

MEETING:	COUNCIL
DATE:	02 MARCH 2012
TITLE OF REPORT:	ELECTORAL REVIEW OF HEREFORDSHIRE: COUNCIL SIZE SUBMISSION
REPORT BY:	HEAD OF GOVERNANCE

CLASSIFICATION: Open

Wards Affected

County-wide

Purpose

To consider and approve the proposed submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission, in respect of council size.

Recommendations

THAT: the attached submission to the Local government Boundary Commission in respect of Council size be approved.

Key Points Summary

- The Local Government Boundary Commission (LGBC) confirmed in May 2011, that it would undertake a formal electoral review of Herefordshire, beginning in March 2012.
- The purpose of the LGBC review is to ensure electoral equality as far as possible. Achieving electoral equality means ensuring that there are an equal number of electorate per local ward councillor for every Council ward in Herefordshire.
- A cross-party Members' Electoral Review Working Group, and a supporting Electoral Review Officers' Project Team, were formed in November 2011 in order to assist with the review. Both groups have met a number of times in preparation for the review, and they will continue meet throughout the review period in order to be consulted on aspects of the review including the information/evidence to be provided to the LGBC as part of the Council's submission. In addition, Mr Mike Flynn has been appointed as the Council's Electoral Review Officer for the duration of the review, and he will guide both groups through the process and prepare all of the Council's submission paperwork.
- Before the formal review commences, the Council is required to indicate its preference on Council size (i.e. the total number of local authority councillors) to the LGBC. Council may also choose to give an indication of its preference for single- or multi-Member wards. The LGBC will then decide whether it is minded to accept the Council's preference, and this decision will dictate what type of review the LGBC conducts.

- The submission on Council size has been prepared by the electoral Review Officer using feedback and information from both Electoral Review groups, and is attached as Appendix A. Members are asked to note that the submission is still in draft at this stage. This is because, at the time that the Council agenda went to print, the Members' Electoral Review Working Group was still waiting to meet with representatives from the LGBC to receive feedback on the draft submission and note any areas where further information might still be required. This meeting will have taken place before Council on 02 March 2012, and if any further updates are needed to the submission, they will be circulated to members as soon as possible, or tabled at Council with this report.
- The preference for Council size is indicated in the submission as 54. The attached submission contains the reasoning behind this preference and sets out the case for reducing the number of councillors from the current 58 to the proposed figure of 54.
- The report also sets out the Council's general preference for single member wards wherever possible, particularly in the rural areas, provided it can be achieved without detriment to local communities.

Alternative Options

- 1 Council can approve an alternative Council size if it wishes, but in doing so must evidence that there would be sufficient capacity to enable Councillors to discharge all aspects of their roles and run the Council effectively.

Reasons for Recommendations

- 2 The electoral review will begin formally in March 2012, and the Council's initial submission on size is required beforehand in order to inform the LGBC on what type of review should be conducted.

Introduction and Background

- 3 The electoral review is necessary because 30% of wards in the county have an electoral variance in excess of 10% from the average figure of electors per councillor in the Authority. In particular, Hollington Ward has a variance of 34%.

- 4 Once agreement is reached on the number of councillors, the requirements of the review become clearer. The LGBC has issued technical guidance to help local authorities, organisations and members of the public, and in this it lists three options for reviews as follows:

Type A – applicable where there is no need or case for a change in Council size. Typically such a review is triggered mainly by electoral imbalances, or if there has been a review within the past ten years and there are no new arguments for change. This type of review takes about 26 to 30 weeks to complete before the LGBC makes a final recommendation.

Type B – applicable where a small change in the number of Councillors is proposed which normally means an increase or decrease of up to three Councillors and the LGBC is minded to accept the Council's preference on size. This review gathers views and information from the public on community identities, the impact of new ward boundaries and possible warding arrangements. The Council would make a submission on warding arrangements at this stage which helps the Commission to formulate Draft Recommendations which are then subject to formal public consultations. This type of review is estimated to take between 42 to 50 weeks to complete.

Type C – applicable where the Authority makes a case for a substantial change of number of councillors which normally involves more than three Councillors In this instance the LGBC conducts an initial formal public consultation on Council size, following which a minded to recommend notice is issued and views/information are sought from the public on warding arrangements and related issues. This then leads to the second stage of public consultation on the Commission's Draft Recommendations. This review can take between 52 and 62 weeks to complete.

5. In March 2012, the LGBC will make its decision about which review it will undertake for Herefordshire Council.

Key Considerations

6. Appendix A to this report deals only with the issue of Council size, because this initial requirement is the Council's responsibility and must be dealt with first. Once the review type is chosen and starts formally, detailed research will be undertaken on all other aspects of the review, such as warding arrangements, mapping proposals, community identity and effective working arrangements for members. Any organisation, group, political party or individual will also be able to contribute to the review and the LGBC will give equal weight to all information it receives. In all instances, information must be supported by evidence.
7. Section 4.2 of Appendix A refers to the LGBC's technical guidance in respect of the criteria for Council size. The submission must demonstrate that it meets all four points listed.
8. Section 18 of the report provides detailed reasoning that a Council size of 54 is viable. It demonstrates the extent of member's workloads and how the work is distributed between them, and gives the current number of places allocated to members on committees, sub-committees and outside bodies. It also lists their other responsibilities to schools, communities and parish and town councils. It argues a case for members spending more time working within given localities, and less time corporately.
9. Paragraph 19.1 outlines the Council's case for warding arrangements. This will require further, much more detailed work in several stages during the formal review, and will result in consideration of several different options.
10. The cross-party Member Electoral Review Working Group has met to consider the Council's draft submission on Council size, which is a statement of the current working arrangements of members. However, not all Members agreed with the full content of the document. In particular there was a range of options put forward concerning the future size of the Council and the fact that the current Overview and Scrutiny arrangements were not fully supported by all Groups.

Community Impact

11. It should be noted that any new warding arrangements could have implications on the Council's current localities, however it could be possible to set criteria for the warding exercise that aims not to cut across two localities.

Financial Implications

12. Costs have been incurred in the preparation of the Council's submission which can be met from current budgetary provision and there will be additional costs involved in undertaking any re-warding exercise that will follow the Commission's decision.

Legal Implications

- 13 The review is being undertaken in accordance with the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 and the Secretary of State's statutory guidance. The Council has a duty to comply with the review.

Risk Management

- 14 The need to undertake a re-warding exercise may clash with the organisation of the Police and Crime Commissioner elections and the Annual canvass, which will place considerable strain on existing resources.

Consultees

- 15 A detailed communication exercise will be undertaken as part of the review.

Appendices

Appendix A – Draft submission on Council Size

Background Papers

None