

ELECTORAL CYCLE BRIEFING REPORT

25 November 2024



I. 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 Council's Local Government Association Peer Challenge in 2022 recommended that the Council reviews its current arrangements, although it made no recommendation as to what cycle the Council should adopt.
- 1.3. At its meeting on 21 November 2022, the City Council agreed to undertake a public engagement on the future Electoral Cycle for the Council.
- 1.4. 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.
- 1.5. The Local Government Boundary Commission for England is in the process of undertaking an electoral review of Plymouth City Council's size and warding arrangements. The process and implications of this are covered in section eight of this report.
- 1.6. This briefing sets out the policy, financial and legal context relating to local government electoral cycles and arrangements for consultation.

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 years, 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 the 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.
- 2.5. Of the 29 local authorities in the Southwest 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 conducting 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 ▪ Electors more likely to understand the election cycle ▪ 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 over 10 years, dependent on when the UK General Election is held.
Dis-advantages	<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 ▪ 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 over 10 years. 	<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, 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

4. ELECTORAL CYCLE FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1. To continue with elections by thirds over a ten-year period (calculated between 2022 to 2032) would cost an estimated £2.66m. Should the Council to move to whole council elections after 2027 it is estimated that this would cost £1.26m across a ten-year period and save £1.4m dependent upon when the UK General Election is held.
- 4.2. Whole council elections will be held in 2027 notwithstanding whether a resolution is made by Council as this is required by law as part of the review process in areas that have new warding arrangements.
- 4.3. 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.
- 4.4. The estimated revenue cost of running a single all-out election is £420k.
- 4.5. 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 provided 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.
- 5.4. The result of any consultation or advisory poll conducted under the act is advisory in nature and does not commit the Council or any other entity to a particular course of action.

6. CONSULTATION

- 6.1. A full analysis of the consultation process is included at Annex B.
- 6.2. The consultation was run primarily online with a survey; however steps were taken to ensure it was fully accessible and in addition, in-person/online meetings were held to provide information and encourage responses to the consultation:
- 6.3. Two sessions were arranged with the Youth Parliament on the 04 September and 11 September 2024. This received a positive response with the young people commenting on the importance of this issue in the session and generated over 100 hard copy survey responses.
- 6.4. Three online sessions were arranged with Councillors on the 18, 19 and 20 September.
- 6.5. Representatives from the Council's Elections Team attended Plymouth Area Disability Action Network (PADAN) on the 13 September to raise awareness of the consultation and encourage responses to the consultation.
- 6.6. The consultation was widely promoted through residents' newsletters, printed press and social media. An email was also sent to all registered electors.
- 6.7. In summary the consultation results were as follows:
 - A total of **7,051** responses were received to the online survey:
 - Change to 'Whole Council Elections' – **4,063** (57%)
 - Keep the current system – **2,443** (35%)
 - No preference – **545** (8%)
- 6.8. Stakeholder letters were received from four major organisations across the city, all indicating that they would support a change to 'whole council elections'.
- 6.9. When the result was analysed against the demographic information collected (respondent information/representation, age, health/disability and postcode district) in all but one category the majority selected change to 'whole council elections'. The category that selected 'keep the current system' as the preferred option were those that indicated that they were a serving MP or Councillor (28 respondents with 16 selecting keep the current system).
- 6.10. The main reasons why respondents selected a change was in relation to resources and democracy - save money, simpler process and align with the general election cycle. Also, stability was a recurring theme – effective governance, consistency time to implement decisions.

- 6.10. The main reason for selecting keep the current system was also around democracy and stability, citing better accountability and continuity.
- 6.11. The Audit and Governance Committee reviewed the consultation responses and were satisfied with the process and result of the consultation and formally commended the matter to Full Council for a decision.

7. DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

- 7.1. A vote to change the election system must be passed by a majority two thirds of voting members at a specially convened meeting to consider the resolution.
- 7.2. The resolution must specify the year for the first ordinary elections of the council at which all councillors are to be elected.
- 7.3. 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.
- 7.4. 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.
- 7.5. Members should note that should a resolution be passed, the election system cannot be changed to a different model within 5 years.

8. LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND: PLYMOUTH ELECTORAL REVIEW

- 8.1. The Council was informed in November 2021 that the Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) 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.
- 8.2. 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. After the review, the Council will be required to have an 'all out' election, where every seat is contested.
- 8.3. The Council noted on 16 September 2024 Full Council meeting that the Boundary Commission will only start their review when the Council has made its decision on its election cycle.
- 8.4. The LGBCE has given the council a new review timetable which confirmed that the implementation of any changes will take effect from May 2027.
- 8.5. Plymouth City Council's election cycle consultation was conducted from 24 July to 22 September 2024.
- 8.6. Full Council will make its decision on whether to remain thirds on its election cycle or to change to all-out on 25 November 2024.
- 8.7. The Council will formally notify the LGBCE of its decision on 25 November 2024 in respect of the election cycle.
- 8.8. As soon as formal notice is received, the Boundary Commission will start their full electoral review. The Council's electoral cycle decision will inform the Boundary Commission's recommendations for consultation on Council size, warding patterns and corresponding number of councillors per ward.

- 8.9. Any new arrangements arising from the Boundary Commission's review will be laid before Parliament in the spring of 2026 and will take effect in May 2027.
- 8.10. Irrespective of whether Council decides to remain with the current electoral cycle or change to all out elections, the law mandates that PCC must hold an election by thirds in May 2026, followed by all-out elections in May 2027 which is when any new warding arrangements will take effect.

9. DECISION TO BE TAKEN

- 9.1. Council is invited to consider the contents of this report, including the results of the consultation exercise, the arguments for and against both electoral cycle options and then make a decision as to whether the Council should make a change to whole council elections from May 2027.