

POLICY AND PERFORMANCE - COORDINATING COMMITTEE

30 SEPTEMBER 2015

13 NOTICE OF MOTION - 44 COUNCILLORS

The Committee considered the following Notice of Motion referred to it by the Council at its meeting on 20 October 2014 (Minute No. 57 refers). It had been proposed by Councillor J Green and seconded by Councillor L Fraser that:

'Council notes the recent decision taken by Knowsley Council to begin consulting its residents over reducing the number of Councillors from 63 to 45.

This Council believes that instead of presenting the public with petty, vindictive, rehashed and previously rejected budget options including:

- pulling the plug on school crossing patrols
- introducing car parking charges at Wirral's Country Parks
- not filling grit bins
- removing Council Tax over 70s discount
- closing public conveniences
- increasing fees and charges for football pitches, allotments, bowling greens, burials and cremations

The Leader of the Council should be consulting the public over reducing the number of Councillors.

In the absence of the Leader of the Council's willingness to act Council requests the Boundary Commission for England commence an inquiry into the number of Councillors, and the electoral cycle, in Wirral, on the Council's wish to reduce the number of councillors to 44.

Council therefore instructs the Chief Executive to invite the Boundary Commission for England to meet with representatives of all parties represented on the Council and agree a timetable for the inquiry.'

The Chair set out the way in which she intended to deal with this item of business. As Councillor J Green was not in attendance at the meeting she invited Councillor L Fraser to address the Committee and set out the reasons for the Motion. The matter would then be open for debate, Councillor L Fraser would be given two minutes to respond to what was said and following that the Committee would reach its conclusions.

Councillor L Fraser informed that, in the light of the diminishing size of the Council's work force, following the cost-cutting departure of more than 2,000 staff consideration should be given to consulting residents of the Borough on reducing the total number of Wirral Councillors. She proposed that the Boundary Commission be requested to assess Wirral's requirements with a view to cutting the number of Councillors from 66 to 44. Councillor L Fraser proposed that as the Council's middle managers' pay had reduced by 10% Councillors should make cuts as well. She

proposed that at a time when employees were being asked to do more for less and go the extra mile, the number of Councillors should be reduced and elections should be held every four years.

Councillor L Fraser informed that the Local Government Association had a view which it had reached this year, that the public wanted each Councillor to represent a distinct area. This enabled them to be held to account. She was aware that some Councillors took on some additional duties as a matter of choice but she did not consider that should be a mitigating factor. Reducing 66 Councillors down to 44 meant there would be two to represent each ward.

Councillor L Fraser made reference to Knowsley Council which was reducing the number of its Elected Members from 63 to 45 in order to make savings of £250,000 over the next two years. She quoted the Council's Leader, Andy Moorhead who had said that

“It was a tough decision, but the right one. Quite simply, it means that us as Councillors have to work that bit harder. We're asking our employees to do exactly the same. I think it is fair that we do the same.”

Councillor L Fraser proposed that the Chief Executive be requested to write to the Boundary Commission to invite it to undertake an eight week consultation exercise on whether to conduct a Local Government Boundary Review in Wirral.

Some Members considered that what had been proposed was a good idea and the way forward particularly as members of the public found three Member wards very confusing. Also, it did not necessarily follow that there would be a Local Government Boundary Review after the Parliamentary Boundary Review which was due to begin next spring.

A Member informed that no options were off the table and reducing the number of Councillors would be considered. However, what was currently proposed was a very big step especially as there had been a significant increase in the workloads of Councillors. Another Member informed that the Government was making savage cuts and people were turning to their Councillors for help like never before which meant a significant increase in their workloads. He considered that the Council should write to the Government about the damage it was causing by its austerity measures.

Some Members informed that they provided cover for each other in three Member wards and that they worked well together as a team.

The Committee noted that a recent Local Government Boundary Commission Review had resulted in a reduction in the number of Elected Members in Knowsley but the point was made that it was not one of Wirral Council's comparator councils. In Warrington the Boundary Commission had agreed that the number of Elected Members should increase from 57 to 58. A Member pointed out that the average ward in Liverpool consisted of approximately 2000 people whereas the figure for Wirral was 3,000 plus.

The point was made that the Council now had a system of Constituency Committees and Members were working in their local communities with community groups. Also, there had been mass reductions in Council staff and Councillor's workloads had increased because staffing levels had decreased. Communities needed to be engaged more and more.

Councillor L Fraser responded informing that it was not automatic that a Local Government Boundary Review would be carried out after the next Parliamentary Review. She also informed that she was disappointed at the political response from one Member as she considered that she had not been political in anyway. It was appropriate to reduce the number of Councillors as the number of staff had been reduced.

The Chair informed that the Council was getting better at scrutiny. She considered that there was merit in this Notice of Motion. The Council needed to look at the cost of democracy in the light of its budget but comparisons with Knowsley were not relevant because of the size of its wards in comparison to Wirral. Also, no rationale had been put forward for the 33% reduction in the number of Elected Members. The Chair was of the view that consideration must be given to whether the Boundary Commission was the appropriate body to carry out a review and that this was a much more complex issue than this Notice of Motion led Members to believe.

The Chair also informed that good scrutiny depended on those involved avoiding the practice of retreating into Party Political bunkers and that the wording of the Motion, she supposed was a reflection of the context in which it was proposed, made it difficult for the Council to achieve. Stripping away the rhetoric, there was a serious issue of how good representation of the people should be working and that was what was concerning the Committee this evening.

The Chair reported that the Committee had heard a number of points being made during the evening, some which obviously seemed to indicate that there was some value in the Notice of Motion. She considered that the overriding feeling of the Committee was that this was a more complex issue than the Notice of Motion suggested and that there were issues which did need more exploration before binding conclusions were reached.

For those reasons the Chair proposed the following Motion which was seconded by Councillor C Muspratt:

'That

- (1) the Committee thanks the Mayor for the referral of this Notice of Motion and regrets that there has been a delay in it being brought to the Committee for its consideration, though it accepts that this was due to a number of circumstances which were not in its control; and
- (2) the Committee considers that factors to be considered when determining what constitutes proper, fair representation of Wirral's population go beyond simply numbers and so proposes that it establishes a Task and

Finish Panel to undertake a more in depth examination of the issues and that this be added to the Committee's Work Programme.

This Motion was put to the vote and was carried 8 for to 5 against.

Councillor T Anderson proposed a further Motion which was seconded by Councillor A Sykes as follows:

'That the Boundary Commission be invited to carry out a Local Government Review of the number of Councillors in Wirral.'

This Motion was put to the vote and lost 5 for to 8 against.

RESOLVED: That

- (1) the Committee thanks the Mayor for the referral of this Notice of Motion and regrets that there has been a delay in it being brought to the Committee for its consideration, though it accepts that this was due to a number of circumstances which were not in its control; and**
- (2) the Committee considers that factors to be considered when determining what constitutes proper, fair representation of Wirral's population go beyond simply numbers and so proposes that it establishes a Task and Finish Panel to undertake a more in depth examination of the issues and that this be added to the Committee's Work Programme.**