

## **ELECTORAL REVIEW**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

1.1 The purpose of this report is to consider future steps for a possible reduction in the number of members on the District Council. The report sets out:

- The background to the review
- The statutory framework and Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) guidance
- Electoral Review and Possible savings
- The Task and Finish Group's deliberations and recommendations
- The conclusions and recommendations of the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel

### **2. BACKGROUND**

2.1 Members will recall that, at the February 2013 budget meeting, the Council asked a task and finish group to investigate decreasing expenditure by reducing the number of councillors. The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel established the group (the membership is shown at the end of this report) and it had a series of meetings in 2013/14.

2.2 The Group saw merit in investigating the implications of a reduction in the number of district councillors and asked officers to formulate outline schemes for a 40 – 45 member Council and to estimate the likely cost reductions that would be achieved. The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel endorsed this suggested way forward, and the Cabinet supported this position by resolving on 3 July 2013: "That, provided the costs of the review and consultation process are properly considered against the likely savings and potential benefits, the Electoral Review Task and Finish Group progress the evaluation of outline schemes for a 40 or 45 member Council."

2.3 Over autumn/winter 2013 the task and finish group consulted all members of the Council twice seeking their views regarding options for reducing the number of members. A total of 37 members commented. Of these, 19 favoured no change, 15 supported a reduction (some expressing preferences for one or more options), and 3 expressed no view either way.

### **3. STATUTORY FRAMEWORK AND LGBCE GUIDANCE**

3.1 The Council cannot itself decide whether, and if so how, its current membership is to be reduced and its wards re-drawn as a consequence. Such a decision can only be made by Parliament on the recommendation of The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE). However, the LGBCE would give great weight to a locally-generated scheme that had been well thought through and consulted on.

- 3.2 On certain conditions the LGBCE can itself initiate a review. However, none of the conditions for this currently apply in New Forest District. If the Council wishes to undergo a review, it must therefore approach the LGBCE and ask to be included in its programme, with reasons for requesting a review.
- 3.3 When undertaking a review, the LGBCE is bound by law to have regard to certain criteria, and their guidance details how it will have regard to those criteria. In broad terms, they are:
- (a) the need to secure equality of representation; (ie that, as nearly as possible, each elector's vote has the same weight);
  - (b) the need to reflect the identities and interests of local communities; and
  - (c) the need to secure effective and convenient local government.
- 3.4 If LGBCE agrees to conduct a review, the process will be as follows:
- (a) informal dialogue between the Council and LGBCE, ending with the Council submitting its proposals for Council size to the LGBCE;
  - (b) analysis by LGBCE and public consultation on proposals for Council size;
  - (c) LGBCE decision on Council size;
  - (d) invitation to submit warding arrangements in the light of decision on Council size;
  - (e) consultation on warding arrangements;
  - (f) LGBCE analysis of representations;
  - (g) LGBCE publication of its draft recommendations;
  - (h) public consultations on draft recommendations;
  - (i) analysis of above, and final recommendations.
- 3.5 This entire process generally takes somewhere in excess of 18 months. An Order would then need to be laid before Parliament.

#### **4. ELECTORAL REVIEW AND POSSIBLE SAVINGS**

- 4.1 Although the original Council resolution of February 2013 cited cost reductions as the driver for the review, financial considerations are not among the criteria considered by the Boundary Commission when conducting electoral reviews. Notwithstanding this, the Group considered it important to understand the financial implications of any reduction in the number of councillors.
- 4.2 The Group were advised that an accurate forecast of the likely savings from reducing the Council to between 40 and 46 members could not be made unless and until the Council made decisions on other matters, such as:
- whether the current Committee structure and/or frequency of meetings would be altered;
  - whether members' allowances would be increased;
  - whether Committee sizes would be reduced (where the law permits)
  - whether the Community Engagement Grant (currently £600 per member (£36,000 a year)) would remain at the same level.

No attempt has been made to quantify how much staff time is taken up in supporting members, or to make a reliable estimate of whether and how much this might reduce if Councillor numbers decreased. Support to members is provided by a wide range of officers across the Council and not just the democratic core. Savings would depend to a considerable extent on the answers to the queries raised above.

- 4.3 A calculation based only on the members' basic allowance and national insurance would result in annual savings of between £85,000 per annum (for a 46 member Council) and £121,000 per annum (for 40 members) (**Note:** these amounts have been adjusted from those reported to the Task & Finish Group to take account of the reduced level of members' allowances and the fact that members' allowances will no longer be pensionable). The officers consider that, bearing in mind the imponderables explained above, it should be safe to say that these would be the minimum savings that would be achieved.
- 4.4 Members noted that the cost of the review itself need not be great. Additional officer time would be required, as well as the specialised printing of maps, and some extra meetings. However, the majority of this could be funded from within existing budgets. Consultation with parishes could largely be undertaken electronically, although officer attendance at some parish meetings was likely. The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) would itself undertake major consultation exercises, which it would pay for.

## 5. RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE TASK AND FINISH GROUP

- 5.1 Having considered all the issues, the task and finish group recommend that a reduction in the number of councillors be pursued and that an approach be made to the Boundary Commission accordingly, but with the notional aim of achieving a new Council comprising around 46 members. (Two members of the Group had a contrary view, which is set out in paragraph 6.2).
- 5.2 The Group favoured a reduction in members after hearing the following views:-
- (i) Some areas of the District were 'over-represented' with an MEP, an MP, a County Councillor, 4 District councillors and 5 Parish councillors.
  - (ii) The proposed changes were not aimed just at the year 2019, but looked further ahead to 2030 or beyond. By that time it was anticipated that there would be radical changes in the way councils and councillors operated, with technology probably transforming communication and working methods. While there remained personal contact with constituents, most interactions with constituents and officers were already electronic.
  - (iii) Although any new arrangements would produce anomalies in the way wards were arranged, the existing arrangements were also not ideal.
  - (iv) Comparing Councillor:elector ratios with other authorities was not useful. There was no 'right' or 'ideal' ratio. Large authorities with more wide-ranging powers had fewer members and operated successfully.
  - (v) Not all members were as active as others. Approximately 15 members had not served on any task and finish groups. It could be said that the Council was already operating effectively with less than 60 active members.

- (vi) Several members referred to recent reductions in employee numbers and felt that the number of members should decrease as well. It was acknowledged that there had been some adjustments in member structures over recent years, notably in the size of the Cabinet and the number of scrutiny panel, but failure to give serious consideration to reducing the number of councillors might leave members open to criticism.
- (vii) Parish and town councils would be fully consulted on any new warding arrangements.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

- 6.1 For the reasons set out in paragraph 5 above, the majority of task and finish group members felt that the Council should pursue a reduction in the number of councillors, with the aim of achieving a new Council of around 46 members.
- 6.2 A minority of members considered that a reduction from the current 60 members would result in a loss of local democracy, particularly in the rural areas where the size of wards would become unacceptably large. This would discourage candidates from standing, particularly those without the backing of a strong political party. Wards would cover a greater number of parish councils, making it less likely that members could attend them all regularly. A change from the present system would not represent best value for residents.

## **7. VIEWS OF THE CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL**

- 7.1 The Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel considered the Task and Finish Working Group's recommendations at their meeting on 20 March 2014 and concluded that there would be no overall benefit in reducing the number of Members on the Council and consequently no further action should be taken on this matter. Their recommendation is set out below.

## **8. PORTFOLIO HOLDER'S COMMENTS**

- 8.1 The Portfolio Holder would like to thank all those members who contributed to this review, and in particular those serving on the task and finish working group, for their work in evaluating this issue. Their close attention to detail and the thoroughness of the review are greatly appreciated.

## **9. RECOMMENDATION OF THE CORPORATE OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL:**

- (a) That the Task & Finish Group's recommendation that the Boundary Commission for England be approached to initiate an electoral review of New Forest District Council be not supported; and
- (b) That a reduction in the number of members on the Council be not pursued.

**Working group membership:**

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W S Rippon-Swaine  
Mrs M J Robinson  
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**Background Papers:**

Published documents

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