

ELECTORAL REVIEW FOR SEVENOAKS DISTRICT COUNCIL

Governance Committee – 20 October 2015

Report of Chief Officer Legal and Governance

Status: For Consideration

Key Decision: No

This report supports the Key Aim of Effective Use of Council Resources

Portfolio Holder Cllr. Firth

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Recommendation to Governance Committee:

That members' views on the possibility of an electoral review of this Council be given.

Reason for recommendation: To give Officers an indication of any initial work to be done prior to the next meeting of the Committee if there is a view that an electoral review of this Council could be pursued.

Introduction and Background

- 1 At the previous meeting of this Committee on 13 July 2015 it was agreed that "An item would be added for the meetings in October and April for considering the boundaries of the Council wards and whether there was inequality in the number of voters per councillor. The Committee would also consider the effect if the total number of District Councillors were to be reduced".
- 2 If the Council wished to pursue any changes to the current arrangements it would have to be carried out as an Electoral Review by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE). This report sets out the processes that are used in such a review together with some indicative base data for this Council and for other Kent Shire District Councils.
- 3 The last such review of this Council was concluded in 2001. This abolished all the previous wards of the District Council and created the 26 wards that are in existence now. It introduced more multi-member wards from previously single-member wards (eg combining Dunton Green and Riverhead; Seal and Weald) and increased the number of District Councillors from 53 to 54. The changes were implemented at the 2003 local elections.

LGBCE Processes

- 4 Electoral Reviews consider the overall number of councillors, the names, number and boundaries of wards and the number of councillors to be elected to each. They are carried out primarily to improve electoral equality (that is ensuring, as far as is reasonable, that the ration of electors to councillors in each ward is the same). A copy of the Commission's detailed technical guidance for such reviews is available from their website:

https://www.lgbce.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/10410/technical-guidance-2014.pdf

- 5 The Commission will initiate a review if more than 30% of a Council's wards have an electoral imbalance of more than 10% from the average ratio for that council; one or more wards have an imbalance of more than 30% and these imbalances are unlikely to be corrected by foreseeable changes to the electorate within a reasonable period. Such reviews can also be carried out at a local authority's request, for example to look at the council size (total number of councillors). The Commission has to implement any changes by way of a Statutory Instrument.
- 6 The Commission use the following statutory criteria in conducting any electoral review:
- The need to secure equality of representation
 - The need to reflect the identities and interests of local communities; and
 - The need to secure effective and convenient local government
- 7 The Commission will take into account any changes to the number and distribution of electors that is likely to take place within 5 years following a review, and the council will be required to provide both current and projected electoral statistics on a polling district basis (polling districts are the building blocks for both Parish and District Council wards).
- 8 For requested reviews, before deciding whether to agree to the request, the Commission will meet with the Council's Chief Executive and Leader to establish the reason for the request; the likely scope of any review; and the commitment and capacity of the council to meet the information requirements.

Council size

- 9 There is wide variation in council size across England, not only between different types of authority but also between councils of the same type. The Commission recognises that local government is diverse and their aim is to secure a council size which is right for that particular authority.
- 10 Broadly speaking the Commission will take a view on the right council size by reference to:
- The governance arrangements
 - The scrutiny function and responsibilities to outside bodies; and
 - The representational role of councillors in the local community

- 11 In cases where the authority's proposal would mean the council size differs significantly from similar authorities, the Commission will require particularly strong evidence. A copy of the Commission's publication "Have your say on: council size", which includes summarised case studies, is attached at Appendix A.

Base Data

- 12 Appendix B gives electorate data by District Council ward based on the current Electoral Register and the projections to 2020 that had been made by Kent County Council as part of their recent Electoral review. It is unlikely that the Commission will initiate a review themselves as the electoral variances indicated are not in excess of the LGBCE criteria (see 5 above). On this basis, the Council would have to request a review if it wished to pursue one.
- 13 In terms of council size, Appendix C gives electorate data for the 12 Kent Shire District Councils, based on 2013 data and 2020 predicted data used in the recent Kent County Council electorate review. This indicates that Sevenoaks, at some 1,630, has the lowest number of electors per councillor of the 12 authorities. Two authorities stand out as being significantly different to the others – Canterbury and Shepway whose ratio is around 2,850 electors per councillor. Both these authorities were subject to electoral reviews concluding in 2014 and saw a significant reduction in their council size (Canterbury reducing from 50 to 39, Shepway from 46 to 30).
- 14 Within the electorate data used for the Kent County Council Review it is notable that Sevenoaks is the only one of the 12 authorities projected to have a slightly reducing electorate, with all the others predicted to grow larger.

Timescales

- 15 Appendix D shows the various stages of an electoral review and indicates likely timescales for each part. This is taken from the LGBCE Technical Guidance referred to above.

Key Implications

Financial

None – an initial view only at this stage as to whether to pursue a review.

Legal Implications and Risk Assessment Statement.

Legal responsibility for any review lies with the LGBCE.

Equality Assessment

The decisions recommended through this paper have a remote or low relevance to the substance of the Equality Act. There is no perceived impact on end users.

Conclusions

Members' views are sought on the possibility of requesting an Electoral Review of the Council.

Appendices

Appendix A – LGBCE publication: Council Size

Appendix B – Current District Ward electorate data

Appendix C – Kent Shire District electorate data

Appendix D – LGBCE Review Timetable

Background Papers:

Appendices to report

LGBCE website – <https://www.lgbce.org.uk/>

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