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**Highwoods Independent Group**

## Summary

This submission sets out the case for reducing the present number of Councillors elected to serve on the Colchester Borough Council (CBC) from the present 60 to a total of 51. Elections would take place in 17 wards that each elect 3 Councillors to serve a 4 year term of office. The effect of such a reduction would produce a more cost effective, fairer, efficient and coherent means of representing the borough's growing population.

This submission puts the case for such a change in four parts. First by outlining why the review carried out by the Local Government Boundary Commission of England (LGBC) is being undertaken.

Second, by describing the electoral characteristics of the borough, the electoral disparities that currently exist, the impact that sustained growth of the borough's population is likely to have on these disparities and the justification for considering change.

Third, by reviewing the evidence for change, how underlying factors are driving change in how CBC runs, how this impacts on the role of Councillors and why consideration of the future size of the Council (in terms of the number of Councillors elected) is merited.

Fourth, sets out the case for change based upon the effects of forecasted population growth on the existing electoral disparities, the fundamental changes taking place in how the Council operates, the opportunity that the LGBC review provides to secure greater electoral equality through reconfigured wards that retain coherent communities that are represented in an effective, efficient and convenient way and what such change would entail. Fifth and last, the submission sets out what the Highwoods Independent Group on CBC believes that change should look like and why a reduction of 9 Councillors to a total of 51 makes sense.

### 1.0. Introduction

1.1 Colchester Borough Council (CBC) has invited The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (The Commission) to look at how it elects its councillors.

This submission sets out, as a starting point for the review, what the Highwoods Independent Group on CBC believes the future size of the Council should be.

1.2 In making its recommendations The Commission wishes to take into account:

- A. Governance and how decisions are made.
- B. Scrutiny and outside responsibilities.
- C. Councillors representation and engagement.

1.3 When making its overall recommendations the Commission will look at the following criteria:

- A. Electoral Equality to ensure that each person's vote is of equal value
- B. Community Linkage to the particular area that councillors represent have an identifiable community.
- C. Each area had reasonable transport links so that all electors can engage in the affairs of the community.
- D. That councillors can continue to confidently and effectively represent their wards' electorate.

1.4 The Commission has said that Councils, such as CBC, that elect its councillors in thirds, should return its councillors in three member wards.

1.5 CBC has already decided that it does not want to increase the current size of the Council. The Highwoods Independent Group agrees with this and thinks that a smaller council in the current circumstances is both desirable and sensible.

The aim of the Highwoods Independent Group's submission is to recommend what it thinks is the best numbers of councillors to meet the criteria set out in paragraphs 1.2 and 1.4 above.

The Highwoods Independent Group's submission does this by evaluating the case for change in section 4 entitled 'The Case for Change' and sets out it's recommendations in section 5 entitled 'What that change should look like'.

## 2.0. About the Borough

2.1 The Colchester Local Government Administrative Area known as the Colchester Borough Council is to be found in the Eastern part of England situated in the north of the County of Essex. The borough covers roughly 329 sq. kms. In 2010 this is expected to grow to 206,000 people. Colchester has grown in the last decade. Despite the recession, it is expected to continue doing so in this decade.

2.2. This growth makes Colchester the second largest district in Essex. Nearly 12.5% of the County's population lives in the borough. Nearly an extra

17,000 people are expected to live in the borough by 2020. During this period the density of the population in the town itself is expected to rise from 474 to 526 people per sq km. It is forecast that in future an extra 830 homes will be built each year.

The Council's current core planning policy seeks to secure the extra house building to designated growth areas and contain the growth in the remaining parishes and urban areas.

2.3 In 2013 the total electorate was 130,550 with an average electorate per councillor of 2,176. It is thought by 2020 the total electorate will be 149,596. If the number of councillors were to remain at sixty the average electorate per councillor would rise to 2,493.

2.4 Under the current twenty seven ward configuration there exists a wide anomaly between the number of electors that each councillor represents. In accordance with the principle upon which democratic representation is based, each elector's vote should be of equal value when electing councillors.

Therefore, to enable the Colchester Borough Council to democratically absorb the expected growth in the borough's population, these anomalies will need to be addressed where it is possible to do so. For example, in 2013 the imbalance between the value of each vote across the borough was 1,137 electors. This is evidenced by the fact that the one councillor representing the Copford and West Stanway ward currently represents the smallest number of electors per councillor within the borough. This being 1,528 electors. Whereas, each of the three councillors representing the current Mile End ward represents the largest number of electorate at 2,665 electors. On current growth projections, this imbalance would have only by 119 voters by 2020. Projections show that on the current ward boundaries the smallest number of electors per councillor will be in the Marks Tey ward. This being 2,309 electors. In contrast, each councillor in the Mile End ward will still end up representing 3,327 electors a gap of 1,018. If the average number of electors per councillor based on a projected electorate of 149,596 electors is to be achieved and the current projected growth pattern is to be accommodated, then the current configuration of ward boundaries would leave the Marks Tey ward with 184 electors below the 2,493 average figure, but 64 electors within a reasonable tolerance of minus 10%. On the other hand, Mile End ward would be 834 electors above average and 585 electors outside of a reasonable tolerance of plus 10%.

2.5 Therefore taking into account the projected growth in population and consequent increase in the electorate, the Highwoods Independent Group recognise CBC's decision not to seek an increase in the size of the Council and embraces the need for change in the configuration of the current ward boundaries in order to create a more equal spread of electors and make each vote of more equal worth in accordance with democratic principles.

### 3.0. The Evidence for Change

**3.1. The Highwoods Independent Group accepts that in common with many other local authorities, CBC is adopting a number of strategic approaches in order to cope with reducing budgets, rising costs and rising demands upon the services that it facilitates or provides for the residents of the borough. In the face of this massive challenges the Council continues to review it's services.**

3.2 Part of these reviews will necessarily aim not to only save money but will also change fundamentally how people interact and access council services. As the savings to be gained from greater efficiency and more investment in areas such as technology begin to dry up, the Council will have to look at taking a more commercial approach in order to generate more income to help to plug the funding gap that is emerging. This will inevitably mean that the balance between what the Council does and what individuals do for them will change.

3.3 In line with these challenges and the changes that CBC's preferred solutions will bring, the Council has agreed that the introduction of a Trading Board that will enable a cut of the number of Councillors involved in scrutinising and reviewing policy to be considered.

3.4 In addition, CBC's own survey of Councillors has shown that the way in which individual Councillors are interacting with their electorate has also changed. Whilst Councillors say they continue to put in the time they expect to devote to serving their electors, the survey shows that over 40% may now be using social media when contacting or consulting their constituents. This indicates that electors are open to alternative ways of communicating with their representatives and the need for face to face contact with Councillors may be diminishing.

3.5 When considering the scope for change it is also necessary to take into account what has already changed as well as what is likely to change. So in order to consider the evidence base, it is necessary to scope out how the

Council does business and what the demand upon Councillors is. This can be done in four ways. These being:

1. How the Council is governed and how decisions are made.
2. How the Council's decisions are scrutinised.
3. How Councillors represent their electors.
4. What the future holds for the Council.

3.6 In terms of how the Council is governed and how decisions are made, the evidence points in three ways. First in terms of leadership, the Council has moved to a Cabinet model that facilitates strong leadership. It is therefore in the main, the Cabinet and not Committees that take decisions on behalf of the Council. It is therefore recognised that the role of members outside of the Cabinet has consequently changed.

The Cabinet is where the leadership of the Council now resides. It has eight members and each is delegated a strategic portfolio. Decisions are delegated to what are effectively local ministers. The leader assigns powers to these local ministers in the name of the Council. Such powers are used within the constraints of the Council's budget, its overall Policies and Constitution. All non urgent decisions can be called in by ordinary Councillors. The Chief Legal Officer is the final arbiter of how policy is interpreted on any matter. In this model strong leadership is provided but also constrained by democratic checks and balances. All major and contentious planning applications are still submitted to the Planning Committee and Licensing Committee still carries out it's quasi-judicial function.

Second, in terms of regulation, the Cabinet is responsible for all the Council's functions unless the law says otherwise. Therefore, for issues such as licensing and planning decisions are still reserved for Councillors, in the Committee rather than for the Cabinet to take.

Changes have therefore resulted in the number of places available for Councillors on various Panels and Committees. These have reduced from 64 in 2011/12 to 58 currently. The Scrutiny Panels have been reduced from three to one. Changes in law and both national and local policy has in some cases, however, increased the workload of some committees and the Councillors who take part. An example is the transfer of licensing functions transferred from the Magistrates Courts to Local Authorities. In addition CBC, in common with other Councils running the Cabinet system, has introduced working groups to actively look into topical issues and policy or service changes. Examples are: Colchester's Night Time Economy: 20mph speed limits and new initiatives for recycling. As mentioned previously, there are

however changes that have led to less scrutiny panels being required. Further retrenchment in what the Council does in the face of falling budgets, greater costs and rising demands alongside more commercialism may yet bring further changes.

Third, in terms of demand upon a councillor's time the Highwoods Independent Group recognises that the demands upon the Council's Leader, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Members are greater than those of ordinary members. Although no formal job description for Councillors exists, there is however a policy to provide for the training and development of Ward Councillors as well as those in leadership roles or chairing knowledge and skills needed to be effective in their roles. This approach is Councillor and not Officer led. An annual budget for this purpose is allocated. For members of the Licensing and Planning Committees training is compulsory.

The Highwoods Independent Group recognises that there exists the will and means to help Councillors effectively, both run the Council and scrutinise its decisions and to represent their electors' interests. In fact, a survey of Councillors has established that most spent up to thirty five hours reading, researching, attending to Council matters and dealing with constituents each week.

3.7 In terms of how the Council's decisions are scrutinised, the main avenues are either through formal Scrutiny Panel held on a monthly basis or through Working groups looking at particular issues.

The workload of the Scrutiny panel is scheduled and reviewed on a regular basis. The capacity of Councillors to scrutinise issues is not felt to be unduly impacting upon the resources of council officials. No reviews are undertaken without Officers first identifying the necessary resources needed to do so.

The Chair and Group Spokespersons of the Scrutiny Panel get together before each set it in order to be briefed and assist with the running of the meetings. This enables the meeting to run in both a smooth and timely fashion whilst addressing any questions and gaps in the information available to assist Councillors to effectively execute their scrutiny roles.

3.8. In terms of how Councillors represent their electors a CBC survey of Councillors showed that most did this through a mixture of seeking support from Officers, taking their own independent approach or a mixture of both.

Although in the past Councillors have received computer and broadband facilities, technological advances have resulted in Councillors mostly providing their own equipment and access to broadband. A dedicated Personal Assistant continues to support the Council Leader and other Cabinet members.

The same survey found that Councillors engage with their electors in a variety of ways, although modern technology has speeded up how they communicate especially through e mails. The survey found that few Councillors hold surgeries, rather they are more likely to use other means of communicating events, personal canvassing, newsletters, through community groups, social media and Town and Parish Councils.

Concerning how Councillors communicate, the survey found that once more a variety of methods are used. These being: e mails; private meetings; telephone; websites; walkabouts; LinkedIn; Twitter; reporting monthly to Parish Council meetings; Neighbourhood Action Panels; Resident Associations meetings; home visits and face to face meetings. In terms of social media Twitter and Facebook were the most popular some however, have their own websites.

Concerning how Councillors communicate the views of the electorate, personal canvassing followed by newsletters were the most popular, followed by leaflets, community events, community groups, social media and Town or Parish meetings.

Concerning how Councillors represent their electorate within the Council, the change for a Committee based approach to a Cabinet and Council Leader model has changed a Councillor's role from that of being constitutionally consulted to a more inquisitorial role. This involves the Councillors having to submit written questions, take part in question times at Council meetings, inputting topics for discussion at Council debates and taking part in working groups that take a close look at particular topics.

Concerning how Councillors get to, understand the views, opinions and needs of the younger generation, Councillors interact with young people through visits to local schools in their area and taking part in school democracy weeks. They can consult with Youth representatives via the appointed Youth Champion to the Borough Council and with linkages to the County Council's own Youth Council, the Young Essex Assembly.

Concerning how Councillors interact with and consult with Town and Parish Councils ( and where these don't exist, resident meetings), they still have the opportunity to attend such meetings within their own wards. Some Councillors sit on these Councils as well as on the Borough Council. Some Councillors are also County Councillors as well as being both Borough and Parish Councillors.

3.9 In terms of what the future holds, the way in which the Government's Localism Agenda is progressing and Policy Development that stems from this needs to be considered. As does how services are delivered and financed.

Concerning the Government's Localism Agenda, a number of initiatives have been agreed by CBC that affects how the Council does business. These include the :

- A. Community Right to Challenge.
- B. Assets of Community Value and the Communities Right to Bid for these assets.
- C. The Community Infrastructure Levy
- D. The Welfare Reform Changes
- E. A Local Highways Panel involving Borough, County and Parish Councillors
- F. A Joint Locality Board with Essex County Council in order to focus upon economic development, public health and education.

Concerning the devolution of further responsibilities or assets to community organisations CBC has a practice of identifying services that can either be provided or supported by community organisations. CBC also seeks to give buildings to communities under planning gain like community centres and village halls.

Concerning how Council services are delivered; these have meant that the type of workload Councillors contend with has changed. Although services such as Council Housing and Parking have been devolved to Colchester Borough Homes (CBH) and The North Essex Partnership (NEPP) respectively, electors still contact Councillors expecting their help and input as they see these services as being still Council-run services (albeit indirectly). Councillors who sit on the boards of these organisations also help these organisations to provide strategic direction to determine policy, approve spending decisions and monitor performance. Therefore, the Highwoods Independent Group recognises that the workload of Councillors' overall, rather than directly increasing or decreasing, has changed. The Highwoods

Independent Group further recognises that, given that CBC uses both private companies and directly employed labour to conduct its business, the way in which Councillors get involved can vary but does not necessarily change the amount of workload they deal with.

3.10 In view of the level of cuts in CBC's income imposed through less money coming from Whitehall, changes in how Council tax support is funded and the need to become more commercial and leaner in the way in which the Council operates, the Highwoods Independent Group recognises that consideration to the cost of democracy should also be given where it is desirable to do so. The Highwoods Independent Group believes that the advances in technology, especially around the reach of digital media, alongside existing technologies such as the telephone, coupled with greater commercialism and streamlining of how the Council both delivers and oversees public provision, mean that a reduction in the number of Councillors (implemented in a way in which they can remain both effective and accessible to their electorates) is both desirable and deliverable.

In short, by the Council working both smarter and leaner alongside advances in technology, means consideration of a smaller sized Council is merited.

#### 4.0. The Case for Change

4.1 Following the above review of the evidence for change the case that the Highwoods Independent Group makes for change is therefore based upon:

Clear evidence that development growth within the borough and in the town of Colchester in particular has led to wide disparities between the average numbers of electorate that individual Councillors represent. The growth in households and therefore electors is projected to do nothing to address the imbalance in the value of each elector's vote that already exists. Therefore a review of ward boundaries is self evident in order to establish a better electoral equality that currently or is likely to exist in the future if nothing were done.

The impact of the huge funding cuts imposed by central government has and is causing a fundamental shift in how the Council facilitates and provides services to local residents who form the basis of the electorate to which Councillors are answerable. Whilst this change is and will continue to present fundamental changes, opportunities also exist to facilitate a more efficient role for Councillors whilst maintaining their effectiveness within conveniently configured electoral wards.

The opportunity that the review being undertaken by the LGBCE presents to consider reducing the present size of the Council in order to provide greater electoral equality through reconfigured wards that remain coherent communities represented in an effective, efficient and convenient way.

4.2 The evidence in support of change can be seen in the following ways:

1. The potential to accommodate increased workloads for fewer Councillors.
2. Enhanced communications and information directly available to residents.
3. The changing role of Councillors.
4. The value for money to be achieved from the decreased costs of democratic representation.
5. The ability of the Council to accommodate continued change alongside a smaller number of Councillors.

4.3. The potential to accommodate increased workloads for fewer Councillors is evidenced by the results of the Councillors' survey undertaken by CBC.

The results show that Councillors felt that their workloads were manageable and they were doing what they felt was expected of them. The Highwoods Independent Group believes that greater use of existing and new technologies such as the telephone, e mails and social media will enable Councillors to absorb the potentially greater workloads arising from bigger wards.

4.4. The enhanced communications and information directly available to residents is likely to continue to reduce or contain the demand for direct contacts made with Councillors. This is because CBC's investment in web based technology is enabling more residents to communicate with the Council through the internet and e mail. With the spread of these technologies to most households, residents are now able to access a lot of information online without needing Councillors to get the information for them.

4.5. The changing role of Councillors since the move towards a Cabinet Leader has, as previously alluded to, led to Councillors outside of the Executive having a more inquisitorial role. This, coupled with the previous three scrutiny panels being rolled into one, will facilitate a smaller number of Councillors to become specialists and lend themselves to more effective scrutiny of outside providers and the Council's Trading Board as CBC

continues to directly provide fewer services and acts more commercially in order to help bridge the emerging gap between funding and spending.

4.6. The value for money from the decreased costs of democratic representation would be evidenced through the way in which leaner council services and more efficient opportunities for scrutiny would enable Councillors the opportunity to continue to take part in the affairs of the Council and effectively represent a greater number of electors in bigger wards but, at the same time, make each vote cast of a more equal value than currently the case or would be if nothing is done to address the current electoral imbalances that exist.

4.7. The ability of the Council to accommodate change alongside a smaller number of Councillors is evidenced by the way in which CBC, in common with other Councils in England, has reshaped the way it governs itself through moving from a cumbersome Committee structure to a leaner Cabinet system that facilitates strong leadership overseen by Councillors that have robust opportunities to both enquire and hold the Executive's decisions to account. It is the Highwoods Independent Group's belief that this stronger focus on leadership and enquiry has allowed CBC to accommodate legislative changes such as localism and the changes that a drastically reduced funding regime will continue to bring. The Highwoods Independent Group therefore believes that a smaller but more focused Council will be able to accommodate the legislative and organisational changes that will continue to present themselves both now and in the future.

## 5.0. What That Change Should Look Like

5.1. The Highwoods Independent Group sought to take the opportunity offered by the LGBC review by seeking agreement with the other political groups on CBC as to what the future size of the Council should be. This proved not to be possible.

5.2. The Highwoods Independent Group, in conjunction with the other political groups on CBC, had already ruled out seeking an increase in the number of Councillors in order to accommodate the growth expected between now and 2020. The Highwoods Independent Group therefore recognises the merits of reducing the present 60 members of the Council to a smaller number elected in fewer than the present 27 wards.

Given that the LGBCE's advice is that councils such as CBC that have decided to continue to elect Councillors by thirds should move to electing all

Councillors in three member wards, the Highwoods Independent Group recommends that the future size of the Council should be 51 Councillors that each represent an average of 2,933 electors plus or minus 10% (based upon forecasts for the total number of electors living within the Colchester borough by 2020) configured in 17 three member wards. This would respect the democratic principle that each elector's vote shall, as far as is possible, have equal worth.

5.3. The Highwoods Independent Group believes that a reduction of nine Councillors provides the best value for money for electors. The Highwoods Independent Group firmly believes that, at a time when electors are themselves facing rising costs, reducing the costs of their political representation is a responsible thing to do, so long as in doing so change does not undermine the remaining Councillors' abilities to represent their own electorate or to oversee the Council's delivery and facilitation of services to local residents.

5.4. The Highwoods Independent Group does not therefore foresee the need for more Councillors in the future. This assumption is based upon the way in which the streamlined structures of the Council, as previously described, facilitate the role of a strong leadership overseen by a smaller number of Councillors. The assumption is set alongside the continuing trend, both locally and nationally, of providing and facilitating services in new and different ways.

5.5. The Highwoods Independent Group therefore recommends that the future size of CBC should be 51 Councillors' elected in 17 x 3 member wards within meaningful communities that each Councillor can adequately represent in an effective and efficient way based upon an average of 2,933 per Councillor.

In support of this recommendation the Highwoods Independent Group puts forward this submission to the LGBCE for consideration.



