

Report of Chief Executive

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Submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission on Council Size

Recommendation

To authorise the chief executive to submit the proposal on council size contained in appendix one of this report to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England

Purpose of Report

1. To agree a submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) on council size. The submission forms appendix one to this report

Strategic Objectives

2. The council has a strategic objective to manage its business effectively. It makes good business sense to align the number of councillors to the way it has chosen to run its operations, taking account of advances in technology and changes in legislation.

Background

3. In February 2011 council passed unanimously the following resolution:

That council requests the Local Government Boundary Commission for England to undertake a periodic electoral review of the district with a view to reducing the number of councillors from the current 51 to around 34, such reduction to reflect the efficient working practices in place at the council and to achieve a significant saving in the costs of democracy.

4. The LGBCE notified the council in the autumn that it had scheduled the electoral review to commence in March 2012. The first stage of the electoral review is for the LGBCE to make a proposal regarding the future size of the council i.e. the

number of councillors. To that end, it has invited us to make a submission setting out our proposal before it publishes its own for consultation, and that is what is attached at appendix one.

5. A small working group has overseen the production of the proposal. This comprised Yvonne Constance, Roger Cox, Tony De Vere and Richard Webber. Council will note that we are now proposing that the council has 38 councillors in future, rather than the “around 34” agreed last year. The working group considered that this slightly higher number enabled a better level of representation across the district, as well as providing the opportunity for discrete representation of the four main urban settlements – Abingdon, Faringdon, Grove and Wantage.
6. There is no guarantee that the LGBCE will consult on a council size of 38. It will make its own decision based on its own assessment of relevant local factors. Officers have, however, liaised with the LGBCE whilst the submission has taken shape and at no stage has it given any indication that it is unhappy with what we are putting forward. It would, therefore, be disappointing if its proposal varied markedly from our own.
7. Appendix two contains the full timetable for the review. Councillors who attended the briefing from the LGBCE in December will have seen this already but it is a useful reminder of the whole process. Once the LGBCE has published its proposal on council size we will begin work in earnest looking at potential new ward boundaries. The working group will see the extent to which it is possible to develop a set of proposals that command cross party support and where differences lie, meaning that individual political groups wish to put forward their own ideas. At every stage the LGBCE will consult widely seeking views of town and parish councils, other interested organisations and individuals.
8. Finally, it is worth reminding council that we will not implement the new warding arrangements until the elections in 2015. Any by-elections prior to that will take place based on current ward boundaries

Financial Implications

9. There are no direct financial implications. Decisions about allowances payable to councillors are for the new council to take in 2015.

Legal Implications

10. Having requested the review the council is now, effectively, a consultee. The duty to comply with the law rests with the LGBCE.

Conclusion

11. The electoral review is now at the starting gate. The council cannot take its own decisions on size or warding arrangements but it can submit proposals to the LGBCE at every stage. This report contains a proposal on size, which council is invited to endorse.

Background Papers

- None

Appendix one

Further Electoral Review of Vale of White Horse

Proposals in relation to council size

Introduction

1. The Boundary Commission's technical guidance document sets out the following key criteria for determining the size of the council:

5.14 We believe the factors that influence council size can be drawn together into four broad elements:

- *the decision-making process – what decisions, taken where, and how is it managed?*
- *quasi-judicial processes – e.g. planning and licensing – what is the workload and how is it managed?*
- *the scrutiny process – what is scrutinised and how is the total scrutiny workload managed?*
- *the representative role of the elected member.*

5.15 Those submitting proposals to us should examine the political management and working practices of the council under review, and make well-argued and reasoned proposals.

2. In this submission we address each of these key criteria to justify our proposal for a reduction in the number of elected councillors for Vale of White Horse district council from the current 51 to 38.
3. The last review of electoral arrangements took place in 2001. At that time little or no account was taken of the fundamental impact that the Local Government Act 2000 would bring to the way the council operated. The new executive arrangements were in their infancy. Eleven years on, however, we can take fully into account that impact and with streamlined decision making we do not need as many councillors as historically to manage our business. The time spent in decision making meetings is reduced hugely.
4. We have also taken account of advances in use of technology. Communication in the past 11 years has moved from being largely paper based to almost wholly through electronic channels. This means that many residents who may previously have used their local councillor to access information can now do so directly. New technology has also speeded up decision making processes and made it simpler to move to delegated decisions where, with the press of a button, all councillors can be informed of what is happening.

Executive process

5. The council has chosen to streamline decision making with extensive delegation to individual councillors and officers. Broadly speaking, full council takes decisions only on those matters that it is required to do by law. The cabinet, which currently comprises five councillors, has scheduled meetings once every two months and meets on an ad hoc basis as necessary to take other decisions if they are urgent. During 2011 it met on nine occasions to consider 31 reports – an average of just 3.4 per meeting.
6. The simple fact is that the day-to-day business of the council is conducted without the requirement to engage the majority of councillors. Full council agrees a corporate plan every four years and a budget annually and the cabinet, working with the management team, is empowered to deliver it. All councillors receive an electronic weekly information sheet setting out key decisions and updates and a monthly report on key performance indicators. The scrutiny committee considers performance quarterly to hold the cabinet to account.

Quasi-judicial processes

7. The council has a planning committee, currently comprising 15 councillors. The committee meets every four weeks to consider the few applications that the head of planning does not determine using delegated powers. In 2011, the planning committee considered 111 planning applications, around seven per cent of the total number determined. It met 12 times, so on average considered just over nine applications per meeting. We do not expect to see any significant change in its workload over the next few years.
8. The council's licensing acts committee did not meet in 2011. Its sub-committees, made up of three councillors, deal with licensing applications. In 2011 these met on four occasions. The general licensing committee did not meet either in 2011. It appoints three members of the committee to panels to consider taxi hearings. In 2011, there were 10 taxi hearings.

Scrutiny process

9. The council has an active scrutiny committee that considers policy development issues, monitors performance and, occasionally, reviews decisions made by the cabinet. It meets every five to six weeks on average. During 2011 the committee, which has a membership of 12, met 10 times and considered 25 items – an average of 2.5 items per meeting.
10. The council also has an audit and corporate governance committee, consisting of 10 councillors, which meets four or five times per year. The committee audits the council's financial processes but also has a range of other responsibilities that support the scrutiny function, such as reviewing complaints.
11. Currently, the council also has a personnel committee but, following changes to its constitution, most personnel functions are now delegated to the chief executive and its future is under review.

Decision making generally

12. All of the above illustrates that from a political and managerial viewpoint the council has put very streamlined decision-making processes in place. Cabinet meetings rarely last for more than one hour; council and scrutiny committee average around two hours; and planning committee three. We do not need 51 councillors to run the business of the council in the way that we have chosen to do. That is reflected in part by the fact that 15 councillors do not sit currently on the cabinet or any of the main council committees (scrutiny, planning, audit and governance).

Representative role of councillors

14. Vale of White Horse is a relatively large rural district. Some district wards cover quite large rural areas and multiple parishes. But these are the exception. Forty councillors represent wards comprising three parishes or fewer. Only two councillors represent wards with seven or more parishes. The average electorate currently per councillor is 1860.
15. Historically, the council has nominated councillors to sit on a wide variety of outside bodies. Recent analysis has indicated, however, that a review is overdue with the rationale for some external appointments lost over time. The expectation is that the council will nominate many fewer councillors to sit on outside bodies at its next annual meeting in May.
16. Different councillors make different arrangements for discharging their representative role. We have tried to simplify things for them as far as possible. All councillors receive a weekly e-newsletter that updates them on key developments within the council as well as issues of wider interest. Most communication is via email. Simple processes are in place to cover things like the call-in of planning applications.
17. Caseload varies throughout the district but, given its overall relative affluence, is less than in areas with higher levels of deprivation. The council has no housing stock so councillors do not have to deal directly with housing matters. Planning and benefits issues tend to be the main reason constituents contact their councillor.
18. Many constituents can now access information directly via the council's website that they may previously have relied upon a councillor to give them. They are also more likely to respond directly on issues that affect them via email or some other electronic means. All of this takes pressure off councillors in their representative role and means that a smaller number representing a larger electorate is a realistic proposition.
19. It is also worth reflecting on the fact that the Vale of White Horse area has 421 parish councillors spread across 51 parishes. Whilst parish and district council roles are different, it is fair to say that most residents have ready access to a local parish councillor, who often has good knowledge of how the district council works and can help individuals resolve problems.

Justification for a new council comprising 38 councillors

20. When the council resolved to ask for the electoral review, it did so with a view to reducing the number of councillors from the current 51 to around 34. At that time no detailed work had taken place to look at whether this figure was precisely correct, but councillors agreed that it looked to be about right given the way we operate.
21. Since then we have done some more detailed analysis in order to determine a proposal that enables, as far as possible, the potential for discrete representation for the district's four main settlements – Abingdon, Faringdon, Grove and Wantage. This is something that we think is important. Councillors generally take the view that it is better to represent an urban or rural ward rather than a mix of the two. This allows them to improve focus, represent a single community of interest and make most effective use of their time. Thirty-eight councillors provides the potential we are looking for, although we accept that we will need to discuss with the Commission our assumptions around electorates and housing growth and that some compromise may be needed.
22. The proposal for 38 councillors takes full account of the changes we expect to see in the size of the electorate over the next decade. There is uncertainty as to how much and how fast that electorate will increase as many of the key housing developments across the district are at the pre-planning stage rather than underway or close to starting. We are satisfied, however, that the additional four councillors above the number originally envisaged provides ample capacity to deal with even the most optimistic assumptions about electorate growth.
22. Overall, we think that 38 councillors is the optimum number going forward. It will provide us with sufficient councillors to manage the business of the council; it provides for average electorates of around 2,700, which will allow councillors to fulfil adequately their representational roles; and it offers the potential for discrete representation of the council's main towns. We urge the Commission to accept our proposal.

Appendix two

Periodic Electoral Review – likely timetable

Consultation on Council Size	27 March – 8 May 2012
Provisional decision on council size	25 June 2012
Draft recommendations on warding arrangements	17 Dec 2012
Consultation on draft recommendations	17 Dec – 12 Feb 2013
Final recommendations	14 May 2013