

Meeting: Full Council
Date: 13th June 2024
Classification: Part 1
Key Decision: Yes
Title of Report: Election Cycle change consultation results

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Executive Councillor: Cllr Daniel Cowan, Leader of the Council

1. Executive Summary

- 1.1. The Council made a commitment to explore a change in electoral cycle when it accepted the findings and recommendations of the Local Government Association Corporate Peer Challenge.
- 1.2. The Council invited residents, local businesses, partners and staff to share their views as part of a formal consultation. In addition, this paper presents financial, productivity, equality and environmental opportunities. It presents the view of Government, including its commissioners, and the Electoral Commission, and further details the growing trend in local government, especially unitary authorities, to operate with whole council elections.
- 1.3. The evidence, as presented, weighs towards a case for change. This coincides with a timing opportunity when the Council will be required to hold a whole council election in May 2026 following the ongoing ward boundary review.

2. Recommendations

It is recommended that Council:

- 2.1. Consider the case for election by thirds and whole council 'all out' elections.
- 2.2. Decide whether to continue with whole council elections after the whole council election in 2026 following the Ward Boundary Review.

3. Background

- 3.1. At present the Council is elected by thirds, with one third of the councillors elected at a time. Under the four-yearly election option, all the seats on the Council would be elected at the same time and the City Council elections would be held once every four years. This is often referred to as 'all-out' or whole council elections.
- 3.2. In October 2022, the Local Government Association (LGA) and peers conducted a Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC). Peer challenges are not inspections but are improvement focussed and tailored to meet individual Councils' needs.
- 3.3. Peers found that the Council was self-aware and had huge potential with many positive attributes and assets both within the Council and city, including the strong community ethos and sound financial management. However, they also found that approaches to leadership, governance and decision making were impacting the council's capacity to progress. The LGA's findings were published, and nine recommendations were made.
- 3.4. One of nine recommendations asked the Council to consider moving to a four yearly "all out" electoral cycle as an alternative to the current system. Peers determined this view having heard from a number of officers and councillors who described how the current system can impact on strategic decision making and direction.
- 3.5. Peers recognised the opportunity to consider the election cycle alongside Southend's ward boundary review, which will require an 'all out' or whole council election in the first year after implementation (to take place in May 2026). The timetable for the ward boundary requires a decision on the preferred election cycle by 9th July 2024.
- 3.6. At the Council meeting on 19 October 2023, Council gave approval to consult and ask residents and partners for their views on the election cycle. A nine-week public consultation was conducted with cross-party collaboration and support on the survey design and engagement plan. The full results are available in the appendices.

4. Evidence

- 4.1. The results of public consultation are advisory only, and form just one element of wider considerations and context for Council to make an informed and considered decision. A summary of the evidence is presented below.

	Whole-Council election support	Elections by thirds support
4.2. Local Government Association	The Local Government Association (LGA) Corporate Peer Challenge (CPC) recommended that Council consider moving to a four yearly whole council electoral cycle. Peers determined this view having heard from officers, councillors and partners who described how the current system can impact on strategic decision making and direction.	
4.3. Ward Boundary Review	The upcoming Ward Boundary Review will require a whole council election in the first year after implementation (May 2026). Most councils that decide to change their election cycle do so at this opportunity as it reduces duplication of resources and capacity in adapting to first whole council elections twice.	
4.4. Electoral Commission	A 2004 Electoral Commission report concluded whole-council elections provide a clear, equitable and easy to understand electoral process which would best serve the interests of local government electors. The Commission recommended that each local authority in England hold whole-council elections.	
4.5. Best Value Guidance	On 8 th May 2024, government published new Best Value Guidance. It states: 'All-out as opposed to multiple elections within the four-year cycle can enhance political stability and reduce ongoing campaigning that can hinder improvement.' (these opportunities were also raised by some residents in the Southend consultation).	

<p>4.6. Neighbouring Councils</p>	<p>At a Special Council meeting on Wednesday 31st January 2024, Castle Point Borough Council (District) voted in favour of a change to whole council elections every 4 years from 2nd May 2024, following their ward boundary review.</p> <p>The Commissioner's Best Value Inspection Report at Thurrock Council (Unitary) have recommended a whole Council election. Government have now ordered the Council to change its cycle. Thurrock will move to whole Council elections from 2025. More details are provided below.</p> <p>Medway Council (Unitary) holds whole council elections.</p>	<p>Rochford, Basildon and Brentwood District Councils elect in thirds.</p>
<p>4.7. English Unitary Councils</p>	<p>Over the past 20 years, local government has seen a growing shift from election in thirds (where 58% of unitary councils elected in thirds) towards whole council elections (where 77% of unitary councils are now electing all their members once every four years).</p>	<p>23% of unitary councils hold elections in thirds.</p>
<p>4.8. Best Value Inspectors</p>	<p>The Commissioners report¹ into the failings in Thurrock noted an environment in which Thirds and No Overall Control (political control) led to challenges: <i>This short-termism is driven, in large part, by a combination of Thurrock's fine political balance, exacerbated by holding elections 'by thirds' which results in an election taking place in three out of every four years... We have heard consistently that work to bring members' attention to the big strategic issues is only possible for a few months each year, as they quickly go back into</i></p>	

¹ [Thurrock Council Best Value Inspection Report \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

	<i>'election mode' for the following year.</i>	
4.9. Southend partners and businesses	<p>Partners were unanimous in their support for changing to a whole council election cycle. Seven partners cited benefits of a more strategic and longer-term approach to policy and project implementation, for financial prudence and the positive opportunity of not losing momentum during the pre- and post-election period.</p> <p>All partner comments can be read in full in Appendix B</p>	No partners supported a thirds system.
4.10. Southend-on-Sea City Council employees	<p>Council employees were asked to consider the change in the context of efficient ways of working.</p> <p>Staff identified the opportunity to increase productivity during the period from pre-election to administration forming and aligning to new portfolio structures.</p> <p>Council staff identified more potential opportunities for more capacity and efficient ways of working through a whole council election cycle including more time to implement the Council's Corporate Plan, more opportunity to agree key long-term strategies such as the Local Plan and Local Transport Plan, the ability to maintain budget discussions over a longer period of time and financial savings in running elections as well as the time taken by staff to facilitate them.</p>	Staff noted the potential for the thirds cycle to increase collaborative to smooth transition from one year to the next as well as the larger Cllr induction programme.
4.11. Resident consultation	<p>49.4% of residents were in favour of whole council elections.</p> <p>Residents who support whole council elections see the benefits of additional councillor time and</p>	<p>50.6% of residents are in favour of 'thirds'</p> <p>Residents who support thirds are concerned about councillor</p>

	<p>energy better placed in implementing change for the city, rather than canvassing.</p> <p>Residents have articulated through the consultation comments a preference for money spent on elections could be better allocated, such as on essential services.</p>	<p>accountability and responsiveness. Concerns about poor quality councillors and/or decisions being left for too long without an annual public vote (in some cases there appears a misunderstanding that councillors can be voted out after one year).</p>
	All resident comments can be read in full in Appendix C	
4.12. Financial and resource implications	<p>If the Council decided that elections should be held every four years, then a saving of circa £450k across that same period could be realised for the Council's budget (this takes account of possible by-elections).</p> <p>During the May 2024 local elections, around 600 staff members were involved. From helping to process postal votes, working in or visiting polling station to working at the count and inducting councillors. Capacity levels are impacted as a result.</p>	<p>Whole council elections may increase the number of by-elections with associated costs. However, this minimal cost has been considered in the saving identified.</p>
4.13. Carbon	<p>Reducing the election cycle from three into one, would allow opportunities to minimise the carbon impact of producing materials, as well as running, and taking part in elections.</p>	<p>By-elections would generate a carbon impact in the ward in which the election is taking place. Whole council may increase the likelihood of by-elections.</p>
4.14. Equalities	<p>The Electoral Commission's 2003 research found that "the apparent disparities and contradictions of the current pattern of electoral cycles are not, in themselves, of particular concern to us. However, our research has found significant evidence of confusion and misunderstanding which suggests that many electors</p>	

	<p>simply do not know when or why local elections are held in their area.”</p> <p>The Commission concluded that a pattern of whole-council elections for all authorities in England would provide a clear, equitable and easy to understand electoral process which would best serve the interests of local government electors.</p>	
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5. Reason for recommendation

- 5.1. The Council agreed to accept the findings of the LGA’s Corporate Peer Challenge, considering the evidence and opportunities presented in this paper will fulfil that commitment.
- 5.2. It is recommended that, if Council decide to change the election cycle, that this is implemented in line with the ward boundary review which will already see a whole council election in May 2026, thereby reducing any duplication in the recourses and capacity required to implement another in the future.

6. Other Options

- 6.1. The decision as to whether to change the election cycle is a political one, the results of the consultation are advisory only.

7. Financial Implications

- 7.1. The Council’s annual revenue budget to fund the costs of local elections in a financial year is currently £132.8k. The Council receives Government grants to support the cost of General elections but not specifically for local elections. The Council does however receive Government grant funding for elections held at the same time/different times as local elections for elections such as the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner election.
- 7.2. The annual budget of £132.8k is used to part fund the net cost of elections (after the deduction of any applicable in-year Government grants from the gross cost) with the balance of funding coming from the Council’s electoral reserve. In one of the four years, there may be some ancillary or preparation costs but not the full costs of a local election and therefore there is a contribution from the revenue budget of £132.8k back to the electoral reserve to help support the cost of elections in the other three years.
- 7.3. The gross cost of the elections in 2022/23 and 2023/24 were respectively £280.4k and £271.1k. These were funded by the base budget of £132.8k, government grants and the electoral reserve. The average net annual cost of elections to the council’s budget across those two years was circa £225k.

- 7.4. The electoral reserve is currently being reviewed given the increasing costs associated with holding annual elections.
- 7.5. In addition, the significant decrease in productivity and staffing capacity during the election period cannot be underestimated and has not been financially costed.
- 7.6. It should be noted that by-elections are more likely to occur under a system of whole-Council elections. Under the Council's current arrangements, if a councillor resigns or dies within 6 months of their seat coming up for election, the election can be held at the same time as the annual cycle of elections in May, rather than separately as a by-election. Therefore, elections held 3 out of 4 years minimises the number of by-elections whereas elections every 4 years could increase the number of by-elections. Funding (£10,000) would need to be set aside each year to fund a possible by-election.
- 7.7. The savings achieved by the proposed changes to the electoral cycle arrangements would contribute towards meeting the Council's financial challenges both in terms of a direct financial contribution but also with increased staff productivity and capacity to deliver the Council's Corporate Plan.

8. Legal Implications

- 8.1. The Local Government and Public involvement in Health Act 2007 ("The Act"), as amended by the Localism Act 2011, sets out a number of provisions in relation to elections including one enabling a council to vary the cycle of elections. The Act allows councils that elect by thirds to move to whole-Council elections. However, the law does not permit councils to move from elections by thirds to elections by halves.
- 8.2. For Council to consider the question of moving towards holding four-yearly elections, a public consultation exercise must be undertaken before any final decision was made. The results are advisory only.
- 8.3. This matter is now coming back to Council for a decision on whether to change the electoral pattern of the Council. In order for a change to be agreed, two thirds of councillors must vote in favour. In Southend-on-Sea City Council this equates to 34 councillors agreeing to a change.

9. Carbon Impact

- 9.1. See 4.12 above.

10. Equalities

- 10.1. An equalities impact assessment ensured that the consultation was carried out with due regard to facilitating participation by those with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. In response, various groups

were identified and contacted with promotional material, including an Easy Read guide.

10.2. See 4.13 above.

11. Consultation

11.1. Residents, council employees and partners were asked to participate in a 9-week consultation. 1,190 responses were submitted. Whilst the consultation was not a referendum and the outcome is advisory only, time should be taken to carefully consider residents views. There was no strong preference from residents with 50.6% in favour of 'thirds' and 49.4% in favour of whole council elections, this equates to just 13 responses difference. Given the close outcome, the comments section provides useful insight and can be read in full at Appendix C. Council employees identified more opportunities for improved working in moving to a whole-council election cycle and 100% of partners supported whole-council elections. The details of this feedback can be read in Appendix B.

11.2. In addition to the information provided in Appendix A & C, we draw your attention to the design of the consultation, where group leaders took the decision to make the consultation as open and accessible as possible. This meant that registration was not required to participate and demographic or personal details about the participant were not collected. The risk of which is open to multiple responses balanced with fewer restrictions to participation.

11.3. However, date, time location and preference data points were analysed in order to identify any abuse of the system. Analysis does not suggest that large batches of entries were made in close succession.

12. Appendices

- Appendix A - Engagement plan
- Appendix B – Partner and Staff Consultation Results
- Appendix C – Public Consultation Results

Background paper: 19 October 2023 Full Council paper, Election Cycle change consultation

13. Report Authorisation

This report has been approved for publication by:		
	Name:	Date:
S151 Officer	Joe Chesterton	03/06/24
Monitoring Officer	Susan Zeiss	23/04/24
Executive Director(s)	Claire Shuter	23/04/24
Relevant Cabinet Member(s)	Cllr Cowan	31/05/24

