

ELECTORAL REVIEW OF THE LONDON BOROUGH OF BEXLEY

COUNCIL SIZE SUBMISSION BY THE COUNCIL

Section 1 Introduction

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) is undertaking a review of the London Borough of Bexley's electoral arrangements. The outcome of the review will be implemented for the May 2018 Council elections.

The review will cover the entire borough. The statutory criteria that the LGBCE will apply when making its proposals are:-

- Electoral equality (a consistent number of electors per Councillor);
- Community identity (strong ward boundaries that reflect communities); and
- Effective and convenient local government (coherent wards with good internal transport links).

The review was initiated in February 2015 and the preliminary stage of the review will determine the future Council size. The provisional decision on Council size by the Boundary Commission will then inform the next stage of the review, which will consider size and numbers of wards, ward boundaries and the number of councillors to represent each ward.

The Commission will form its view about the right Council size for an authority by considering the three following areas:

- The governance arrangements of the Council and how it takes decisions across the broad range of its responsibilities;
- The Council's scrutiny functions relating to its own decision making and the Council's responsibilities to outside bodies;
- The representational role of Councillors in the local community and how they engage with people, conduct casework and represent the Council on local partner organisations.

This submission presents evidence in relation to each of those criteria and its proposal to reduce the number of Councillors from the current number of 63 to 45. The Council is of the view that 45 elected Councillors in the London Borough will facilitate effective and convenient local government.

Section 2 Background information relating to the Borough and its electors

2.1 Current Council arrangements

The current Council size was determined by the previous review in 1999, before the introduction in the Local Government Act 2000 of Executive Arrangements, which streamlined local authorities' political management arrangements and significantly reduced

the number of committees and related duties that Councillors are required to perform.

The Council is currently comprised of 63 Councillors across 21 wards. In line with most London borough Councils at present, there is a uniform pattern of three-member wards across the borough. All Councillors are elected for a four year term.

2.2 Officer management structures

Over many years the Council has streamlined its officer arrangements in response to financial pressures due to reductions in support from government and a re-alignment of services. Integral to this process, was a review of the Council's senior management and the extent to which a revised management structure could effectively support the decision making processes and the delivery of services. With these principles to the fore, the most recent reports on the organisational blueprint have reduced the senior management of the Council at Director and Deputy Director level. Since 2010, the Management Board has been reduced from 7 to 6 (despite the addition of the statutory Director of Public Health post) and the number of Deputy Directors from 21 to 8. Further reductions have taken place in Heads of Service roles.

Officer delegations have been reviewed and amended to reflect the changes. In addition, Heads of Service have been mandated to play a wider role in the Council's corporate governance and the formulation of strategic policies to deliver the Council's priorities.

The changes have resulted in a more streamlined management structure. As a consequence of the changes made at senior management level, savings of £1.6 m have been delivered between 2010 and 2014, with further projected savings of approximately £1m being delivered in the current phase of expenditure reductions.

The emphasis in such changes has been to protect front line services by reducing management roles.

2.3 The Council's operating model

The Council has a strong tradition of working with partners for the delivery of services. Accordingly the Council has transferred its housing stock to housing associations; residential care and home care for all clients groups is delivered by independent providers; ICT services are delivered by a contractor; parking services and library back-office services are delivered in a shared service with the London Borough of Bromley; Registrars services are delivered by Kent County Council on behalf of Bexley; waste, street services and ground maintenance are delivered by a contractor. As part of the current programme of review known as "Strategy 2018", a range of service models including externalisation and shared services are being considered for "back office services".

The impact of this approach is that Bexley has the smallest annual pay bill and second lowest number of directly employed staff of all London Boroughs.

Since 2010, many of the Council's schools have opted to become academies (and therefore have a far greater level of autonomy from the Council than community schools). Of the borough's 81 schools, all 16 secondary schools and 20 of the borough's primary schools are academies. As described below, this has resulted in fewer Councillors acting as school governors and a different role for the Council in education matters.

2.4 Current Electoral Numbers

The table at Appendix 1 provides information about the borough's wards and the number of electors within those wards as at June 2015. These figures are subject to change daily, because of the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration (IER) in June 2014 which has encouraged electors to register when they move home, or within or into, or out of the borough. Prior to the UK Parliamentary General Election on 7 May 2015, there was a general increase in registration activity resulting in frequent additions and deletions to the Register. However, in general, the overall numbers of electors currently on the Register in the London Borough of Bexley remains stable.

The current number of electors is 179,439 and the average number of electors per three member ward is 8,545. This equates to an average number of electors across the borough, per Councillor of 2,848. The biggest variations from the average are Belvedere with 9,006 (5% above the average), Colyers 7,617 (11% below the average), Crayford 9,422 (10% above the average) and Sidcup 9,064 (6% above the average).

Significant new development in the Crayford ward over the past few years has seen a small rise in elector numbers and this probably accounts for the slightly higher overall figure in that ward of 9,422. The Belvedere ward has also seen an increase in electors, since the development of Belvedere Park and this figure is expected to rise still further as more families move into the area and the new housing being provided there.

The same applies, in reverse, for the Colyers and North End Wards where current development work has seen electors move away from the area while new homes are built. The Larnar Road estate in Colyers and the former Howbury site in North End are areas where elector numbers have dropped over the past year, but are expected to rise again once the new housing developments are completed and ready for habitation.

2.5 Projections of Electoral Numbers

The Council has undertaken work to produce a projection of the number of electors in 2021. The methodology and data used to produce this projection is set out in Appendix 3.

In summary, it is projected that the number of electors will rise by 5.4% across the borough as a whole to a figure of 189,189. The projections show, that due to specific development that can be evidenced, a number of current wards will increase in size at a higher rate than the average during the period of the projections. All developments of 10+ units have been taken into account when determining how the distribution of growth in the Borough will relate to individual wards and polling districts. As the replacement for the Larnar Road estate (Erith Park) will not be completed until March 2018, a projection based on full occupation of the development has been provided.

It is noted that the Council has a strategy for growth for the period to 2031 but that the projections used as the basis for decision-taking by the Boundary Commission are projections up to 2021.

Section 3 How the Council Works

This section considers the current Councillor arrangements in Bexley and each of the key areas identified by the Commission, evidencing how the proposal to reduce the number of Councillors to 45 will result in better management of the Council.

Councillors through a Member Working Group including representatives from all parties have confirmed that the current governance arrangements are less onerous than the committee

system that applied when the electoral arrangements for the borough were last reviewed in 1999, and that the proposed number of 45 councillors will allow the Council's current governance arrangements to be fully and effectively discharged.

Demands on Councillors by their representational role are greatly reduced due to the different role of the Council and the widespread use of ICT and other channels of communication.

A review of the time commitments of Councillors in undertaking their formal duties suggests that roles could be effectively discharged within the 60 hours time commitment suggested by the London Councils' Independent Remuneration Panel when making their recommendations on the Level of Councillors' Basic Allowance.

3.1 Governance arrangements of the Council

The Council operates a strong Leader and Cabinet model of governance in accordance with the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. These arrangements were introduced in 2001 and despite the considerable streamlining inherent in this system compared to the former committee system and further reductions made since then, the number of Councillors has remained the same.

Executive Decision Making

In 2014/15, the Cabinet consists of eight Councillors, including the Leader of the Council. This represents a reduction of two Cabinet Members compared to 2010/11. The statutory maximum number for Cabinet membership is ten.

In Bexley, executive decisions taken by Cabinet collectively and individual Cabinet Members are made following consideration of reports on the matters concerned. There has been a significant reduction in individual Cabinet Member decisions over recent years. In 2010/11, 104 individual Cabinet Member decisions were taken compared to 74 in 2014/15 (a decrease of 29%). This reflects an approach whereby Councillors have agreed programmes of activity (e.g. Bexley First and Strategy 2014) with appropriate delegation to officers to progress implementation. It is anticipated this downward trend in individual Cabinet Member decision making is likely to continue for the following reasons.

- Firstly, an increasing number of the Council's strategic priorities, emerging through Strategy 2018, fall to the Cabinet for decisions.
- Secondly, executive decisions made by officers will increase as the scope of delegations to them increases. This change in emphasis on where decisions are made is specifically recognised in the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements)(Meetings and Access to Information)(England) Regulations 2012.

With regard to decisions reserved to Full Council (for example, budget setting), a proposed reduction in the number of Councillors to 45 will facilitate effective operation of the decision-making process, using debates and reports submitted to Full Council. The Council's Constitution will continue to provide (for example) for Petitions to be submitted to the Council and for Councillors to sponsor Deputations from residents and other stakeholders.

Regulatory and Advisory Committees

Councillors sit on a number of regulatory and advisory committees. These committees, with the number of Councillors and number of meetings in 2014/15 are set out below:

Committee	No. Cllrs 2015/16	Number of meetings							
		2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16
Planning	18	17	14	16	16	16	14	12	10
Licensing	15	3	3	5	4	4	5	4	4
Licensing Sub-Committee	3	45	34	36	21	18	18	14	<i>tbd</i> *
General Purposes	10	4	4	4	4	4	3	4	4
Audit	6	4	5	4	3	3	3	3	3
Pensions	6	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
Constitution Review	7	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0
Members Code of Conduct/ Standards Committee / Sub Committees*	6	4	5	11	11	2	1	1	2
Civic Recognition Panel	7	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	1
Overview & Scrutiny Committees	19	28	28	24	28	28	28	12	12
OSC Sub Groups	7	25	17	19	27	27	18	19	<i>tbd</i> *
Total		136	116	126	119	109	96	74	<i>tbd</i> *

*Licensing sub committees and scrutiny sub groups are not scheduled in advance

Until the introduction of the Council's new Members' Code of Conduct in July 2012, complaints against a Councillor were (by law) dealt with by Councillors. The then statutory complaints regime provided for a Standards sub-committee to consider the complaint, as well as a Standards review sub-committee. In addition to these sub committees, the Full Standards Committee met at least twice a year to review its work programme. The arrangements prior to July 2012, consumed considerable Councillor time. For example, in 2010/11 there were nine meetings of the Standards Committee sub committees to deal with complaints against Councillors.

Under the Council's new Members' Code of Conduct (introduced pursuant to the Localism Act 2011), delegations have been made to the Monitoring Officer and his team to consider complaints and conduct reviews. The procedure provides for appropriate complaints to be referred to the Members' Code of Conduct Committee.

In terms of meetings of the Members' Code of Conduct Committee, one was convened in 2014/15 to review the complaints procedure.

There are a number of other Panels etc. that have been established but these meet rarely and only when required.

Councillors also sit on a number of other bodies that are not Committees established under the Local Government Act 1972, but are required by statute, for example the Health and Wellbeing Board, Pensions Board, Local Safeguarding Children Board, Corporate Parenting Forum and Schools Forum.

It is clear from the information set out that the number of councillors required to fulfil regulatory and advisory roles has substantially reduced. A proportionate reduction in the number of Councillors overall would be therefore appropriate.

3.2 Regulatory Committees

Licensing Committee

The Licensing Act 2003 requires each licensing authority to establish a licensing committee consisting of at least ten, but not more than fifteen, members of the authority. The Act prescribes that the role of this committee is the discharge of the authority's licensing functions. The Act sets out that a licensing committee may establish one or more sub-committees consisting of three members of the committee. In Bexley, the Licensing Committee consists of fifteen Councillors in 2014/15.

Members of the Licensing Committee meet once each municipal year to re-establish its Sub Committee. Further meetings of the Licensing Committee are convened, as required, in order to agree or amend any overarching policies, processes and procedures; and set the fees, in respect of the various licences that fall within its remit. The Licensing Committee also meets to agree the strategic direction of the licensing authority as and when necessary. The number of times that the Licensing Committee has met over the past six municipal years (2009-15) is 25.

The Licensing Sub Committee comprises any three members of the main Licensing Committee. The role of the Licensing Sub Committee is to hear and determine specific licence applications that are subject to representations or objections, together with applications which seek the review of an existing licence. The Sub Committee also sits to classify films and to serve counter notices in respect of opposed Temporary Event Notices.

There has been a steady decline in the number of times the Sub Committee has met over last six municipal years, as highlighted in the preceding table.

The main Licensing Committee must, in law, comprise of at least ten Councillors. Historically it has been made up of between thirteen and fifteen Councillors but could be reduced to ten. Analysis carried by the Council indicates this reduction would enable Members to fulfil their roles and meet the statutory requirements.

Planning Committee

Planning Committee is the regulatory committee that meets most often, approximately twelve times per year. In addition, a significant number of decisions are delegated to the Head of Planning Control (339 in the period 31 March to 21 May 2015). This compares to 293 for a similar period in 2011. The number of Planning Committee meetings has been reduced to ten meetings per year.

It is clear from the previous paragraphs that the trend in relation to regulatory committees is for a lighter workload for elected Members, and that the regulatory function can be effectively

and efficiently delivered by Councillors appointed from a reduced Council.

3.3 The Council's Scrutiny arrangements

The Overview & Scrutiny Committee structures at Bexley were reorganised in May 2014 to reduce the number of committees and sub-groups and to refocus Overview & Scrutiny on the core business of the Council. The number of Overview and Scrutiny Committees (OSCs) was reduced from seven to three, each having thematic orders of reference – People; Places; and Finance & Resources.

Each OSC meets four times per year. Therefore there are 12 scheduled OSC meetings in 2015/16, reduced from 28 meetings per year under the previous structure. Since the reduction in OSCs and the more wide-ranging terms of reference, agenda and meeting length has increased to between 3 and 3.5 hours.

Each OSC continues to be able to establish individual topic-based sub-groups. To date, seven such sub-groups have been established in 2014/15. Meeting frequency is determined by each sub-group. Some may have only one or two meetings, whilst others may have five or six. There have been 16 sub-group meetings in 2014/15. This is not too dissimilar to the number of sub-groups in previous years; there were ten sub-groups in 2012/13 meeting on 22 occasions and six sub-groups in 2013/14 meeting on 17 occasions.

Between OSC meetings, there is an expectation that Councillors will keep a “watching brief” on issues within the orders of reference of the OSCs of which they are a member, so that they can use this experience to identify agenda items and contribute to debate at Committee. The Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen take a lead on this. Reality checking visits also take place with varying frequency between meetings. Attendance at reality checking visits and other activities is optional.

The trend is for a reduction in the number of overview and scrutiny committees. Councillors have recognised that there is scope for further changes to scrutiny arrangements that will enhance its effectiveness whilst requiring fewer councillors. These changes might include the greater use of co-option of representatives from organisations with specialist knowledge or expertise for specific topics.

3.4 Delegation to officers

The approach taken by the Council over a number of years has been to rely and expect the Chief Executive and senior officers of the Council to effectively implement the strategic decisions of the Council and to run operational services effectively, making use of their professional expertise and experience. This approach has been reflected in the delegation of authority to officers to implement significant programmes such as Bexley First, Strategy 2014 and the Council's organisational blueprint.

This approach has led to fewer decisions being required from Members both of the executive and other committees.

3.5 The representational role of Councillors in the local community

Casework

Individual Councillors manage and progress their casework with advice and guidance from officers as appropriate. The Council does not collect or hold data about the volume or complexity of such casework, although such matters will sometimes result in enquiries to officers to clarify or provide information about the Council's approach to a particular issue.

Councillors have, however, observed that the use of e mail and other media has allowed for faster, less time consuming communication with both residents and officers in relation to case work. Similarly, the availability of on line information, services and ways of reporting issues for residents and Councillors alike has also reduced the time required to undertake casework.

In addition, as services have increasingly been delivered through partners, enquiries and queries from residents are dealt with by those partners at first instance. For example, the large volume of correspondence in relation to housing matters received by councillors when a council owns its housing stock is significantly reduced for an authority that has transferred its stock to a partner housing association.

Traditionally Councillors had a role in assisting residents with complaints. Following the introduction of a corporate officer Complaints team and appropriate software for tracking and monitoring the handling of complaints, the number of cases referred to the Local Government Ombudsman has dropped markedly in recent years, In 2013/14 the Ombudsman made 90 decisions in Bexley cases and this reduced to 76 in 2014/15. There has been minimal Councillor involvement with these complaints. Furthermore, Bexley is receiving fewer complaints in comparison with neighbouring authorities

Community/neighbourhood representation

Some Councillors conduct surgeries, which vary in nature and frequency according to the individual Councillor's assessment of need and demand. For example, some Councillors hold regular fortnightly meetings in such places as, for example, local community centres, whilst others prefer to make themselves available either through email, telephone conversations or by meetings with residents. Some Councillors find individual meetings a more personal and suitable way of engaging with people in their constituency than surgeries.

The Council does not hold any data about the time spent by Councillors on representation of individual electors.

Appointments to outside bodies

The number of outside bodies to which the Council nominates Councillors has reduced significantly from 97 in 2008/09 to 41 in 2015, a reduction of 58%. Traditionally Councillors have been nominated by the authority to a wide range of outside organisations. The Council and many of our partners have moved towards other models of accountability including annual commissioning meetings involving Cabinet Members and officers .

Councillors are also often appointed as Local Authority School Governors. The number of Local Authority Governors overall has decreased significantly over recent years and as more schools become academies. There are currently 11 Local Authority positions filled by Council Members. This compares to 33 in 2011.

In each aspect of the representational role, the workload of Councillors has reduced so that residents can be fully and effectively represented by the smaller number of Councillors now proposed.

3.6 Other requirements of Councillors

Councillors receive induction training, covering key elements and essentials in undertaking the role of Councillor. Training is provided on regulatory matters such as planning and licensing. Political Groups also provide ongoing development support to newer Councillors. Time required to be spent on training is limited.

Section 4 Future plans or developments affecting the Council

4.1 Challenges

Balancing reductions in funding with the ever increasing demands on services continues to be a challenge. Councils have been challenged to move away from narrow service delivery functions and to adopt a more strategic commissioning role. This means stepping back from traditional service delivery by focussing on understanding the needs of our communities and leading activity to secure improved outcomes. Increasingly areas are creating joint decision making arrangements to deal with important issues that cross local authority boundaries (such as commissioning children's services, health and well-being and joint strategic needs assessments).

The period to 2018 will continue to be challenging and as a Council, we will need to continuously review the services we provide and the ways in which we provide them. It means being open to using the best way of securing service outcomes and thinking creatively about how to get the most from available resources.

4.2 Streamlined Operational Model

As described above, we have streamlined our operational model. Our Cabinet is composed of eight Members, the Overview and Scrutiny programme has been focused on our three corporate priorities and we have reduced the number of formal Member appointments to Outside Bodies, in line with this strategic approach, from 97 to 41 bodies. Local authority appointed governors have also reduced in numbers due to legislation governing community schools and through the academy conversion process. Councillors can choose to submit their Member's Enquiry to the corporate complaints team who will log, co-ordinate and record the enquiry and response, thus helping to reduce the time expended by Councillors in resolving complex enquiries.

Moving from the traditional intermediary role, Councillors as leaders within their communities can help to broker discussions about making the most of assets to meet community needs. They can bring together Council, other statutory authorities, local voluntary and community groups, local businesses and other private landowners to build a constructive partnership.

The proposed Council size complements our leaner operational approach.

4.3 Changes in residents relationship with the Council

The nation is becoming increasingly digitalised and the typical person is beginning to use digital technology in all aspects of their daily lives. The Office for National Statistics

measures the access residents have to the internet and for January – March 2014 (Quarter 1), 92% of residents in the Outer London South area have access to the internet.¹

According to the Office of National Statistics² in 2014, 73% of adults in Great Britain used a computer every day, up from 45% in 2006. Increases in daily computer usage between 2006 and 2014 were seen for all age groups, with the largest relative increase being for those aged 65 and over. In 2006, of those aged 65 and over, just 9% reported that they used a computer every day, compared with 42% in 2014.

Technology will increasingly empower the public to resolve issues themselves online directly with the Council, rather than rely on assistance from others. This will require fewer Councillors to act as intermediaries.

4.4 Building More Resilient Communities

The Council is actively engaging with communities to encourage wider engagement of residents in their areas. This policy of building resilient communities to enable them to shape how services are delivered in their areas is exemplified by the examples provided below. The policy and process of capacity building within communities will positively change the way residents relate to the Council:

- Libraries - We have two successful community managed libraries in Bexley Village and Slade Green. The Bexley Village Community Library has more than 1,000 members plus regular events and new activities. Slade Green and Howbury is newer but is on course to exceed the number of visitors recorded when it was a Council-run facility.

We are now seeking community groups to help run four more of the borough's libraries (Blackfen, Bostall, North Heath and Upper Belvedere) following a Cabinet decision taken in December that approved the adoption of a new Library Strategy and plans for the remodelling of the service.

- Community centres - three charities now run six of the borough's community centres. North Cray Neighbourhood Centre; Parkside Community Centre and Hurst Community Centre are operated by Youth Action Diversity Trust. Belvedere Community Centre is operated by a new organisation acting as holding trustees for the Belvedere Community Forum. Falconwood Community Centre and St Michael's Community Centre will be operated by the Welling Community Centres Trust. In addition, we opened a new community centre for Slade Green in October 2014 which is operated by Eco Communities, a social enterprise company. The new Crayford Community Centre is run by the Council's Library Service.

The enabling of communities means a reduction in the direction and involvement of the Council, with a corresponding reduction in councillor workloads.

¹ Internet Access Quarterly Update: Q1 2014. ONS published 14th May 2014.
<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/publications/re-reference-tables.html?edition=tcm%3A77-336652#tab-all-tables>

² Internet Access – Households and Individuals 2014, ONS Statistical Bulletin 7 August 2014
http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_373584.pdf

4.5 Residents views

The Council has in recent years consulted residents in the course of its budget preparation on options and priorities for expenditure. A consistent theme in responses has been that the cost and number of Councillors and administration should be reduced.

The Council undertook consultation on its expenditure reduction programme (known as Strategy 2014) in 2010, inviting comments, alternative proposals and further suggestions. Similarly, consultation will also be undertaken on Strategy 2018.

Last year's consultation on budget proposals through an online system known as You Choose generated 394 responses. As part of this, we asked for views on eight specific proposals. The one on 'Reducing democratic overheads' was the most popular, gaining the support of 86% of those who responded.

193 You Choose respondents took up the invitation to make their own suggestions on how the Council could save money. Reducing the number of Councillors was one of the most popular suggestions.

Section 5 The proposal for Council size

The previous sections of this report have described how the way that the Council, has streamlined its arrangements so that fewer Councillors have a formal role in the decision making of the Council, there are fewer committees scrutinising executive decisions, and fewer outside bodies on which the Council has representation. Officer arrangements too have changed with fewer senior managers and a focus of resources on delivering front-line services. The Council has sought to ensure that it is managed effectively with lean and efficient structures. It is considered appropriate that this approach should also apply to the number of Councillors.

The Council passed a resolution on 23 July 2014 to call on the Boundary Commission, as the relevant authority, to start the process to review the number of Councillors and the Ward boundaries to allow appropriate representation to best support our residents. During this debate and in subsequent discussions it is very evident that the Council and all its political groups are committed to a significant reduction in elected members to take effect at the May 2018 elections.

Appendix 2 sets out similar information for London Boroughs. When compared to London Boroughs in 2014, Bexley was joint fifth highest with regard to its number of Councillors and had the eighth lowest number of electors per Councillor with a figure of 2,842. This compares to Bromley with 3,958, Greenwich with 3,424 and Lewisham with 3,631, Havering with 3,483. Bexley strives to be amongst the most efficient and lean authorities amongst its peers, seeking innovative ways to serve and represent its residents and it is considered appropriate for the Council to adopt a Council size that reflects this aspiration.

Each of the political groups in Bexley has concluded that a Council size of 45 would be appropriate to satisfy the criteria, having taken account of the three areas of consideration set out by the Boundary Commission.

The Council has considered how many Councillors are required to allow key roles to be properly and effectively undertaken. Analysis by the Council of Overview and Scrutiny Meetings and other formal time commitments for Councillors indicates there is capacity for Members to deliver their role effectively with reduced Council size of 45 Members. Councillors at the Members Working Group considered how a Council size in a range of

between 40 and 50 might meet the requirements and concluded that a size of 45 would allow the Council to effectively discharge its obligations in relation to governance, scrutiny and representation, recognising the considerable changes set out in this submission.

The substantial changes that have taken place since 1999 in the way that the Council and its Councillors undertake their responsibilities support a significant reduction (29%) in the size of the Council. Such a reduction is also appropriate taking into account the future challenges and anticipated contraction that the Council will undergo to meet its severe financial challenges.

Section 6 Financial impact of Council size proposal

The budget allocated for Members' Allowances for 2015/16 is £861k. In addition, a small budget of £9k is provided for any training, attendance at conferences and travel and subsistence, although in reality, this is claimed only rarely by Councillors.

The major part of the £861k budget is allocated for the Basic Allowance, which is currently paid at £9,418 per Councillor, plus the Special Responsibility Allowances paid to Councillors who either hold leadership roles or as Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen of the Council's committees. The total expenditure for Members' Allowances for the last financial year, 2013/14, was £862,112.36.

Assuming that the level of allowances paid to individual Councillors remained the same going forward, any reduction in total spend would relate to £9,418 (Basic Allowance) for each Member and any Special Responsibility Allowances that were either reduced, or cancelled. A reduction of one third of the number of Councillors would result in a potential saving of around £198k per municipal year for the Basic Allowance. Any potential savings of Special Responsibility Allowances would be made through, either a reduction in the number of committees, or the removal of an allowance from a Member.

In addition to the direct costs of payments to Councillors, support is provided by a Members Services Team and for formal decision making and scrutiny by the Committee Services and Scrutiny Team. It is envisaged that any reduction in the number of Councillors may also result in modest savings in these areas.

Section 7 Next steps

The Council wishes to engage with residents and will publish this submission on our website to enable people to consider the issues and to make any comments they wish to the Boundary Commission. We will be making residents and interested parties (such as residents associations and key partners) aware that the Boundary Commission is undertaking this review and the process and the timetable to be followed.

The Boundary Commission will undertake its own consultation via its website and will contact local organisations to invite their views, as well as undertaking visits to the borough.

All Councillors have had an opportunity to attend a briefing by the Boundary Commission on 27th May which explained the process and timetable, and made clear that the Boundary Commission will accept representations and views from any resident or organisation, including political parties in respect of any issue within the scope of the review.

The General Purposes Committee on 14th April agreed that a Member Working Group be established to undertake the detailed work in relation to the review. All parties attended, including the Leader of each political group. This Group has concluded that a Council size

of 45 will allow the Council to function effectively in terms of its governance, scrutiny and representational role.

Section 8 Summary

This report has described the significant changes in London Borough of Bexley since the last review of electoral arrangements in 1999. It proposes a reduction in the size of the Council from 63 to 45. This reduction and submission on size has the unanimous support of the three political groups represented on the Council.

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**Reporting to: [REDACTED]
Chief Executive**

Appendix 1 Current Electoral Numbers with 2021 variance

Please refer to the attached pdf file for the current electoral numbers.

London Borough of Bexley: Current and Forecast Electorate

Name of Borough ward	Number of cllrs	Electorate 2015	Electorate 2021
Barnehurst	3	8,432	8,887
Belvedere	3	9,006	9,587
Blackfen and Lamorbey	3	8,258	8,487
Blendon and Penhill	3	8,558	8,805
Brampton	3	8,570	8,819
Christchurch	3	8,727	9,182
Colyers	3	7,617	8,476
Cray Meadows	3	8,676	9,011
Crayford	3	9,422	10,110
Danson Park	3	8,424	8,750
East Wickham	3	8,565	8,977
Erith	3	8,734	10,391
Falconwood and Welling	3	8,578	8,904
Lesnes Abbey	3	8,691	8,991
Longlands	3	8,380	8,720
North End	3	8,194	8,845
Northumberland Heath	3	8,212	8,426
Sidcup	3	9,064	9,456
St. Mary's	3	8,627	8,867
St. Michael's	3	8,389	8,619
Thamesmead East	3	8,315	8,879

Appendix 2 Electoral arrangements in London Boroughs

London Borough	Total electorate at 17/2/2014	Number of Wards/ Divisions	Council Size	Electors per Councillor	Area (Hectare)	Density (Electors per Hectare)
Croydon	260,588	24	70	3,723	8,652	30.1
Ealing	242,655	23	69	3,517	5,553	43.7
Hillingdon	209,202	22	65	3,218	11,570	18.1
Barnet	233,881	21	63	3,712	8,674	27.0
Bexley	179,076	21	63	2,842	6,056	29.6
Brent	216,145	21	63	3,431	4,323	50.0
Enfield	210,581	21	63	3,343	8,083	26.1
Harrow	182,141	21	63	2,891	5,047	36.1
Lambeth	221,367	21	63	3,514	2,682	82.5
Redbridge	211,767	21	63	3,361	5,641	37.5
Southwark	206,857	21	63	3,283	2,885	71.7
Bromley	237,497	22	60	3,958	15,015	15.8
Hounslow	190,793	20	60	3,180	5,598	34.1
Merton	149,615	20	60	2,494	3,761	39.8
Newham	192,589	20	60	3,210	3,622	53.2
Waltham Forest	184,895	20	60	3,082	3,881	47.6
Wandsworth	232,812	20	60	3,880	3,426	68.0
Westminster	138,200	20	60	2,303	2,148	64.3
Hackney	173,503	19	57	3,044	1,906	91.0
Haringey	175,211	19	57	3,074	2,959	59.2
Camden	155,341	18	54	2,877	2,180	71.3
Havering	188,099	18	54	3,483	11,227	16.8
Kensington & Chelsea	106,494	18	54	1,972	1,213	87.8
Lewisham	196,088	18	54	3,631	3,515	55.8
Richmond Upon Thames	139,231	18	54	2,578	5,742	24.2
Sutton	147,827	18	54	2,738	4,385	33.7
Barking & Dagenham	128,792	17	51	2,525	3,609	35.7
Greenwich	174,640	17	51	3,424	4,735	36.9
Tower Hamlets	179,788	17	51	3,525	1,977	90.9
Islington	154,629	16	48	3,221	1,486	104.1
Kingston Upon Thames	118,808	16	48	2,475	3,725	31.9
Hammersmith & Fulham	130,495	16	46	2,837	1,640	79.6

Appendix 3 - Methodology statement for 2021 Electorate Forecast

Introduction

Bexley has considerable experience in the area of demographic forecasting of its population and uses population forecasts regularly in the planning of many services such as its statutory responsibility to provide sufficient school places, demand for Adult and Children's Social Care services, early year places and Special Educational Needs provision amongst others.

As one of the 32 London Boroughs Bexley has the benefit also of the experience and expertise of the Greater London Authority Intelligence Unit who provide key demographic information, including population projections which are similar to those modelled by the Office of National Statistics. Unlike ONS projections though these take account of development information provided by the Authority as well as other intelligence about the Local Authority and have proved to be relatively accurate in recent years in estimating population increases due to increased net migration.

In developing robust electorate forecasts for this review the Local Authority has taken the view that the Greater London Authority ward based standard trend projections represent the most realistic projection of population growth in the Borough by 2021, providing levels of population growth in the adult population across all areas with concentrated growth in those parts of the Borough that will see new housing developments being completed and occupied by 2021. The projection assumes that similar trends in recent years seen in Bexley will continue in terms of population growth, in part but not exclusively fuelled by development.

The current registered electorate (19 May 2015) of 179,439 compares with an estimated 18+ population of 184,832 according to the GLA living in the Borough at 30 June 2015. This represents a registration rate of 97.5% which will be accounted for when calculating population growth by polling district and ward.

Overall we forecast that the electorate will increase by 9,670 residents aged 18 and over from 2015 to 2021, a 5.4% increase on the current registered electorate of 179,439 to 189,189.

Overview of GLA Population projections

The GLA Intelligence Unit produces annually updated population projections for all London Local Authorities. There are a variety of different types of projections produced, those solely linked to housing development, trend based projections which reflect recent population changes (part of which will be linked to new housing development) and housing linked forecasts which contain elements of both.

The process to produce population projections is very similar to that used by ONS. The population from the previous year is adjusted by taking account of births and deaths and inward and outward migration to produce a population for the next year. For trend based projections a number of variants are used to model higher and lower birth rates and levels of net migration. The variant being used for this projection is the standard central one which assumes that recent high levels of net migration will continue but that the birth rate will fall slightly from recent historic highs. This variant aligns with the reasons behind Bexley's recent population growth.

Trend based forecasts are appropriate to use in forecasting the electorate in 2021 as the extent of development is expected to be broadly similar in the next 6 years to recent years. Large scale growth in the Borough's population driven by the growth strategy is not formally

confirmed yet within the development plan and, if it does occur, is not expected to come until much later, in the plan period, beyond 2021. In line with the Electoral Commission's guidance this potential growth is not specifically taken account of in producing electorate forecasts for 2021.

Changes in the 18+ population by ward can be identified between 2015 to 2021 and the forecast change has been applied to current electorate numbers to show the level of change in six years' time. The population of all wards is forecast to increase but this varies considerably from only 2.6% in Northumberland Heath to 19% in Erith.

Office of National Statistics forecasts

As explained above GLA projections use similar statistical modelling than that of ONS but can be more sophisticated as they have access to a range of information about Bexley which constrains the forecast by taking account of factors which ONS do not (such as land availability in some parts of the Borough).

ONS population forecasts for Bexley are higher than those of the GLA. Their published forecast for total population (all ages) is 255,138 in 2021 which compares to 252,810 in the GLA standard trend forecast being used. Reasons for this difference are likely to include higher assumptions about fertility rates, higher net migration and assumptions about growth that are unconstrained by factors such as lack of availability of land for new housing in some wards.

New ONS mid-year estimates were published on 25 June 2015. These have had significant implications for Bexley in that they show a further increase in the overall population above projected annual growth levels, due to higher levels of net migration compared to the previous year. Bexley's all age population increased by 3,178 persons from 1 July 2013 to 30 June 2014 to 239,865 compared to a 2,416 increase between mid-2012 and mid-2013.

This has created concerns that net migration assumptions for Bexley implicit in the GLA trend forecasts may be insufficient and that the higher ONS projections are more in line with the extent of population growth that could be expected. As a result forecast elector numbers have been revised upwards to take account of the most recent ONS data on net migration and bring the forecast in line with the latest forecast ONS population for all ages in Bexley of 255,138 in 2021.

Applying ward projections to polling areas

As population projections are provided on a ward basis at the lowest level it was necessary to develop a methodology for applying these to polling areas in a way that would be robust. The 2021 projections assume growth across the Borough but this is much higher in a number of areas where developments are anticipated to be completed over the next 6 years.

Maps of the developments expected to be completed by April 2020 are attached as Appendices A and B. These represent all developments with planning permissions for 10+ units in the Borough which need to reflect growth in the electorate.

Where no development of 10+ units is anticipated the population rise in the ward has been applied equally across all polling districts. This is determined by the increase in the adult aged population from 2015 to 2021 (minus 2.5% to reflect the number of eligible electors who are likely not to register despite extensive efforts).

This has been achieved by allowing for 2 adults per dwelling to be added to the population in those polling districts with approved or likely to be approved housing developments within them as identified in the annual housing land supply assessment. A figure of 2 residents per dwelling is felt to be consistent with average household size in Bexley which at the 2011 Census was 2.49 when children were included. For example: -

Barnehurst Ward – A development of 120 dwellings in BH5 provides for an additional 240 electors. The remaining increase of residents is then applied equally in proportion to the current electorate to arrive at the forecast electorate for 2021.

Colyers Ward - Larner Road, (now renamed as Erith Park) has been the subject of a regeneration programme in which 622 homes were demolished and are being replaced by 587 dwellings in a number of phases for completion by March 2018. A number of the replacement dwellings are larger units than the ones they have replaced.

As a replacement programme, no allowance was made for electorate growth due to new housing in the relevant polling district. However due to the ongoing programme of regeneration, the majority of former residents are not currently living in the polling district, resulting in the current electorate figure being artificially low.

In order to produce a more accurate forecast for this polling district, we have considered the number of electors on roll prior to the regeneration programme commencing. The last annual canvass before works commenced was on 1 December 2011 when there were 788 properties and an electorate of 978.

Allowing for a similar degree of demographic growth as applied to all areas, we have therefore included a rise in the projected number of electors for this polling district from 466 to 1,008.

For each ward where 10+ units are planned this same exercise has been undertaken with the elements of the population increase that are directly associated with development being applied to the relevant polling district.

Other factors taken account of in producing forecasts

Attainers/Students

Following the introduction of Individual Voter Registration (IER) the number of attainers (17 year olds on the register) on the Bexley register has fallen considerably. The current number of registered attainers is 507 compared with an estimated 17 year old population of 3165 which is only 16%. As the number of attainers can be extremely difficult to forecast and they are in effect not eligible voters, the forecasts have focused on the projected increase in the 18+ population and have compared the 18+ estimated population with the current electorate. In formulating these forecasts we have assumed that the rate of registration of attainers and students will remain broadly similar.

The number of adults in dwellings

A range of different factors were considered which relate to the number of adults living in each dwelling. These factors included the incidence of houses being sub-divided and occupied by extended or multiple families; the increasing number of adults who stay or

return to the family home due to the unaffordability of housing; the ageing population and in particular the increasing number of older people, e.g. widows/widowers, living alone; the mix of dwellings , i.e. houses vs flats.

It was noted that some of these trends might be reflected to some degree in the 2011 Census or in assumptions around migration. It was noted that to the extent that such trends were not fully reflected in those sources, there was a lack of data that could be relied upon in making projections, and that the factors also acted against each other. It is considered that the current forecast takes account of such factors as far as is possible.

Long term population trends nationwide are for household size to decline as people live longer and there are forecast to be more one person households. Recent experience in Bexley suggests this may not being reflected locally with recent increases in population outstripping expectations. However expectations regarding potential for household size to increase need to be tempered with the demographic trends implicit with an ageing population overall.

Vacant Dwellings

Bexley does not have a major issue with vacant dwellings in new developments and the forecast of the electorate assumes that the rate of vacant dwellings will remain broadly similar.

Housing Development

The population growth contained in the GLA population projections takes account of future development in that it forecasts on recent trends which include residents who have moved into the borough as a result of development. Development only projections considerably under-estimate the future population of the Borough as they take no account of the birth rate or high net migration and would be inaccurate for the purposes of this review. The standard trend projection has been analysed by ward and officers are confident that they reflect as closely as possible the degree of growth in in Bexley which is expected within current adopted plans.

Our own development data has been used to determine how and where to allocate population growth within the ward to the relevant polling district. The methodology for this is explained above. We have excluded all known development which is not expected to be completed before 2021.

Individual Voter Registration

The Elections Team has confirmed that Bexley has achieved one of the highest rates of voter registration in London. Each Household has received a significant amount of explanatory and request correspondence since the introduction of IER in June 2014, starting with a Household Enquiry Form (HEF) and followed up, where required, by written reminders, and at least two personal visits by the Council's canvassers. A decision has yet to be taken by HM Government as to whether the non-responders to the transitional IER Canvass of 2014 should be removed from the register from 1 December 2015, or 1 December 2016. This may result in a small reduction in the number of electors if and when these non-responders are removed, as required by the Electoral Commission. This decision should be confirmed by August 2015. However, experience suggests that at least a proportion of these electors will then immediately take steps to re-register. Overall, there is good reason to believe that the current register represents a sound starting point for future projections.

Population Change in Bexley

Recent population growth in Bexley has taken place at a faster rate than due to new development alone. Net migration (those arriving minus those leaving) to the Borough has shown a significant rise in recent years driven by a number of factors which include: -

- Increases in international migration and migration from other London Boroughs (particularly Greenwich and Lewisham)
- Relative affordability of Bexley to buy and rent in comparison with other parts of London and the South East
- Popularity of schools and enhancement of perceptions of Bexley as a desirable place to live
- Decline in the number of residents moving out of the Borough to a non-London address (in common with the majority of outer London Boroughs)

Looking forward we recognise that the rate of net migration to the Borough may decline from its current high historic levels but this is balanced by current development levels being sustained and forecasted to increase in the long term. The forecasts show the levels of net migration continuing at current levels with much of this driven by new housing developments resulting in an increased electorate in wards such as Erith, Crayford, North End, Thamesmead East and to a lesser extent elsewhere.

Conclusion

The approach taken to forecasting the electorate in 2021 has taken account of all of the factors that are relevant in determining future population growth. In Bexley it is important that a balance is struck between forecasting based on population growth due to significant net migration and higher births than deaths, and future anticipated housing development. The most recent ONS 2014 mid-year estimates have been taken account of in finalising forecast electorate numbers. Our view is the balance taken is the right one and that the forecasts provide as accurate a reflection of the electorate in 2021 at polling district level as can be produced at this time based on all the evidence available.