

POSSIBLE ELECTORAL REVIEW OF THE DISTRICT COUNCIL

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 The principle of requesting the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) to undertake a review of the District Council's electoral arrangements with a view to reducing the number of members on the District Council has been considered on two occasions since 2013. In 2013 a Working Group was appointed and, in 2014, recommended that the Council seek a reduction in its numbers from 60 to around 46. That recommendation did not gain the support of the Corporate Overview & Scrutiny Panel or the Cabinet, and the Council on 14 April 2014 decided not to request a review. At the Council meeting the view was expressed that the matter was one that should be left to the new Council elected in May 2015.
- 1.2 Arising from a question by Cllr John Ward to the Leader of the Council at the Council meeting on 12 September 2016, a new Task & Finish Group was established. The Group comprised Cllrs Binns, Clarke, M Harris, McEvoy, Penson, Thorne, Tungate and J Ward. The Panel's terms of reference were:
- (i) To consider and make recommendations on whether the Council should request the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) to undertake a review of New Forest District Council with a view to reducing the numbers on the Council; and
 - (ii) To take into account the effect a change in numbers would have on:
 - (a) The Council's governance and decision-making arrangements; and
 - (b) Councillors' representational roles
- 1.3 The current T&F Group has met three times, on 14 November 2016, 17 March 2017 and 30 October 2017 and, after exploring various options and associated issues, recommends that an approach be made to the LGBCE to conduct a review of the District Council's electoral arrangements with the aim of reducing the numbers on the Council to approximately 48. This report explains the rationale behind the T&F Group's recommendation, and presents the recommendation to the Panel for consideration.

2. BACKGROUND

- 2.1 The last electoral review of the District Council was in 1999. It resulted in the LGBCE increasing the number of members from 58 to 60, and significant changes to District Ward boundaries. There are now 34 District Wards, most represented by two District Councillors, but eight by a single member. The new electoral arrangements took effect at the 2003 quadrennial election.

2.2 The LGBCE has a duty to review principal authorities' electoral arrangements when:

- More than 30% of a council's wards have an electoral imbalance (member:elector ratio) of more than 10% from the average for that authority; and/or
- One or more wards have an electoral imbalance of more than 30%; and
- The imbalance is unlikely to be corrected by foreseeable changes to the electorate within a reasonable period.

2.3 The member:elector ratio for New Forest District Council, based on the register published on 1 December 2017, is 1:2367. Based on population predications, and retaining the current 60 members, this ratio is expected to rise to 1:2423 by 2023.

2.4 Seven of the Council's wards (20.5%) currently have an electoral imbalance of more than 10% from the average. These are:

Becton	-13.03%
Buckland	+13.22%
Fordingbridge	+12.02%
Forest North West	-10.10%
Furzedown & Hardley	+13.31%
Totton Central	-10.54%
Totton West	-18.95%

2.5 At the time of the 1999 review, the LGBCE had a programme of periodic electoral reviews (PERs), which meant that principal authorities' electoral arrangements were subject to external review at intervals of approximately 10–12 years. The programme of PERs appears to have been affected by the need for reviews following the creation of a number of new unitary authorities and the merging of others. In the current circumstances, with the member:elector ratios within acceptable levels, a review of this Council's electoral arrangements is unlikely unless the Council makes a reasoned request to the LGBCE.

2.6 The LGBCE's guidance stresses that it has no preconceptions about the right number of councillors to represent an authority. It recognises that every local authority will represent local people and deliver services in different ways. The LGBCE therefore makes recommendations on the basis of the evidence it receives during the electoral review.

2.7 Reviews by the LGBCE of principal authorities in Hampshire since 2015 have all resulted in reductions in the number of members, as set out below. Also shown in the table below are:

- Harrogate, an authority in the same CIPFA "nearest neighbours" comparator group as New Forest District, which underwent a review in 2017
- the current, and possible future, electoral equality in New Forest District Council:

Authority	Year review completed	Council size before review	New Council size	% reduction	New "electoral equality"
Eastleigh	2016	44	39	11.3%	2732
Test Valley	2017	48	43	10%	2411
Winchester	2015	57	45	21%	2233
Basingstoke & Deane	In progress	60	54 (being sought)	10%	2667
Harrogate	2017	54	40	25%	3223
					"Electoral equality"
New Forest (current position)		60			2023
New Forest (based on 48 members)			48	20%	3029

2.8 The LGBCE's guidance states that, to provide context to an authority's proposal on council size, the LGBCE will refer to CIPFA's "Nearest Neighbours" model.

3. RECENT DELIBERATIONS BY THE TASK & FINISH GROUP

3.1 The T&F Group has considered the issues in detail and has examined a number of options for reducing the size of the Council from 60 to between 54 and 44 members. Some members of the Group were against any reduction, some favoured a modest reduction, but the conclusion of the majority was to recommend a reduction from 60 to approximately 48 members. Strong views were expressed both for and against a reduction which are summarised below. As reflected in the table at paragraph 2.7, a reduction to 48 members would mean an electoral ratio of approximately 1:3029 by 2023.

In favour of reduction:

- The pressure for the Council to reduce expenditure. The annual budget for members' allowances is approximately £480,000, with travel of approximately £20,000, a total in the region of £500,000. There have been significant reductions in staffing over recent years, with officers being expected to take on greater workloads. In the current financial climate Councillors should be prepared to do the same.
- Since the introduction of the Cabinet system of decision-making, there is less work for non-Executive members.
- Modern technology has made communication with local constituents, and therefore councillors' representational roles, easier and quicker.
- There is a degree of over-representation of residents in two-tier authorities with electors being represented by a Member of Parliament; a County Councillor; one or more District Councillors; and Parish/Town Councillors. The existence of the National Park Authority (which is the Planning Authority for that area) across a large part of the District Council's area contributes to this "over-representation".
- The Council operates Executive arrangements. Extensive delegation to individual councillors and officers has produced efficiencies and reduced the need for larger numbers of members to be involved in decision-making.

- (f) The day-to-day operational business of the Council is conducted without the need to engage the majority of Councillors. The full Council adopts policy frameworks and most of the operational work of the Council is undertaken by officers under that policy framework. Where Councillor involvement is required, this is usually at Cabinet or Portfolio Holder level, in consultation, when appropriate, with local members.
- (g) Exceptions to paragraph (f) above relate to the functions carried out by the Planning Development Control, the General Purposes & Licensing and the Audit Committees. The NPA deals with planning applications within its area. Although these are few in number compared with the number of applications dealt with in the remainder of the District, the existence of the National Park has reduced the workload of the Planning Development Control Committee. The General Purposes & Licensing Committee is scheduled to meet 5 times per year but, generally, at least one meeting is cancelled for lack of business. The Licensing Sub-Committee (comprising three members) meets on average 6 times per year. The Audit Committee meets four times a year.
- (h) The three Overview and Scrutiny Committees have 5 scheduled meetings per year. Each appoints Task & Finish Groups which meet as determined by each. Meeting numbers overall have decreased markedly since the introduction of the Executive arrangements. In 2000/01 there were approximately 150 "formal" meetings involving Councillors whereas, in 2016/17 there were approximately 90.
- (i) The whole of the District is parished with active Parish/Town Councils. Many of these provide a range of services to their local communities and are often the first point of contact for residents. Parish Councils and Parish Councillors often have good knowledge of the operation of the district council and help residents resolve problems.

Against a reduction:

- (j) The councillor:elector ratio in New Forest District compares favourably with other District Councils in Hampshire. Reducing the number of Councillors to 48 will increase the number of electors each Councillor represents.
- (k) The growth in IT has made District Councillors more accessible to their constituents. This is a good outcome but has increased, rather than decreased, councillors' workloads
- (l) Meeting numbers, or serving on formal Committees, should not be a yardstick by which members' workloads are measured. Their representational roles, helping residents with issues, are equally important.
- (m) Once the Council makes a request to the LGBCE for a review, the matter is effectively out of its hands. Decisions on the appropriate number of Councillors for the District would be taken by the LGBCE and might result in an outcome that is not best suited to local arrangement or in accordance with local views.
- (n) Any reduction in the number of District Councillors will inevitably mean more District Council wards crossing parish boundaries, in order to meet the "electoral equality" criterion. While the LGBCE has three main criteria to take into account - electoral equality, community identity; and effective and convenient local government; it appears that electoral equality is paramount, often to the detriment of the other two criteria.

4. TASK & FINISH GROUP'S RECOMMENDATION AND WAY FORWARD

- 4.1 As mentioned in paragraph 1.3, the Task & Finish Group has, on balance, recommended that an approach be made to the LGBCE to undertake a review of this Council's electoral arrangements, with a view to reducing the number of members on the Council from 60 to around 48. The Panel is requested to consider this recommendation. Any recommendations arising should be submitted to the Cabinet and then to the Council.
- 4.2 If the Council approves a recommendation to this effect, a formal request would be submitted to the LGBCE which would then decide whether or not to undertake a review. In assessing a request relating to Council size, the LGBCE would look initially at issues such as the Council's governance and delegation arrangements, including those of the regulatory functions; demands on Councillors' time; scrutiny arrangements and the workload of the scrutiny committees; and the representational role of councillors.
- 4.3 Detailed work has not yet been undertaken on the ward patterns that might arise from a 48 member Council, but the Panel is asked to be aware that the substantial changes to ward boundaries that would be required would inevitably result in wards crossing more parish boundaries than at present. A suggestion has been made that the newly-introduced county division boundaries be used as the basis for the District ward arrangements. While this is a sensible aim, it will not always prove possible when electoral equality issues have to be taken into consideration. However, these are matters that would receive detailed consideration if and when the Council decides to request a review and the size of the Council considered appropriate.
- 4.4 Any changes that the LGBCE might approve in the number of members on the Council would take effect at the first ordinary election of Councillors following the conclusion of the review. It is too late for a review to be completed for implementation at the next quadrennial elections in 2019. Therefore, any changes that might be agreed could not be implemented before the 2023 District Council elections.

5. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 Reducing the number of members on the council by 12 to 48 would mean savings in members' allowances of approximately £78,000 per year.

6. ENVIRONMENTAL, CRIME & DISORDER AND EQUALITY & DIVERSITY IMPLICATIONS

- 6.1 There are none.

7. RECOMMENDATION:

- 7.1 The Electoral Review Task & Finish Group's recommendation is that it be recommended to the Cabinet that the Local Government Boundary Commission for England be requested to undertake a review of the electoral arrangements in New Forest District Council with a view to reducing the number of members on the Council from 60 to approximately 48.

Further Information:

Rosemary Rutins
Service Manager, Democratic Services &
Member Support
(023) 8028 5588
Rosemary.rutins@nfdc.gov.uk

Background Papers;

Notes of Task & Finish Group