

Note from Electoral Review Workshop 10 October 2016

Members attending:

Cllr Pett - chaired the meeting
Cllr Dr Canet
Cllr Clack
Cllr Dickins
Cllr Esler
Cllr Eyre
Cllr Firth
Cllr Hunter
Cllr Purves

Cllr Pett set out the background to the workshop, referring to the previous discussions at meetings of the Governance Committee and the Member Survey carried out during March 2016. He suggested that the review option would be to look for a reduction in the number of Members from the present 54 to somewhere in the mid-30s.

Issues discussed and views expressed

- 1 Growing number of houses and population in the District. This would lead to a bigger workload on Members even at the current numbers.
- 2 Once the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) begins a review, the District Council would lose control of it and there could be a risk that a figure would be imposed. A recent review at Shepway District Council resulted in a reduction to 30 Members, whereas the Council itself had proposed 38.
- 3 Is the main driver for a review based on finance. Can the Council champion its population and protect its services as well, or better, with fewer Members.
- 4 The 700+ councillors across Kent currently cost around £6million a year, so there should be a case for reducing costs. Some Members felt that these costs could be reduced in other ways rather than reducing the numbers of representatives, such as reorganisation of committees.
- 5 It was suggested that the issues Members dealt with were different in Rural and Town areas, and that rural representation could be a more difficult job. This is not reflected in the electorate equality criteria.
- 6 One Member thought that reducing numbers would encourage political parties to be more discerning when selecting candidates. There was a general view that the input by Members varied widely, and that in some areas there was sometimes difficulty finding candidates to stand. There was no guarantee that a councillor who was part of a smaller number would necessarily be of the more active variety.

- 7 A worry was expressed that reducing numbers, which would broaden each councillor's role and number of population to represent may discourage working people from standing. Some felt that in fact some working Members put in a great deal more than some who did not work at present.
- 8 There was also a view expressed that fewer, larger, wards could result in political balance problems for minority parties. At an extreme these could be wiped out completely.
- 9 A view was expressed that given the contraction of the Council, in terms of the number of employees, and the significant changes made to the way the Council works with increased use of technology and self-service by customers, that the role of the councillor is diminished leading to the possibility of reducing councillor numbers.
- 10 In reality, the Executive Arrangements used by the Council concentrates power to the few Cabinet Members, and if this can be matched to an effective Scrutiny system and a first-class judicial committee system; then there should not be a need for the relatively large number of councillors as at present.
- 11 The last review to take place was some 16 years ago and there was some feeling that the Council should take control by initiating a review before the LGBCE imposed one. It was recognised that the current electoral imbalance of the Council was within LGBCE criteria, and is likely to remain like that for some years.
- 12 One view was that Members fell into 3 main categories -
 - a) Activist - leading/lobbying on particular issues
 - b) Business - getting involved in the day-to-day service activities
 - c) Case Worker - workload driven by local electors' issuesClearly Members carry out all these roles to different extents. It is the Case-Worker role that could increase for Members if there were fewer Members in total.
- 13 It was suggested that the Council's Communications Team need to be involved to ensure the local press portray a true view of any decision taken. Also that all Members of the Council should be advised of the Governance Committee meeting on 3 November and of the importance of the decision on this issue.
- 14 To conclude the meeting Cllr Pett asked for a show of hands of those present as to their view about inviting the LGBCE to carry out a review. Four of those present were in favour of looking for a reduction, three were against. One member had previously left - they had expressed a view that there was some scope to reduce, but not such a large reduction to the mid-30s.

The meeting concluded at 8.13pm