



HOUSE OF COMMONS  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

Peterborough City Council

*Sent via email*

8 September 2022

### **Response to the consultation on Peterborough's electoral cycle**

The Governance Review produced by Andrew Flockhart is a thoughtful document, containing many helpful suggestions. His recommendation to consider 'through an evaluation process, the option of moving to "all out elections" on a four-year cycle' was one of eleven summarised points.

Mr Flockhart did not recommend that this change happen – and nor did DLUHC in its correspondence. A change should be considered in Peterborough because, in his words, being 'in NOC alongside annual elections presents the risk of a short-term approach'. He left it for the evaluation process to determine whether this risk is best addressed by changing the electoral cycle.

Governance is obviously easier without NOC (No Overall Control), but elections in thirds do not make NOC outcomes more likely. Where majority control already exists, I agree that holding elections once every four years reduces the chance of moving into NOC, while providing a window for controversial decisions. Whether this always improves decision-making is debatable, as the case of Croydon Council exemplifies.

Conversely,, a switch to all-out elections would reduce Peterborough's opportunities to get out of NOC by two-thirds. In my opinion, the governance problem at the City Council is 'No Overall Control' itself, not the electoral cycle. An all-out election could easily lock-in the instability of NOC for another four years, having the opposite effect on governance to that intended. Nor would the change be of any tangible benefit to the Council's financial position, which has seen good progress following the External Assurance Review.

Mr Flockhart wasn't wrong in identifying the risk of short-term thinking, but consideration identifies other risks that are worse. One risk can be dismissed, however. I am aware that some people regard moving to all-out elections as necessary to avoid jeopardising Peterborough City Council's standing with DLUHC. Having discussed this view with both the current minister and with his predecessor when the review was published, I know that the Government regards the choice as entirely local. There is no prospect of Peterborough City Council being harmed by retaining its current electoral cycle and this would not be a factor in other departmental decisions.

There are two further points in favour of elections by thirds. First, as the Council notes in its press release, ‘it can reduce the difficulties associated with having several new members within the council at once and allow for succession planning’. This rather understates the difficulties: some local authorities that elect every four years saw half their councillors change in 2022, through a combination of retirements and defeats. Having this many inexperienced members does not lead to good decision-making.

Secondly, the impact of an individual vote changes in an all-out election. Smaller parties often stand just one candidate in a multi-member ward, regardless of the three positions being contested. This deprives some voters of the chance to use all three of their votes as they would ideally wish, while skewing the outcome for candidates with the misfortune to have a surname lower down the alphabet. We shouldn’t switch to an electoral cycle in which winning or losing can be determined by someone’s surname.

Finally, I am concerned by the consultation form itself, which the Council has framed as an online poll. Reasons and evidence are treated as incidental, left for “any other comments” that the respondent “may have” to fill a one-line, non-expanding box. Consultations are not polls because the responses are self-selecting and unrepresentative. Their purpose should be to elicit thorough and well-argued responses, which the structure of the online form actively discourages. This does not follow best practice.

The vast majority of Peterborough’s voters will not be aware of the consultation. I hope that local residents will not have their electoral arrangements changed by a tiny minority who are aware, but have nothing substantive to say. A single good reason should be given greater weight than a hundred ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answers, because the outcome should rely on the merits of the argument alone.

The Government asked us to consider whether changing the electoral cycle would help us and that case is at best unproven, with the evidence pointing the other way. In my view, we should stick with the arrangements that we have.

Yours faithfully,



**Paul Bristow MP**

Member of Parliament for Peterborough