

26 JUNE 2015

NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL

GENERAL PURPOSES AND LICENSING COMMITTEE

Minutes of a meeting of the General Purposes and Licensing Committee held in the Council Chamber, Appletree Court, Lyndhurst on Friday, 26 June 2015

- * Cllr S J Clarke (Chairman)
- * Cllr L R Puttock (Vice-Chairman)

Councillors:

- * G C Beck
- * G R Blunden
- * Ms L C Ford
- R L Frampton
- * A T Glass
- * L E Harris
- * J M Olliff-Cooper

Councillors:

- A K Penson
- D N Tungate
- * A S Wade
- * Mrs C V Ward
- J G Ward
- Mrs P A Wyeth
- * E J Heron

*Present

Officers Attending:

J Ives, Mrs R Rutins and Mrs M Stephens

Councillors Attending:

E J Heron

Also in Attendance:

County Cllrs Miss England and Thornber, and Mrs D Vaughan, Head of Member & Democratic Services, Hampshire County Council.

Apologies

Cllrs Frampton, Penson, Tungate, Ward and Mrs Wyeth.

14 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No declarations of interest were made by members in connection with an agenda item.

15 ELECTORAL REVIEW OF HAMPSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

The Committee considered the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) Electoral Review of Hampshire County Council.

The Commission was carrying out the review to deliver electoral equality for voters by seeking to correct imbalances which occurred where some county councillors represent many more, or many fewer, electors than their colleagues across the county.

The review would recommend new electoral arrangements for Hampshire County Council and would propose the total number of councillors elected to the Council (likely to be 78), the number of electoral divisions, the number of councillors representing each division, division boundaries and the names of those divisions.

A 10 week public consultation had commenced, during which the Commission had invited proposals for new warding arrangements. This first consultation would close on Monday 3 August, after which the Commission would publish its draft recommendations. A further period of consultation would then commence to seek views on the draft recommendations with final proposals being published in April 2016. It was intended that the new electoral arrangements would come into effect in time for the County elections in 2017.

In response to the review, the County Council had established a Members' Working Group with one member drawn from each District, plus a Chairman. The New Forest was represented by Cllr Miss England, member for Lymington. The Group was also chaired by Cllr Thornber, member for Brockenhurst Division. Cllrs England, Thornber and E Heron, member for Fordingbridge Division, were in attendance and addressed the Committee.

Cllr Thornber explained that the Members' Working Group had examined in detail key electoral forecast data, focusing on over or under-representation of each division, when considering possible changes to individual electoral divisions. Cllr Thornber clarified that the LGBCE had made it clear that the registered electorate data at the start of the review (December 2014) should be used and applied to the electorate forecasting exercise. With regard to the total number of councillors elected to the Council, the County Council had recently voted to remain at 78 members and the LGBCE had indicated that it was minded to recommend this number.

When considering any changes to the number of County Councillors representing the New Forest, the Members' Working Group had taken account of the large geographical area of the New Forest. The New Forest had two large divisions – Fordingbridge and Brockenhurst. If the County Council's recommendations relating to Test Valley were adopted, these would become the 1st and 3rd largest divisions respectively in the County. The Working Group accepted that County Councillors representing large divisions had greater working pressures placed on them. Given the complex and unique area of the New Forest with the existence of the National Park Authority and other statutory bodies that made democratic representation more complicated, the Working Group would recommend that the County Council representation for the New Forest remain at 11 members.

Cllr England highlighted the rationale used by the Working Group in developing recommendations. She explained that she had sought the views of all County Councillors representing the New Forest when bringing recommendations to the Working Group. The New Forest had very clearly identifiable communities (both rural and urban) which could be put at risk should electoral divisions be broken up.

Cllr E Heron reiterated the views of Cllrs Thornber and England. The New Forest presented many challenges that other areas did not have to face. The installation of faster BT broadband within the New Forest had proved very difficult because of the role of a number of statutory bodies. This was just one example of challenges that more urban areas, such as Eastleigh, did not have to face.

In the ensuing debate, members agreed with the views expressed by the County Councillors, that the New Forest was a unique area with many challenges. It was noted that a start had been made on reviewing the District Council's local plan and this might result in more housing development than currently predicted. In all the circumstances, the Committee supported the recommendations that the County electoral arrangements within the New Forest remain unchanged.

RECOMMENDED:

(a) That strong representations be made to the LGBCE to retain the 11 divisions and county councillors for New Forest District Council's area, for the following reasons:

(i) While the main criterion of the LGBCE is to ensure electoral equality, it is considered that in large geographical areas such as the

New Forest, equal weight should attach to two other LGBCE criteria – reflecting interests of communities and achieving effective and convenient local government. Very large divisions which result from the imposition of electoral equality do not support effective and convenient local government.

(ii) Effective representation of rural communities is more difficult and time-consuming than in urban areas. The Fordingbridge Division, with 13 whole parishes and one ward of another, covering an area of 91.98 sq miles; and the Brockenhurst Division, with 8 parishes and an area of 85.22 sq miles, are examples of this. These divisions are 386% and 350% respectively larger than the average for the county. Extending rural divisions to achieve electoral equality would entail very large geographical expansion, to the extent that it would place unacceptable workloads on county councillors representing those divisions.

(iii) The complexities arising from the existence of the New Forest National Park over a large area of the District and other statutory bodies such as the Forestry Commission and the Court of Verderers, and the consequent division of or effect on decision-making, further complicates “effective and convenient local government”. It places more onerous burdens on councillors representing areas partly or wholly within the National Park.

(iv) Constraints on housing development within the National Park cause difficulty in creating divisions with greater electoral equality in that more development pressure is placed on the areas outside of the National Park. The District has a large, sparsely populated, interior surrounded, particularly to the east and south-west, by more intensive development. Expanding an urban division into the sparsely populated interior would be highly inappropriate.

(v) While the need for the LGBCE to set a point in time on which to base projected electorates to form the basis of their reviews is understood, and while respecting the integrity of the SAPF models, the forecasts on which the current review will rely must be regarded with some caution. The effects of individual electoral registration, introduced in 2014, on the total electorate are still uncertain. In addition, in order to meet national planning guidance, the Council has commenced a review of its Local Plan for the period 2016 - 2036, and new development areas and housing allocations will be considered as part of this process. Given this context of uncertainty over future development levels it would be premature to reduce the County representation.

- (b) That the LGBCE be urged not to divide rural parishes across county divisions for the purposes of achieving electoral equality, because this is contrary to the aim of achieving effective and convenient local government.***

Chairman