

# The Local Government Boundary Commission for England Review of Thanet District Council - Council Size

<b>Meeting</b>	Council - 7 December 2023
<b>Report Author</b>	Committee Service Manager
<b>Portfolio Holder</b>	Cllr Rob Yates - Cabinet Member for Corporate Services
<b>Status</b>	For Decision
<b>Classification:</b>	Unrestricted
<b>Previously Considered by</b>	Boundary Electoral Arrangements Working Party 21st November 2023
<b>Ward:</b>	All Wards

## Executive Summary:

To consider a recommendation from the Boundary and Electoral Arrangements Working Party (BEAWP) that the number of Councillors should be reduced to 42 as part of the periodic boundary review by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE)

## Recommendation(s):

To consider the recommendation from the Boundary & Electoral Arrangements Working Party namely:

“that a proposed figure of forty two (42) councillors be the total number of TDC councillors to be forwarded to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE).”

## Corporate Implications

### Financial and Value for Money

The council's annual expenditure for member allowances is approximately £370,000.

Whilst budgetary savings are not a specified reason to be considered when deciding if Councillor numbers should be amended it is important to note that if the number of councillors were to reduce the council could decide to either keep allowances at broadly the same level and realise a budget saving, or the financial headroom could be used to increase the level of allowances that are provided to members.

If the number of members were reduced to either 42 this would generate a revenue saving of approximately £100,000. The commitment required to be a district councillor can represent a significant personal and professional sacrifice, and by using the saving to increase allowances, it could be asserted that a lifting of allowances would make standing as cllr a more attractive and realistic proposition for a greater proportion of Thanet's residents, which

in turn could assist in the election of councillors from a wider range of socio-demographic backgrounds, enhancing the democratic representation of the member body.

It should also be noted that even after the recent application of a 10% increase in allowances, as approved by Council on 12 October 2023, that TDC has the second least generous basic allowance in comparison to other local authorities in Kent.

Due to budgetary constraints there is no funding available to pay allowances for an increased number of councillors and we also do not have the financial resources to significantly increase member allowances, without reducing or reallocating funding directed to service delivery.

## **Legal**

As set out in this the Local Government Boundary Commission for England is carrying out a review on behalf of the Government under Section 56 of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009. Section 56 provides the following:

- (1)The Local Government Boundary Commission for England must from time to time—
- (a)conduct a review of the area of each principal council, and
  - (b) recommend whether a change should be made to the electoral arrangements for that area.

And:

- (4) In this Part “electoral arrangements”, in relation to the area of a principal council, means—
- (a) the total number of members of the council (“councillors”),
  - (b) the number and boundaries of electoral areas for the purposes of the election of councillors,
  - (c) the number of councillors to be returned by any electoral area in that area, and
  - (d) the name of any electoral area.

As indicated in this report the work of the Boundary and Electoral Arrangements Working Party (BEAWP) will support the work of the LGBCE by making recommendations based on local information and knowledge as detailed in this report.

## **Risk Management**

The only significant risk is if the Council doesn't engage with the process as determined by the LGBCE. If the Council chose not to engage then there would be a significant risk of a solution being imposed upon the Council. By engaging with the LGBCE at the numerous opportunities for input and consultation the Council can ensure its views are taken into account.

## **Corporate**

Councillors are a fundamental part of any Council and so ensuring that the Council properly reviews its number when necessary is of great importance. Not agreeing to a number or causing unnecessary delay in the LGBCE process would be reputationally damaging for the Council.

## **Equality Act 2010 & Public Sector Equality Duty**

Members are reminded of the requirement, under the Public Sector Equality Duty (section 149 of the Equality Act 2010) to have due regard to the aims of the Duty at the time the decision is taken. The aims of the Duty are: (i) eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act, (ii) advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it, and (iii) foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.

Protected characteristics: age, sex, disability, race, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, religion or belief and pregnancy & maternity. Only aim (i) of the Duty applies to Marriage & civil partnership.

This report relates to the following aim of the equality duty: -

- To eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act.
- To advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it
- To foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and people who do not share it.

## **Corporate Priorities**

This report relates to the following corporate priorities: -

- *Communities*

### **1.0 Introduction and Background**

- 1.1 The Council was initially contacted by the LGBCE in March 2023 informing the Council that the LGBCE would be conducting a periodic review of the Council's electoral arrangements as it had been over 20 years since its last review of Thanet District Council. The review officially started with an introductory meeting between the Leader and Chief Executive and the Chair and Chief Executive of the LGBCE in June 2023. This was followed by a meeting between Groups leaders and the LGBCE in July 2023 and finally a members briefing from the LGBCE in late September 2023.
- 1.2 Thanet District Council has a standing working party with responsibility for all Electoral and boundary matters - the Boundary and Electoral Arrangements Working Party (BEAWP). The BEAWP initially met on 22 August 2023 in order to start undertaking the work required by the LGBCE in the first stage of the review, namely a submission suggesting a revised number of Councillors that the Council should move to at the next set of local elections in 2027.
- 1.3 The BEAWP has made a recommendation to Full Council as part of its work in creating the submission for the LGBCE, this is detailed in paragraph 3 of this report.

Once a revised number has been agreed and included in the submission, this will be sent to the LGBCE, they will then evaluate the submission and inform us if they agree with our revised number. The review will then continue as per the timetable set out in paragraph 2.4 of the report.

## 2.0 Review of Councillor numbers

2.1 The review by the LGBCE covers the following five areas and are carried out strictly in this order:

1. Total number of councillors
2. Total number of wards
3. Ward boundaries
4. Number of councillors elected to each ward
5. Names of each ward

2.2 The LGBCE will be checking that the Council has evidenced how the revised number that the Council select as part of its submission is sufficient to ensure that the following three specific functions can continue to be undertaken:

- a) **Strategic Leadership** (how many councillors are needed to give strategic leadership and direction to the authority?);
- b) **Accountability** (Scrutiny, Regulatory and External Partnerships); and
- c) **Community Leadership** (how the representational role of councillors in the local community is discharged and how they engage with people and conduct casework)

2.3 When evaluating the evidence covering the three themes above the LGBCE will not consider any of the following arguments:

- The Political consequences.
- “It ain’t broke don’t fix it” arguments.
- Parliamentary boundaries.
- Postcodes or addresses.
- House prices & insurance.

2.4 The overall timetable for the review is outlined in the table below:

Review Stage	Dates
Preliminary period/ Number of Councillors	Now to January 2024
Consultation on warding patterns	19 March 2024 to 27 May 2024
Consultation on draft recommendations	3 September 2024 to 11 November 2024
Final recommendations published	February 2025
Order Made in Parliament	Spring 2025
New arrangements elected upon	May 2027

### 3.0 Recommendations of the BEAWP

3.1 The BEAWP met five times between August and November 2023 during the course of creating the Submission document. The minutes of its meetings detailing its considerations can be found on the Council's [website](#).

3.2 At its meeting on 21 November they made following recommendation:

As a result of the additional information that was presented to the Boundaries and Electoral Arrangements Working Party, Councillor Everitt proposed, Councillor Kup seconded and Members agreed to recommend to Full Council that a proposed figure of forty two (42) councillors be total number of TDC councillors to be forwarded to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE).

3.3 The reasons for BEAWP recommending reducing the amount of Cllrs can be summarised as:

- a) Change of governance model, previously at date of the last review the Council used the committee model of governance, now use the Cabinet and Strong leader model.
- b) Reviewing the Policy Framework, Key decision thresholds and officer delegations have set clear boundaries as to which significant and important decisions are reserved to members and what is left to Officers.
- c) Individual Cabinet Member decisions have reduced from 246 in the first five years of the Leader and Cabinet model, in the last five years there have only been 54.
- d) The scheme of officer delegations was switched to a delegated to Officers unless it was retained by the Cabinet members model.
- e) When the Council first moved to the leader and Cabinet model it had three Overview and Scrutiny Panels and no work programme, it now only has one with a planned and scoped out work programme.
- f) The percentage of planning applications determined by the Planning Committee has now dropped to 5% of the total applications.
- g) Over the past five years 37% of Licensing Board meetings have been cancelled due to a lack of business.
- h) The proposed structure of committees for 2030 overall reduces the size of the committees and although there would be 14 fewer Councillors the average committee seats per Councillor would drop from 2 currently to 1.69 per Councillor.
- i) There are now half the number of Outside Bodies representatives needed as at the time of the last review.
- j) Councillors now have Council provided ICT equipment and Council email addresses. In addition the Council conducts as many non LGA 1972 committees as it can via online meetings.
- k) The Council operates an online first approach to service delivery, with over 140 online forms for the public to use to contact the Council and just last year there were approximately 1.2m visits to the Council's website, an increase of nearly 50% since its relaunch, all moving regular contact towards officers and away from Members.

3.4 The reasons for BEAWP recommending not to increase the amount of Cllrs can be summarised as:

- a) There was little concrete evidence to say that all Councillors were now busier than they were 20 years ago. The BEAWP felt there were as many “busy” wards as there were “quiet” wards and the issue had to be looked at in a whole Thanet context. The introduction of a casework officer would in future assist Members in signposting them to the correct officers and ensuring that those officers who have been asked to provide information to Councillors reply promptly. This will eliminate repeat contacts and chasing that Councillors sometimes have to do, therefore making dealing with casework much easier.
- b) The BEAWP did not feel that there was always a direct link between deprivation and having a “busy” ward, although an area of deprivation did generally have a higher prevalence of particular case work. It was often the case that a more affluent ward with constituents more aware of who their Councillors were could produce as much casework as a deprived ward.
- c) Some Members felt that certain wards needed extra Councillors, however as all ward boundaries would be re-drawn, this wouldn’t be an issue.

## 4.0 Options

- 4.1 To agree to the recommendations from BEAWP.
- 4.2 To suggest an alternative number of Councillors for the submission to the LGBCE. If this option is chosen, then new evidence must be provided to support the chosen number.

## 5.0 Next Steps

- 5.1 The BEAWP will finalise the submission based on the result of this meeting and the final submission document and the other statistical information requested by the LGBCE will be sent to them no later than the deadline of the 4 January 2024. TDC will then await their response and the review will proceed on the timeline outlined in paragraph 2.4 of the report.

Contact Officer: Nicholas Hughes (Committee Services Manager)

Reporting to: Ingrid Brown (Head of Legal and Democracy & Monitoring Officer)

### Annex List

None

### Background Papers

None

### Corporate Consultation

**Finance:** Chris Blundell, Director of Corporate Services

**Legal:** Ingrid Brown (Head of Legal and Democracy & Monitoring Officer)