

ELECTORAL REVIEW – COUNCIL SIZE SUBMISSION

Council – 25 July 2024

Report of: Chief Executive

Status: For Consideration

Key Decision: No

Executive Summary: The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) is undertaking an electoral review of the Sevenoaks District during 2024 and 2025. An electoral review evaluates the number of Councillors required and reviews the warding patterns within the District boundary. This report recommends a draft Council Size submission, which should it be adopted by the LGBCE, would take effect from the next scheduled District Council elections in May 2027.

Contact Officer: Lee Banks, Ext. 7161

Recommendation to Council:

- (a) A proposed Council size of 48 District Councillors to be implemented from the May 2027 District Council elections is submitted to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England; and
- (b) The Draft Council Size submission, as set out at Appendix A, is approved.

Reason for recommendation: To ensure that Members are aware of and support the Council Size submission developed by the Governance Committee Member Working Group.

Introduction and Background

- 1 At its meeting on 30 January 2024 the Governance Committee were informed that the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) was to begin an Electoral Review of the District Council.
- 2 The timetable for the review meant that a Council Size submission would be required to be developed for submission on or before 2 September 2024.
- 3 To assist in developing a Council Size submission, the Governance Committee formed a Member Working Group to advise the Governance Committee over the duration of the review.
- 4 The membership of the Member Working Group is as follows:
 - Cllr Michael Horwood (Chairman)

- Cllr Kim Bayley
 - Cllr Graham Clack
 - Cllr Laura Manston
 - Cllr Elizabeth Purves
 - Cllr Lynda Harrison (consultant member)
 - Cllr Margot McArthur (consultant member)
- 5 The Member Working Group held their first meeting on 4 March 2024, with Officers attending to provide background information and to provide the information that the working group required to inform their work and decision making.

Developing a Council Size proposal

- 6 The members of the Working Group have had the opportunity to present their views and opinions and debate the options in relation to the future Council size. This included thoughts on the impact of the Council size on communities, the level of work required of each Councillor and the impact on the Council's governance arrangements. This has helped to develop a recommendation for Governance Committee and Council to consider.
- 7 The Group has also received data in relation to the number of electors represented by each Councillor and how this is forecast to change by 2030, the date set out by the LGBCE as relevant to the decision making for this electoral review. Information has also been provided on the number of Councillors, the number of electors per Councillor and information on committee structures on neighbouring and statistically similar local authorities.

Council Size Submission

- 8 As a result of this work, the Governance Committee has recommended to Council that the Council Size submission to the LGBCE should be a reduction from the current 54 Councillors, to 48 Councillors from May 2027.
- 9 The reasons and rationale for this are set out further in the draft Council size submission provided at Appendix A to this report. The Council Size submission follows the template and guidance set out by the LGBCE.
- 10 The views of Members are welcome in respect of both the number of Councillors being proposed and any comments they would wish to make on the draft Council Size submission set out at Appendix A.
- 11 It should be noted that whilst it is expected that the Council makes its own Council Size submission, and that is what is proposed through this process, this in no way prohibits any other Councillor or group of Councillors making their own alternative submission by the deadline of 2 September.

Next Steps

- 12 Should Council support the Council Size submission, Officers would submit the proposal to the LGBCE on behalf of the Council before their deadline of 2 September 2024.
- 13 From that point forward the timetable for the review will be follows:
 - LGBCE decision on Council size – 15 October 2024
 - Consultation on ward patterns – 22 October 2024 to 13 January 2025
 - LGBCE Draft Recommendations – 15 April 2025
 - Consultation on draft recommendations – 13 May 2025 to 21 July 2025
 - LGBCE Final Recommendations – 28 October 2025
 - Implementation – District Council elections 6 May 2027

Warding Patterns

- 14 The LGBCE should publish their decision on Council Size on 15 October 2024. Their decision may be to support the current Council proposal of 48 Councillors, or it may be another number. At this stage it remains a draft number that could be amended following the conclusion of the warding pattern exercise, but would only be expected to change by one or two Councillors.
- 15 October 2024 marks the start of the formal period of the electoral review, beginning with a consultation on warding patterns. Following the LGBCE publishing its initial conclusions on council size on 15 October 2024 there will be a general invitation to submit warding proposals during a 12 week consultation period.
- 16 The Council will seek to submit its own proposal during the 12 week consultation period. As with the Council Size stage of the review this will be led by the Member Working Group, with Officer support and reported back to Members. As this stage is also a public consultation stage there is expected to be more than one submission made, and Councillors and / or groups of Councillors are able to make their own submissions separate to the work of the Member Working Group.
- 17 As the Sevenoaks District has full representation from Town & Parish Councils across its area, the LGBCE will provide both a briefing for those Councils and seek to build warding patterns in so far as possible on existing parish boundaries. If this cannot be achieved community governance reviews may be required to be undertaken locally following the completion of the electoral review.
- 18 The law that governs the LGBCE's work means that they must make decisions about new warding arrangements based on three specific criteria: electoral equality – ensuring each councillor represents a similar number of electors;

community identity; and effective and convenient local government – an example of effective and convenient local government is to ensure that wards are internally coherent. That is to say, that there are reasonable road links across the ward so that it can be easily traversed, and that all electors in the ward can engage in the affairs and activities of all parts of it without having to travel through an adjoining ward.

- 19 Should conflicting or different proposals arise through the consultation on warding patterns the LGBCE will seek to assess the relative strength of the evidence presented. Equally, they will seek to strike a balance between the criteria when putting together warding arrangements, and do so by assessing the evidence received over the course of the review.
- 20 The **deadline for consultation responses on warding patterns is 13 January 2025**. The LGBCE then have a period of approximately 12 weeks to evaluate the consultation responses and develop their draft recommendations. The draft recommendations will be published around 15 April 2025.
- 21 At which point a further report will be presented to Members to consider any next steps.

Further information and guidance

- 22 A wide range of information about the electoral review process is available on the LGBCE website, at <https://www.lgbce.org.uk/changing-wards-number-councillors-council-has>
- 23 This includes a short guide for Councillors which is available at <https://online.flippingbook.com/view/84147699/>

Other options Considered and/or rejected

Council could choose not to support the recommendations, or to recommend the Council does not make its own submission. This option is not recommended as it would give the Council no say on its future size or the impact that may have on the ability to deliver its services and ensure communities are represented effectively.

Key Implications

Financial

There are no financial implications arising from the recommendations to this report.

Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement

The LGBCE are required by regulation to undertake an electoral review of the District Council and to follow a defined process in reaching their decisions.

Failure to engage fully in the electoral review process places a risk of an unfavourable outcome on the District and the District Council.

Equality Assessment

There are no equality impacts arising from the recommendations to this report.

However, when considering submissions through the electoral review process Members are reminded of the requirement, under the Public Sector Equality Duty (section 149 of the Equality Act 2010) to have due regard to (i) eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Equality Act 2010, (ii) advance equality of opportunity between people from different groups, and (iii) foster good relations between people from different groups.

Climate Change Implications

The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the council's ambition to tackle the challenge of climate change. There is no perceived impact regarding either an increase or decrease in carbon emissions in the district, or supporting the resilience of the natural environment.

Community Impact and Outcomes

An electoral review provides an opportunity to deliver improved electoral equality across the District, whilst ensuring our communities continue to benefit from strong representation and support from their District Councillors.

At relevant stages through the electoral review, working with the LGBCE, residents' views will be encouraged in relation to electoral numbers and warding patterns that suit community needs.

Conclusions

Through the work of the Governance Committee Member Working Group it is proposed that a Council Size submission is made to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England which recommends 48 District Councillors from May 2027.

Appendices

Appendix A – Draft Council Size Submission

Background Papers

Report to Governance Committee – 30 January 2024

<https://cds.sevenoaks.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=289&MId=3116&J=4>

Report to Council – 20 February 2024

<https://cds.sevenoaks.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=121&MId=3175&J=6>

Report to Governance Committee – 11 July 2024

<https://cds.sevenoaks.gov.uk/ieListDocuments.aspx?CId=289&MId=3332&J=1>

Dr Pav Ramewal
Chief Executive