



Wednesday 31 August 2016

Visit to Bexley London Borough – To explore circumstances and approach taken in reducing the number of Councillors

Present: Councillor Alan Deadman, Councillor Don Massey, Nick Holier, Rose Bedlow, Dave Easton and Bjorn Simpole,

Kirklees: Councillor Andrew Cooper, Councillor Eric Firth, Councillor Gemma Wilson and Richard Farnhill

Summary of Key Issues

- Council resolution to seek new electoral arrangements for Bexley agreed with all party support. Council currently has 63 Members, with twenty One Wards, each with three Councillors, elected on a 4 year cycle.
- Baseline electorate is 179,000 with a projected electorate at 2,021 of 181,000.
- A Working Group had been established by the Council and had worked with the Boundary Commission to establish their methodology for the review.
- On 18 August 2015 the Boundary Commission had published a proposal for a Council comprising 45 Councillors.
- Work then undertaken and consultation carried out on Warding arrangements, on which draft recommendations were published by the Boundary Commission, leading to further comments from the Council, resulting in a number of limited draft recommendations for 4 Wards.
- The final decision anticipated to be taken by the Council on 8 November 2016, with implementation at the 2018 elections.
- Issues arising from the review were the number of Members per Ward, projections in terms of population numbers within Bexley and the impact of housing development projections on ward boundary design.
- Key issue for consideration by the Boundary Commission is the ratio of Councillors to population represented in a Ward, with a view to ensuring a consistency across the Council area.
- The Boundary Commission offer a view but are keen to encourage consensus and work within a fixed time scale though, in Bexley, unexpected changes were made which led to further recommendations and an extension of the timescale.
- Drivers for the review in Bexley were the financial impact of a reduction in the number of Councillors and the opportunity for Councillors to work smarter and embrace new technology.

- The primary saving would be achieved through the reduction in Members Allowances.
- In general there has been agreement to the proposed changes by residents in Bexley, though there is some fear about the impact on response times from Councillors on Ward enquiries/case work.
- It was intended that training would be provided for Councillors on the use of new technology to assist them in their roles as Ward Councillors and that this would be incorporated within training for new Councillors at the point of election.
- There was an expectation of a saving of between £200,000 to £400,000 per annum as a result of the reduction in numbers of Councillors - a large proportion of this is a result of the basic allowance paid to Councillors.
- A system whereby there are varying numbers of Councillors per Ward would make it difficult to hold elections on a basis of thirds.
- Population projection proved a stumbling block in the process as there had been argument about the reliability of information that was available for use and the year in which it should be applied.
- Work of the review in terms of calculating the numbers of Councillors is constrained by the data used by the Boundary Commission in terms of projected populations in 2020/2021.
- Geography had been a big issue in determining Wards and Wards size in terms of applying the Boundary Commission guidance on ratio of Councillor to electorate in terms of identification of Ward. This had led to some difficulties in terms of the perceived attachment of communities to Wards.
- There had been an issue in terms of the capacity within the Council to undertake the review as there were periods where intensive internal support was required to meet the Boundary Commission timelines.
- The development of a simple Councillor number change (i.e. from three Councillors per Ward to Two) did not work as the process was statistically driven, in that the maximum variation allowed from the agreed Councillor to electorate ratio was plus or minus 5% in determining Ward size.