

# Minutes

of a meeting of the

## Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee



held on Wednesday 13 September 2023 at 6.00 pm  
in Meeting Room 1, Abbey House, Abbey Close,  
Abingdon, OX14 3JE

**Open to the public, including the press**

### **Present in the meeting room:**

Councillors: Oliver Forder (Chair), Diana Lugova (Vice-Chair), Cheryl Briggs, Eric de la Harpe, Sally Povolotsky, and Max Thompson

Officers: Steven Corrigan (Democratic Services Manager), Susan Baker (Electoral Services Team Leader), Darius Zarazel (Democratic Services Officer), Ben Silverthorne (Trainee Democratic and Electoral Services Officer), and Jordan Kennedy (Electoral Services Officer)

### **Remote attendance:**

Officers: Susie Royce (Broadcasting Officer) and Chris McMullin (Electoral Services Officer)

Guests: Councillor Bethia Thomas (Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Climate Action and the Environment)

#### **1 Apologies for absence**

There were no apologies for absence.

#### **2 Minutes**

**RESOLVED:** to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 6 December 2022 as a correct record and agree that the Chair sign them as such.

#### **3 Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

#### **4 Urgent business and chair's announcements**

There was no urgent business or announcements from the chair.

## **5 Public participation**

There was no public participation.

## **6 Electoral Review of Vale of White Horse District Council - submission on council size**

The committee considered the report from the head of legal and democratic on the draft council size submission for the Vale of White Horse District Council. The democratic services manager highlighted to the committee that it was the first stage of a review undertaken by the Local Government Boundary Review Commission for England (The Commission) and was triggered due to electoral inequality across the district as covered in the report.

The first stage of the review was to look at the total council size. Although the decision would be made by The Commission, the council had the opportunity to input its view. It was also noted that political groups could separately submit their views on the council's size.

The democratic services manager informed the committee that the officer proposal was to retain the existing size of 38 councillors and that the final decision on the council's submission would be made by a meeting of the full council at their meeting in October and the committee's recommendation would be brought to that meeting.

Members asked the democratic services manager about the party submission process, and he confirmed that political groups were permitted to submit their own proposals to The Commission.

The committee noted that, with the increase in population, if the council kept the same number of members, it would effectively result in less members per resident. The committee agreed that longer term population figures should also be included in the statistics as this would help assess future needs.

On pages 18 and 19 of the draft Council Size Submission document, on how often the Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee meets, the democratic services manager clarified that the number presented was an average of how often the committee met and that he expected the committee would meet at least twice next year.

On page 20, the committee discussed the entry on the Climate Emergency Advisory Committee and agreed that an additional point should be included which would note that it was a new committee with additional responsibilities and work needed for members which came about after the council declared a climate emergency. The committee also inquired about the inclusion of the committee's method of meeting and then agreed that 'and primarily remotely' should be removed from the report.

On page 21, the committee noted that a word was missing from the first sentence of fourth para, so it should read, 'The scrutiny function at the council has not changed significantly over a number of years'.

On page 22, on the analysis of planning, members agreed that more emphasis should be put on the additional work that members of the committee undertake as the planning committee was one of committees with the heaviest workloads for members. This could include reference to site visits and the large officer reports that were needed to be read in preparation for the meetings.

On page 24, members discussed the work that would come from joint committees and agreed that detail of the frequency and duration of meetings should be included for these committees.

On page 26, a member inquired if it would be appropriate to include reference to the things that the council does well, but the chair clarified that this report was mainly an examination of the council's workload, not the quality of the work. In response to a question about the definition of 'fully parished', the democratic services manager confirmed that this meant there were parish councils in the whole of the district.

Members discussed the last sentence of the report and agreed that this should be removed as the committee wished to encourage members from a wide range of backgrounds to stand as candidates, including people who work full time. The committee also noted how young the members of the council were and that it was important that the workload not be so intense as to push younger full-time workers out of the role – the change of the councils working arrangements to more online meetings and evening meetings were also noted as being factors enabling younger residents to consider standing as candidates. They agreed that reference to this be added to the summary.

Finally, the committee discussed the community leadership aspect of the role and highlighted that there were a number of organisations that members join which were also time consuming and that a number of them were now community champions. They agreed that more emphasis on these aspects of being a member should also be added to the summary.

The committee, satisfied with their amendments to the draft report, then discussed the council size. Members made reference to the largely rural nature of the district and that there were members who covered a large area with a large number of parish councils. They noted that if there were a reduction in members, it would disproportionately affect these wards.

The committee noted that Kingston Bagpuize, Steventon and the Hanneys, and Blewbury and Harwell had growing populations and that it would be appropriate to have more members represent them than they currently had. However, the democratic services manager informed the committee that warding and number of members per ward, would be considered in a future stage of the review, and that future population figures would be considered by The Commission when they made that decision. He also confirmed that the Commission could change the ward boundaries and that this could reduce the load on existing ward members.

The committee discussed the potential of making the total number of members an odd number, rather than an even number, in order for votes to never be even.

Although the committee recognised there would be a cost implication for the addition of more members to the council, overall, they believed that a small increase in number would be worth the cost due to the benefits it would bring to members workload. This was also accounting for the projected population growth and ensuring that a wide range of residents could become members.

Although some members wanted to increase the number to 42 as higher populations in the future could mean that 41 would be an undercount, the committee agreed that an increase of three members was reasonable and would allow for more multiple member wards rather than single member wards which was agreed to be the most desirable situation.

**RESOLVED:** to:

- 1) Recommend to Council that the size of the Vale of White Horse District Council be 41 members.
- 2) Authorise the head of legal and democratic, in consultation with the chair of the committee, to produce a revised Council Size Submission document, incorporating the points raised by the committee, for submission to Council

The meeting closed at 6.52 pm