

**MINUTES OF THE ELECTORAL REVIEW STEERING GROUP HELD ON
THURSDAY 18TH DECEMBER**

Present:

Cllrs Baldwin, Bialyk, Denham, Edwards, Leadbetter and Sutton

Apologies:

Cllr Mitchell

Officers:

Corporate Manager, Democratic & Civic Support
Democratic Services Manager (Elections)

1. Introduction

The Corporate Manager, Democratic & Civic Support introduced the reasoning behind the Boundary Commission's intention to undertake an Electoral Review for the City of Exeter. In short, 8 of the City's 18 wards had a variance of +/- 10% from the norm in their electorate. A review was therefore needed to rectify this imbalance. The Boundary Commission had also commented on the Council's current practice of differing size electoral wards, and how that could potentially disenfranchise some elements of the City in that they only voted in a City Council election two out of every three years.

The initial stage for this was for the Council to give its view as to the size of the Council (i.e. the number of councillors required to satisfactorily carry out its responsibilities) and also its electoral cycle (either all out elections, or the continuance to elections by thirds). This would then form the basis for a series of consultation exercises by the Boundary Commission during 2015.

Following discussions with the Boundary Commission, an accelerated timetable for this review had been agreed, ensuring that sufficient time was given between its conclusion (October 2015), and possible all out elections on the new ward boundaries in May 2016. This required the Council's initial view to be formalised by Mid January 2015. It was noted that at all stages of the process, any views formulated by the Council must be backed by suitable evidence – these would then be considered by the Boundary Commission alongside any others received throughout the process.

The Group was informed that if the Council's decision was to continue with elections by thirds, then the total number of councillors across the City should be a derivative of 3, therefore meaning that the number of councillors would change from that currently. This would also ensure that if this model was agreed, all parts of the City would be involved in elections each year, which the Boundary Commission felt was more democratic. Discussions on ward boundaries would form the next stage of the process and would be undertaken during February/March.

The Leader of the Council moved that the Council's current status of elections by thirds should continue for the future, and that the overall number of councillors should be reduced to 39. This it was felt was the optimal number of councillors required to deliver and manage the services and responsibilities

of a Council such as Exeter, particularly so when noting the requirements of the review, that projections for future growth of the City to 2021, needed to be taken into account during this review.

A discussion then ensued as to whether this was the correct number of councillors and whether a better number would be either 36 or 42. 36 was dismissed as being too few due to the inevitable increase in electorates across the City as a consequence of the development proposals for the City, and the increased workloads for councillors that would follow, particularly as the size of the wards would also increase.

A contrary view was expressed that by suggesting 36 councillors, the current number of electoral wards could be retained, therefore ensuring retention of the current coterminosity with the Council Council's electoral divisions. This, it was noted, would only work if the electoral cycle was amended to all out elections every four years. There was a view that, whilst coterminosity was helpful, it was not essential and that the new City wards should not necessarily be influenced by the County Divisions.

42 was dismissed as it was felt there was no appetite to increase the overall number of councillors above that which current exists.

A counter proposal was also put forward that the number of councillors should be set at 36, with elections being changed to be all out elections every four years. In addition to the reasons set out above, it was suggested that this would deliver savings to the City Council in the costs running of elections. It was noted that whilst there may be some small savings attributable to this, they would not be as significant as may be thought due to the common practice now of elections for differing bodies being held on the same day, with many of the costs being shared.

Reference was also made to the size of the Council in comparison with its nearest neighbours in terms of Cipfa comparators, which showed a range of between 57 councillors and 33.

After further discussion, which included the possible timetable for the review during 2015, it was the majority view of the Group that the Council's initial view of the Electoral Review for the City be that the future number of Councillors be set at 39, with the current practice of elections by thirds continuing.

It was also agreed that the next meeting of the Group be held on Friday 9th January at 4pm.

Meeting commenced at 09.00 and concluded at 09.40.