



Kirklees Democracy Commission

Summary Note of the visit to Knowsley Metropolitan Borough Council

6 October 2016

Present:

Commissioners - Cllr Andrew Marchington, Cllr Cathy Scott and Cllr Fazila Fadia
Knowsley Councillors - Cllr Andy Moorhead, Cllr Mike Murphy, Cllr Chris O'Hare, Cllr Frank Walsh

In Attendance:

Yvonne Ledgerton, Penny Bunker, Yolande Myers

Summary of comments/discussion:

Knowsley Council has gone through a voluntary process to reduce the number of councillors on the Council from 63 to 45. The Democracy Commission's Councillors met with the Leader of the Council, Cllr Andy Moorhead, 3 other councillor and Yvonne Ledgerton, Assistant Executive Director for Governance.

The time line for the review process was:-

- May 2013 – Members workshop
- September 2013 – Invitation to Boundary Commission (BC) to undertake review
- December 2013 – met with BC
- December 2013 – proposals to Council
- Feb / March 2014 – Member workshops
- March 2014 – MB proposal presented to Council
- July 2014 – Councils preferred option sent to Commission
- August 2014 – Commission commences public consultation

As part of implementing the change there is a requirement to have an all-out election. However the Council intends to revert to election by thirds thereafter. At the time the decision was taken, all councillors on the Council came from the Labour Party. There are currently 3 Liberal Democrat Councillors.

Some of the drivers for the change in councillor numbers were the smaller ward sizes compared to neighbours in Merseyside. Knowsley had an average of 5,000 electorate per 3 ward members, whereas other areas in Merseyside had between 7-11,000 electorate for the same number of members. Previous national boundary reviews had tried unsuccessfully to assimilate Knowsley into Liverpool City Council so Knowsley wanted to address the areas that had led to the merger proposal in 2010.

Knowsley was an area with high levels of deprivation, so there was an argument for more councillors per electorate, but overall there was an argument to stretch the ratio.

The initial process began with a member working group chaired by the Leader, and included representatives from each geographical area (there were 21 wards with 63 members). The Boundary Commission were invited to complete a review and they appreciated the amount of work done by Knowsley members and officers. The more work undertaken by the Council itself in preparation, the happier the Boundary Commission are.

Due to the geographical makeup of Knowsley, 15 wards in total felt like a correct fit taking into account the projected electorate for 4/5 years' time which would be 7,500. Proposals were then taken to Council to reduce to 15 wards with 45 members. It was important to have Council support and commitment prior to approaching the Boundary Commission. However, there was a gap to bridge between cabinet members and other councillors.

Member workshops then took place to help shape the ward arrangements, particularly to ensure the areas being merged would gel together. Every street was considered individually to ensure the best fit.

Members and officers had to tell the Commission how it was going to make decisions and how this would be managed. The exact new Governance model couldn't be given at this point, but the Commission wanted to see what this would be in principle.

Communication was an essential with Parish and Town Councils. Two-way conversations being important to nip any problems with communities in the bud. Partners also made positive comments in writing to the Commission and these proved helpful. Due to the neutral position of officers, they delivered the presentations to communities and Town Councils about the changes being proposed.

In relation to the consultation, it was important to get across that this was the Commissions review. The consultation was received in different ways. Some saw it as a threat, others got involved as they saw it as shaping their own destiny, rather than it being dictated to them.

The review was a catalyst for new governance arrangements. There are less committees. Knowsley had retained the Leader and Cabinet model, with 7 Cabinet members including the Leader. Scrutiny was reduced to 3 procurement committees (policy and performance) which included Adults and Children. The new committees undertake the scrutiny role but also have some powers to give them "teeth". Knowsley has 3 quasi judicial statutory committees: -

- Governance and Audit (includes Audit, standards and appeals functions)
- Planning
- Licensing.

There is no area based decision making structure. The ambition is that the committees will have 15 councillors, one from each ward.

Knowsley run an incentivisation scheme which all new (Labour) councillors have to sign up to at the beginning of their term of office. This contract ensures that members know meeting attendance is mandatory. If a member cannot attend, they are required to send their apologies by e-mail (to provide a paper trail) giving details for the reasons for non-attendance. The Group Whip maintains an overview of attendance.

The incentive scheme means that 10% of members allowance is withheld until February each year, when a decision is taken as to whether the member is given the remaining allowance, based on complaints, meeting attendance, attending surgeries, being contactable etc. This is the first year it has been introduced so as yet there have been no decisions not to pay the 10%.

Attendance at meetings is also reviewed quarterly in respect of SRA holders (Chairs and Deputy Chairs).

Meetings are held at 5pm to allow for more members to retain a paid working role.

The positive changes that evolved out of the review were:-

- less committees – with trialling of different options
- A review of Outside bodies – questioning why was there a rep on all of them?
- Polling stations – undertook a polling station review as part of establishing new wards. Questioned why they were keeping open polling stations with only 50 members of public using them?
- £250k saving on member allowances
- Savings on reductions in Governance staff (unquantified)
- A political ‘cleansing’ of Council Chamber with the ‘bar’ being raised
- Younger Members being elected
- Improved IT offer for councillors, including Lap top, tablet and smart phone.
- Officers say it feel like a more “can do” borough now.