

GOVERNANCE COMMITTEE

Minutes of the meeting held on 20 October 2015 commencing at 7.00 pm

Present: Cllr. Pett (Chairman)

Cllr. Ms. Tennessee (Vice Chairman)

Cllrs. Dr. Canet, Clack, Layland, London and Ms. Tennessee

Cllrs. Eyre, Firth and Grint were also present.

8. Minutes

Resolved: That the minutes of the meeting of the Governance Committee held on 13 July 2015 be approved and signed as a correct record.

9. Declarations of Interest

No additional declarations were made.

10. Actions from the previous meeting

There were none.

11. Governance Review with Invitation Speaker

The Chairman welcomed Cllr. Fran Wilson, Leader of Maidstone Borough Council to the meeting.

Councillor Wilson described to the Committee her experience at Maidstone Borough Council since they had agreed to move to the committee system of governance one year before. She suggested that the move had been decided upon as a majority of councillors had felt powerless under the previous Cabinet system. She believed that the new arrangements allowed for greater participation as the role previously played by Cabinet members was now carried out by service committees. As a Leader of a council with No Overall Control she said that she did not have the same powers as she would have had under a Cabinet system. They had agreed that the Leader would automatically be chairman of the Policy & Resources Committee, which controlled the budget, but that for each service committee the vice chairman must be from a different party to the chairman.

In responding to Members' questions she advised that the rewriting of the constitution had been cross-party with an outside consultant meeting with the Chief Executive and each party leader. She stated that the change-over was broadly cost-neutral but would supply figures to the Committee outside of the meeting. She did not feel that there were more meetings under the Committee system as, although there were more formal

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committee meetings, Cabinet members would often have had more frequent informal meetings with Officers.

Councillor Wilson advised that even if she had had a political majority she would still have been in favour of the Committee system. She believed that if a council had a political majority then a committee system would not lessen the clear direction of the Council, because that majority could still push through their objectives. She believed that cabinet systems suffered from a lack of succession planning, whereas the committee system allowed for any councillor to build up experience and to put items on agendas. She did not consider that chairmen controlled decision making in the same way as Cabinet members, as chairmen had no authority to make decisions themselves.

Councillor Wilson was asked about the criticisms of the committee system in that it caused delays and that there was no individual to be held accountable for decisions. In her experience she had found no delays in decision making. There had been a slight increase in the number of urgent items considered by committees. The Leader, Chief Executive and chairmen could all be focal points for the public. She confirmed that Maidstone Borough Council had reviewed the range of governance structures two years before adopting the committee system and so had not considered Sevenoaks District Council's hybrid structure.

The Chairman thanked Cllr. Wilson for her views on the committee system as adopted by Maidstone Borough Council.

12. Appointment of a Deputy Electoral Registration Officer and Returning Officer for parish polls

The Senior Electoral Officer presented a report which recommended that Council appoint a Deputy Electoral Registration Officer and also a Returning Officer for Parish and Community Polls.

The report identified that the appointment of a Deputy Electoral Registration Officer would reduce the risks of not being able to administer electoral register hearings within the statutory timescale in the event that the Electoral Registration Officer was absent for a long period. A Returning Officer would need to be appointed for the conduct of any Parish Poll, which was held under its own electoral rules. No such Returning Officer had previously been appointed but traditionally the Chief Executive had been appointed to all Returning Officer roles.

Public Sector Equality Duty

Members noted that consideration had been given to impacts under the Public Sector Equality Duty.

Resolved: That it be recommended to Council that

- a) the Chief Officer for Corporate Support be appointed Deputy Electoral Registration Officer for the Sevenoaks District Council; and
- b) the Chief Executive be appointed as Returning Officer for any polls held under the Parish and Community Meetings (Polls) Rules 1987.

13. Progress of Individual Electoral Registration

The Senior Electoral Officer presented a report which explained that the Electoral Services Team was carrying out a statutory canvass under Individual Electoral Registration, with the register to be published on 1 December 2015. Each residential property had received a Household Enquiry Form and new residents would receive a statutory Invitation to Register form. Non-responses within the canvass period would receive reminder forms and a visit from a canvasser. Applicants for the register were asked to provide a National Insurance Number and date of birth to reduce potential electoral fraud. Costs were projected to be £55,800 over budget. The Senior Electoral Officer advised that they had received an 80% response rate with a month to go which was similar to neighbouring Local Authorities.

Members queried the reason for the significant overspend. Officers advised that the costs had been difficult to estimate beforehand and the Council had applied for and received extra funding from the Government. However, the printing had to be carried out externally due to the complexity of the forms, postage costs had risen due to the number of reminder forms being sent and canvassers were visiting significantly more properties than previous years. The costs set out at Appendix A to the report were considered, which highlighted the areas of over spend. Members suggested that Officers could explore the possibility of joint tendering for printing with other Local Authorities.

Members enquired how the registration process catered for those people who may be illiterate or in care homes. The Senior Electoral Officer explained that canvassers visited all non-responders and staff would assist the public as much as possible if they telephoned instead. If, for a suitable reason, a person could not provide a National Insurance Number then they would be asked to submit certain documents to prove their identity and address or, failing that, their identity could be attested to by another elector.

Resolved: That the progress of Individual Electoral Registration be noted.

14. Further Limited Consultation Period on the KCC Boundary Review

The Chief Officer Legal & Governance presented a report which explained that on 21 July 2015, during an initial consultation period, Full Council had approved a submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) of an alternative proposal for Kent County Council divisions within the Sevenoaks District. The LGBCE was proposing significant alterations to its recommendations in the initial consultation, holding a further limited consultation until 26 October 2015. The new proposals were in accordance with the submission by the Council and therefore the Council was not being consulted on the new proposals.

Councillor Grint addressed the Committee and said that the Badgers Mount Parish Council was overlooked in the initial LGBCE consultation as it had only recently been formed. However, the Parish Council felt closer links to Shoreham and to the Darent Valley and so would naturally fit with that proposed division instead of Sevenoaks West. The Chairman recommended that the Badgers Mount Parish Council make its own submission to the LGBCE.

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Resolved: That the further information from the Local Government Boundary Commission, which accorded with the recommendations made by Full Council on 21 July 2015, be noted.

15. Electoral Review of Sevenoaks District Council

The Chief Officer Legal & Governance presented a report which explained that, at its last meeting, the Committee had requested an item to consider whether there was inequality in the number of voters per District Councillor and to consider the effect if the total number of District Councillors were to be reduced.

The report explained that the current number of electors per ward was not sufficiently unequal to trigger a LGBCCE initiated review and any review would have to be requested by the Council instead. Any review would need to consider equality of representation, reflecting the identities and interests of local communities and securing effective and convenient local government. The Chief Officer Legal & Governance noted that the Council had the lowest number of electors per Councillor in the County and that this would fall further by 2020.

Members discussed the implications of reducing the number of Councillors. Concern was raised that workload would increase for each Councillor if the overall number were reduced. The Chairman noted that Member on-costs were becoming a substantial part of the Council's costs.

Members also thought that consideration should be given to a low cost public consultation, such as by using InShape.

Resolved: That

- a) the possibility of reducing the number of District Councillors be further investigated; and
- b) a Member Survey be carried out to consider all Members' views on possibly reducing the number of District Councillors, with the results to be reported to the Committee at its meeting on 13 April 2016.

16. Work Plan

It was noted that the results of the Member Survey would be reported to the Committee on 13 April 2016. The Chairman clarified that a Member from Canterbury City Council would be invited to the meeting on 13 April 2016 to discuss governance arrangements.

THE MEETING WAS CONCLUDED AT 8.50 PM

CHAIRMAN