

Minutes of a meeting of the Democracy and Standards Committee

Held at 7.00 pm on Tuesday 12th April, 2022 in the Council Chamber, Swanspool House, Wellingborough, NN8 1BP

Present:-

Members:

Councillor Lora Lawman (Chair)
Councillor Jean Addison
Councillor Lyn Buckingham
Councillor Emily Fedorowycz

Councillor Macaulay Nichol
Councillor Kirk Harrison
Councillor Gill Mercer
Councillor Michael Tye

Officers:

Adele Wylie, Director of Governance and HR;
Paul Gault, Interim Democratic Services Manager;
Carol Mundy, Senior Democratic
Services Officer (Committees/Members).

Also in attendance – Councillors Philip Irwin and Kevin Watts (substitutes) and Councillor Jim Hakewill (speaker).

18 Apologies

There were no apologies.

19 Minutes of the meeting held on 8 February 2022

The minutes of the meeting held on 8 February 2022 were approved and signed as a true record.

20 Members' Declaration of Interest

The chair invited those who wished to do so to declare an interest in respect of an item on the agenda.

Resolved to note that no declarations were made.

21 Notification of requests received to address the meeting

A request had been received from Councillor J Hakewill to address the meeting on item 6 – Local Government Boundary Commission for England Review of Electoral arrangements proposed council size and item 7 – Independent Remuneration Panel – Review of Members' Allowances.

The chair confirmed that Councillor Hakewill could speak and asked that he do so at the beginning of each item.

The chair also welcomed Councillor Addison, as a member of the committee, along with substitute members, Councillors Irwin and Watt.

22 **Constitutional Amendments (if any)**

Resolved to note that there were no constitutional amendments before committee.

23 **Local Government Boundary Commission for England Review of Electoral arrangements - Proposed Council size**

The annexed circulated report of the Director of Governance and HR was received to inform the committee of the proposals of the cross-party member/officer Boundary Commission Working Group, who had been considering draft proposals for the Council's size as part of the first stage of the review of electoral arrangements in North Northamptonshire.

Appended to the report were the following:

Appendix A - Draft submission on Council Size;
Appendix B - View of the Labour Group;
Appendix C - View of the Green Alliance Group

The working group's deliberations were detailed within the report along with a recommendation to be put before Council.

Councillor Hakewill addressed the meeting and thanked both members and officers who had worked tirelessly during the working group discussions.

Speaking on behalf of the Green Alliance, he expressed the view that the proposal for an additional 21 Councillors, making a total of 99, was excessive. It was considered that it would be more beneficial to create a modern council that was more economically viable, with less councillors who were more focused and who worked with officers effectively. The Green Alliance would be suggesting a membership of 60 and this would be submitted by the Group to the Boundary Commission, as being more beneficial for the community.

The chair thanked Councillor Hakewill.

The chair explained the work that had been undertaken by the working group, which had been considerable, and which had culminated in the recommendation to be put to Council, as detailed at Appendix A Council Size Submission document.

The working group's proposal, as part of the first phase of the Review, to determine the appropriate number of councillors for the future, is as follows:

"North Northamptonshire Council should petition the Boundary Commission to agree to an increase to 99 councillors i.e., 21 additional councillors to account and distribute the current and additional workload for the next 10 years and allow new committees to be set up to accommodate the evidenced 13% increase in population = 99 councillors for the next 10 years".

A lengthy debate ensued with the committee thanking the working group for the extensive work that it and officers had undertaken in preparing the submission before committee.

Many of the committee considered that the suggestion of increasing the number of councillors to 99 over the next 10 years was a good way forward and that this would accommodate the volume of work expected of them which was anticipated to considerably increase in the future.

Other members of the committee felt that they were unable to support the recommendation. They considered that the Independent, Government appointed, Inspector Max Caller, OBE's original suggestion of 45 Councillors was deemed too low for the workload, but that an appropriate number would be between 84 and 86 councillors going forward.

Members also questioned how the current number of 78 councillors had been reached and where this figure had emanated from. It was confirmed that this had been agreed as part of the shadow structure. It was noted that during the 'shadow period' there had been a total of 152 councillors from all sovereign councils, and that this had reduced to 78 from 1 April 2021 when North Northamptonshire Council had formed.

It was suggested that this detail be included, in the form of a chart, in the submission documentation along with an explanation to demonstrate where the reductions had been in relation to the county council and each of the sovereign boroughs/districts.

The committee also expressed concern over the increase in members allowances should there be an additional 21 councillors. It was considered wise to explore different ways of working before suggesting an increase in councillors and that an option of 60 councillors should be considered. It was also noted that not all councillors fully engaged with all aspects of being a councillor, often due to work commitments and time constraints of family life. Consideration should be given to employing more officers, rather than increasing the number of councillors.

It was cautioned that there was expected to be considerable growth in the North Northamptonshire area in the coming years and this would result in more constituents and a higher workload generally for councillors, which had been fully considered by the working group in recommending the number of 99 over a 10-year period. Additional growth would also increase the number of meetings, such as planning committees. Encouragement was also needed to attract younger councillors.

Resolved that:

- (i) The work of the Member/Officer Working Group on the first phase of electoral arrangements for North Northamptonshire be noted;
- (ii) Approval be given to the Council Size Submission, with the inclusion of an explanation chart at page 36 as detailed above, being submitted to an Extraordinary Council meeting, to be held in June 2022;
- (iii) A Council size number of 99, as recommended by the working group and detailed in Appendix A, be recommended to full council;
- (iv) The alternative options, submitted by the Labour Group and Green Alliance, as detailed at Appendix B and C respectively to the report be noted;
- (v) It be delegated to the Director of Governance and HR, in consultation with the Chair of the committee, to make any amendments to the submission prior to consideration by full Council, in the light of any further comments from the committee and any minor/typographical changes;

- (vi) It be confirmed that the working group continue to meet to address any queries or questions that the Boundary Commission may have regarding the submission, and to plan for, carry out and report to the committee any recommendations in respect of stage two of the Electoral review;

(Reason for recommendations: To update the committee on the work of the working group and to agree a submission to full Council.)

24 Independent Remuneration Panel - Review of Members' Allowances

The report of the Independent Remuneration Panel (IRP) on the review of the current Members' Allowances Scheme was circulated for the information of the committee, prior to it being forwarded to council for determination.

Councillor Hakewill addressed the meeting. He referenced the review of allowances, which had been agreed to be undertaken by the shadow council, after North Northamptonshire Council had been in place for a year. He noted that the review had been carried out but considered that there should be a freeze on any increases suggested therein. The current financial crisis was hitting all residents of North Northamptonshire and he considered that increases to Members' allowances should not be considered at the current time as it would be hard to justify substantial increases and should be seen to be showing empathy.

The committee discussed the report. There was some general disappointment that very few councillors had made representation to the panel. Some Members considered that in the current financial climate that any proposed increases to the allowances should be held back. It was stressed that this was not a decision for the committee but one that would be made by full council and the report was before the committee for information or comment.

It was proposed that there be a freeze on Member Allowances until after the 2025 election, which found a seconder. Committee was advised that this was not a decision of the committee and the proposal was withdrawn.

It was agreed that any comments or queries on the report be submitted to the Interim Democratic Services Manager so he could forward them to the panel to enable clarification to be made.

Resolved that the report of the Independent Remuneration Panel be noted, and that any comments thereon be submitted to the Interim Democratic Services Manager, for onward forwarding to the Independent Remuneration Panel, so the report can be submitted to an Extraordinary Council meeting to be held in June 2022.

25 Close of meeting

The chair closed the meeting at 8.55pm.

Chair

Date