a four-year cycle (with no elections in the fourth year). This costs around £380k per election.

The council has agreed to consult on its electoral cycle, asking communities in Plymouth whether we should stay as we are, or move to an alternative where local elections are held every four years, with all 57 seats on the Council being contested at the same time. The move to conduct elections every four years is estimated to save around £1.4m over a ten-year period.

A report was presented to Council in March 2022, which sought the Council's endorsement to carry out a public consultation and to engage with communities across the city on the issue of staying as we are or moving to whole council elections. At the Audit and Governance Committee in the following July, it was agreed that the consultation would be carried out following discussions with Southampton City Council, who had recently undertaken both an Electoral Review with the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) and a review of their electoral cycle.

Following these discussions, it has now been agreed that Plymouth will consult on the electoral cycle in the summer of 2024, and for full Council to make a final decision in November 2024.

It is important to be clear that this is not a vote or a referendum. It is a way of gathering the views of local people in an advisory capacity, before full Council makes its final decision. In addition, the consultation will consider not just the views of residents currently eligible to vote, but also feedback from across the city including local businesses, voluntary organisations and young people who will be able to vote in the coming years.

This communications plan outlines how we will make the communities in Plymouth aware of the proposals and invite them to submit their views. Ensuring that the consultation process adheres to the Gunning Principles as follows:

- Proposals are still at a formative stage: A final decision has not yet been made, or predetermined, by the decision makers
- There is sufficient information to give 'intelligent consideration': The information provided must relate to the consultation and must be available, accessible, and easily interpretable for consultees to provide an informed response
- There is adequate time for consideration and response: There must be sufficient opportunity for consultees to participate in the consultation.
- 'Conscientious consideration' must be given to the consultation responses before a decision is made: Decision-makers should be able to provide evidence that they took consultation responses into account

CONSULTATION OBJECTIVES

- Raise awareness of the current electoral cycle model and the pros/cons of the current system and of the alternative model
- Ensure that all other stakeholders in the city are aware of the consultation and the implications to local decision making
- Encourage residents and local communities to submit their view – striving to have a representative view from all wards and all demographics

KEY MESSAGES

This is not a referendum or a vote. However, it is important that the consultation is clear as to the pro's and con's of each electoral cycle model to enable everyone to make an informed viewpoint. Therefore, we will focus on the following key messages:

- This consultation is important in informing full Council when making their decision on the future electoral cycle of the Council. This consultation is not a vote or a referendum – views will form an advisory part of the decision-making process
- We are being open and transparent about the pro's and con's to each model

SUMMARY OF NARRATIVE

Current model for elections (by thirds)

Plymouth currently has 57 elected members, representing residents across 20 wards. 17 of these wards have three members, and the remaining three wards have two members. The council currently uses a 'by thirds' electoral system. This means that councillors are elected for a 4 year term and at each of these elections a third of the council is elected. For the 2-member wards there are no elections in the third year. In the fourth year there are no elections in any ward.

Perceived positives of this system:

- 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.

Perceived negatives of this system:

- 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.

Alternative model for elections (all out every four years):

This process (called 'All Out Elections') would see all councillors in every ward up for election at the same time once every four years.

Perceived benefits of this system:

- Electorate can vote on four-year manifestos and long-term commitments.
- Clearer opportunity for the electorate to change the political composition of the Council.
- Electors more likely to understand the election cycle.
- Same electoral cycle as Police and Crime Commissioner and elections which take place every four years.
- Fewer elections may mean less election fatigue and voter apathy.
- Reduced costs. By holding a local election every year costs around £380k every year. If we move to conducting elections every four years, it is estimated that we will save £1.4m.

Perceived negatives of this system:

- 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, particularly if the direction of the council is changed significantly.
- Political complacency.
- May lead to more by-elections taking place and an increase in costs.
- Potential 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.

KEY DATES

23 July	Audit and Governance Committee to agree consultation approach
24 July	Launch of consultation (eight-week consultation with two weeks either side of the August holiday period)
22 September	Close of consultation
22 October	Draft consultation report finalised
29 October	CMT briefing / discussion
4 November	Cab Planning briefing / discussion
7 November	Publish Audit and Governance Committee papers
14 November	Audit and Governance Committee
15 November	Publish Council papers
25 November	Full Council

CONSULTATION APPROACH

The consultation will involve a mixture of approaches:

- 1) A survey for the general public / businesses
- 2) Written submissions from key partners / businesses and other organisations
- 3) Feedback gathered from a series of workshops / briefings

The consultation will be asking people:

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

- **Change to 'Whole Council Elections'** (One election every four years, where all councillors are elected at the same time)
- **Keep the current system** (One councillor in each ward is elected every year for a four-year term. Elections occur every year, for three years, with no election in the fourth year)
- **I have no preference**

Open text box: **Why do you think this is the best option?**

The consultation will ask for some demographic information so that we can ensure feedback is being received from across different communities and geographies in the city:

Age

Disability

Postcode (first part only e.g. PL3, EX20)

Representation

- I am a local resident
- I represent a local business
- I am a serving MP or Councillor
- I live / work outside of the area
- I am a student / in education
- I represent a public sector organisation
- I represent a voluntary / community organisation

Copies of the survey will be available in hard copy from local libraries. In addition, information will be made available in different formats e.g. large print / alternative languages etc on request. When evaluated, the results of the survey will be presented, alongside the key themes / feedback from the workshops, and written submissions.

STRATEGY

We are proposing the following campaign phases:

Phase One: Have your say	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How people can have their say • Why should people care about our electoral cycle. • Ensuring that voices from all parts of the community are able to have their say. 	During the consultation
Phase Two: Feeding back the result	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrating that 'your views' matter 	Once the consultation has concluded

STAKEHOLDERS / TARGET AUDIENCES

It is proposed that the consultation will reach out to:

- The public/electorate
- Younger people who will be eligible to vote from 2026 onwards
- Serving Councillors
- Members of Parliament
- Other political parties
- Key city partners
- Community and voluntary sector
- Businesses

We will carry out a full stakeholder mapping exercise to ensure that all stakeholders, particularly those linked to the above audiences, will be targeted.

An internal communications plan will be developed to reflect the external messaging, this includes information in Staff News, Staffroom and Team Talk and video screens.

IMPLEMENTATION

The below outlines a selection of the tools that we propose to use for the campaign.

Branding:

To ensure that there is consistency of look and feel across materials, we will develop a brand for the consultation. This will cost approx. £300.

Press Release:

We will draft and issue a press release and issue to our local / regional media.

Website:

We will include the latest information, FAQs and signposts on our website, including on our front page.

The Chronicle:

To maximise the opportunity for those without access to digital channels to still receive the information, we will include updates in The Chronicle – including regular half page adverts. Chronicle size is a half page: 264x160 and costs £1,580 + VAT (for all four editions) plus design costs.

Letters:

Email all those people on the electoral register to let them know about the consultation – signposting people to the website.

Libraries:

Ensure that library staff are well-briefed on the proposals so members of the public who are not digitally enabled have somewhere they can find out more information and pick up a hard-copy consultation form to have their say. We will also place advertising on their digital display boards. There will be approximately a £200 design and printing cost.

Resident news:

Throughout the campaign, we will have regular updates in our resident's e-newsletter, providing a clear rationale / signposting for more information and a clear call to action, inviting people to 'have their say.'

Posters:

We will display posters in key locations around the city e.g. Council buildings / libraries / car parks.

Stakeholder toolkits:

We will create a series of stakeholder toolkits to distribute information to key individuals or organisations (including councillors), enabling them to cascade on our behalf. Full stakeholder mapping will be carried out, but will include:

- Universities
- Plymouth Community Homes
- Babcock / Armed Forces
- NHS / Hospital
- Business community
- Voluntary Sector – particularly those representing older residents or residents with disabilities

Briefings:

We will hold briefings for elected members / existing external forums e.g. Chamber of Commerce / MPs to present the consultation, answer any questions and gather feedback. These will be facilitated by the Elections Team.

Letters:

Letters will be sent to key stakeholders (including wider political groups), outlining the information and inviting them to submit their feedback in writing.

Accessible workshops:

Working with Youth Services and other key organisations, we will seek to gather the views of a number of stakeholder groups, via a series of workshops with e.g. Youth Parliament / local schools. These will be facilitated by the Elections Team.

Digital promotion:

We will have a series of posts on all PCC social media accounts (Facebook / Twitter / Instagram / LinkedIn and Next Door) that are posted regularly throughout the campaign.

However, we will also programme a series of paid-for advertising posts, looking at all aspects of the campaign, particularly targeting those residents in the economically deprived wards, who would not typically respond to Council consultations. We will have a strategic digital advertising plan that will be targeted at different demographics e.g. students / older people etc. This cost is flexible, however the bigger the budget, the more people will be reached. It is therefore recommended we spend £3,000 as a minimum, plus design costs.

Staff Communication:

We will promote the consultation via our staff communication tools e.g. Staff Room / Staff News.

TOTAL COST

The total cost for publicity for this project is estimated as: £5,000.

EVALUATION

We will check the success of the campaign throughout its delivery, to ensure that we are getting feedback from across the city. We will adapt the campaign as we go. We will report back throughout the campaign to the working group and ensure that we provide a communications summary at the end of the campaign.

We will ensure that we feedback to all those who participate by publishing the results of the consultation as part of the Council decision. This will be advertised throughout the campaign.