

PROPER REPRESENTATION FOR RESIDENTS

IN THE HARROGATE BOROUGH

Up until 2002 there were 59 members of Harrogate Borough Council representing local needs in the Council Chamber. At the last Boundary review members were aware of the changes to decision making arrangements that were about to be introduced and cut the number of Councillors to 54 in anticipation of the impact the changes would make to governance arrangements and member involvement. It was understood that fewer Councillors would be needed for effective decision making.

Streamlined Decision Making

Over the last fifteen years, since the introduction of the Cabinet system there have been many changes to the Committee structure and standing orders. Planning and Scrutiny committees have all been reduced and restrictions on member involvement in the decision making process have put in place. Having seen how the Cabinet system and streamlining of the decision making of the Council has operated for fifteen years now, a further reduction in the number of Councillors is acceptable but a reduction to 40 members would be a step too far if effective representation in the Council Chamber is to be achieved. One very important role of the Council is to provide effective community leadership and representation. Councillors come from a variety of backgrounds and age groups. They have a local knowledge and their input is vital if effective Local Government is to operate properly in our area.

Council Submission

The Council submission about Council size makes many good points and explains the thinking of the Working group established to examine the details. What it does not do however is explain the thinking behind how or why 40 members would give local people proper representation in the Council Chamber. The Harrogate district is the largest in terms of population throughout North Yorkshire. Like most Shire District authorities the support and back up service given to elected members is limited when compared to Unitary and Metropolitan authorities. During the debate on the size of Harrogate Council several members explained how cutting the numbers of Councillors from 54 to 40 would be financially beneficial to Council Taxpayers. It is noted that in the Boundary Commission's explanations to Councillors it was clearly stated that "a reduction in numbers solely to achieve financial savings" is not an argument to be used. Some rural Councillors at the same meeting pleaded for more help for them to be able to represent the new large wards that a Council of 40 would bring. The Working Group established by the Council at its first meeting said it was looking for a Council size of between 45 and 54 members. Details below will explain why a reduction to 48 members is the appropriate size for a district as large as Harrogate.

CIPFA Family Group Comparision

The Boundary Commission gives guidance about recent decisions made concerning other local authority boundary changes to our "family CIPFA authorities". In other Shire authority reviews the new Councillor/ Elector ratio ranges from 1727 to 2718. None of them come anywhere near the 3223 per elector proposed for Harrogate. Even Hambleton Council which cut its number of Councillors from 44 to 28 still has an average of 2532 electors per Councillor. Harrogate Borough Council covers an area of over 500 square miles. Wards with an average 3223 electors would be huge compared to what has existed to date and some would have to cover a large area.

Meeting the Commission's objectives

The Boundary Commission says it would like to avoid the splitting of parish boundaries and avoid merging urban wards with some rural ones. That would be very hard to achieve with a Council of 40 members. It will be less likely

to create wards that have common interests such as transport links, shared interests and easily identifiable boundaries under a Council of so few members. In the case of Knaresborough because of the already high proposed Councillor/Elector ratio (3421 **AVERAGE for the proposed four Knaresborough wards**) it would be impossible to reach any **logical ward arrangement** that did not exceed the maximum number of electors allowed (3544) for each ward without considering transferring the Scriven village area (212 electors) into the neighbouring rural ward. The Commission itself says it wants to avoid creating wards that have no community identification. It also wants to avoid creating wards that are too large and will have too many parish councils to represent. This would be impossible to achieve with a Council of 40 members.

Councillor's work and Involvement

Many Councillors are involved in committee work and their local communities. They are also part time and from a variety of age groups and backgrounds who genuinely want to put their local knowledge, contacts and involvement into the decision making process. There are many outside of the Executive Cabinet who are involved in Scrutiny or the other Regulatory functions of the Council. 28 of them have important links to their local Parish Councils as well. In the urban areas, Councillors regularly deliver newsletters to keep in touch and also conduct surveys and hold "surgeries" to help them "keep their fingers on the pulse". In a survey of Councillors it was revealed that 35% of existing Councillors time was taken up with dealing with individual constituents and local community work. An extra 44% increase in the number of electors in wards (40 members) would make it very difficult for younger Councillors to fulfil their role properly whilst trying to hold down a full time job, looking after family concerns etc. In the near future, as more Grant reductions take effect, Councillors will be taking a leading role in encouraging people in their local communities to get involved in volunteering to provide services that local authorities are still currently providing.

Development pressures

There are some tremendous development pressures facing the Harrogate District in the future. We already expect that 4,485 new homes with existing planning permission will be built by 2021 – giving a projected increased electorate of 7,970 people. Areas to the north and west of Harrogate, to the east and north of Knaresborough, the west of Ripon and various parts in the Vale of York will face intense development pressures over the next decade. To cut local democratic representation from 59 at the turn of the century to 40 by 2018 does not make any sense.

Conclusion

Of course it is possible to devise some kind of scheme for ward boundaries whatever number of Councillors is agreed however a Council of 40 members would struggle to meet the Boundary Commissions own objectives. A Boundary Review is more than just "a numbers game". It has to be about fair representation with wards created that bring communities with common interests and issues together. Modern technology has changed the way people access information and use Council services. A further reduction of 6 Councillors would be appropriate for our district now. A Council of 48 elected members would meet the objectives, accommodate the changes to the decision making process whilst ensuring the proper and practical involvement of being a representative of local communities. With an average of 2,685 electors per Councillor it also brings us closer to the CIPFA family group of local authorities now being approved in current boundary reviews.

Strong and effective representation of people and local communities in the Council Chamber is an important feature of good local government and we believe a Borough Council of 48 elected members is the best way to provide this.

