

Agenda Item No: 9.9 **Report No:** 88/15
Report Title: Electoral Review: Council Size
Report To: Cabinet **Date:** 6 July 2015
Cabinet Member: Councillor Rob Blackman, Leader of the Council
Ward(s) Affected: All
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Purpose of Report:

To seek Cabinet's views on the recommendations of the Council's Electoral Review Working Group on council size, as part of the East Sussex-wide Electoral Review being conducted by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE).

Officers Recommendation(s):

- 1 To note the proposals of the Electoral Review Working Group on council size;
- 2 To note the scope for the Electoral Review Working Group to consider ward proposals;
- 3 To note the timescale of reporting for the submissions on council size and ward proposals;
- 4 To recommend to Council:
 - (a) To agree the recommendation of the Electoral Review Working Group that the proposed council size of Lewes District Council from 2019 should range between 35 – 41 councillors;
 - (b) To decide the final preferred number of councillors from within the proposed range of 35 – 41 councillors for the submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England on council size;
 - (c) To confirm the scope for the Electoral Review Working Group to consider and produce the subsequent proposals for wards (names, number and boundaries); and
 - (d) To note the timetable of reporting for the submissions on council size and ward proposals.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 1 To achieve the outcomes of the Electoral Review and to ensure the LGBCE timetable is met.

Information

2 Background

- 2.1 The LGBCE is required to undertake an Electoral Review of East Sussex County Council prior to the next County Council elections in May 2017. In addition, reviews are being conducted in Wealden and Hastings as part of the process as, in both authorities, electorate imbalance in wards/divisions (where some councillors represent significantly more or fewer electors than other councillors) has triggered the need for such a review.
- 2.2 Although there was no current requirement for such a review in Eastbourne, Lewes or Rother, the LGBCE asked to review the whole County at the same time and all the relevant authorities agreed to take part. There are a number of advantages of the County Council and the District and Borough Councils being reviewed together which include the potential for coterminous boundaries and economies of scale.
- 2.3 Due to the simultaneous reviews being conducted county-wide, consistency of approach is being overseen by a joint officer Project team with representatives from all the authorities. However, within the bigger picture, each Council will need to produce its own review proposals.

3 Review criteria and conduct

- 3.1 The LGBCE gave a presentation to councillors on the Electoral Review prior to the full Council meeting on 23 April 2015. At that meeting, full Council agreed that a cross-party Electoral Review Working Group be formed which was tasked with looking at the first key issue of the review, which is the number of councillors required to run the Council to ensure appropriate levels of governance, scrutiny and community representation, to come into effect at the next District Council elections scheduled for May 2019.
- 3.2 Essentially, there are two parts to the review, firstly to make proposals in respect of the number of councillors (ie. council size) and secondly, to make proposals in respect of ward numbers, boundaries and names. **This report solely considers the issue of council size.**
- 3.3 Lewes District Council currently has 41 Councillors and 21 District wards, and its boundaries are fully coterminous with our 8 county electoral divisions. As a result of the last electoral review conducted in 2000, our council size was reduced from 48 to 41 councillors.
- 3.4 The LGBCE has made it clear that the review will only be considering council size and internal ward boundaries. The review specifically excludes all forms of outer (District and parliamentary) boundaries.

- 3.5** It has also been made clear by the LGBCE that council size changes would be considered within specific representational ranges appropriate to the size and demographic of the District. In the case of Lewes, the approved range is a council membership of from 27 to 59, thus we are currently in the middle of that recommended size range with scope to increase, reduce or maintain our council size.

4 Electoral Review Working Group proposals

- 4.1** The Electoral Review Working Group, comprising cross-party representation of all the political Group Leaders, met on 5 May 2015 to consider and formulate a council size proposal for recommendation to full Council.
- 4.2** An Electoral Review survey had been circulated to all councillors to complete. The survey captured the time spent on Council duties and enabled members to give their views on what size the Council should be in the future. 26 councillors had responded to the survey which represented a 63% response rate.
- 4.3** The Working Group reviewed the results of the survey and other considerations to formulate a proposed council size that would be sufficient to ensure that three specific functions can be carried out effectively at the Council in the future, namely governance, scrutiny and community representation.
- 4.4** The Working Group was mindful of the considerations that having too few members might result in the Council not being able to take important decisions quickly and lacking democratic accountability in some areas. Having too many could lead to inefficient decision making and not provide effective local government. The Council needed enough members to hold colleagues to account for the decisions taken, and the right number to represent local communities.
- 4.5** With regard to governance and scrutiny, the Cabinet style system had already been in operation at the Council when the last review was conducted in 2000 and had made decision-making more efficient and business-like. The Working Group looked at various options of how the Council might structure its representation on committees but with less members, assuming the operation of the existing committee structure. It was satisfied that if the number of councillors was to reduce, the Council could still effectively discharge its governance and scrutiny functions, without creating any significant burden on remaining members.
- 4.6** The Working Group suggested that the list of outside bodies that councillors were appointed to could be considerably streamlined in future. Some of the outside bodies were seen as unnecessary to have a councillor attend, especially where the necessary business could be conducted via email or the Council could just receive a report back. The number of outside bodies was subsequently reduced as part of the appointments report to Annual Council on 20 May 2015.

- 4.7** With regard to community representation, one significant change that has occurred since the last electoral review in 2000 is the use and availability of technology by members in discharging their representational role. Although most respondents to the survey felt that caseloads and workloads generally had increased, enhanced technology meant that the role of the councillor had changed as there was more interaction via email and social media, and less face to face contact with residents. This was seen as an efficiency in the way that councillors dealt with enquiries, as well as being significant in diverting many enquiries away from councillors as residents either contacted the Council directly or simply found the information themselves through the website.
- 4.8** Although the role of localism, which aimed to devolve more decision-making powers back to communities and councils, had not necessarily seen a transfer of functions down, it had brought about an increasing efficiency and effectiveness of Town & Parish Councils. This had seen some reduction in the workload on District councillors as Town & Parish Councils were now able to deal with more enquiries directly.
- 4.9** Although outside of the criteria of the review, the Working Group suggested that a reduction in councillors may enable an increase in allowances paid to members which in turn could make becoming a councillor more attractive and representative, without increasing the cost to the taxpayer.
- 4.10** The Working Group noted that the LGBCE will assess the proposed council size submission against the Council's 15 nearest neighbour authorities as set out by CIPFA (the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy). These are local authorities that share similar characteristics with Lewes District Council. Most of the Councils in our CIPFA family who had already undertaken an electoral review had tended to reduce their numbers.
- 4.11** Regards the overall survey results, the Working Group also noted that 54% of respondents felt that the number of councillors at Lewes District Council was about right, whilst 46% of the responders felt that there were too many. 42% of the responders felt that the number of councillors that a Council like Lewes District Council needs going forward is 36-40.
- 4.12** Thus, having regard to the retention of the same statutory democratic structure as those that existed in 2000, and the advancements in technological tools and the organisational improvements in addressing issues in the community, **it is recommended that we submit a proposal on council size within the range from 35 to 41 councillors, with the final preferred number to be agreed by full Council.**

5 Timetable and further work

- 5.1** The timetable for the submission of draft proposals on council size to the LGBCE is 10 July 2015, with final proposals due by 7 August 2015.

- 5.2** To meet the timetable, the Working Group has asked for Cabinet's views on 6 July 2015 on its recommendations on council size. The draft submission will then be sent to the LGBCE. The final proposals will be taken to full Council for approval on 16 July 2015.
- 5.3** Following on from that, the second key stage of the Electoral Review will be for the LGBCE to consider and consult on ward proposals, starting from 22 September 2015. Effective ward proposals will need to address electoral equality for voters, community interests and identities, and convenient and effective local government.
- 5.4** Therefore, as soon as possible after 22 September 2015, we will need to submit our ward proposals. It is recommended that the Electoral Review Working Group consider and make draft proposals in respect of ward numbers, boundaries and names. It will be especially important for councillors to share any specific thoughts on ward change proposals, via the Working Group members, as early as possible in order that the necessary analysis of current and future electorate balance can be undertaken. A report on ward proposals will then be brought to the next Council meeting on 14 October 2015.

Financial Appraisal

- 6** Part funding of the joint Project Manager required until 2017.

Legal Implications

- 7** None over and above those set out in the body of this Report.

Risk Management Implications

- 8** If the recommendations are not implemented, the main risk will be that the Council fails to meet its legal duties and the requirements of the Electoral Review are not met.

Equality Screening

- 9** An Equality Analysis report has been completed and appended to this Report. Positive impacts are expected from the Electoral Review as its purpose is to provide electoral equality and to ensure fair representation at local government elections.

Background Papers

- 10** None

Appendix

- 11** None (other than the Equality Analysis report).