

OUTCOME OF ELECTORAL REVIEW WORKSHOP

Council - 22 November 2016

Report of Chief Officer Corporate Services

Status: For Decision

Also considered Governance Committee - 3 November 2016
by:

Key Decision: No

Portfolio Holder Cllr. Anna Firth

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Recommendations to Governance Committee: To agree to recommend the following to Council

Recommendations to Council: That

- (a) (i) an approach be made to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) to initiate an electoral review of this Council with the objective of a significant reduction in the number of councillors by the 2019 elections;
- (ii) the Leader of the Council and the Chief Executive be authorised to meet representatives of the LGBCE to discuss the process and a potential review timetable, and
- (iii) options to set up a Member Task & Finish Group to oversee the process are considered.
- (iv) a supplementary estimate of £50k to £70k be agreed, funded from the Budget Stabilisation Reserve to support the review process.

OR

- (b) no action be taken at this stage, but the matter be reconsidered shortly after the 2019 local elections

Reason for recommendation: If the Council wish to initiate an electoral review that could conclude and be implemented at the 2019 local elections an approach would need to be made before the end of 2016. Thus a decision needs to be made at this meeting of the Governance Committee, for consideration at full Council on 22 November.

Introduction and Background

- 1 At the meeting of the Governance Committee on 20 October 2015 a report was submitted setting out the processes and timescales were the Council minded to request the LGBCE to carry out an electoral review of this Council. The report indicated that the current electoral ratios of the Wards of the District Council are within the “acceptable” criteria set by the LGBCE and so no imposed review would take place. The report also noted that the Council had the lowest number of electors per Councillor in the County and that this would fall further according to Kent County Councils population projections.
- 2 Following that meeting a Member Survey was carried out to consider all Members’ views on the possibility of reducing the number of District Councillors. The result of that survey was reported to the last meeting of this Committee on 13 April 2016. 33 Members had responded with 55% (18) in favour of a review and 45% (15) against the proposal.
- 3 At the Governance Committee on 13 April 2016, following a further discussion which other members present also contributed to, the Committee resolved that:
 - a) further work be undertaken, particularly with an aim of improving the Council’s data on the projections for the future electorate and re-consult with Members before the Governance Committee meeting of 3 November 2016;
 - b) the Governance Committee hold a workshop open to all Members, inviting guests to speak about the experience of a reduction in Members at other Councils, with a report back to the Committee at its meeting on 3 November 2016.

Electoral Review Workshop - Results

- 4 At the request of the Governance Committee an Electoral Review Workshop was held on 10 October, with all Members invited. Cllr Pett, as Chairman of Governance Committee, chaired the Workshop and eight other Members were in attendance. A note outlining the areas of discussion, and views expressed, is attached at Appendix A.
- 5 An Officer from Shepway District Council, who have been through such a review process leading to a significant reduction in the number of their Members, was due to attend but unfortunately was not able to on the day.

Electoral Review - issues

- 6 Clearly an electoral review is a lengthy process, requiring considerable time and effort. It should not be undertaken unless it is likely to produce worthwhile results. It should be stressed that at present, and for the foreseeable future, the current position does not have any significant

electoral anomalies. It really is a question of whether the overall number of Members is correct.

7 Broadly speaking, the LGBCE takes a view on the right council size by considering:

- The governance arrangements of the council, how it takes decisions across the broad range of its responsibilities, and whether there are any planned changes to those arrangements. If the council has too few members, it might not be able to take important decisions quickly and the council could lack democratic accountability in some areas of its work. Too many councillors could lead to inefficient decision-making and would not provide the kind of effective local government the Commission tries to encourage.
- The council's scrutiny functions relating to its own decision-making and the council's responsibilities to outside bodies, and whether any changes to them are being considered;
- The representational role of councillors in the local community and how they engage with people, conduct casework and represent the council on local partner organisations.

8 In so doing it will seek a vision for the local authority in five to ten years' time. Likewise, when considering the division of the area into wards, it will seek six-year forecasts of electorate changes

9 If such a review were pursued it is suggested that the Council should seek an outcome that would produce a significant reduction in the number of councillors, probably to somewhere in the mid-thirties, and that would also:

- Provide a basis for ward boundaries that provide acceptable equality of representation and reflect the identities and interests of local communities;
- Produce manageable workloads for councillors;
- Reflect efficient working practices and the general contraction in the size of the organisation.

10 Any approach to the LGBCE would need justification from the process that the Council has already gone through. There would need to be recognition of the possible impacts on the Council, as discussed at the Workshop, and including:

- a) Reduction in the amount of business councillors need to transact at the council offices;
- b) Councillors would have to accommodate larger caseloads of ward work in the community;
- c) A possible reduction in the number, size and frequency of meetings of committees;

- d) Possible impact on ability to recruit candidates for election, and possible impact on political proportionality for minor groups;
 - e) Making best use of new ways of working in the digital environment;
 - f) Possible impact on the many joint arrangements providing services;
 - g) Reflecting that a smaller managerial and officer organisation needs to be matched by a reduction in councillors;
- 11 Should a review take place at the present time there would be a resource impact in terms of the work involved in providing the ward-based electorate projections and consideration of options to provide ward electoral equality. In particular the Planning Policy Team is fully stretched at present working on the Local Plan and Housing Market Needs. It would be the case that some of this work would provide some of the data-sets required by the projections process, but there would still be a need to draw all the different aspects together to provide solidly-backed electorate figures (which the LGBCE will expect).
 - 12 There could also be complications which arise from any known likely future large developments if they straddle ward or Parish boundaries, which would need consideration of a Community Governance Review in their own right, Fort Halstead being a case in point.
 - 13 It is also the case that the final decision relating to the number of Councillors and Ward Boundaries sits with the LGBCE with the Council adopting the outcome.
 - 14 If any review is progressed the Council would need to consider the setting up of a vehicle, such as a Task & Finish Group, for Member involvement.
 - 15 Given the current stage of the Local Plan process, and if Members are not minded to request a full review at this stage, an option would be to review Community Governance arrangements in the light of the Local Plan and Housing Needs Assessment. Any projected anomalies could then be regulated by making adjustments to Parish Boundaries, and to then reconsider the option of a full review after the 2019 local elections.

Other Options Considered and/or Rejected

None.

Key Implications

Financial

- 16 If a review took place there would be financial implications in carrying out the necessary electorate projections and the testing of options for achieving electoral equality with possible new Ward boundaries.

- 17 This would require a supplementary estimate of £50k to £70k to fund the required resource to support the review process. This amount is not currently built into the budget. This would need to come from reserves, most likely the Budget Stabilisation Reserve.

Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement.

- 18 Legal responsibility for any review lies with the LGBCE.

Equality Assessment

- 19 The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

Conclusions

- 20 Members have had an opportunity to provide their views, through a survey and a Workshop, as to whether they would support an electoral review for Sevenoaks District Council. For any review to be effective by the 2019 local elections, Members' must agree to approach the LGBCE now; the alternative being to re-consider the matter soon after those elections.

Appendices

Appendix A - Note from Electoral Review
Workshop 10 October 2016

Background Papers:

[Governance Committee 20 October 2015](#)

Item 8

[Governance Committee 13 April 2016](#)

Item 4

Jim Carrington-West
Chief Officer Corporate Services

