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BOUNDARY REVIEW GROUP

14 JANUARY 2015

Present: Councillor I Sharpe (Chair)

Councillors N Bell, S Johnson, A Khan and D Scudder

Also present: Councillor B Mehta

Officers: Electoral Services Manager
Head of Democracy and Governance
Democratic Services Manager

5 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

None were received

6 DISCLOSURES OF INTEREST (IF ANY)

There were no disclosures of interest

7 MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

The minutes of the meeting held on 15th December were submitted and signed.

8 COUNCIL SIZE

At the first meeting of the Group on 15 December 2014 Members agreed to speak to their respective groups and report back on views on recommendations to Council for the optimum size of the Council.

The Head of Democracy and Governance presented the report and drew the Group's attention to the statement from Councillor Ian Brandon, the Green Party Member, which had been received. Councillor Binita Mehta from the Conservative Party attended the Group meeting to present her views.

The Head of Democracy and Governance commented that figures had been provided for the Group in the report to give them an indication of different sizes which the Council could look at i.e., with 30, 33 or 39 Councillors. She reminded the Group that any choices made must be evidence based. It was highlighted that the Boundary Commission requested evidence of the Councillors' constituency work to take into their considerations.

The Chair commented that the amount of time which a Councillor spent on their Council work varied significantly between Councillors.

Councillor Khan had submitted that he spent 26 hours per week on Council work. This had been calculated using his calendar for the year and then averaged as some periods were busier than others. He had excluded the months leading up to the election where time was spent more on political campaigning. However, during the year door knocking and leaflet production could be tools to connect with the local community and get their views on an issue.

The Chair and Councillor Scudder commented on the figures in the pack which had been provided to the Independent Members Remuneration Panel. It was felt that these would not have significantly changed since they were produced in 2013.

Councillor Khan suggested also including in the Council's submission, evidence gathered from the Councillors' individual self assessments which documented their community activities.

The Chair said it would be hard to justify the case for having an increased number of councillors and commented that the size of the Council could not be reduced for the reason of making financial savings.

The Head of Democracy and Governance responded that when the Council had tried to do this previously it was on the basis of reducing the number of Councillors in each ward. This present review was brought about from the Boundary Commission due to different numbers of electors in each ward. Therefore, the Council needed to consider if the number of Councillors was reduced by three what effect would this have on their ability to serve the electorate.

The Chair considered that a decrease in the number of Councillors would affect the Council, particularly with regards to the Licensing Committee. The Licensing Sub Committees put pressure on those Councillors who are available during the day. If the Council reduced its size to 30 Councillors then half would have to be on the Licensing Committee. Those Councillors would also need to be available during the day. Again with scrutiny committees, if the Mayor was part of a minority group then it would leave few members available to sit on scrutiny once the Mayor had set up their Cabinet. Scrutiny was particularly important in a Mayoral authority. The workload for the Development Control Committee had reduced but sufficient Councillors were required to be able to sit on the committee and also to have trained Councillors to act as substitutes when needed. He concluded that he could not see a case for increasing Councillor numbers nor would it be helpful to decrease them and that therefore the Council should propose 36 members to the commission.

Councillor Bell commented that from looking at reports and census information it would be hard to justify an increase in Councillor numbers. A reduction to 30

would put pressure on licensing and scrutiny committees so 36 Councillors was about right.

Councillor Mehta said that she had come to the same conclusion but thought that 25 hours per week for Councillor work was an understatement. Having three Councillors in a ward helped to balance the work. Councillor Mehta commented that there should not be a situation where having a day job prevented people from being a Councillor in order to attract and retain young people as Councillors. This was in response to earlier comments regarding the need for Councillors to be available during the day to be on Licensing Sub Committees. She felt that 36 was an appropriate size for the Council.

The Chair drew the Group's attention to the comments received from Councillor Ian Brandon. However, the proposal was not acceptable as the final number had to be divisible by three.

Councillor Khan commented that Watford was the most densely populated, cosmopolitan Borough outside London with a wide variety of casework for Councillors. Councillor Khan questioned the difference between figures given by the Boundary Commission for the number of registered voters and the Council's figures.

The Elections Manager responded that this was due to Individual Electoral Registration as 2000 voters had not registered under the new system.

Councillor Khan drew the Group's attention to some statistical research he had undertaken. Out of all councils in England (352) Watford ranked 146/352 for the number of electorate represented by each Councillor. If County Council's were removed from the total then Watford was 146/325. Finally if only two-tier districts were left then Watford ranked 137/201. This demonstrated that Watford's Councillors represent a larger number of electors than many other similar Councils. He commented that scrutiny was particularly important and needed to be sharp and effective due to the increased amount of outsourcing.

The Head of Democracy and Governance explained that following the Group's meeting the Council would put forward its case for 36 Councillors, however, the final decision was with the Boundary Commission. In response to questions she commented that the Boundary Commission's decision was final. Once the outcome was known from the Boundary Commission on the Council's size then the Group would reconvene to discuss ward boundaries. The result from the Commission could possibly not be known until May. GIS would be available to help plot wards.

ACTION – Electoral Services Manager to find out when the online tool regarding ward boundaries would become available to Councillors.

ACTION – Democratic Services Manager to contact Partnerships and Performance Section Head regarding missing population information for Callowland ward.

RESOLVED

That the Group recommends to Council that a proposed size remaining at 36 Councillors is put forward to the Local Government Boundary Commission.

Chair

The Meeting started at 6.30 pm
and finished at 7.15 pm