

Electoral Matters Committee

Monday, 18th October, 2021

MINUTES

Present:

Councillor Matthew Dormer (Chair), Councillor Gemma Monaco (Vice-Chair) and Councillors Aled Evans, Andrew Fry and Mike Rouse

Officers:

Melissa Bassett, Kevin Dicks, Sue Hanley and Darren Whitney

Senior Democratic Services Officer:

Jess Bayley-Hill

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NAMED SUBSTITUTES

There were no apologies for absence.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. MINUTES OF THE LAST MEETING

RESOLVED that

the minutes of the meeting of the Electoral Matters Committee held on 22nd October 2019 be approved as a true and correct record and signed by the Chair.

4. LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND PRELIMINARY STAGE BOUNDARY REVIEW FOR REDDITCH - COUNCIL SIZE SUBMISSION

The Electoral Services Manager introduced a report on the subject of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's Preliminary Stage Boundary Review for Redditch. Members were advised that at this stage the focus was on the size of the Council, or the total number of Councillors that there should be at Redditch Borough Council moving forward. The Boundary Commission for England was paying for the review, so this process would be completed at no financial cost to the Council. The subsequent stage of the process would focus on the location of the wards in the

Chair

Borough and what these should be called. The Electoral Matters Committee would again be consulted as part of that process.

The Senior Electoral Services Officer subsequently presented the report in detail and in doing so highlighted the following matters for Members' consideration:

- In preparing the Council's submission, Officers had reviewed the governance arrangements in place at the Council and the existing number of Councillors and it was noted that there had been no changes made to these since 2002.
- During the review process, Members had been invited to complete a survey and the responses provided had helped to inform the content of the submission. In total, 18 Councillors had completed this survey.
- In the feedback provided in the completed copies of this survey, Members had reported that technology was increasingly important as a tool for liaising with local residents and for resolving case work.
- The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Council working practices, including Committee meeting arrangements, had been taken into account. It had also been highlighted within the submission that the Council's strategic purposes were in the process of being reviewed due to the impact of the pandemic.
- There was an average electoral ratio of 2,199 electors per Councillor. However, three wards varied by more than 10% from this ratio: Abbey, Church Hill and Lodge Park. West ward was also close to this point. The Boundary Commission was clear that there should not be a variance over 10% and preferred variances to be less than 5%
- Comparative data for other Councils in Worcestershire, in respect of the electoral ratio and numbers of Councillors, had been considered. Members were asked to note that the Council had the smallest number of Councillors in Worcestershire, though both Malvern Hills District Council and Wychavon District Council were in the process of undertaking a boundary review.
- Similarly, Redditch Borough Council had a lower number of Councillors compared to the authority's nearest neighbours by population and other demographic data rather than geographic location.
- Statistical information provided by Worcestershire County Council had been analysed during the review and, based on the data provided, no overall growth in the voting population in Redditch was anticipated.

- Some anticipated changes in population by ward had been identified, based on information that had been provided by the Planning Department in respect of large planning applications.
- The statistical information provided revealed that the number of young people living in the Borough was similar to the national average, though higher than the Worcestershire average.
- The proportion of residents in the Borough from black and minority ethnic communities (BAME) was also higher than the county average.
- Redditch was ranked 107 out of 317 local authority areas in England in terms of deprivation levels and weekly pay was lower than the national average.
- The Council was keen to continue to have a system of elections by thirds. The Boundary Commission had suggested that in order to continue with this system the Council should consider the introduction of three-Member wards for all wards in the Borough.
- The requirement for three-Member wards meant that the overall number of Councillors, or size of the authority, needed to be divisible by three. Two options, both divisible by three, had therefore been identified for the overall number of Councillors: 27 or 30.
- In terms of the option to have 27 Councillors, it was anticipated that there would be a sufficient number of Councillors to participate in Committee business. The Council would also secure a small financial saving from a reduction in the overall number of Councillors, as all Members were entitled to receive the basic allowance, currently set at £4,437 per annum.
- Should there be 27 Councillors in total at the Council, this would mean that the Borough would have nine wards.
- The option of 30 Councillors, by contrast, would result in an increase in expenditure on Members' allowances, due to the introduction of an additional Councillor. Furthermore, there was a risk that if there were an even number of Councillors there might be challenges at a political level in terms of the appointment of an administration to run the Council.

Following the presentation of the report Members discussed a number of points in detail:

- The population growth figures provided by Worcestershire County Council in respect of the Borough. Members expressed some surprise that no population growth was anticipated.

Electoral Matters Committee

Monday, 18th October, 2021

- The extent to which planning applications for particular wards had been taken into account, with Members noting that large planning applications were anticipated for Church Hill and West wards which did not appear to be reflected in the figures. Officers explained that the Boundary Commission's criteria in respect of the planning applications that could be taken into account as part of this process were quite strict, though officers undertook to check the figures before the report was considered at a meeting of Council.
- The number of Councillors who had responded to the Member survey. The Chair expressed some disappointment that only 18 out of 29 Councillors had responded to this survey and Members requested that the survey be circulated again prior to the Council meeting.
- The typographical error in the report which referred to Worcestershire County Council as Worcestershire City Council. Members commented that Worcestershire County Council provided services to the whole of the county not just Worcester.
- The impact that Covid-19 had had on Councillors' work and the uncertainty that Members had about what the new normal would look like for Councillors' work once the pandemic ended.
- The next stage of the process, whereby wards would be reviewed and the possible changes that might be made. Officers suggested that Members needed to remain open minded and to consider the proposals that were brought forward on their own merits rather than through reference back to the existing wards.
- The potential for local districts to be kept in the same wards when wards were reviewed.
- The support that Councillors could provide to each other should all wards be represented by three Councillors.
- The need to attract candidates from a range of backgrounds, including people with work commitments and young families, to serve as elected Members. It was suggested that three-Member wards would potentially help to attract candidates as they would be able to share the workload with their colleagues.
- The software that would be used in the next stage to identify the location of the wards. Officers explained that this software was in the process of being installed.

The Committee concluded by discussing the total number of Councillors that would ideally serve on the Council in future. Members agreed that three-Member wards would be preferable. It was noted that the Council had always had 29 Councillors and

Electoral Matters Committee

Monday, 18th October, 2021

either 27 or 30 Councillors was a similar figure to this. However, there was general consensus that an odd number of Councillors would be preferable in order to provide some certainty in terms of identifying the majority political group at any one time. Concerns were also raised about the difficult position of the Mayor, and choice of who should serve as Mayor, should there be an even number of Councillors with an equal number representing opposing political groups. For these reasons, the Committee agreed to recommend that there should be a total of 27 Councillors.

RECOMMENDED that

subject to the amendments detailed in the preamble above, Council put forward the Council Size Submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England, including a proposal for there to be a total of 27 Councillors at Redditch Borough Council.

The Meeting commenced at 2.06 pm
and closed at 2.43 pm