

Report to: Policy and Resources Committee, 21st November 2023

Report of: Corporate Director - Planning and Governance

Subject: ST PETER THE GREAT COUNTY PARISH COUNCIL/ WARNDON PARISH COUNCIL: REVIEW OF ELECTORAL ARRANGEMENTS

1. Recommendation

1.1 That the Committee identifies a preferred option for the ordinary year of election for St Peter the Great County Parish Council and Warndon Parish Council and refers the matter onto full Council to make a final determination.

2. Background

- 2.1 At an Extra-Ordinary meeting of Council on 22nd February 2022, the City Council resolved to change from elections by thirds to whole council elections every 4 years as from 2024.
- 2.2 The resolution was passed following the outcome of a stakeholder consultation process which concluded that the majority of respondents supported a move to whole council elections with a sizeable minority preferring to remain with elections by thirds.
- 2.3 As a result of this decision, it now means that Warndon Parish Council and St Peter the Great Parish Council, who also hold whole council elections every 4 years, have a different 4-year election cycle.
- 2.4 Both parishes had scheduled elections in May 2023, although in the event there were no contested seats. The next elections are scheduled to take place for both parishes in May 2027, being a year behind the City Council elections in May 2028.
- 2.5 The current parish election timings mean that the parish councils would be required to fund the whole cost of administering their Poll from May 2027, as opposed to sharing the cost with the City Council, which both parishes did when the City Council held its elections by thirds. Both parish councils have expressed their view to the Deputy Returning Officer for Worcester that with limited budgets, self-funding whole parish elections would not be sustainable.
- 2.6 The power of the City Council to change Parish Council cycles is contained in Section 53 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. Detailed Government guidance on community governance reviews includes guidance on reviewing the ordinary year of election of parish councils.
- 2.7 Prior to the parish council elections held on 4th May 2023, both parish councils published a formal notice stating that the parish council was minded to request that Worcester City Council conducts a review, including carrying out a public

consultation process, of the parish council electoral arrangements to determine what the ordinary year of election should be.

- 2.8 Following the publication of the formal notice and substantial discussions between the City Council's Deputy Returning Officer, St Peter the Great County Parish Council on 13th April 2023 and Warndon Parish Council at its meeting on 3rd April 2023 resolved to request the City Council to take any necessary steps to review parish council electoral arrangements to determine the ordinary year of election, including the delivery of a consultation process if required. Furthermore, the decision made by the City Council regarding the parish electoral cycle, has been requested by both Parish Councils to be made by the end of 2023 at the latest.
- 2.9 At its meeting on 11 July 2023, the City Council resolved to undertake a public consultation on options for the Parish Councils' ordinary year of election and to report back on the outcome of that consultation.

3. Consultation Process

- 3.1 The City Council ran a consultation process from 7 August to 17 September. The consultation was publicised in local media and through the local Parish Councils. The consultation took the form of an online survey on the City Council's website, with a means a returning hard copy ie paper responses also provided in the Guildhall and all of the information being circulated directly to the Parish Councils for onward distribution. At the end of the consultation period, a total of 27 consultation responses were received through the online survey. No hard copy responses were received.
- 3.2 The consultation invited respondents to select a preferred option from the following list:
- Option 1:** Extend term of office following May 2023 elections by 1 year resulting in the next Parish elections taking place in May 2028 with City Council elections.
 - Option 2:** Reduce term of office following May 2023 elections to 1 year resulting in the next Parish elections taking place in May 2024 with City Council elections.
 - Option 3:** Make no changes, resulting in the next Parish elections taking place in 2027 on their own and every four years after.
 - Option 4:** Hold an election in 2027 and then have another election in 2028 and thenceforward every four years (in line with the Worcester City Council cycle)
 - Option 5:** Hold an election in 2027 and then not have another election until 2032 and thenceforward every four years (in line with the Worcester City Council cycle)
- 3.3 Of the 27 respondents, 81.48% (22 respondents) indicated that they were Worcester residents and 18.52% (5) indicated that they were parish councillors. The consultation did not invite respondents to draw any distinction between the two

Parish Councils nor to identify themselves as being interested in a particular Parish Council.

3.4 The responses were as follows:

51.8% (14 respondents) favoured option 1

33.3% (9 respondents) favoured option 2

3.7% (1 respondent) favoured option 3

0 % (0 respondents) favoured option 4

11.1% (3 respondents) favoured option 5

3.5 The following comments were made by 7 of the respondents:

"As the term of office was unknown at the time of the parish elections in May 2023. It would seem a fairer option to hold the next Parish election in May 2024 in-line with City elections once the outcome of this consultation has been decided.

It seems sensible to bring the parish council elections into line with the city council on the grounds of cost.

Fully costed information should be included with each option, to highlight what cost impact would be for each on the tax payer.

The cost of holding Parish Council elections separate from either the City or County Council election cycle makes it an expensive option for the parish councils to meet entirely from their own budget. As elections were only held in May of this year it seems unnecessary to hold fresh elections just 12 months later.

Option 1 will save thousands of £s in unnecessary election expenses if the Parish and City Council elections are all held at the same time.

Standalone elections would consume a very significant part of the small precept that St. Peter's Parish Council has at its disposal and which could otherwise be spent for the betterment of our community. Having just had our parish elections and (as is usually the case) ended up with less candidates than seats, I see no need to go to another election next year or indeed in 2027. An extra year on the current term seems the easiest route forward so that by 2028 both parish and city are in synch.

Parish Council elections must be in line with City Council Elections to avoid wasting resident's precept taxation. Separate elections are in fact double taxation!"

3.6 It should be acknowledged that a survey size of 27 responses is very small, even taking account of the localised nature of Parish Council business.

3.7 City Council officers have contacted the Parish Councils (via their Chairs and Clerks) to obtain their views on the preferred option. St Peters Parish Council has confirmed their preference is Option 1, ie the next election would be held in 2028. Warndon Parish Council confirmed their preference is Option 2 ie the next election would be held in 2024. Any further views of the Parish Councils in response to the consultation feedback and this Committee report, will be reported to the Committee at its meeting.

- 3.8 The City Council is entitled to take account of other information that may be considered relevant to the determination of the appropriate ordinary year of election for the Parish Councils. Relevant information could include:
- Financial impact;
 - Consideration of which options best achieve convenient and effective local government;
 - Evidence of demand for elections in the Parishes, including number of candidates nominated and voter turnout levels- this information will be available for the Committee meeting.

4. Preferred Option

- 4.1 The Committee should identify a preferred option and refer this matter to the meeting of Council on 28 November for a final determination and the making of an order to change the Parish Council electoral cycle, if that is what is decided.
- 4.2 Deciding to proceed with any of the options to change the electoral cycle, will require the City Council to make a formal Order, in accordance with the legislation, to bring the change into effect and then duly publicise its decision.

5. Implications

5.1 Financial and Budgetary Implications

By changing both the parish councils 4-year election cycles to align with the 4-year election cycle for the City Council, would result in costs remaining in line with existing budgets which allow for parish elections at the same time as City Council elections. Not changing the cycle would result in some costs arising for the City Council in terms of arranging and managing the election which could not reasonably be passed to the parish councils, such as premises costs and management time. These are difficult to quantify but would not be significantly in addition to the Council's existing budgeted costs. As indicated in the report, transferring the full costs of running a stand-alone election to the parish councils would create significant financial pressures for those councils.

5.2 Legal and Governance Implications

In situations where a Council has resolved to change its own election cycle, the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, Section 53 gives power to councils to alter years of ordinary elections of parish councillors. The council may by order make provision that changes the years in which the ordinary elections of parish councillors for any parish situated in the council's area are to be held.

The power may only be exercised so as to secure that those elections are to be held in years in which ordinary elections of district councillors for a ward in which any part of the parish is situated are to be held.

5.3 Risk Implications

There are no significant risks identified.

5.4 Corporate/Policy Implications

Any change to both parish council 4-year election cycles would be published on the Council's website, Parish Council websites and publicised with stakeholders.

5.5 Equality Implications

Anonymous equality information was collected as part of the consultation process and no specific equality implications were identified.

Elections must be delivered in such a way as to ensure the needs of people with protected characteristics are considered and appropriately accommodated.

5.6 Human Resources Implications

None identified.

5.7 Health and Safety Implications

None identified.

5.8 Social, Environmental and Economic Implications

Regular review and debate of the Council's governance and electoral arrangements is one mechanism by which the residents and businesses of Worcester can be assured that the Council is responsive to their needs and interests.

Ward(s): **Warndon Parish South/Warndon Parish North/St Peter's**

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Background Papers: **None**