

CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL

Minutes of a meeting of the **Electoral Review Sub-Committee**
held on Wednesday, 16th August, 2023 in Room R1 & R2 - Westfields,
Middlewich Road, Sandbach, CW11 1HZ

PRESENT

Councillors J Bratherton, C Browne, J Clowes, S Corcoran, S Edgar (for Cllr Pearson), C O'Leary and F Wilson

OFFICERS IN ATTENDANCE

Brian Reed, Head of Democratic Services and Governance
Nick Billington, Economic Research and Intelligence Officer
Peter Jones, Senior Lawyer
Laura Bateman, Senior Project Officer
Paul Mountford, Democratic Services

Apologies

Councillor J Pearson

1 APPOINTMENT OF CHAIR

RESOLVED

That Councillor S Corcoran be appointed Chair.

2 APPOINTMENT OF VICE-CHAIR

RESOLVED

That Councillor C Browne be appointed Vice-Chair.

3 DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

4 PUBLIC SPEAKING / OPEN SESSION

There were no public speakers.

5 CHESHIRE EAST ELECTORAL REVIEW

The Sub-Committee considered a report on the background to, and proposed work associated with, the Boundary Commission for England review of Cheshire East Council's electoral arrangements.

The report explored what would be required of the Council in response to the review, and what representations the Council might wish to make.

The Sub-Committee was advised that the Boundary Commission's review would focus on:

- How many councillors the Council should have.
- How many Council wards there should be, where their boundaries should be, and what the wards should be called.
- How many councillors should represent each ward.

The Commission was undertaking the review because the Council now met both of its intervention criteria as detailed in the report.

The purpose of the electoral review was to ensure that:

- The Council's wards were in the best possible places to help the Council carry out its responsibilities effectively.
- New wards would leave each councillor representing roughly the same number of voters as other councillors elsewhere in the authority.
- New wards, as far as possible, would reflect community interests and identities, with identifiable boundaries.
- New wards promoted effective and convenient local government.

The Sub-Committee's attention was drawn to the timetable for, and stages of, the Commission's review, as set out in the report to the Corporate Policy Committee on 11th July 2023.

Information would be sought from the Council, including electoral forecasts and other data and documents. A model had therefore been prepared which had generated forecasts of future electorate numbers up to the end of 2029, for various geographical tiers. Officers had also prepared a detailed technical report that explained the forecasting methodology, and were preparing the other data and documents that the Commission required.

The Commission would decide how many councillors should be elected to the Council in the future. This decision would be based on information received from the Council (the Council-size submission), and any other representations made. The Commission's view on Council size would be informed by:

- The governance arrangements of the Council
- The Council's scrutiny functions
- The representational role of Councillors
- Future trends and plans for the Council

- The Borough's geography, community characteristics, demographic pressures and any other relevant constraints, challenges, issues or changes

In addition to the Council size submission, which the Commission had asked to be made in draft by 13 November 2023, the Council was also asked to submit proposed warding patterns.

There would be a period of public consultation on warding patterns (23rd January to 1st April 2024), following which draft recommendations would be made upon the Council's electoral arrangements. Consultation on the draft recommendations would follow. The review process could take 12-18 months to conclude. The Commission's recommendations would then be published and would be subject to approval by Parliament. The new arrangements for Cheshire East would then take effect in May 2027.

The Commission had provided some examples of what might be described as "best practice" submissions. The Commission had also identified CIPFA "nearest neighbours" as reference points for the Council's Council-size submission. Details were appended to the report.

The officers recommended that the best examples of these submissions be used as a guide for the approach to be taken by Cheshire East Council. With regard to Council-size, it was proposed that officers adopt a similar approach to that of Central Bedfordshire. With regard to warding arrangements, it was proposed that officers follow the example of Nuneaton and Bedworth.

It was not anticipated that the Council would undertake any consultation work on the review, except internally with its own Members.

The Sub-Committee had a preliminary discussion on the number of elected members that the Council should have in the future. Members acknowledged the need to keep an open mind on the matter and to consider all of the relevant evidence before reaching a conclusion. However, it was noted that there was significant population growth projected for Cheshire East. Therefore, members felt that the number of councillors should perhaps either remain the same or increase.

In response to questions by members in relation to council size, officers commented that:

- Housing forecasts were based on expected future housing developments and not local plan targets. This was the most realistic forecast of future housing completions available.
- The electoral register was one of the documents required by the Boundary Commission as part of the Council's submission and officers were satisfied as to its accuracy. However, a caveat could be included in the Council's submission that there were pockets of communities in particular places that were not accurately represented in terms of the electoral register.

Officers advised that they would be seeking the Sub-Committee's agreement under the next item to conduct a survey of all members regarding their workload. The aim would be to use the survey results to provide evidence as part of the Council's submission to the Boundary Commission. The Sub-Committee agreed that a survey would be helpful but that the purpose and importance of the survey should be made clear to members.

With regard to future warding arrangements, members felt that wards should perhaps comprise one or two ward members but not three. However, it was important that wards were based on discrete communities and should not be enlarged beyond those communities simply to add additional members.

There was some concern expressed over the use of roads to define ward boundaries, particularly in urban areas, as this did not necessarily reflect local communities and often led to practical difficulties with local residents. Members asked if this could be taken into account when considering future ward boundaries. Officers understood the point but reminded members that the Council had been encouraged to use clearly identifiable physical features such as roads to delineate boundaries during the community governance review.

RESOLVED (unanimously)

That the Sub-Committee

1. notes the contents of the report;
2. endorses the proposed actions set out within the report and instructs the officer Project Board to progress them;
3. endorses the methodology adopted for the production of electoral forecasts;
4. agrees that the officer Project Board should adopt an approach to the production of a draft Council size submission, and warding arrangements submission, which is informed by the approaches adopted in the best examples of comparator submissions supplied by the Commission to the Council, and in particular agrees that:
 - a. with regard to Council size, officers should adopt a similar approach to that of Central Bedfordshire, in respect of the Cheshire East submission, albeit using the Commission's proforma for this purpose; and
 - b. with regard to warding arrangements, officers should adopt a similar approach to that of Nuneaton and Bedworth, in respect of the Cheshire East submission;

5. agrees that the officer Project Board should develop a work programme which will provide for the submission to the Commission of electoral forecasts, the other data and documents listed in the Commission's Information Request Pack, draft Council size submission, and warding arrangements submission; and
6. agrees that suitable dates for future meetings of the Sub-Committee should be identified, these to take place during the summer and autumn of this year, but acknowledging the need for flexibility to be adopted, so as to allow informal meetings of the Sub-Committee to take place from time to time, and for meeting dates to be added or removed from the list of those identified.

Members then discussed the dates for future meetings up to mid-November and agreed on the following:

Friday, 22nd September 2023 at 3.30 pm (hybrid meeting) – informal meeting to provide an update for members.

Friday, 6th October 2023 at 12 noon – to consider the draft council size submission.

Wednesday, 15th or Thursday, 16th November 2023 (am or pm) – to recommend the final draft council size submission to the Corporate Policy Committee.

It was also noted that a special meeting of the Corporate Policy Committee may need to be held on 30th or 31st October to approve the draft council size submission to the Boundary Commission.

[Note: since the Sub-Committee's meeting, officers had held further discussions with the Boundary Commission and the Commission had agreed that the draft submission may be delivered to them on the day of publication of the report to the scheduled Corporate Policy Committee meeting on 22nd November. This obviated the need for a special meeting of the Committee.]

6 CHESHIRE EAST COUNCIL ELECTORAL REVIEW PROJECT MANAGEMENT PRODUCTS

The Sub-Committee considered a report which provided details of the project management arrangements, process and timeline that were proposed in order for the Council to fulfil its responsibility as 'consultee' in the electoral review and deliver appropriate submissions to the Commission in relation to council size and warding arrangements within the required timescales.

Following discussion under the previous item, members were asked to agree that officers conduct a survey of all members in relation to their workloads.

There was a brief discussion about whether it would be appropriate to issue a press release following the meeting. It was agreed that the matter would be raised with the Communications Team.

RESOLVED (unanimously)

That the Sub-Committee

1. notes the following project management products which will guide the work of the officer Project Board:
 - a. the Governance Arrangements (Appendix A)
 - b. The Draft Product Initiation Document (Appendix B)
 - c. the Product Breakdown Structure (Appendix C)
 - d. the work in progress Project Plan (Appendix D)
2. endorses the High-Level Timeline (Appendix E); and
3. authorises the Head of Democratic Services and Governance to make such adjustments to the Project Plan as he considers necessary as the review progresses; and
4. agrees that a survey of all members be undertaken to establish workloads, and authorises the Head of Democratic Services and Governance, following consultation with Group Leaders, to conduct the survey.

7 WORK PROGRAMME

The Sub-Committee considered its work programme which covered the period of the electoral review.

The work programme would be updated to reflect the decisions taken at the meeting.

RESOLVED

That the work programme be noted.

The meeting commenced at 10.30 am and concluded at 11.37 am

Councillor S Corcoran (Chair)