

OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY BOARD

A meeting of the Overview and Scrutiny Board was held on 18 December 2012.

PRESENT: Councillor Brunton (Chair), Councillors Cole, Harvey, C Hobson, Junier (as substitute for Councillor Dryden), Kerr, P Purvis, Sanderson, J A Walker and Williams.

OFFICERS: J Bennington, P Clark, C Davies, M Harvey and J Polson.

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE were submitted on behalf of Councillors Arundale, Dryden, McIntyre and Mawston.

DECLARATIONS OF INTERESTS

There were no declarations of interest at this point of the meeting.

1 BOUNDARY COMMISSION - ELECTORAL REVIEW

In a report of the Scrutiny Support Officer and in a briefing note of the Members' Office Manager circulated at the meeting reference was made to the next stage of the Electoral Review by the Boundary Commission to determine ward patterns including boundaries and sizes and of the need to determine the methodology for carrying out such an exercise including an appropriate consultation process.

The first phase of the overall review had been to assess and propose an appropriate Council size. Following public consultation the Commission had considered representations at its meeting of 13 November 2012. In a letter recently received by the Authority the Commission had stated that as there were no substantial argument received in opposition to the proposal for a Council size of 46 the Commission had therefore adopted such a proposal for Middlesbrough. The wording in the Commission's letter as to there being 'no substantial argument received' was challenged by a Member as substantial alternative proposals from Members had been submitted to the Commission.

Whilst the Commission had provided some guiding principles in relation to the next stage of the process in respect of ward patterns it was acknowledged that the timetable to complete this stage by 18 February 2013 was regarded as relatively short given the extent of the work to be undertaken in this regard.

The Commission had identified three main criteria for its consideration in determining new patterns for wards as follows:-

- that each councillor represents approximately the same number of voters across the authority;
- ward patterns should aim to reflect community interests, identities with identifiable boundaries;
- the proposed arrangements should reflect convenient local government and the Council's electoral cycle.

It was acknowledged that strong evidence would need to be provided in support of any recommendations and that detailed information would be required regarding economic/demographic data and mapping; community village usage mapping; local place surveys; and partner/stakeholder details.

Members' attention was drawn to a number of basic assumptions that the Commission would expect to be satisfied in any proposals including electoral equality, community identity, effective and convenient local government, number of councillors in each ward or division and current forecast electorate.

Although the Commission did not require reviews to result in wards of mathematically equal size they required each Member of the Council to represent a similar number of electors

referred to as the Councillor: Elector Ratio. Given the projected electorate in 2018 of 101,561 and 46 Councillors the Elector Ratio for Middlesbrough was reported as 2,208 electors per Member.

In relation to Community Identity the Commission accepted that this was not easily measured and could mean different things to different people. They considered it essential to explain what the community is and more importantly what defines it and marks it out as a distinct community. It was noted that community identity in the Commission's guidance could be defined by the location of public facilities such as doctors' surgeries, hospitals, libraries or schools. It was pointed out that such arguments could not be considered in isolation and that there should be evidence that such facilities stimulated or provided a focus for community interaction and distinct from their role as points of service delivery to individual citizens.

The Commission's guidance indicated that whilst an area's history and tradition may be the basis of its sense of community identity communities changed over time and historical considerations may not have such importance in areas which had been the subject to recent development or population dispersal.

Other considerations included factors such as the existence of major roads which could be seen to be the focus of an area if they were the location of shops or community facilities which people visited regularly and where they interacted. The guidance pointed out however that major roads, rivers or railway lines were often barriers marking the boundary between different communities. The existence and activities of resident's associations and local voluntary organisations could also be sources of evidence relating to the existence of a community.

It was recognised that effective and convenient local government was also relatively difficult to define. A practical example was provided in the Commission's guidance where wards were internally coherent in that they were reasonable road links across the ward so that it could be easily traversed and that all electors in the ward could engage in the activities of all parts of it without having to travel through an adjoining ward.

In relation to the number of councillors in each ward or division the Commission's guidance indicated that whilst there was no upper limit in legislation to such numbers the Commission took the view that wards or divisions returning more than three councillors resulted in a dilution of accountability to the electorate and it would not normally recommend a number above that figure.

The Commission required electorate statistics from a local authority but was not constrained to using existing polling districts as building blocks for wards. The Board was advised that the Commission must have regard to the likely increase, decrease or movement in electorate over a five-year period from the making of its final recommendations.

As part of the background information and initial considerations illustrative maps were displayed and circulated at the meeting which showed for each current ward the percentage differences to the average of 5% to 10% and greater than 10% based on the number of electors per councillor (current numbers) for the 2018 elector projections. It was considered prudent to be mindful of such considerations and avoid the trigger for a further electoral review in the near future.

With regard to Community Identity a map was also provided which illustrated one view of possible localities and in relation to Effective and Convenient Governance a test which showed wards and Lower Order Super Output Areas which was generally computer generated but based on old boundaries. Reference was made to the importance of such information in terms of intelligence on the composition of the local population and which informed the National Indices of Deprivation. It was stressed that the example shown was very much an initial test emanating from Officer discussion.

In terms of the overall process the Board was advised that following completion of Stage 2 of the process the Commission would embark on a twelve week period of consultation on the draft recommendations following which, they would consider the representations received and formulate its final recommendations. The Commission anticipated that they would publish their

proposals in November 2013. Given the short period for the exercise to be undertaken and following discussion with the Electoral Commission they had agreed to the submission deadline for proposals to be extended to 22 February 2013, two days after the scheduled meeting of the Council on 20 February 2013.

The Board's attention was drawn to options for undertaking the consultation process in terms of Member consideration and engagement with the public.

In terms of the political debate some Members questioned whether the Board was the appropriate body to undertake the exercise and stressed the importance for all Members to have the opportunity in an open forum to express views and put forward proposals. Given the involvement of the Board in Stage 1 of the process Members suggested that it was appropriate for the Board's continuing participation in Stage 2 which would not preclude the opportunity for other Members either individual or as a political group to make submissions. Although the timetable constraints were understood Members suggested that at least arrangements be made for a number of workshop meetings for all Members and that the minutes of the Board be circulated to all Members. Should the Board decide to proceed it was suggested that arrangements be made for the Board to meet on a weekly basis starting early in January 2013 in order to meet the February deadline for the submission of proposals to the Commission.

Members referred to the similar exercise undertaken in 2002 with similar if not the same parameters which could be used as a starting point. It was considered likely that in certain cases there had been no major changes over the last ten years. Given the assumptions which had been made ten years ago regarding Middlehaven it was considered that the Commission was likely to be far more rigorous regarding the extent to which appropriate information and evidence would be required.

In relation to engaging with the public Officers referred to the opportunity of speaking to Community Councils in early 2013 and/or provide a briefing note especially to those not meeting in time to fit in with the tight timetable. Members referred to the importance of ensuring that any communication provided to the public should be precise and as clear as possible. Reference was made to other channels of communication including appropriate use of social networking sites, information from the Council's community development and utilising Ward Members' knowledge.

In commenting on future information to be provided Members suggested an updated version of the map which showed for each current ward the percentage differences to the average of 5% to 10% and greater than 10% based on the number of electors per councillor (46 councillors) for the 2018 elector projections.

It was also suggested that it would be helpful if further information could be provided regarding the projected 2018 electorate.

Whilst it was acknowledged that it was an Electoral Review rather than a boundary review nevertheless Members considered it worthwhile if contact was made with Redcar and Cleveland Council to enquire if there was any scope in discussing current boundaries with particular regard to those areas within Redcar and Cleveland which were closely affiliated and would regularise the Middlesbrough boundary.

ORDERED as follows:-

1. That meetings of the Overview and Scrutiny Board be held on a weekly basis commencing in early January 2013 to early February 2013 in order to meet the timetable for submissions to the Boundary Commission.
2. That arrangements be made for a workshop involving all Members in early 2013.
3. That information be provided to a future meeting on an updated version of the map provided which showed for each current ward, the percentage differences to the average of 5% to 10% and greater than 10% based on the number of electors per councillor on the 2018

elector projections but based on the figure of 46 councillors.

4. That further information be provided regarding the projected 2018 electorate.

5. That the Director of Legal and Democratic Services write to Redcar and Cleveland Council with a view to requesting if there is any scope in discussing current boundaries with particular regard to those areas within Redcar and Cleveland in the south east of the area which were closely affiliated to Middlesbrough boundaries.

6. That with regard to the issues to be considered in relation to Community Identity further information be provided on the views initially examined as the basis of subsequent deliberations on the matter.