

TITLE	Electoral Cycle Decision
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Extraordinary Council on 22 June 2022
WARD	(All Wards);
LEAD OFFICER	Monitoring Officer - Andrew Moulton

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

The purpose of the report is to enable the Council to consider the outcome of the public consultation on the electoral cycle and decide on the future electoral cycle for the Borough Council.

RECOMMENDATION

The Council is recommended to change the electoral cycle to all out elections every four years from 2024.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

At its meeting of 17th February 2022, Council resolved to undertake a consultation with stakeholders on moving to a whole council (all-out) electoral cycle. This report presents the consultation results and sets out the case for changing the electoral cycle. There were 3,067 responses with 54% in favour of a move to whole council (all-out) elections and 46% in favour of retaining the current arrangements.

Under Section 33 (3) of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, if Council wishes to change the current electoral arrangements, a two-thirds majority of those present would need to vote in favour of the recommendation.

Members should note that, of the 52 English unitary authorities, Wokingham BC is one of only 16 councils that continues to elect by thirds. The recent Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge also recommended that the Council consider the case for moving to whole Council elections as part of its commentary on the governance of the Council. The Council's Corporate Leadership Team's views are aligned to the financial and business planning arguments put forward by the LGA.

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) is currently undertaking an electoral review of the borough and will commence a consultation in July 2022 on the warding arrangements to come into effect in May 2024. If Council decides to change the electoral cycle, the LGBCE warding proposals may establish one, two, or three member wards. If the Council continues to elect in thirds, the LGBCE warding proposals will be based on the principle of three member wards.

It should be noted that, regardless of the Council's decision on all-out elections, there will be whole Council elections in 2024 following the LGBCE's electoral review. This decision will therefore clarify the post 2024 electoral arrangements of the Council.

1. Background

- 1.1 The legislation governing the move to whole council (all out) elections is contained within the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and the Localism Act 2011. The Acts give councils the power to decide whether to move to whole council elections, or back to elections by thirds (if they have elected this way at some point since 1 April 1974).
- 1.2 The most recent Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) data shows that, amongst the 52 unitary English authorities, 36 elect on a whole council basis, and 16 elect by thirds.
- 1.3 Within Berkshire, three Councils elect by thirds (Wokingham BC, Reading BC, and Slough BC) although Slough BC is currently consulting with stakeholders on a proposed move to whole-council elections.
- 1.4 The LGBCE is due to commence a consultation in July 2022 on proposed changes to warding arrangements in the Borough. Whilst the decision on the electoral cycle is the Council's alone, there will be a direct impact on the LGBCE warding proposals.
- 1.5 If the Council decides to move to whole council elections, the LGBCE may establish one, two, and three-member warding arrangement as at present. If the Council retains election by thirds, the LGBCE will develop warding proposals based on the principle of three member wards. Regardless of the decision arising from this report, the work of the LGBCE will result in all-out elections in 2024.

2. Whole Council Elections

- 2.1 There is a limited amount of research on the subject of different electoral cycles and their benefits. However, the Electoral Commission conducted research in 2003 on the subject of local government electoral cycles which concluded that whole council elections would provide a clearer and more equitable system of voting for electors in the area.
- 2.2 The research focusses primarily on promoting a consistent national pattern of local elections, which it claimed would help to focus national attention on local government issues.
- 2.3 The report goes on to discuss issues around clarity and understanding for electors, which it claims is reduced by a system that elects by thirds. Research conducted by MORI that forms part of the report highlights the level of misunderstanding amongst electors regarding who they are voting for, or how often they are expected to vote. This confusion increases amongst younger voters or those from black or minority ethnic groups which suggests there are equalities issues to consider when considering an appropriate electoral system.
- 2.4 Since 2003, there has been a notable shift by unitary councils from electing in thirds to whole council elections. The most frequently cited reasons for doing so are the financial benefits and the argument that whole council elections aid better longer term decision making.

- 2.5 More recently in April 2021, a Best Value Report on Liverpool City Council by the Government Appointed Lead Inspector, Max Caller CBE, recommended that the City Council move from a thirds electoral system to a whole-council electoral system, noting that, “LCC being in election mode every year provides less opportunity to scrutinise the Mayor’s actions...” and that a whole-council electoral system would provide LCC a better ability to have a “longer-term focus.”
- 2.6 It is also notable that Slough BC commenced a public consultation in December 2021 with a view to moving to whole council elections as part of its response to addressing its governance and financial difficulties.
- 2.7 In November 2021, the Local Government Association undertook a corporate peer challenge review that included consideration of the Council’s governance arrangements. The Executive received the report of the LGA and an associated action plan at its meeting of 7 March 2022. The LGA reported that “the current electoral cycle of elections in thirds can contribute towards a short-term focus” and recommended that the Council consider how a change to the electoral cycle “might help to foster a more collaborative culture.”

3. Election by Thirds

- 3.1 The current system of electing by thirds means that 18 seats are elected every year in three out of four years.
- 3.2 The benefits of this system have been stated as providing greater stability for the Council in terms of its membership. Electing by thirds reduces the risk of wholesale change within the Council (although for some this may be desirable and so not a risk but an opportunity) and allows for succession planning because there is always a mixture of new and experienced councillors on the Council.
- 3.3 Additionally, electing by thirds provides the electorate a greater opportunity to be involved in decision-making at the Council, and arguments have been put forward that this makes councillors more democratically accountable.
- 3.4 Lastly, it has been stated that some smaller political parties would find it difficult to field enough candidates to contest all seats at an all-out election. However, electing by thirds does not, in and of itself, create a greater availability of candidates for any party, but those candidates who are willing to stand have more frequent opportunities to do so.
- 3.5 It has been suggested that electing by thirds ensures that knowledge on delivering elections is retained and maintained within the Electoral Services team. However, as there are a wide variety of electoral events that take place across the cycle (which use similar procedures and legislation) this would not have a significant impact on the training and/or expertise of the team.
- 3.6 Retaining election-by-thirds will require all wards to be three member wards. This will have a significant impact on the size of wards that are currently one and two Member wards and result in larger wards that will include communities that have previously had separate representation.

4. **Costs and Savings**

- 4.1 As a Best Value authority, Members are required to consider the costs of services, and from time to time review those costs to ensure that the taxpayer is receiving best value for money.
- 4.2 It is the case that whole Council elections cost less to run than electing by thirds, in particular where those whole Council elections can be combined with other significant elections such as the Police and Crime Commissioner elections (as the costs for fixed entities such as polling stations, staff on polling stations, and sundries, are shared).
- 4.3 An example of the savings that could be achieved over a four-year period is set out at Appendix A. This shows that over the four-year cycle from 2024 to 2027 the authority would save over £316,000 by not holding Borough elections in 2026 or 2027.

5. **Consultation Results**

- 5.1 The Council consulted with stakeholders for six weeks from 7 March until 15 April 2022. The consultation was online and supported by a letter to every household in the borough. There were 3,067 responses. The overall results of the consultation showed that 54% of respondents were in favour of the move to all out elections and 46% were in favour of retaining election by thirds.
- 5.2 The most common reasons for supporting the change were:-
- Cost savings (about 200 responses in favour of all-out elections referenced this as a reason)
 - Clearer / easier to understand (about 50 responses)
 - Would enable better long-term planning (about 35 responses)
 - Greater participation (about 30)
 - Continuity / less disruption (about 30)
 - Fairer / more democratic (30)
- 5.3 The most common reasons against the change were:
- Loss of accountability with fewer elections (about 80 responses referenced this as a reason)
 - Continuity / stability (about 65 responses)
 - By thirds system more democratic / fairer (about 30)
- 5.4 The consultation provided a large number of responses with a small majority of respondents favouring a move to all out elections. The full results are available as part of the background papers.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	£0	Yes	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£0	Yes	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£0	Yes	Revenue

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

The £316k tangible savings associated with moving to whole council elections referred to in the report will commence from 2027.

The Chief Financial Officer has quantified additional, less tangible benefits in excess of £4m over the 4-year period, arrived at following consultation with the Council's senior leadership team. This is not intended to be a calculation of precision but is intended to provide an indication of the hidden costs of disruption associated with an annual elections cycle.

Cross-Council Implications

The Council's electoral arrangements are a key part of its governance and democratic arrangements, and as such, impact all aspects of the Council's priorities and services.

Public Sector Equality Duty

Due regard to the Public Sector Equality Duty has been taken evidence through the completion of an equalities assessment.

Climate Emergency – *This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030*

Whilst there are no direct or immediate impacts on the Council's climate emergency targets, administering elections and their associated processes can incur carbon costs for the Council and residents.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2

Not applicable.

List of Background Papers

Electoral Commission research paper 2003
LGA Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report – November 2021
Consultation detailed feedback

Contact Andrew Moulton

Telephone No Tel: 07747 777298

Service Governance

Email

andrew.moulton@wokingham.gov.uk

This page is intentionally left blank