

GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE

Thursday, 22 July 2021

**Present: Councillor Paul Barrington-King (Chairman)
Councillors Holden (Vice-Chairman), Lewis, Pope, Rands, Scott, Simmons and
Wormington**

Officers in Attendance: Lee Colyer (Director of Finance, Policy and Development (Section 151 Officer)), Jane Clarke (Head of Policy and Governance) and Caroline Britt (Democratic Services Officer)

Other Members in Attendance: Councillor Dr Hall

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

GP22/21 There were no apologies received.

DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST:

GP23/21 There were no disclosable pecuniary or other significant interests declared at the meeting.

NOTIFICATION OF VISITING MEMBERS WISHING TO SPEAK (IN ACCORDANCE WITH COUNCIL PROCEDURE RULE 18):

GP24/21 Councillor Dr Hall had registered to speak on Agenda Items 5 and 6.

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF 27 APRIL 2021

GP25/21 Members reviewed the minutes. No amendments were proposed.

RESOLVED – That the minutes of the meeting dated 27 April 2021 be approved as a correct record.

WHOLE COUNCIL ELECTIONS

GP26/21 Jane Clark, Head of Policy and Governance introduced the report as set out in the Agenda.

Registered Speakers: Councillor Dr Hall.

Discussion and questions from Members included the following:

- An earlier report by Mike McGeary (2011) would be circulated to Members after the meeting.
- Appendix B provided details of the relative merits of each system, but if Members decided further information would be helpful to residents, this could be done. But to note, the consultation was due to be published on Monday 26 July 2021.
- It was suggested whole elections would be good for the stability of the Council and better provided for medium and long term financial planning.
- It was further suggested that whole elections would make more sense to the electorate and that it would provide significant financial savings.
- Central Government and two thirds of other Councils operated a

- whole election system, including Kent County Council.
- The consultation sought to harvest views of the electorate that would better inform a decision by Members.
 - There was very little research on whole elections and as such the report did not show any clear evidence of any significant benefit.
 - Residents would vote on the issues of the day and this would be true whether the Council adopted whole elections or elections by thirds.
 - There was a risk that if local elections took place at the same time as national elections, local elections would lose out.
 - There was a risk that whole elections would result in the loss of democratic engagement.
 - There was a further risk that all political parties (and not just smaller parties) may not be able to field candidates if there was a move to whole elections. This could leave some seats uncontested.
 - Any change in system would require a two thirds majority.
 - The cost of the consultation would not be significant. It would feature on the TWBC website and in the four main local newspapers.
 - Neither system would guarantee a stable Council.
 - A mixture of experience on the Council was very important.
 - One advantage of elections every 4 years (whole elections) was that it would give more time to find the talent. Better candidates might improve voter turnout.
 - A recent article in the Times of Tunbridge Wells did not come from a press release issued by the Council or from the Cabinet. It was likely that it was 'picked up' following the publication of the Agenda for this meeting and not from any official source. Once the consultation had been published, it was expected that TWBC would issue a press statement.
 - There was concern that the questions included in the consultation were not sufficiently prescriptive to give the electorate enough information to make an informed decision.
 - The two proposed consultations included in the Agenda would be published as one consultation for a period of 6 weeks. The information would be amalgamated and would total 4 questions.
 - The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) don't consult on Council size. The reason TWBC were suggesting a consultation was to gather evidence on this issue.
 - The LGBCE were likely to run a consultation in early 2022 on the size, shape and names of Wards.
 - There was no formal way to weight consultation responses so it would be for Members to make a judgement on what weighting to put on each response.
 - In terms of numbers of Councillors, this was determined by ratio of Councillors to electorate. To increase the number of Councillors (more than 48) there would need to be a strong case as to why there was a need to go outside of the range as determined by the Boundary Commission. It was unlikely the Boundary Commission would agree to a higher number of Councillors.
 - However, if Councillors wanted to include a higher number as part of the Consultation process this could be done.
 - It should be noted that Tonbridge and Malling had agreed to reduce their number of Councillors by 11.
 - It was recognised that it was unlikely there would be a high level of response to the consultation. The consultation would help to inform views, but it was not the only piece of evidence for Members.
 - Consultation was a legal requirement and must include key

stakeholders, including Parish and Town Councils. Given this, there was no reason not to also include members of the public.

- Engagement with the electorate was important and to ensure the decisions as a result of the consultation were fully understood.
- Elections by thirds allowed feedback on decisions 3 out of 4 years and could potentially avoid big mistakes and/or commitments being made.
- It was important that Members helped educate the electorate so they knew what they were voting for.
- The reasons for the answers the electorate gave would be important. It would be further important that the right questions were asked.
- It was suggested it should be made clear the research referred to in the preamble was quite old and based on national rather than local elections.
- There was a discussion on the use of 'yes' and 'no' answers in the consultation. It was suggested that this form of questioning was outdated. The answers should instead be in the form of statements.
- Ultimately it would be for Councillors to make a decision on this issue. Consultations were only part of the decision making process.
- The Borough already benefited from over 200 representatives – Parish, Town, Borough and County.
- The preamble could be amended to reflect the research in 2003 and include a hyperlink to that research.
- The wording of Question 1 could be changed to not include a 'yes' 'no' answer.
- The General Purposes Committee was a regulatory committee so the decision rested with this committee rather than with Cabinet. If a decision could not be made, it would be referred straight to Full Council.
- An amendment to Question 1 was proposed by Cllr Wormington, seconded by Cllr Pope and a vote was requested. The wording to be amended as follows:

“Which electoral system do you think the Council should have?

- All Out (where Councillors are elected once every four years)
- By thirds (where a third of Councillors are elected three years out of four)”
- A vote was taken:
 - o 6 for
 - o 1 against
 - o 1 abstain
- The amendment was passed.

RESOLVED – The recommendations set out in the report were supported to include the amendment to Question 1.

ELECTORAL REVIEW

GP27/21 Jane Clark, Head of Policy and Governance introduced the report as set out in the Agenda.

Registered Speakers: Councillor Dr Hall.

Discussion and questions from Members included the following:

- To note, a revised table showing the electoral ratio was circulated at the meeting as there were technical issues with the original version published on the website. In addition, the source information from the Boundary Commission was also circulated.
- The number of Councillors listed were sample numbers, more numbers could be added as long as they were divisible by three.
- To produce a range maps to show how the Wards would change if the number of Councillors changed was not possible.
- Because the process was complex the Boundary Commission required that the number of Councillors be established first before work commenced on Ward Boundaries.
- If the decision was to continue to elect by thirds, Ward patterns would change dramatically because there was a requirement for three Member Wards.
- It was disappointing the Boundary Commission did not take into account population size.
- The Borough could increase in size by one third, but with no additional representation.
- It was suggested the consultation should include a number higher than the current number of 48. It was also suggested that the consultation include a column that allowed respondents to 'choose' their own number.
- It would also be important respondents knew what the current number of Councillors were.
- The number of Councillors wasn't as important as ensuring that those Councillors were effective.
- In terms of total number of Councillors, TWBC sat in the middle across the region.
- If the Council moved to three Members per Ward it would sit near the bottom of the list.
- The more Councillors the better the ratio between Councillors and population.
- The Boundary Commission did take into consideration population growth.
- It was suggested that the question should be amended to better explain what was being sought by the Council.
- An amendment was proposed by Cllr Rands, seconded by Cllr Holden and a vote was requested. The wording to be amended as follows:

"Would you like to have:

- Fewer Councillors (this will save money, but Councillors will represent more people);
- 48 Councillors (this is the same as we currently have);
- More Councillors (this may cost more money, but Councillors will represent a smaller group of people and would take into account of a growing population)."

- A vote was taken:
 - o 5 for
 - o 1 against
 - o 2 abstain

-The Amendment was passed.

RESOLVED – The recommendations set out in the report were supported including the amendment to the question.

URGENT BUSINESS

GP28/21 There was no urgent business.

DATE OF NEXT MEETING

GP29/21 Two further meetings would need to be scheduled, dates agreed as follows:

Thursday 19 August 2021 at 6:30pm
Tuesday 21 September 2021 at 6:30pm

NOTE: The meeting concluded at 8.35 pm.