

## **REPORT TO Executive**

**Date of Meeting: 9 December 2014**

**Report of: Corporate Manager, Democratic & Civic Support, Electoral Registration and Returning Officer**

**Title: ELECTORAL REVIEWS OF DEVON AND EXETER**

### **Is this a Key Decision?**

No

### **Is this an Executive or Council Function?**

Council

## **1. What is this report about?**

- 1.1 This report details the City Council's proposed response to the Local Government Boundary Commission's current electoral review of Devon, and also informs Members of the proposed electoral review of the City of Exeter and its implications.

## **2. Recommendations:**

- 2.1 That the comments contained in this report form the basis of the City Council's response to the Local Government Boundary Commission's electoral review of Devon.
- 2.2 That in relation to the Local Government Boundary Commission's electoral review of Exeter the cross party working group comprising the Political Group Leaders (or their representatives) be established to consider the council's initial decision on its future size and electoral cycle.
- 2.3 That in relation to the Local Government Boundary Commission's electoral review of Exeter, an Extraordinary meeting of Council be held in January 2015, to consider the recommendations of the above working group.

## **3. Reasons for the recommendations:**

- 3.1 The Local Government Boundary Commission for England, is currently undertaking a review of the electoral divisions within the County of Devon, and has asked for comments on this by 19 January 2015.

It has also written to the City Council indicating that it intends to undertake a similar review of the electoral wards within Exeter itself, which in one scenario could lead to all out City Council elections as early as May 2016. This would mean consultation on the Commission's proposals being undertaken during 2015.

So as to give maximum time for arrangements to be made for the possibility of all out elections in 2016, and to allow the Boundary Commission an appropriate timescale for consultation on this, the Council needs to make its initial decision on its future size and electoral cycle by mid January 2015.

Whilst appreciating that this is a relatively short timescale, it is suggested that these initial discussions would best be undertaken by a small cross party working group comprising the Group Leaders (or their representatives) which would produce its recommendations to an Extraordinary Council meeting in Mid January 2015.

## **4. What are the resources implications including non-financial resources?**

- 4.1 There would be few costs associated with any changes to the County Electoral Divisions, other than the potential costs of compiling two separate electoral registers if the County Divisions and City wards were not conterminous. This would be a cost to the City Council as the electoral registration authority. It would be difficult to identify this at the present time.

As to the resource implications associated with the City electoral review, these could be considerable including officer time to undertake the whole project, as well as the prospect of all out elections as early as 2016 when normally there would only be elections in two thirds of the City in that year. To this end, an additional resource has been advertised in the Electoral Services team, with the costs being met from within existing budgets.

Present timetabling would mean that any elections in 2016 would be combined with those for a Police and Crime Commissioner, so many of the costs would be shared. However, there could potentially be an additional cost to the City Council.

## **5. Section 151 Officer comments:**

- 5.1 Any financial implications arising from the outcome of the review and the potential additional costs associated with all out elections will be considered once the costs is known and built into the financial plan as appropriate.

## **6. What are the legal aspects?**

- 6.1 No comment.

## **7. Monitoring Officer's comments:**

- 7.1 This report raises no concerns for the Monitoring Officer.

## **8. Report details:**

### **What is an electoral review?**

The Local Government Boundary Commission regularly reviews the electoral map across the Country so as to ensure electoral equality for voters.

Such reviews recommend new electoral arrangements, and in particular, propose:-

- The total number of councillors elected to a council in the future;
- The number of divisions/wards;
- The number of councillors representing each division/ward;
- Division/ward boundaries; and
- Names of the divisions/wards.

## Devon County Council review

The Boundary Commission is currently undertaking a public consultation on where new county electoral division patterns should be drawn. To this end, it is minded to recommend that 60 councillors should be elected to Devon County Council in the future (down from the current 62), and is seeking views as to how a pattern of divisions should be drawn up to accommodate this number. In doing so, it must balance the following three criteria:-

- To deliver elector equality where each county councillor represents roughly the same number of electors as others across the county;
- That the pattern of divisions should, as far as possible, reflect the interests and identities of local communities; and
- That the electoral arrangements should provide for effective and convenient local government.

Currently, there are 9 County Electoral Divisions covering the Exeter area. It is understood that there are no proposals to change the overall number of divisions covering the City, although their boundaries may be changed to reflect the above criteria.

Currently, each of these Divisions is coterminous with two City electoral wards. This makes matters much easier for the administration of elections, as well as for the electors themselves who can readily identify the division in which they live.

As such therefore, if the Electoral Divisions were amended ahead of any review of the City wards, it may lead to additional workload when running elections for both authorities as it is unlikely that their boundaries would continue to match. This could also lead to confusion for the electors themselves as the names of the Divisions and Wards would also be out of step from each other. This would lead to unnecessary complications associated with having to hold separate electoral registers for both City wards and County Divisions, thereby adding administrative burdens on the Electoral Registration Officer and his staff when trying to run efficient elections.

- 3.3 Most notably though, any change to the County Divisions ahead of a review of the City wards, could lead to a predetermination of potential new wards for the City Council in the assumption that they remained coterminous with any new County divisions. This is considered to be the wrong way round as any review should be lead from the bottom up, so that proper consideration is given to the size of electoral wards and divisions (both geographically and in terms of the size of the electorate).
- 3.4 Any changes to County Divisions ahead of City Wards could also lead to a loss of identity and interests of local communities within the City. For example, there is a logical affiliation between the Alphington and Cowick areas of the City as they both share the same side of the river, and have a higher concentration of population than some other areas of the City. Similarly, there is a cohesion between Duryard and Pennsylvania areas, as both are more on the rural edge of the City and have areas which are more sparsely populated than others in the City.
- 3.5 Residents in all areas of the City tend to share civic and other facilities within close proximity to the areas (if not within them themselves) as well as the larger more generic city wide facilities. It would seem incongruous to separate areas which work well together, to then place them in areas where there is little or no community cohesion.

3.6 It is accepted though, that with the rapid growth in the City, and in particular some of the areas within it, some redrawing of electoral boundaries is necessary to reflect this growth, both in housing and also the demands that come with it. As suggested in the points above, any such redrawing of electoral boundaries should be done from the bottom up, with a review of the City ward boundaries being ideally undertaken ahead of the county divisions.

Officers and Political Group Leaders met with representatives of the Boundary Commission on 24<sup>th</sup> November to primarily discuss the proposal of a review of City electoral arrangements, but also took the opportunity to rehearse many of the points raised above.

In response, the Boundary Commission confirmed that the concept of City ward and County division boundaries being conterminous could not be sustained for the future, for reasons identified below.

### **City Council review**

As stated above, officers and Political Group Leaders met with representatives from the Boundary Commission on 24<sup>th</sup> November, to discuss arrangements, implications and the timetable associated with an electoral review of the City wards.

This has been triggered by the Boundary Commission, as more than a third of the City's current electoral wards contain an electorate imbalance of plus or minus 10% from the norm. This is therefore contrary to the first of the Boundary Commission's criteria.

The first element to the whole process of an electoral review is for the Council to consider its preferred options in relation to:-

- Electoral cycle (i.e. continue with elections by thirds or all out elections every four years);
- Overall number of councillors

If the Council decided that it preferred to continue electing by thirds, and bearing in mind the current electorate imbalance, the Boundary Commission would insist that all out elections on these new wards would be required in 2016. There is also a requirement that the overall number of councillors would be divisible by 3, meaning that each ward would be represented by 3 councillors, ensuring that elections were held each year across the whole of the City,.

This would therefore have implications for the Council in that the overall number of councillors will have to change, as will the number of wards.

Alternatively, if the Council was minded to change to whole elections every four years, the same exercise would need to be undertaken to correct the electoral imbalance by reviewing ward boundaries. In this scenario though, the Council could decide the year in which elections would be fought on the new ward boundaries, with the latest date being 2018.

Either way, any decision would require the resolution of an Extraordinary meeting of full Council.

The proposed course of action identified within this report would bring the timetabling of the two electoral reviews much more in line with each other, ensuring as best a fit as possible for the City ward boundaries, taking into account the restrictions detailed above.

**9. How does the decision contribute to the Council's Corporate Plan?**

9.1 It ensures that the Council's democratic process is as equitable as possible across the City.

**10. What risks are there and how can they be reduced?**

10.1 No risks associated with this matter.

**11 What is the impact of the decision on equality and diversity; health and wellbeing; safeguarding children, young people and vulnerable adults, community safety and the environment?**

11.1 It ensures that the Council's democratic process is as equitable as possible across the City

**12. Are there any other options?**

12.1 If we do not respond to the consultation on the County electoral review, then our views as electoral registration authority will not be taken into account, which could lead to less efficient elections being held within the City.

12.2 If we were to not to take a decision on the future electoral arrangements within the City, we could potentially have no control on the size of the Council nor its electoral wards as this would be left to the Boundary Commission to recommend – we would then merely become a consultee.

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**Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1972 (as amended)**  
**Background papers used in compiling this report:-**

Letter from the Local Government Boundary Commission for England dated 28<sup>th</sup> October 2014.

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