

1. **REPORT TITLE** **Review of Electoral Arrangements – Council Size**

Submitted by: **The Monitoring Officer**

Portfolio: **Policy, People & Partnerships**

Ward(s) affected: **All**

Purpose of the Report

Members are asked to consider reviewing the current Council size. The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) has acknowledged that currently this authority with 60 members is at the top of the range when compared to our 'CIPFA nearest neighbours group'.

Recommendations

- (a) That the Council resolves that the current council size of 60 members should be reduced.**
- (b) That the Council resolves that the number of elected Members should be in a range between 42 to 48.**

Reasons

Following the publication of the electoral register in March 2015 it was clear that the Council had met at least one of the criteria required to trigger a review by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE). Prior to the LGBCE commencing their review a decision needs to be made in terms of the Council size.

1. **Background**

- 1.1 Newcastle Borough Council has 60 Councillors representing 24 wards. Wards are represented by either two or three councillors; and elections take place by thirds i.e. elections are held three in every four years with each councillor being elected for a four year term of office. In the fourth year when the county council elections are held there are no Borough elections. Through this mechanism individual seats are elected on rotational basis for a four year term.
- 1.2 On the 26 November 2014 Full Council agreed to establish a Governance Sub Committee to look at the electoral arrangements of the Council. The Sub-committee comprises 7 members, 5 of whom are members of this Council with full voting rights, 2 will be independent with no voting rights.
- 1.3 The first meeting of the Sub-Committee took place on the 9 March 2015; the main focus of this meeting was to receive a presentation from the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) which was provided by Max Caller, Chairman of the LGCBE and Joylan Jackson, Chief Executive of the LGBCE.
- 1.4 Members from the Commission provided an overview of the options that were available to the authority in terms of an electoral review. The Commission acknowledged that currently this authority with 60 members was at the top of the range when compared to our 'CIPFA nearest neighbours group'. They reported that in relation to reviews recently undertaken with authorities within this family group, there had been a reduction in Council size of up to 10%.
- 1.5 Since March the Sub Committee has met on two occasions and has discussed a number of issues in relation to this review. The main issues that need to be considered and agreed upon are council size and the electoral cycle.

- 1.6 Consideration on changing Electoral Cycle have been dealt with under a report presented to Special Council on the 26 November 2015
- 1.7 In relation to determining council size the Sub Committee sanctioned a questionnaire that was sent to all Members just prior to the election in May 2015. The results of this questionnaire have been collated and will be used as part of any submission to the LGBCE. In addition various scenarios in relation to council size have been reviewed and costed, details of which are covered later in this report

2. Issues

- 2.1 Since the Governance Sub Committee commenced their work there have been further developments in that the Council has now hit the trigger points for the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) to automatically undertake an electoral review.
- 2.2 Contact has been made with the LGBCE to confirm timescales for a review and it is anticipated that they will address the Council in early 2016, with a view to work commencing in March 2016.
- 2.3 The question of Council size is the starting point in any electoral review, since it will determine the optimum councillor/elector ratio across all electoral areas, against which levels of electoral imbalance can be measured. The LGBCE is of the view that each Council area should be considered on its own merits and that there should be no attempt to aim at equality of council size between authorities of similar types and populations.
- 2.4 In coming to a view on council size, the LGBCE will consider the following;
- The governance arrangements of the council, how it takes decisions across the broad range of its responsibilities, and whether there are any planned changes to those arrangements;
 - The council's scrutiny functions relating to its own decision making and the council's responsibilities to outside bodies, and whether any changes to them are being considered, and
 - The representational role of councillors in the local community and how they engage with people, conduct casework and represent the council.

3 The considerations of the Governance Review Sub-Committee

- 3.1 The Sub-Committee has considered the level and nature of the workload of councillors serving on the Borough Council. To inform this work the Sub-Committee commissioned a survey of all councillors. A copy of this survey and the key findings are contained in Appendix 1 of this report.
- 3.2 The Sub-Committee has also had the benefit of an analysis of a Peer Review conducted by the Local Government Association (LGA) which reviewed the current pattern of member meetings. Copies of this report have already been circulated widely and it is therefore not attached with this report. The analysis undertaken as part of this Peer Review provided very useful commentary on the demands placed upon Members through the current governance arrangements. The findings of the Peer Review are currently being assessed through the Council's scrutiny process and it was not the role of the Sub-Committee or of this report to consider the recommendations of the Peer Review. However, the review report provided valuable evidence about the work demands on councillors and has therefore assisted the Sub-Committee in its consideration about the appropriate number of councillors required to perform the Council's functions.
- 3.3 Whilst it has not been a primary consideration, the Sub-Committee has considered the cost of Member allowances and has been mindful that a reduction in the number of councillors would produce cost savings on the assumption that the allowances paid were broadly in line with the

currently approved scheme. The potential cost reductions arising from savings in basic allowances by reducing the number councillors serving on the Council are given in the financial and resource implications section of this report.

- 3.4 There is a relationship between the number of councillors serving on the Council and the frequency of the electoral cycle. If the Council retains a pattern of election by thirds then it is a requirement that there shall be a pattern of three Member wards across the Borough. This is to ensure that electors in all parts of the Borough have an equivalent entitlement to vote for a candidate each time an election is held. In the case where the Council has a pattern of all out elections every four years this means that there can be a pattern of one, two or three Members for each ward. There is a report on the agenda of a Special meeting of the Council to be held on 25 November 2015 at which the Council is asked to consider the matter of the future election cycle. In its considerations the Sub-Committee has been mindful of the inter-relationship between these two matters.
- 3.5 The matter of the number of councillors serving on the Council has a direct bearing on the pattern of wards. In considering the warding of the Borough there is a range of considerations, but the two most significant are the electoral considerations and the community identity considerations. In drawing up a pattern of wards these need to reflect consistency in the size of electorate in each ward. The other key consideration when undertaking warding is to produce wards which reflect natural communities with particular care being given to avoiding creating ward boundaries which cut across communities.
- 3.6 In considering the issue of future council size, the Sub-Committee has looked at a wide range of comparator authorities, a table of councils within the council's comparator authority group is given in Appendix 2 of the report. The Sub-Committee noted that Newcastle is the largest of any of the comparator councils. The statistical average size of council for the comparator group is 47.
- 3.7 The Sub-Committee recognises that the matter of determining wards is a sensitive one and needs to be undertaken after full and careful consideration, indeed it is the major task which the LGBCE will undertake as part of any review process. The advice which the LGBCE has given is that the key to this task is to determine the appropriate number of councillors required to undertake the duties of the role. It is for this reason that the Sub-Committee has focussed its work on looking at the role and work of councillors and used this to inform its discussions about the appropriate number of councillors to represent the Borough.
- 3.8 After full and careful consideration the Sub-Committee considers that it may be more appropriate to leave the task of determining a pattern of wards to the LGBCE. Having weighed all of the factors and considered a range of options the Sub-Committee does not consider it appropriate to adopt a single preferred pattern of wards for the Council to approve at this time. Indeed, if the Council were to adopt a preferred ward pattern this would be subject to review by the LGBCE in any case.
- 3.9 The Sub-Committee has therefore focussed its efforts and consideration on the appropriate future size of the Council. After careful consideration, the Sub-Committee has not identified a single optimal number of councillors which it would wish to recommend to the Council. This is in part due to the fact that the matter of the electoral cycle is for consideration in parallel with the issue of future council size and also because there are strong arguments which can be made for a Council of a range of different sizes. It is for this reason that the Sub-Committee is putting forward range of size options which it is requesting the Council to endorse and for these to be put before the LGBCE as part of its review process.
- 3.10 The Sub-Committee is clear however that the current Council of sixty councillors is too large and that in view of the demands placed upon Members that in future the Council should be smaller in size. It is for this reason that the Sub-Committee is recommending and seeking a positive

endorsement by the Council of the principle that in any review process the current number of councillors should be reduced.

- 3.11 The Sub-Committee is therefore recommending and seeking Council approval that in future the size of the council should be in a range between 42 and 48 councillors and would wish to leave the LGBCE review to determine the appropriate size within this range and the corresponding warding pattern. The Sub-Committee thinks it both prudent and pragmatic to propose a range for the future council size ahead of the planned LGBCE review as by this means it enables a range of options to be considered through the review process and that by doing so there will be greater opportunity for the consultation process, which will form a part of the review process, to consider representations which will guide the final recommendation by the LGBCE.

4. **Views of the Independent Members**

- 4.1 *“We believe that at 60 the current council is too large. Moving to a size of council in line with similar authorities should be proposed by the Council at the start of any LGBCE review. We support the range of council size which has been recommended by the Sub-Committee but would urge you to a number at the lower end of this range. In suggesting this we are aware of the implications for the size of electorate within individual wards and in the context of the evidence we have heard consider a number in the low forties to be sound for the needs of the Council and the community.”*

5. **Reasons for Preferred Solution**

- 5.1 As the Council has already triggered the criteria for an electoral review it is considered vital that steps are taken as soon as possible to enable to the Council to prepare and submit a proposal to the LGBCE ahead of the review commencing.
- 5.2 The Sub-Committee has met with representatives of the LGBCE and they have advised that where a review has been triggered it is best practice for the council concerned to have considered the matter and to have formulated some comments to provide to the Commission at the start of the review process. They have specifically advised that one of the issues which it is helpful for the Council to have a view on is the appropriate council size. It is for this reason that the Sub-Committee has considered in some depth the work of councillors serving on the Borough Council and come to a view about the size of council it considers best suited to meet the future needs of the Council and its community. Indeed in its guidance document on electoral reviews the LGBCE specifically states that the preliminary stage of any review should be a submission by the council on the council size. Having undertaken this work in good time therefore places the council in a strong position to make representations to the Commission at the start of the review, which is currently understood to be in spring 2016.
- 4.3 It is therefore timely that the Council should consider and endorse the recommendations being made by the Sub-Committee as this addresses the key issue which will be raised by the LGBCE at the start of the review. Having determined a council size, further work can then be undertaken on the related matters, most significantly, the ward boundaries. Again, by determining the size of council in a timely manner this leaves a greater period for consideration of other issues in advance of the LGBCE starting its work. The advice which the Sub-Committee has received from the LGBCE is that having considered the issues in a timely manner means that the Council is in a stronger position to inform the Commission of its views. The LGBCE will seek the views of the Council at the outset of the review and based on the experience of other councils these early views have a significant bearing upon

the final recommendations made. The alternative is for the Council not to make any comments at the outset of the review therefore leaving the LGBCE to determine the parameters. The Sub-Committee is strongly of the view that making a submission to the Commission at the outset of the review is the prudent course of action and is therefore making the recommendations set out in the report accordingly.

5. **Outcomes Linked to Sustainable Community Strategy and Corporate Priorities**

- creating a clean, safe and sustainable Borough
- creating a Borough of opportunity
- creating a healthy and active community
- creating a co-operative Council, delivering high-value, community-driven services

6. **Legal and Statutory Implications**

There is no fixed size for an electoral ward or local authority in England. The LGBCE is responsible for conducting reviews of local authority electoral arrangements. The objective of an electoral review is to ensure that, within each local authority area, the number of electors represented by each councillor is approximately the same.

7. **Financial and Resource Implications**

Reducing the Council size will help to deliver cost savings to this Council.

Cost savings from a reduction in Council Size

Council size = 60 Members

Basic Allowance = £3,365.04

Current Total Cost = **£201,902.40***

** Does not include special responsibility allowances (SRA)*

Council Size	Cost £	Savings £
36 Members	121,141.44	80,760.48
42 Members	141,331.68	60,570.72
45 Members	151,426.80	50,475.60
48 Members	161,521.92	40,380.48
54 Members	181,712.16	20,190.24

8. **Major Risks**

A full risk assessment will be completed prior to the report being submitted to Full Council in November 2015.

9. **Earlier Cabinet/Committee Resolutions**

Report to Full Council on 26th November 2014
Report to Full Council on 9 September 2015

10. **Background Papers**

Report to Council 16 April 2014 'Proposed Changes to Electoral Arrangements'
Report to Council 9 September 2015 'Governance Review Sub Committee – Update'
LGBCE Guidance based on electoral reviews

11. **Appendices**

Appendix 1 – Copy of Member Survey & Electoral Survey Findings Report
Appendix 2 – Table of comparator authorities