

REPORT TO: FULL COUNCIL

DATE: 24 FEBRUARY 2022

TITLE: REFERRAL FROM ELECTORAL REVIEW
WORKING GROUP - COUNCIL SIZE SUBMISSION
TO THE LGBCE

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RECOMMENDED that:

- A** Full Council approves the Council Size Submission response to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) (attached as Appendix A to the report).
- B** That the Director of Governance and Corporate Services be delegated to make any minor or consequential amendments and submit the document to the LGBCE.

BACKGROUND

1. The LGBCE has requested that the Council reviews its electoral arrangements. This is because a number of the wards have populations which are over 10 percent above or below the ward average population.
2. As part of this process the Council is required to submit a proposal on the number of Councillors the Council should have. In order to assist with this process a Councillor survey was carried out. This was carried out to establish current Councillor workload, as well as anticipated workload, and views on future council size.
3. In December 2021, Full Council endorsed the recommendation of the Working Group to not proceed with a consultation on changing to all-out elections. This means that the Council must have wards with equal numbers of Councillors. In the context of Harlow this means that the size of the Council must be a multiple of three. At a council operating elections by thirds, the LGBCE is highly unlikely to accept any proposal which has wards containing differing numbers of Councillors.

4. The Working Group considered the council size submission document on the premise of three possible outcomes: A small reduction in size; no change in size; or a modest increase in size. A copy of the original report to the Working Group is attached as Appendix B.

ISSUES/PROPOSALS

5. The Councillor survey highlighted a number of factors that have changed since the previous review. How Councillors work has changed significantly, with a much greater emphasis on digital communication and engagement. The rise of social media has led to far more interaction with the public.
6. Councillors generally feel able to cope with the current workload, but the Working Group felt this would change as newer developments became populated over the next five years. It should be noted the LGBCE will only consider expected population growth over the next five years which is within Harlow.
7. The Working Group also stressed that there is often work which Councillors would like to do, but decide against doing due to other workload. An increase in the number of Councillors would create extra capacity.
8. Additionally, the Working Group are of the view that increasing the number of wards to 12 will give greater flexibility to achieve better warding arrangements in the next stage of the process.
9. The draft response emphasises the recent rises in workload experienced by Councillors, in addition to further increases that are expected. It was evident from the Working Group's discussion that there were concerns about Councillor capacity over the next few years if there wasn't an increase in the number of Councillors.
10. There was unanimous agreement amongst the Working Group that an increase in three Councillors to 36 would be prudent. This equates to an additional ward.

Next Steps

11. Once submitted, the LGBCE will consider, at a Commission meeting in April, whether it feels the arguments put forward in the submission form justify a change in the size of the Council. The LGBCE will notify the Council on the number of Councillors it should have.
12. The Council is also required to submit proposals on ward boundaries. The Working Group will be starting its initial work on this shortly. Its proposals will be informed by the LGBCE's decision on council size. These will also be subject to Full Council's endorsement in July and approval by the LGBCE.
13. The changes to council size and ward boundaries will have effect from 2024 elections. As has been set out in previous reports, the elections in 2024 are

required to be all-out elections. Subsequent elections would revert to elections by thirds. The electoral review timetable is attached as Appendix C.

IMPLICATIONS

Strategic Growth and Regeneration

None specific.

Author: Andrew Bramidge, Director of Strategic Growth and Regeneration

Finance

None specific.

Author: Simon Freeman, Deputy to the Chief Executive and Director of Finance

Housing

None specific.

Author: Andrew Murray, Director of Housing

Communities and Environment

As contained in the report.

Author: Jane Greer, Director of Communities and Environment

Governance and Corporate Services

As contained in the report.

Author: Simon Hill, Director of Governance and Corporate Services

Appendices

Appendix A – Council Size Submission to the LGBCE

Appendix B – Original report to Electoral Review Working Group

Background Papers

None.

Glossary of terms/abbreviations used

LGBCE – Local Government Boundary Commission for England