

REPORT TO: ELECTORAL REVIEW WORKING GROUP

DATE: 30 NOVEMBER 2021

TITLE: HARLOW COUNCIL ELECTORAL CYCLES

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RECOMMENDED that:

- A** The Working Group recommends to Full Council whether a consultation on changing to all-out district elections should be carried out and what form that consultation should take.

BACKGROUND

1. Currently the Council holds its elections in thirds. Each year, one Councillor for each of the 11 wards is elected. On the fourth year, the Council doesn't hold elections. Essex County Council holds its elections in this year.
2. The Council is also, at the request of the LGBCE, reviewing its electoral arrangements. This is because a number of the wards have populations which are over 10 percent above or below the ward average. Should the ward boundaries change, there will be a requirement to hold all-out elections where all seats would be up for election regardless of how long the remaining term was.
3. The Council has the power to switch from holding elections by thirds to all-out elections permanently. If such a change were to occur it would be best for this to align with the all-out elections which would be triggered by ward changes. The Council has been asked to implement new ward boundaries by 2024.
4. There is no one size fits all approach to election cycles. About two thirds of councils currently hold all-out elections with the remaining councils holding them by thirds.

ISSUES/PROPOSALS

5. Neither election cycle type is inherently better than the other, but they have advantages and disadvantages over each other. Below is a table summarising most of the more common ones:

a) Elections by thirds – Pros

- i) Provides continuity of Councillors and knowledge as not all Councillors are up for election. More experienced Councillors can also carry out a mentor role with newer Councillors.
- ii) Provides a more up to date reflection of the views of local people through more frequent opportunities to vote.
- iii) Electorate are used to the current system.
- iv) Fewer candidates needed each election meaning that all seats are more likely to be contested.
- v) More regular opportunities for people to stand for election and provides a regular influx of new councillors who can bring new ideas and fresh approaches to the Council.
- vi) Yearly district elections are more likely to coincide with national elections and it is more likely they can be scheduled alongside by-elections, reducing costs.
- vii) The counting process is more straightforward and faster because electors only vote for one candidate.
- viii) Allows for more stability with gradual change at the council, rather than the possibility of big changes every four years.
- ix) Polling stations, staff and everyone involved can plan for always having an election every year on the first Thursday in May and are less likely to have by-elections at short notice.

b) Elections by thirds – Cons

- i) Wards must all have three Councillors.
- ii) Elections can be costly to administer each year.
- iii) Constant yearly campaigning by Candidates may lead to voter fatigue and a lack of interest.
- iv) Administrations may be more likely to avoid taking contentious decisions through fear of losing votes at upcoming elections

c) All-out elections – Pros

- i) Allows for single or multi-member wards.
- ii) Voters will get to see a four-year mandate and long-term commitments from candidates.
- iii) Potentially more effective political management and greater political stability. It allows for a strategic approach to policy and decision-making in line with medium term financial strategy as the administration has a four year period to deliver its mandate
- iv) Allows for a complete change in councillors.
- v) Less costly as only once every 4 years. It is estimated that over a 10 year period there would be a saving of £285,000 with the electoral cycle being the same as for the Police, Fire and Crime Commissioner.
- vi) Fewer elections may mean less election fatigue so people may be more interested in voting when the times comes.

d) All-out elections – Cons

- i) Administration of the election is more challenging due to the greater number of candidates, and the counting process being more complicated.
- ii) Loss of knowledge and experience if all councillors could change which could impact on build-up of knowledge etc.
- iii) There may be difficulties identifying sufficient candidates to contest all seats, resulting in uncontested elections, lower quality candidates.
- iv) All out elections may disadvantage smaller political parties who may not have the resources to campaign across the town and put forward as many candidates.
- v) Electors can only have their say once every four years on how the Council is performing
- vi) If a large number of Councillors are replaced in one election this may be disruptive and may lead to big changes to policies, plans and services.
- vii) Likelihood of increase in by-elections as councillors may not be able to stay for full 4 years and so would incur more costs and may be difficult to book venues at different times of the year, especially at short notice.

- viii) May lose experienced election staff if they are not used as regularly and staff will have fewer opportunities to develop skills.

Cost of Elections

6. The Council budgets £85,000 for a standalone district election. There are some fixed costs for elections such as polling venue hire, which mean that combined elections are comparatively cheaper.
7. The Council is able to claim back costs associated with non-district council elections, although it must budget for the initial outlay.
8. If the Council switched to all-out elections, there would be some years where there would be no elections ordinary elections at all. The Council would therefore only need to budget for by-elections, which are clearly much cheaper to run due to their limited scale.
9. Under the current electoral cycle the Council budgets £10,000 on non-district council election years in the event there are by-elections. Under all-out elections the likelihood of by-elections is greater and budget of £27,500 would be required.
10. It is estimated that over a ten year period the switching to all-out elections would save the Council £285,000. This does not factor in inflation and assumes that General Elections will be held in five year intervals.

Next Steps

11. The Council would be required to carry out a public consultation on a possible change to all-out elections before Full Council could approve any change. Any change would be aligned to the requirement to have all-out elections for the revised ward boundaries which would take effect from 2024.
12. The Working Groups is invited to consider the information above and decide whether it would like to carry out a public consultation.
13. The Council is also aiming to submit proposals on the number of Councillors that will be elected to the Council. This will be subject to a separate report which will include an analysis of current Councillor workload. However, it is important that the Council determines what electoral cycle it wishes to have as continuing to hold elections by thirds will require the number of Councillors to be a multiple of three.
14. The LGBCE expects the Council to submit its proposals for council size before March 2022. Therefore any work on electoral cycles must take place as soon as possible so it can feed into the work on council size.

IMPLICATIONS

Environment and Planning (Includes Sustainability)

None specific.

Author: Andrew Bramidge, Director of Strategic Growth and Regeneration

Finance (Includes ICT, and Property and Facilities)

As contained in the report.

Author: Simon Freeman, Deputy to the Chief Executive and Director of Finance

Housing

None specific.

Author: Andrew Murray, Director of Housing

Community Wellbeing

As contained in the report.

Author: Jane Greer, Director of Communities and Environment

Governance (Includes HR)

As contained in the report.

Author: Simon Hill, Director of Governance and Corporate Support

Appendices

Appendix A – Electoral Cycles Leaflet

Appendix B – Equality Impact Decision Tree

Background Papers

None.

Glossary of terms/abbreviations used

None.