



# **Cheltenham Borough Council Elections MOVING TO A FOUR-YEAR ELECTION CYCLE**

## **Information sheet for Public Consultation**

- **Cheltenham Borough Council's Cabinet has suggested changing from a two-year election cycle to a four-year election cycle.**
- **The Cabinet would like to find out your views on this matter on the attached survey. This briefing will give you some background information.**

### **Background**

The Council is composed of forty councillors, with two councillors representing each of the twenty wards. Each Councillor holds office for four years. The Council holds biennial elections with half the Council (i.e. one Councillor for each ward) retiring or seeking re-election at any one time. The result of the elections over the last few years has led to no one party in control or a very slim majority. A series of minority administrations have run the Council and this may have affected the stability of the Council politically and the ability to plan in the medium to long term beyond a two year election timeframe.

Cheltenham Borough Council reviewed its governance and electoral system in response to changes required by the Local Government Act 2000. The review led to the adoption of a new Council constitution, a Leader Cabinet form of executive, overview and scrutiny committees, a standards committee, a new set of ward boundaries and new election cycle. This new governance and electoral system was implemented by Cheltenham Borough Council in 2001.

The first set of elections following the adoption of changes made for the Local Government Act 2000 were held in May 2002 when the whole Council was elected. The result was a change of control from the Conservatives to the Liberal Democrats with an overall majority of one. In the two elections held since 2002, the Council composition has changed to one of No Overall Control. In 2004 the Liberal Democrats formed a minority administration with 18 Councillors, and in 2006 the Conservatives formed a minority administration with 17 Councillors.

The recent Local Government White Paper, "Strong and Prosperous Communities" (2006), proposes that future Council executives (Leader and/or Cabinet) will be elected for a four year term. In addition, the White Paper makes it easier for an authority to move to whole Council elections once every four years in order to facilitate the four year term of an executive, encourage longer term strategic thinking and also increase electoral turnout.

It should be borne in mind that even if a decision is taken to move to whole Council elections for Cheltenham Borough Council every four years, there will still be other elections on a regular basis for Parish, County and Parliamentary elections.

**The arguments for and against changing to a four-year cycle are below:**

### **The case to retain a two year election cycle**

There are several arguments for retaining the existing two year election cycle for Cheltenham Borough Council. A summary of the key arguments is set out as follows:

- Two yearly elections give more frequent opportunities for electors in Cheltenham to exercise their right to vote;
- There may be no dramatic change in political control which ensures that the political composition of the authority more accurately reflects the current political complexion of Cheltenham;
- The experience of councillors as a whole would be preserved since only half of Members face an election at any one time, which allows for a degree of continuity;
- Cheltenham residents have accepted a two yearly cycle over the last three elections and now know when these occur.

### **The case for a four year election cycle**

There are several arguments for changing Cheltenham Borough Council to a four year election cycle. A summary of the key arguments is set out as follows:

- A four year cycle would enable the Council to adopt a more strategic approach to policy and decision making and provide for better stability in Council affairs over the medium and longer terms;
- A four yearly cycle would provide for stronger political leadership and lessen short term decision making for electoral gain;
- Cost savings can be made by moving to a 4 year cycle by halving the number of elections required. Additional savings could also be realised in training budgets for both officers and Members resulting from a lower turnover of Members and the reduced need to train them for Induction, Planning, Licensing and Standards;
- A number of neighbouring authorities at Parish, District and County levels already operate a four year cycle and there is a case to try to establish uniform voting patterns, if possible, to try to make the system easier for voters to understand;

**The deadline for responses is Friday 30 March 2007.**

**A decision on the election cycle term will be made by Full Council.**