

**Council 2nd February 2011**  
**Officer Briefing Note on Notice of Motion**

**‘This Council considers that 60 Councillors is too many for a small District Council.**

**Furthermore, given the pressures on the revenue budget, this Council resolves to reduce the number of Councillors from the current 60, to a more acceptable 40.**

**To achieve this objective by 2015, the Council further resolves work with the Boundary Commission.’**

**Proposed by Cllr Robinson**

**Seconded by Cllrs Sowden and Woodruff**

**Background Information**

Electoral reviews are undertaken by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England, which is an independent body set up by Parliament in April 2010 under the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009.

Schedule 2 to the 2009 Act sets out the ‘statutory criteria’ to which the Commission is required to have regard in conducting electoral reviews. In broad terms. These are:

- the need to reflect the identities and interests of local communities
- the need to secure effective and convenient local government, and
- the need to secure equality of representation

The Commission can make the following recommendations for local authority electoral arrangements:

- the total number of councillors to be elected to the council (known as ‘council size’)
- the number and boundaries of wards or divisions
- the number of councillors to be elected for each ward or division, and
- the name of any ward or division

Generally, the Commission conducts electoral reviews where electoral imbalances across wards have grown since the last periodic electoral review process which took place between 1996 and 2004. The criteria adopted by the Commission is that it will undertake a review if more than 30% of a council’s wards/divisions have an electoral imbalance of more than 10% from the average for that authority; and/or if there is one ward/division with an electoral imbalance of more than 30%, and the imbalance is unlikely to be corrected by foreseeable changes to the electorate within a reasonable period.

The Commission also offers to assist Councils who wish to maintain high quality services at a time of reduced funding by altering the number of councillors representing the Council.

Council size is the starting point in any electoral review since it determines the average number of electors per councillor to be achieved across all wards or divisions of that authority.

The Commission is of the view that each local authority should be considered individually and not compared with other authorities of similar geographic or population size, or those facing similar issues and concerns. In the Commission's opinion, local government is as diverse as the communities it serves, providing services, leadership and representation tailored to the characteristics and needs of individual areas. In addition, the demographic make-up and dispersal of communities in England are such that to aim for equality in the number of electors each councillor represents as an average across the whole country would be impractical, if not unachievable. The Commission therefore will not base its decisions on council size on comparisons between local authorities

Proposals for council size are most easily, and regularly, argued in terms of effective and convenient local government (in terms of choosing the appropriate number of members to allow the council and individual councillors to perform most effectively). Arguments can also be made on the basis of reflecting communities and allowing for fairness of representation. When making recommendations the Commission has to ensure that it can justify its proposals for council size on the basis of the statutory criteria, and the evidence it receives from stakeholders based on these criteria.

The Commission advises that a starting point should be to consider the model of local governance used by the local authority, or intended to be used by any authority. These models have impacts on the workload of councillors and the working practices of the council, and therefore will have an effect on the number of councillors needed by that council. The existence of parish and town councils in an area may also have a bearing, although it is unproven as to whether this factor necessitates more or fewer councillors. The functions of the scrutiny, planning and licensing committees of the council may also have an effect, as might the representational aspect of councillors' roles.

The Commission's technical guidance indicates that it will be for those submitting proposals to it to examine the political management and working practices of the council under review, and make well-argued and reasoned proposals. The Commission has no pre-conceived ideas regarding the number of councillors necessary to run a local authority effectively, and is content to accept proposals for an increase, decrease or the retention of the existing number of councillors, but only on the basis that they can be justified. However, in the absence of sufficient justification the Commission will challenge and ask searching questions about the rationale for the council size being proposed and, if necessary, reach its own conclusions. Such conclusions may be different from those of interested parties to a review.

Even if the Commission is content with the rationale provided in support of a proposal for council size, it may choose to consider whether it is necessary to change this number in order to ensure better levels of electoral representation across the district. It is often possible to improve the levels of electoral representation across an authority by making minor modifications of one or two to the council size. The Commission will also examine whether the allocation of councillors between certain easily distinguishable parts of an authority (for example – a town and a rural area) is accurate. Improving the accuracy of the allocation of councillors between areas in an authority can help achieve better levels of electoral equality.

The Commission's approach to conducting electoral reviews is one of consultation, openness and transparency, aiming to build as much of its recommendations as possible on locally-generated proposals and, to that end, conduct as much consultation as is practicable in any review. The Commission publicises the review as widely as possible, and asks that the local councils, political parties, parish and town councils, community groups, residents' associations and other main stakeholders do the same. Timescales for electoral reviews vary depending on complexity, interest, cooperation from interested parties, and the Commission's workload. They are also dependant on the amount of consultation undertaken by the Commission. Their starting point is usually to conduct at least two rounds of consultation – one at the very start of the review and one following the publication of draft recommendations. However, there are occasions when the Commission will wish to conduct further consultation on specific areas or issues, particularly if they are proving controversial.

### Implications for the Council

Should Council be minded to support the motion, then the first step would be for officers to contact the Commission to establish whether the Commission would be willing to undertake a review and how this would fit with the Commission's current workload, and to establish what information and detail of proposals the Commission would require.

In advance of a review, it is likely that the Council would be required to submit to the Commission various information including electoral data, maps, information about governance arrangements, information about the Council, parish councils, community groups, partners and stakeholders. There would be resource implications for providing such information and for liaising with the Commission throughout the review process. Staff resources would not allow for this to be done during the period leading to the local elections and proposed referendum on the parliamentary voting system in May 2011.

In the light of the forthcoming elections, Members may also wish to consider whether it would be more appropriate for Council to delay considering any possible review of the size of the Council until the newly elected Council is in place, to ensure that any request or proposals put to the Commission have the support of that newly elected Council.

### Section 151 Officer Comments

The Section 151 Officer has been consulted and has no further comments to add.

### Monitoring Officer Comments

The Monitoring Officer has prepared this briefing note.