

BROMSGROVE DISTRICT COUNCIL

MEETING OF THE ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE

7TH DECEMBER 2023, AT 6.00 P.M.

PRESENT: Councillors H. D. N. Rone-Clarke (Chairman), J. Robinson (Vice-Chairman), S. R. Colella, C.A. Hotham, K.J. May and S. T. Nock

Officers: Mrs C. Felton, Mr D Whitney, Ms J. Bayley-Hill and Ms M Bassett.

12/23 **TO RECEIVE APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND NOTIFICATION OF SUBSTITUTES**

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors R. Lambert and H. Jones. Councillor K. May was substitute for Councillor Lambert and Councillor S.T. Nock was substitute for Councillor Jones.

13/23 **DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no declarations of interest.

14/23 **TO CONFIRM THE ACCURACY OF THE MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE ELECTORAL MATTERS COMMITTEE HELD ON 21ST SEPTEMBER 2023**

The minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 21st September 2023 were submitted.

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting held on 21st September 2023 be approved as a correct record.

15/23 **LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND PRELIMINARY STAGE BOUNDARY REVIEW FOR BROMSGROVE - COUNCIL SIZE SUBMISSION**

The Chairman agreed to this item being considered first.

The Committee considered a report which set out the stages for a review of the electoral boundaries in Bromsgrove, which would be carried out by the Local Government Boundaries Commission for England (LGBCE). There had been an update to the timetable to take into account the Police and Crime Commissioner elections in May 2024. The planned dates were now:

- Consultation on ward patterns 30th July – 30th September 2024
- LGBCE to meet on 17th December 2024 to decide its draft recommendations
- Consultation on draft recommendations between 14th January and 24th March 2025

- Publication of the LGBCE final recommendations on 24th June 2025
- Order to be laid in summer of 2025
- Implementation in May 2027.

If the Council wished to make a submission on council size, it should do this by 23rd February 2024 and the Committee was asked to decide whether the Council should make a submission and if so, what the indicative number of Councillors should be.

Officers had prepared an initial draft submission using the template provided by the LGBCE. The draft contained contextual information to aid discussion by the Committee.

The following were the main points discussed by the Committee during consideration of the report:

- it was suggested that reference on page 58 to 'require opposition members to be appointed as Chairmen of the Audit, Standards, and Governance Committee and the Overview and Scrutiny Board' should be amended to acknowledge that this would be impractical if the Council was made up of only one political group
- further to a query, officers would check the ONS data available following the 2021 census to ensure that data quoted in the submission was as up to date as possible
- members queried whether the Council should aim to have an odd or even number of Councillors. It was acknowledged that for practical reasons many Councils preferred to have an odd number of Councillors. This tended to enable a majority administration to be formed in the event of an election outcome leading to political groups of the same size. However, the view was expressed that whilst this was a reasonable consideration, it should not be given more weight than improving the ratio of electorate to councillors across the District
- Members asked for details of the range between the lowest number of electors per Councillor currently and the highest
- It was noted that the previous review of Council size had reduced it from 39 to 31 Councillors and removed multi member wards. With this background Members agreed that there should not be any further reduction in the number of Councillors.
- The view was expressed that the estimated increase in electorate due to proposed development used in the previous review had not materialised, which meant there was an uneven distribution of the electorate across the District currently. Members were reminded that the review was carried out in stages. The LGBCE was looking at the total number of Councillors for the projected electorate as a whole at this initial stage and the Council should focus on that. There would be an opportunity to examine the distribution of wards at the next stage of the review

- The Committee was also reminded that the LGBCE guidance stated submissions should include challenges specific to the District, and examples suggested included an ageing population and increasing complexity of Councillor case work and decisions. It was suggested that this would mitigate against reducing the number of Councillors further.
- A member commented that the final number should take into consideration the need to attract a diverse range of councillors and keep individual workloads to a manageable level
- Whilst the projected increase in the number of electors indicated an additional councillor might be required, as developers might decide to 'landbank' land earmarked for development, it was possible that the number would not be reached in the timescale for the current review (2027) and at this stage an increase in the number of councillors was not justified
- It was suggested that the Committee could recommend the number of Councillors stay the same for the current review and suggest a further review in 8 years' time, by which time it would be known whether or not proposed developments would have been built out. However, it was noted that the timing of reviews was at the discretion of the LGBCE who responded to changes in electoral equality.

Having considered the views put forward, the Committee agreed that the Council put forward a council size of 31 to the LGBCE.

RECOMMENDED that the Council puts forward a council size of 31 in its submission to the LGBCE.

16/23

STATUTORY REVIEW OF POLLING DISTRICTS AND POLLING PLACES 2023

The Committee considered a report which set out the results of the consultation and the findings of the Electoral Services team to the formal review of Polling Districts and Polling Places. The consultation had run between 2nd October to 13th November and all submissions and summaries had been recorded in the appendix to the report.

Members had previously supported a light touch approach to the review, since there would be a need for a further exercise following the County Council electoral boundaries review, which was due to be finalised in the summer of 2024, and again after the review of the District Council electoral boundaries.

Most of the submissions received had expressed satisfaction with the current polling districts and the polling stations within those. It would not be necessary to republish the electoral register unless the Committee considered there should be changes to the polling districts. If there were any changes, these would be in place for the PCC elections on 2nd May 2024 and before that if there was a by election. It was noted that the ARO was asked to comment in response to the consultation and the

interim ARO, Mrs Hanley, had supported the suggestions from the committee and officers.

Details were set out in the report of the 3 areas where requests for change were received:

Polling District COA Cofton Hackett

Proposals had been received to move from the 'old' to the new village hall because of access issues. Following a visit to the new hall, officers supported this proposal and the Committee endorsed the change.

Polling District ALB Beoley

A complaint had been received about election posters being displayed at a property adjacent to the village hall on polling day. This was not relating to the polling place, so no change was proposed and the Committee agreed to this.

Polling Districts ASA (Aston Fields North), ASB (Aston Fields South), SSA (Slideslow South) and SSB (Slideslow North) – St Godwald's Church Hall A submission had been received objecting to the use of St Godwald's church hall as the polling place for two District Wards.

The Committee had previously agreed to trial an alternative polling place from Finstall First School. Due to Covid the first opportunity to use St Godwald's Church Hall as a polling place for Aston Fields and Slideslow was in May 2023. At the election, polling staff handed a short questionnaire to voters at random regarding the polling place and future options for polling. Of the 146 responses received, 87% were happy with the polling place and over 49% would use it in the future, although some issues were raised about parking. Over a third (37%) would like to see the polling place return to Finstall First School.

A member expressed the view that the polling station should move back to Finstall First school because of the parking issues at St Godwald's. He pointed out that whilst the use of school premises at short notice could cause issues, the dates for the majority of elections were known in advance so officers could plan with the school in good time to minimise disruption. Officers reported that whilst concerns had been raised about the use of the First School as a polling station, Government policy was that schools could be used as they were publicly funded community facilities. However, the District and County Councils tried to avoid the use of schools as far as possible because of potential disruption. Officers were investigating the Salvation Army Hall as an alternative polling venue in Aston Fields for electors in that area, which could relieve some of the pressure on parking at St Godwald's. They would report back at a future meeting once they had more details.

Whilst noting the concerns expressed about the use of St Godwald's and the parking issues, members generally considered the accommodation

was suitable and the suggestion to revert to Finstall First School was not supported by the Committee.

A member asked whether health and safety checks of polling stations were carried out routinely. The Electoral Services Manager responded that these were being carried out prompted by actions taken during the Covid pandemic, to review how the polling stations worked, and following the Elections Act 2022 which required accessibility to all polling stations to be reviewed. Health and Safety officers were working through all the polling stations. This was supplemented by forms completed by polling station staff and Inspectors at each election.

In response to a query from a member, Officers would check accessibility at the Hopwood Polling station and report back to the next meeting.

A member queried the fire egress risk referred to in relation to the portable building at King George's Close, how this was being addressed and any implications for future use of this facility. Arising from this, the Committee asked the Electoral Services Manager to check whether the risk was site specific or related to the use of portable buildings generally and what risk assessment/mitigation measures could be put in place.

A member referred to Lowes Hill ward and how some electors in All Saints Place had to go to Barnsley Hall to vote whilst others went to All Saints Church. The Electoral Services Manager suggested that this could be addressed when the ward boundaries stage of the District electoral boundaries review was carried out and this approach was supported by the Committee.

RESOLVED that

- a) that the final proposals in respect of Polling Districts and Polling Places, as contained in Appendix 1 (as amended), be approved; and
- b) that the decisions of the Committee in respect of a) above take effect from the date of poll any election/referendum held or on publication of the revised Register of Electors.

17/23

CHANGES TO POSTAL AND PROXY VOTING - BRIEFING NOTE

The Committee noted the content of the briefing note relating to changes to postal and proxy voting.

The meeting closed at 7.14 p.m.

Chairman