

# ELECTORAL CYCLE CONSULTATION REPORT

October 2024



## I. BACKGROUND

In November 2022, the City Council agreed to undertake a public engagement on the future Electoral Cycle for the Council. Following this, on 20 March 2023 Audit and Governance Committee approved the consultation question and Full Council on the 24 June 2024, delegated authority to Audit and Governance Committee to finalise the details of the consultation process, which it did on 23 July 2024.

The consultation was carried out over an eight-week period from 24 July to 22 September 2024 and engaged with stakeholders across the city on whether they would like to change to 'whole council elections' to elect their local councillors or keep the current system.

The legislation governing a potential move to whole council elections is the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. The Act gives the Council power to move to whole council elections. It also requires the Council to consult such persons as it thinks appropriate on the proposed change. Councils undertaking such consultation must:

- a) Take reasonable steps to consult such persons that it believes appropriate on the proposed change;
- b) Have regard to the outcome of the consultation before making its decision;
- c) Convene a special meeting of the Council to make a resolution;
- d) Pass a resolution to change by a two-thirds majority of those voting;
- e) As soon as practicable after passing such a resolution to produce and make available to the public (at its own cost) an explanatory document setting out details of the new scheme;
- f) Give notice to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England

The result of any consultation conducted under the act is advisory in nature and does not commit the Council to a particular course of action.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

The consultation was hosted online between 24 July and 22 September. The survey remained open online for a further 4 days so that any hard copies received could be manually entered by council staff. A simple survey was designed to capture the view of residents and stakeholders on the decision to keep or change the Council's Electoral Cycle. The question used was single response question:

### **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

This question was followed with the opportunity for respondents to provide a reason for their answer. The survey asked for the respondents' partial postcode so that responses could be monitored from across the city - this would enable targeted promotion in low responding areas and also to identify any differences in views across different parts of the city. The survey also captured respondent information / representation e.g. business, community group, student etc.), age and health problem or disability.

In addition to the survey, in-person/online meetings were held to provide information and encourage responses to the consultation:

- 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.
- Three online sessions were arranged with Councillors on the 18, 19 and 20 September.
- 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.

### 3. PROMOTING THE CONSULTATION

The Council's Audit and Governance Committee approved the Communication and Engagement Strategy for the consultation including the communications materials on the 23 July 2024. Over the two-month consultation, the below communications and promotional activities were delivered:

- Two press releases were issued on the 24 July and the 09 September
- A web page was launched with all the information, FAQs and a link to the survey
- Advertising in four editions of the Plymouth Chronicle newspaper
- Two emails were sent to all Plymouth residents on the electoral register; the first was sent on the 24 July and the second was sent on 09 September
- An Email was sent to Learning Disability providers across the city and the voluntary and community sector (inc. Community Builders)
- There was promotion in Plymouth libraries – along with hard copies of the survey
- Promotion of the consultation was included in four editions of the Council's residents e-newsletter to 26,400 people
- There was promotion on the Council's new What's App channel
- Posters were displayed in key Council premises e.g. libraries / Council House etc.
- Stakeholder toolkits sent to key local organisations e.g. universities / housing associations / NHS / business and voluntary sector groups etc. with a request to assist with promotion (including information sent to all Councillors)
- Personal letters sent to key stakeholders inviting them for feedback
- Development of an animation explaining the different electoral cycle models – promoted on social media and to key groups and organisations
- A paid-for social media advertising campaign ran for the last month of the consultation – reaching 110,761 people in the city, resulting in 6,958 clicks to the consultation web page
- Targeted advertising in areas in the city that demonstrated a lower response than other areas
- General social media across all available channels, resulting in 14 posts. Across Facebook, the organic reach was 26,307, resulting in an engagement figure of 1,699. Across X (formerly Twitter), the organic impressions were 6,553. We also posted across LinkedIn.

### 4. THE RESPONSE

A total of **7,055** responses were received to this consultation. This response significantly exceeded the original target of 5,000.

**Table 1**

Completed online including hard copies received and entered	7,051
Stakeholder letters received from <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Arts University Plymouth</li> <li>• Police and Crime Commissioner</li> </ul>	

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plymouth Community Homes</li> <li>• Plymouth Marjon University</li> </ul>	
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## 5. WHO RESPONDED?

### 5.1 Respondent information/representation

Respondents were asked to select one or more of the following answers which enabled the results to be analysed from multiple perspectives. The majority of respondents indicated that they lived in Plymouth (88%, 6,632), 5.5 per cent (415) of the respondents also indicated that they worked for a public sector organisation. Three per cent (238) respondents indicated that they were a student or in education in the city.

**Table 2**

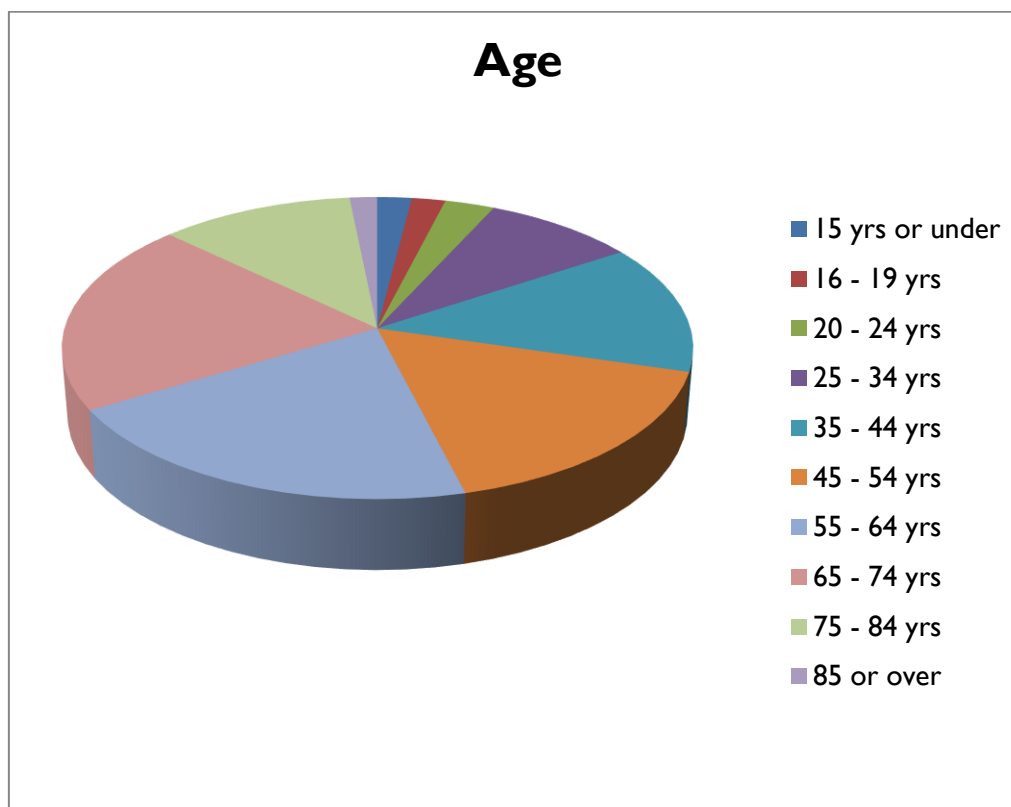
<b>Are you? (Tick all that apply)</b>	<b>% Answer</b>	<b>No.</b>
Living in Plymouth	88%	6,632
A serving MP or Councillor	0.5%	28
A student or in education in Plymouth	3%	238
Representing a voluntary / community organisation	1%	96
A representative of a local business	1%	84
Living outside of Plymouth	1%	80*
Working for a public sector organisation	5.5%	415
No Response		(255)
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>7,828</b>

\*See notes on analysis of data section

### 5.2 Age

Respondents were asked to select the age group that was relevant to them. The highest responding age categories were respondents aged between 55yrs and 74yrs – this accounted for 40 per cent of the total response. Those aged between 35yrs and 54yrs accounted for nearly 30 per cent.

The purpose of collecting this information was to monitor and enable targeted promotion in low responding age groups. The information was also captured to identify the views from younger age groups who would potentially be affected by the decision in the future. Four per cent of respondents (268) were aged 19 years or under. Seven per cent of respondents (464) were aged 24 years or under.

**Figure 1**

### 5.3 Health problem or disability

Respondents were asked about whether their day-to-day activities were limited because of a health problem or disability, which has lasted, or is expected to last, at least 12 months. The purpose of collecting this information was to ensure representations were being made by people who are limited in their day-to-day activities by a health condition or disability and to identify any potential issues around the accessibility of elections. 23 per cent (1,471) of respondents indicated that they had a health condition or disability that limited them a lot or a little.

**Table 3**

Are your day-to-day activities limited because of a health problem or disability?	% Answer	No.
Yes, limited a little	15%	967
Yes, limited a lot	8%	504
No	70%	4,494
Prefer not to say	7%	438
No Response	-	(648)
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>7,051</b>

### 5.4 Postcode district

Respondents were asked to provide the first part of their postcode to enable targeted advertising in areas of the city that demonstrated a lower response than other areas and also to identify whether respondents from different parts of the city had different views about the electoral cycle. 6,267 (89%) respondents provided valid postcode information for analysis.

Of the 6,267 respondents, the highest number of responses were received from respondents living in the PL6 postcode district (932, 14.9%), the second highest number were received from respondents living in PL3 (898, 14.3%).

The lowest number received within the Plymouth boundary were from the PL1 and PL2 postcode districts (10.4% and 9.7% respectively)

42 respondents (0.7%) provided postcode information that clearly indicated that they lived in a postcode district outside the Plymouth boundary.

The data provided below is derived from only the postcode data provided and does not take into consideration whether the respondents indicated that they lived in or outside the city.

The data is only able to provide district level information, however Table 4 provides an indication of the area coverage and the attributable wards.

**Table 4**

District	Coverage	Attributable Ward(s)	No.	%
PL1	Plymouth City Centre, Barbican, Devonport, The Hoe, Millbridge, Stoke, Stonehouse	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Devonport</li> <li>• St Peter and the Waterfront</li> <li>• Stoke</li> </ul>	652	10.4
PL2	Beacon Park, Ford, Keyham, North Prospect, Pennycross, Home Park	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Devonport</li> <li>• Ham</li> <li>• Peverell</li> <li>• Stoke</li> </ul>	608	9.7
PL3	Efford, Hartley, Laira, Mannamead, Milehouse, Peverell, Higher Compton	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compton</li> <li>• Efford and Lipson</li> <li>• Peverell</li> <li>• Stoke</li> </ul>	898	14.3
PL4	Lipson, Mount Gould, Mutley, Greenbank, Prince Rock, St. Judes, Barbican (north)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Compton</li> <li>• Drake</li> <li>• Efford and Lipson</li> <li>• St Peter and the Waterfront</li> <li>• Sutton and Mount Gould</li> </ul>	758	12.1
PL5	Crownhill, Ernesettle, Honicknowle, Whitleigh, St. Budeaux, Tamerton Foliot	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Budshead</li> <li>• Egguckland</li> <li>• Ham</li> <li>• Honicknowle</li> <li>• St Budeaux</li> <li>• Southway</li> </ul>	786	12.5
PL6	Derriford, Egguckland, Estover, Leigham, Roborough, Southway Lopwell, Woolwell, Bickleigh	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Budshead</li> <li>• Egguckland</li> <li>• Moor View</li> <li>• Southway</li> </ul>	932	14.9
PL7	Plympton, Sparkwell	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plympton Erle</li> <li>• Plympton Chaddlewood</li> <li>• Plympton St Mary</li> </ul>	773	12.3

PL9	Plymstock, Heybrook Bay, Mount Batten, Wembury	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Plymstock Dunstone</li> <li>• Plymstock Radford</li> </ul>	818	13.1
Outside boundary			42	0.7
<b>Total</b>			<b>6,267</b>	<b>100</b>

## 6. NOTES ON ANALYSIS OF DATA

### 6.1 Rounding and conversions

The percentage figures included in this report have been rounded to the nearest whole number and therefore may not add up to 100 per cent in all cases.

In some cases, the number of respondents included in the analysis is very low and therefore the percentage conversion result is only an indication of proportion and should be treated with caution.

### 6.2 Postcode district

A review of the data identified 367 entries where the postcode needed to be manually cleaned to provide the most accurate picture in terms of geographical response (e.g. PL 1 to PL1).

42 respondents provided postcode information that clearly indicated that they lived in a postcode district outside the Plymouth boundary. This is different to the 80 respondents who indicated that they lived outside the city boundary when asked this specifically.

This data has been analysed at district level only and the following should be taken into consideration:

- There were discrepancies in the respondent answers
- Some respondents answered that they lived both within and outside the city
- Some postcode data did not match the respondents view of whether they lived in or outside the city
- The postcode districts of PL6, PL7 and PL9 stretch beyond the city boundary.

Closer analysis of the data provided indicated that these discrepancies are few in number and therefore no adjustment has been made to the results presented.

### 6.3 Comment analysis

Of the 7,051 online responses, 4,306 respondents added comments to provide a reason for the answer they gave about the electoral cycle. Due to the significant number of comments received in response to only one question, it is likely that the information will reach a point of saturation, that is, the review and analysis of the comments will no longer provide any new information past a certain number of coded responses.

The qualitative content analysis was supported by two Researchers-in-Residence working with the Council on the Plymouth Health Determinants Research Collaboration (HDRC), who provided a training sessions and joint coding exercise of this data with the team. It was agreed that the independently conducted double coding of the first 100 comments would help produce a consolidated coding frame, and that this would be used to provide a standardised method for coding the comments by different team members.

It was further agreed that due to the large number of comments and the relatively clear coding categories, 20 per cent of them would be randomly selected for analysis. This would give a robust overview of the themes coming through from respondents as to why they selected the option they did. 861 comments were randomly selected from the 4,306 responses. More than one code can be

attributed to each comment, therefore the number of codes in the table below may total more than 4,306.

## 7. RESULTS

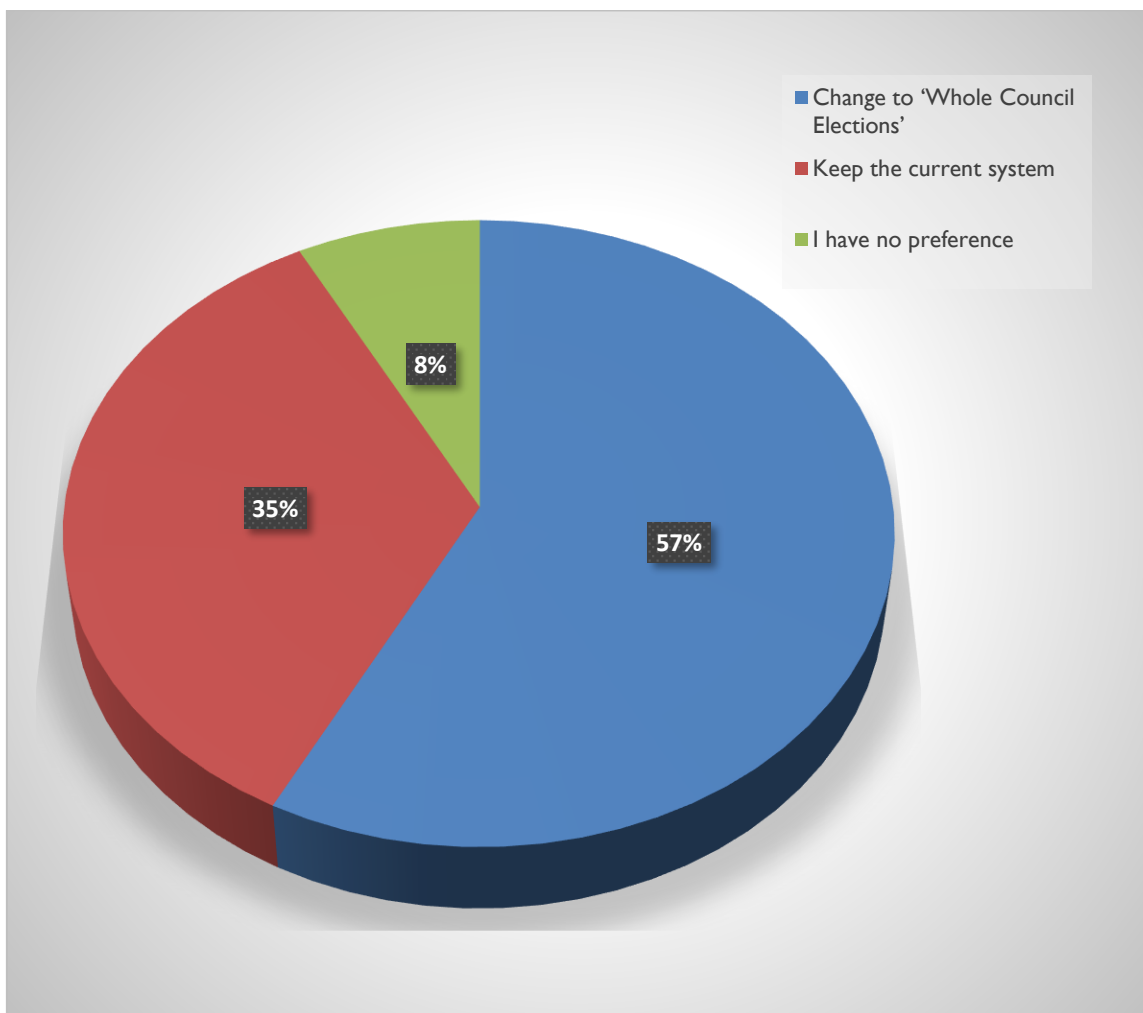
### 7.1 Overall Result

Respondents were asked to indicate, by selecting one option only, which option they would prefer for Plymouth residents to elect their councillors?

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%)

Figure 2



When the 545 responses indicating 'no preference' are removed the re-calculated result is as follows:

- Change to 'Whole Council Elections' - **62%**
- Keep the current system - **37%**

## 8. COMMENT ANALYSIS

Respondents were asked to provide reasons why they selected as they did from the options provided. Table 5 below sets an analysis of a randomly selected sample of respondents (861 or 20%):

**Table 5**

<b>Change to Whole Council Elections</b>	<b>No.</b>
Resources: Save money	207
Democracy: Process simpler/aligns with general election	101
Stability - Effective Governance	92
Stability - Consistency of Council	89
Stability - Implementation time to deliver/benefit	77
Democracy: Turnout/Voter fatigue	60
Stability - [Catchall/non-elaborated]	51
Democracy: Accountability	50
Stability - Reduce flipflopping/procrastination/excuses	22
Resources: Reduce burden on buildings / staff	23
Democracy: Less pre-election period	11
<b>Keep the current system</b>	<b>No.</b>
Democracy: Accountability	98
Stability: Continuity/Gradual change/Fresh	80
Democracy: Democracy Catchall/non-elaborated	50
Stability: Process/Status Quo	48
Democracy: Cllr Engagement/Visibility	27
Democracy: Less party politics/concentrated power/complacency	27
<b>Other comments</b>	<b>No.</b>
OTHER/Change	39
OTHER/Keep	29
OTHER/No Preference	10

### 8.1 Change to Whole Council Elections

Of those who opted to change to 'Whole Council Elections', the most common reason related to resources and the potential for the council to saving money (207). This code captured all comments relating to the benefits in terms of cost savings that might arise from less frequent elections. In the information accompanying the consultation, it was outlined that '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.' It was not further clarified that the £1.4m saving related to a 10-year period



rather than a four-year period. Therefore, any comments relating to savings need to be viewed in that context.

The second most common reason provided for changing the system was that it could be considered to be better for democracy due to the system being simpler (101). This code captured all comments for changing the cycle saying it is better for democracy overall, and some specifically stated that it was simpler / clearer / less confusing for citizens to follow or mentioned alignment with the general election cycle to make sense.

Alongside Resource, and Democracy, Stability was one of the key themes that emerged from analysis of the comments. 92 comments related to stability in terms of the change allowing more effective governance. These arguments for change related to the benefits or outcomes of having a more consistent membership of the Council in terms of long-term decision-making and strategic planning. Examples of the comments cited here typically included: 'effective delivery', 'getting things done', or 'better planning / decision-making'. 89 comments related to stability in terms of the consistency of the actual formation or constitution of the council membership. 77 comments related to stability in terms of the longer period of time between elections which would allow for long-term delivery and realising the benefits or seeing through plans / delivery. A further 51 comments referenced improved stability but did not elaborate further.

There were 60 comments relating to how a system of less frequent elections would enhance the democratic process by improving voter turnout or reducing voter fatigue.

## **8.2 Keep the current system**

There was less variation overall in terms of the reasons being presented by those who selected 'keep the current system'. The most commonly occurring theme (98) was that the current system provided better democratic accountability. This coding category included all comments relating to enhancing accountability through more frequent elections; including comments such as being able to 'keep Councillors on their toes', 'easier to replace', 'ensuring they are more visible', and 'can judge performance more frequently'.

As with those who wanted to change the system, stability was also a commonly occurring theme for those who wanted to keep the current system. 80 respondents referred to the stability of the current cycle, and the perceived benefit of not replacing all members at once, such as sharing knowledge between incoming / outgoing members and enabling more continuity in decision-making. Comments also related to keeping things 'fresh' or 'dynamic' due to regularly refreshing members.

48 comments were coded as 'stability' as they provided arguments that emphasised maintaining the status quo through an established process or maintaining the status quo in various forms. Examples include 'tried and tested', 'fair or familiar for voters'.

## **9. ANALYSIS OF RESPONDENTS**

Further analysis was carried out to help identify the views of different groups of people who responded.

### **9.1 Result by respondent information/representation**

Table 6 sets out the overall result of the consultation against the respondent's information that was collected. For the most part respondents selected 'Living in Plymouth' (6,632, 88%), however respondents could select more than one option if they were representing a business or attending a school in Plymouth for example. The result for those who indicated that they lived in Plymouth saw a similar split to the overall result (58% change/34% keep) and has therefore not been reported in the table below.

#### **Table 6**

NB: Percentage results should be treated with caution where the responding numbers are low.

Responding group	Change to 'Whole Council Elections'		Keep current system		No preference		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Serving MP or Councillor	11	39%	16	57%	1	4%	28	100%
A student or in education in Plymouth	120	50%	55	23%	63	27%	238	100%
Representing a voluntary/community organisation	53	55%	32	33%	11	12%	96	100%
Representative of a local business	48	57%	30	36%	6	7%	84	100%
Working for a Public Sector organisation	270	65%	115	28%	30	7%	415	100%

In all but one of the groups set out in Table 6, change to 'Whole Council Elections' was selected by the most respondents. Out of the 28 respondents who indicated they were a serving MP or Councillor, 16 selected 'keep the current system', with 11 selecting 'change to whole council elections'.

## 9.2 Result by age group

Table 7 below presents the result of the consultation question by age group. In every age category most respondents (50% or more) selected 'change to whole council elections.' The age category of 65 – 74 years had the highest percentage of respondents selecting 'keep the current system' (40%), and 15 years or under had the highest percentage of those selecting 'no preference' (35%).

When analysing the data from the younger age groups (24 and under) there were 464 total responses. 242 respondents selected 'change to whole council elections' (52%). 135 selected 'keep the current system' (29%) and 87 selected 'no preference' (19%).

**Table 7**

Age (years)	Change to 'Whole Council Elections'		Keep current system		No preference		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
15 or under	67	50%	21	15%	48	35%	136	100%
16 – 19	72	55%	39	19%	21	16%	132	100%
20 – 24	103	53%	75	38%	18	9%	196	100%
25 – 34	331	55%	201	34%	68	11%	600	100%
35 – 44	575	61%	263	28%	98	11%	936	100%

45 – 54	680	<b>61%</b>	344	31%	89	8%	1113	100%
55 – 64	845	<b>61%</b>	459	34%	72	5%	1376	100%
65 – 74	770	<b>55%</b>	564	40%	65	5%	1399	100%
75 – 84	406	<b>53%</b>	322	42%	38	5%	766	100%
85 or over	71	<b>66%</b>	29	27%	8	7%	108	100%

### 9.3 Result by health problem or disability

Table 8 shows the result of the consultation question against those indicating that they had a health problem or disability, limiting them a little or a lot. The results show that regardless of respondent group, most respondents selected 'change to whole council elections.' A total of 1,471 respondents indicated that they had a health problem or disability, limiting them a little or a lot. Of these 807 (55%) selected 'change to whole council elections', 552 (37%) selected 'keep the current system' and 112 (8%) selected 'no preference'.

**Table 8**

Health problem or disability	Change to 'Whole Council Elections'		Keep current system		No preference		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Limited a lot	286	<b>57%</b>	182	36%	36	7%	504	100%
Limited a little	521	<b>54%</b>	370	38%	76	8%	967	100%
No health problem or disability	2689	<b>60%</b>	1469	33%	336	7%	4494	100%

### 9.4 Postcode District

Most respondents in all postcode districts selected 'change to whole council elections'. PL1 district had the highest percentage of respondents selecting 'change to whole council elections' (65%).

PL7 had the highest percentage of respondents selecting 'keep the current system' (37%). In all other districts, except for PL1, 35 per cent of respondents selected 'keep the current system'. PL4 district had the highest percentage of respondents who selected 'no preference' (11%).

**Table 9**

*NB: Percentage results should be treated with caution where the responding numbers are low.*

District	Change to 'Whole Council Elections'		Keep current system		No preference		Total	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
PL1	423	<b>65%</b>	185	28%	44	7%	652	100%
PL2	347	<b>57%</b>	211	35%	50	8%	608	100%
PL3	523	<b>58%</b>	311	35%	64	7%	898	100%
PL4	413	<b>54%</b>	262	35%	83	11%	758	100%

PL5	439	<b>56%</b>	276	35%	71	9%	786	100%
PL6	537	<b>58%</b>	327	35%	68	7%	932	100%
PL7	442	<b>57%</b>	283	37%	48	6%	773	100%
PL9	490	<b>60%</b>	285	35%	43	5%	818	100%

The highest percentage of respondents who selected 'change to whole council elections' are located around the central, waterfront and Plymstock areas. The highest percentage of respondents who selected 'keep the current electoral system' are located in the north and Plympton area of the city.

## 10. STAKEHOLDER LETTERS

Stakeholder toolkits were developed and sent to key local organisations with a request to assist with promotion, alongside a personal letter from the Council's Chief Executive, inviting feedback on the Council's electoral cycle. Four responses were received, each indicating that they had reached a consensus as an organisation that they would be supportive of a change to 'whole council elections'.

### Arts University Plymouth

"Arts University Plymouth's executive team is in favour of an 'all out' election."

### Police and Crime Commissioner

"I support the change to the election cycle in Plymouth to every four years. Democracy is at the heart of a cohesive society".

The Police and Crime Commissioner provided several reasons including:

- Alignment with the Police and Crime Commissioner elections
- Stability of leadership for a period of four years at a time, enabling better long-term financial and policy decisions
- The cost to the taxpayer for multi-year elections is an important consideration.

### Plymouth Community Homes (PCH)

"Plymouth Community Homes is in favour of the council moving away from the 'elections by thirds' system and would support the authority in adopting an alternative model where local elections are held every four years, with all 57 seats on the council contested at the same time."

- PCH feels the 4-year system provides clearer opportunities for our residents, our staff and our community partners to both understand and engage with the election cycle, and this would help to reduce voter apathy.
- It would enable a longer-term commitment to change, which could impact positively on our services and our operational work where we are working in close partnership with the council.
- A key point in our recommending the 4-year cycle is also linked to how we manage and govern ourselves. Our Board meets six times a year and is made up of 12 people, including two PCH tenants and two nominees from Plymouth City Council who are sitting ward councillors.
- The current 'election by thirds' system can result in frequent change to the sitting ward councillors who are members of the Board of PCH, and this causes some disruption as it impacts on the continuity of our governance arrangements.

**Plymouth Marjon University**

“A consensus was reached [University’s Executive Leadership Team] that the move to a four-year cycle appeared favourable, both in terms of simplicity for the voter and additionally the financial impact.”