



WEST OXFORDSHIRE  
DISTRICT COUNCIL

## WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL

Name and date of Committee	EXTRAORDINARY COUNCIL – 29 JANUARY 2025
Subject	FREQUENCY OF ELECTIONS TO WEST OXFORDSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL
Wards affected	All
Accountable member	Councillor Alaric Smith, Chair of the Constitution Working Group Email: <a href="mailto:Alaric.Smith@westoxon.gov.uk">Alaric.Smith@westoxon.gov.uk</a>
Accountable officer	Andrea McCaskie, Director of Governance Email: <a href="mailto:democratic.services@westoxon.gov.uk">democratic.services@westoxon.gov.uk</a>
Report author	Andrew Brown, Head of Democratic and Electoral Services Email: <a href="mailto:democratic.services@westoxon.gov.uk">democratic.services@westoxon.gov.uk</a>
Summary/Purpose	To invite Council to take a formal decision to change the electoral cycle to whole-Council elections every four years from May 2027 (which will require a 2/3 majority at this specially convened meeting), following the in principle decision taken unanimously at the 27 November 2024 full Council meeting.
Annexes	None
Recommendation(s)	That Council resolves to: <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>I. Agree to change the cycle for electing councillors to West Oxfordshire District Council from elections by thirds to whole-Council elections, to commence in May 2027.</li></ol>
Corporate priorities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Putting Residents First</li><li>• Working Together for West Oxfordshire</li></ul>
Key Decision	NO
Exempt	NO
Consultees/	The Council's Management Team

Consultation	Council on 27 November 2024 authorised the Chief Executive Officer to seek the views of town and parish councils on whether to harmonise ordinary elections of all town and parish councils within the district area with district council elections from May 2027, in the event that the District Council does decide to move to whole-Council elections from May 2027.
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## **1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- 1.1** West Oxfordshire District Council is subject to an electoral review by The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (“the Commission”). The review is primarily aimed at addressing variances in the numbers of electors in wards across the district.
- 1.2** Phase I of the review is to consider the future size of the Council i.e. the number of Councillors, also known as Members, on West Oxfordshire District Council.
- 1.3** Council on 27 November 2024 approved a Council Size Proposal for submission to the Commission. The Council is requesting an unchanged size of 49 Members.
- 1.4** The Council Size Proposal is predicated on the Council changing its cycle of elections from elections by thirds three years out of every four years to whole-Council elections every four years.
- 1.5** Council on 27 November 2024 agreed in principle to move to whole-Council elections every four years from May 2027 but a formal decision to change the electoral cycle can only be taken at a meeting specially convened for this purpose.
- 1.6** Council is recommended to take a decision on its future electoral cycle notwithstanding the implications of the English Devolution White Paper.

## **2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1** The Council currently has 49 Members representing 27 wards, with a mix of 1, 2 and 3-Member wards. Maintaining the status quo of elections by thirds with a mix of 1, 2 and 3-Member wards is not an option that is open to the Council under current legislation.

## **3. WHOLE COUNCIL ELECTIONS**

- 3.1** A survey of Members was conducted to seek views to inform the development of the Council Size Proposal. The results showed that 42% of respondents favoured whole-Council elections and 19% favoured maintaining elections by thirds. However, at that time nearly a third of Members responded that they would need more information to form a view.
- 3.2** The survey results also showed that members were concerned about the potential size of 3-Member wards in rural areas and the challenges of representing large geographical areas comprising a sizeable number of parish areas.
- 3.3** The Constitution Working Group recommended, and Council on 27 November 2024 agreed, that maintaining a size of 49 Councillors with a mix of 1, 2 and 3-Member wards would be appropriate for the district to ensure effective representation for communities and sufficient Member-capacity on the Council into the future.
- 3.4** To enable the Council to continue with a mix of 1, 2, 3-Member wards, full Council would need to change its electoral cycle to whole Council elections. This is a decision for the Council rather than the Commission. Council on 27 November 2024 unanimously agreed in principle to move to whole-Council elections every four years from May 2027. However, a

formal decision to change the electoral cycle can only be taken at a specially convened full Council meeting by a two thirds majority.

- 3.5** The recommended change to the electoral cycle would be effective from May 2027 in line with the implementation of the electoral review. However, due to the electoral review, whole Council elections would be held in 2027 on new boundaries even if the Council wished to retain elections by thirds. The effect of the change to the electoral cycle would therefore be to change 2028 and 2029 to non-election years for the District Council and for whole-Council elections to be held in 2031 and every fourth year thereafter.

#### **4. LOCAL GOVERNMENT REORGANISATION**

- 4.1** On 16 December 2024 the Government published the English Devolution White Paper, setting out wide ranging proposals for changes to local government. It includes the reorganisation of the current structures of Local Government in two-tier (i.e. county and district council) areas. Under the plans all areas of the country are to be covered by unitary councils which would mean that all district and county councils would cease to exist in their current form.
- 4.2** Following the publication of the White Paper, the Council has sought clarification from the Commission on the implications of the White Paper on the electoral review of West Oxfordshire District Council. The Commission has advised that it is carefully considering the contents of the White Paper and the potential impact of the proposed local government reorganisation on its work programme. The Commission will continue to monitor the situation as more detail on the Government's proposals emerge and will provide the Council with an update as soon as it can on whether there is any impact on the electoral review of West Oxfordshire District Council. In the meantime, the Commission has advised the Council to proceed as normal submitting the council size proposal and other preliminary information.
- 4.3** Clearly if the district council was to cease to exist in its current form at some point in the next few years then that would supersede the recommendation in this report. Given that the Council has been advised by the Commission to continue as normal, Council is recommended to take a decision on the electoral cycle at the extraordinary meeting notwithstanding the expected implications of the White Paper.

#### **5. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS**

- 5.1** The alternative to whole-Council elections is to retain elections by thirds but with a uniform pattern of 3-Member wards across the whole of the district area. This would necessitate the creation of some very large 3-Member wards in sparsely populated rural areas and concerns were expressed in the survey results, by the Constitution Working Group and at the full Council meeting on 27 November 2024 that this would not be conducive to effective representation. This option would also require a council size which is divisible by 3 e.g. 48 or 51 Members but not 49 Members, meaning the Council would need to revisit the Council Size Proposal if the recommendation in this report is not agreed.

## **6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1** Moving from holding district elections three years out of every four to once every four years would result in some savings in the cost of administering elections. The detail of any such savings would need to be worked through and factored into the Council's medium term financial strategy from 2027 onwards if this proposal is agreed by full Council. However, the primary consideration for full Council is to ensure appropriate governance and electoral arrangements for the district into the future.

## **7. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1** The electoral cycle is a decision for the Council and any change to the current arrangement of elections by thirds requires a 2/3 majority vote at a specially convened meeting of full Council under Section 33 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.

## **8. RISK ASSESSMENT**

- 8.1** There is a risk that full Council approves the Draft Council Size Proposal, which requires a simple majority, but does not approve a consequential change to the electoral cycle, which requires a two thirds majority. This would serve to negate the Draft Council Size Proposal, which is based on whole-Council elections rather than elections by thirds.

## **9. EQUALITIES IMPACT**

- 9.1** There are no equalities implications arising directly from this report.

## **10. CLIMATE AND ECOLOGICAL EMERGENCIES IMPLICATIONS**

- 10.1** There are no climate and ecological emergencies implications arising directly from this report.

## **11. BACKGROUND PAPERS**

- 11.1** None.

(END)