

ELECTORAL REVIEW OF NEW FOREST DISTRICT COUNCIL – COUNCIL SIZE SUBMISSION

1. RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Cabinet recommends to Full Council that:-

- (a) the proposed Council Size submission on behalf of New Forest District Council (Appendix 1) be approved and submitted to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE); and
- (b) authority be delegated to the Executive Head of Governance and Regulation, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, to make further editing changes, corrections and updates to the document prior to submission.

2. BACKGROUND DETAIL

- 2.1 Views have been expressed by Members as far back as 2014 that the size of the Council could reduce. In September 2016, a Task and Finish (T&F) Group was established to consider the current position concerning an Electoral Review. After exploring various options and associated issues, the T&F Group recommended to the Corporate Overview and Scrutiny Panel on 18 January 2018 that an approach be made to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) to review the District Council's electoral arrangements with the aim of reducing the numbers on the Council to approximately 48. The Cabinet endorsed these proposals on 7 February 2018 and the decision to make a formal request to the LGBCE was agreed by a large majority by the Full Council on 26 February 2018.
- 2.2 The last Electoral Review was carried out in 1999, prior to the introduction of the Local Government Act 2000 and the implementation of a Leader/Cabinet model in accordance with executive arrangements. Over time, this has brought about significant efficiencies to the way in which the Council has operated, and alongside streamlined decision making, has resulted in less need for as many elected members as historically to manage the Council's business. Furthermore, the emergence of the National Park Authority in 2005 as the Planning Authority for the area covering the national park, has brought about significant changes and a reduction to the number of planning applications dealt with by the District Council.
- 2.3 On commencement of the review, the Local Government Boundary Commission advised that even without the Council's request, their normal timetable had identified that the Council was due for a review in any event.
- 2.4 An Electoral Review comprises two key phases. Firstly, the determination of "Council Size" – that is, how many councillors are required for the Council to operate in the context of its governance and scrutiny arrangements, and the representational role of councillors in both their responsibilities to represent the Council on outside bodies and in their role as Ward Councillors.
- 2.5 The second phase of an Electoral Review involves the formulation of warding arrangements based on the LGBCE conclusion on Council size. Warding arrangements includes the number, names and boundaries of wards and the number of councillors to be elected in each ward.

- 2.6 The recommendations arising from this report deal solely with phase one of the Electoral Review, in determining the Council's official submission to the LGBCE on Council Size.

3. PROGRESS TO DATE

- 3.1 The Cabinet established a new T&F Group in June 2019, chaired by the Leader of the Council, with the following terms of reference:-

1. To maintain a collaborative dialogue with the LGBCE throughout the Electoral Review of the District Council.
2. To consider and make recommendations to Cabinet and Full Council on any proposed submission(s) to the LGBCE on Council Size, Warding Arrangements or in response to any draft recommendations by the LGBCE.

- 3.2 To date, the Council Size submission has been developed by this T&F Group, comprising the following Members:-

Councillors Bellows, M Clark, Corbridge, Hopkins, Levitt, Reid, Rickman (Chairman), Tungate, A Wade, and J Ward.

- 3.3 The submission proposes that the number of councillors elected to New Forest District Council be reduced from its current level of 60 to 48. This figure has been reached by assessing the Council's governance arrangements in the context of the LGBCE criteria, and is further supported by a survey of all Members. The LGBCE is expecting to receive the Council's submission in respect of Council Size by no later than Friday 18 October 2019.

- 3.4 As part of the dialogue between the Task and Finish Group and the LGBCE, the Council's draft proposals have been shared with the LGBCE review team. To ensure any feedback from the LGBCE is adequately reflected in the Council's final submission, alongside the final outcome of the councillor questionnaire exercise, it is proposed that authority be delegated to the Executive Head of Governance and Regulation, in consultation with the Leader of the Council, to make further editing changes, correction and updates to the document prior to submission. It is anticipated that these will be minor in nature.

4. NEXT STEPS

- 4.1 It is anticipated that the LGBCE will make a decision on Council size on 19 November 2019. It should be noted that this figure may subsequently be amended if necessary, to allow for a warding pattern to be developed which produces electoral equality as best as possible. Any such amendments would likely be minor, i.e. +1 or -1.
- 4.2 Once the Council Size submission is completed, the T&F Group will focus efforts on developing warding pattern proposals for submission in early 2020.
- 4.3 The process will conclude with the publication of the LGBCE final recommendations in Summer 2020, before the necessary parliamentary orders are laid and then made from late 2020 into early 2021. The new electoral arrangements will be implemented from the May 2023 quadrennial district elections.

5. ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS

- 5.1 The LGBCE are responsible for determining the Council Size, regardless of the submissions made by the deadline. Therefore, whilst the Council could choose not to submit a response, it would not be in the Council's interest, as the determination could be made without regard to the Council's views on an appropriate Council Size.

6. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 The Council has set aside a total of £30,000 within the current Medium Term Financial Plan, covering the two years commencing 2021/22, should any unknown costs arise. It is not envisaged that there will be any additional costs that the Council will bear other than internal resourcing of the review.
- 6.2 Should the Council Size reduce to 48 from 60, there will be an approximate saving of £78,000 per annum in Members' Allowances.

7. CRIME & DISORDER IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1 There are none directly arising from this report.

8. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPLICATIONS

- 8.1 There are none directly arising from this report.

9. EQUALITY & DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 A successful Electoral Review of the District Council will bring about more representative democracy in the New Forest, as electoral inequality would have been addressed as far as possible as part of the review.

10. PORTFOLIO HOLDER COMMENTS

- 10.1 I would like to thank the members of the Task and Finish Group for all their hard work in bringing this matter forward, and I will support their recommendations.

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Council Size Submission

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Background Papers:

Cabinet report – 5 June 2019
<https://www.lgbce.org.uk/how-reviews-work>
Task and Finish Group documents