

DONCASTER METROPOLITAN BOROUGH COUNCIL

ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE

23RD JULY, 2013

An Extraordinary meeting of the ELECTIONS AND DEMOCRATIC STRUCTURES COMMITTEE was held at the CIVIC OFFICE, DONCASTER on TUESDAY, 23RD JULY, 2013 at 10.00 a.m.

PRESENT:

Chair - Councillor Moira Hood
Vice-Chair - Councillor Kevin Rodgers

Councillors Nuala Fennelly, Deborah Hutchinson, Hilary McNamee, Bill Mordue, Jane Nightingale and Sue Wilkinson.

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Councillors Monty Cuthbert and Chris McGuinness.

APOLOGIES:

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors Patricia Bartlett and Phil Cole.

8. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST, IF ANY

No declarations were made at the meeting.

9. SUBMISSION BY COUNCIL TO BOUNDARY COMMISSION ON COUNCIL SIZE

The Committee considered a report which provided an overview of the Electoral Review of Doncaster being carried out by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE). Subsequent to the agenda despatch for this meeting, the Committee had also received copies of the report of the Cross-Party Working Group established to make recommendations on this Council's submission on Council size to the LGBCE, together with the Data and Information Pack which provided details of Council Governance and Structure, Council and Committees, Outside Bodies, Doncaster Profile, Electorate and Overview and Scrutiny.

It was reported that the LGBCE's review would comprise two stages. The first stage of the Review was to give consideration to the number of Councillors needed to take decisions, manage the business of the Council and provide community leadership and representation. If the LGBCE decided that a different number of Councillors to the present size was appropriate, the second stage of the process would be to consider introducing new Ward boundaries to ensure that each Councillor represented broadly the same number of voters and that local wards reflected the interests and identities of local communities.

Members noted that a Cross-Party Working Group had been established and this had concentrated on the following three work streams that would inform the debate on Council size:-

- (i) Councillor workload outside of formal Council meetings;
- (ii) The future role of local Councillors; and
- (iii) The Council's approach to scrutiny.

It was reported that the Council's Intervention Commissioners had already made a submission to the LGBCE and had recommended a reduction in Council size to approximately 40-42 Members, together with a move to all-out elections, rather than the election by thirds currently utilised.

The Committee noted that, subject to approval by the Council of the submission on Council size, the LGBCE would then consider the proposal, alongside the submission from the Intervention Commissioners and any others received, and make a "minded to" decision on the size of the Council on 13th August, 2013. Members also noted that from 3rd September to 14th October, 2013, the Boundary Commission would undertake a public consultation on its "minded to" decision.

Speaking on behalf of the Cross-Party Working Group, Councillor Chris McGuinness explained that the Data and Information Pack served to demonstrate that, in coming to its recommended Council size of 54 Councillors, the Working Group had taken into account a wide and comprehensive range of relevant factors, including Members' involvement in the Overview and Scrutiny function, representation on outside bodies, frequency and membership of the Council's Committees and Sub-Committees and Members' levels of casework and time commitments in their local wards. Councillor McGuinness stressed that the Working Group was reasonably confident that a Council made up of 54 Councillors plus the Elected Mayor would ensure that the functions of the Council could be maintained. He confirmed that the three main political groups represented on the Working Group had agreed the recommendation, which had been supported by all members present at the Group's meeting. He added, however, that the Independent Member on the Group had subsequently been informed of the outcome and indicated that she did not agree with the final proposal.

Discussion followed, during which Members asked a wide range of questions on the Council size being recommended by the Working Group, and on the Electoral Review in general.

In reply to a query as to how the wards would be shared out between Councillors if a new Council size was agreed, it was explained that this would form stage 2 of the Review process, but any new ward structure could potentially comprise a mix of 3 Member wards, plus some 1 or 2 Member wards. It was noted that the Working Group had worked on the assumption that there would be 3 Member wards.

Arising from a question regarding dates of future Borough Elections, Members noted that the Secretary of State had announced that all-out Elections were to be introduced in Doncaster, to be held concurrently with the Mayoral election.

This could mean that some Councillors might potentially have to stand for Election in 2014, and then again in 2015, when the Election would reflect the new Council size and new ward boundaries, with further Elections then being held in 2017. In reply to further comments by Members on the Secretary of State's decision, the Officers stressed that the Council was bound by the decision and could not challenge it.

Arising from a query by a Member as to what input Doncaster's Members of Parliament had had in the Electoral Review, and whether they had been consulted or not, it was noted that the MPs and/or their representatives had met with the Elected Mayor to discuss the Review and had also been involved in the process through the district Party. A view was expressed that it would have been useful for Members to have been informed of the MPs' views on this matter.

In response to a Member's question as to why the Intervention Commissioners had not been to any Council meeting to explain the reasoning behind their recommended reduction in Council size, the Head of Democratic Services advised that at the last meeting of the Doncaster Recovery Board, the Commissioners had outlined their case for proposing a reduced Council size. Some Members felt, however, that an opportunity for Members to question the Commissioners on their submission to the LGBCE would have been helpful.

It was then

RESOLVED TO RECOMMEND TO THE COUNCIL:

- (a) that the draft Submission on Council size prepared by the Cross-Party Working Group, together with the Data and Information Pack, be approved; and
- (b) that the Submission on Council size be forwarded to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England.