

## MINUTE EXTRACT

### CABINET

16 JANUARY 2017

83

### NUMBER OF COUNCILLORS SCRUTINY REVIEW



**Councillor Phil Davies, Leader of the Council – Strategic Economic Development, Finance and Devolution, said:**

*“This type of in-depth ‘task and finish’ review is an example of the Council’s approach to overview and scrutiny having a real impact on policy development and important decisions. This particular report is extremely helpful, with Members of all three main political parties in Wirral providing a detailed review and analysis of the subject.”*

At its meeting on 30 November 2016 the Environment Overview and Scrutiny Committee had referred the Scrutiny Review, ‘Number of Councillors’ to the Cabinet. The review had been undertaken in response to a Notice of Motion presented to the Council in October 2014.

Councillor Steve Foulkes, a Member of the Scrutiny Panel who had carried out the review attended the Cabinet meeting and introduced the report, completed in November 2016 which set out the Panel’s findings. He informed that the Chair of the Panel, Councillor Phil Brightmore had been unable to attend the Cabinet meeting because of his work commitments.

Councillor Foulkes informed that the Panel had considered the role of the local councillor in Wirral, the role of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England and the available data comparing the number of Councillors in Wirral with other local authorities in England. Panel Members had wanted to reach an informed view on whether or not the Council should actively progress a referral to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England to conduct an Electoral Review. The Cabinet was noted that the work carried out was aligned with the Wirral Plan Pledge – Community Services are Joined up and Accessible.

Councillor Foulkes reported that the Panel, having reviewed the Commission’s remit, processes and timescales for Further Electoral Review, had accepted that the only mechanism to change the number of councillors in Wirral would be via such a review. The Panel had concluded that it would take a significant amount of resources to prepare for and undergo a review and the Commission timescales demonstrated

that this would be a lengthy process, with a less than certain outcome. Any potential savings were unlikely be realised for up to two years.

Councillor Foulkes informed that the Panel had been encouraged by evidence which demonstrated that the Council compared favourably against other councils in respect of electoral equality, as a recognised measure of council size. Of particular note was the ward level data on electoral variation which showed that Wirral was within the Commission's parameters on electoral equality across its wards and, therefore, would not trigger the threshold for a Further Electoral Review.

The Panel had been further reassured that the cost of councillors in Wirral was lower than many of its neighbouring and similar sized national authorities, as evidenced by comparisons of Members' Allowance Schemes and acknowledged by the recent meeting of the Independent Panel on Members' Allowances. The Panel had noted the potential annual saving which a reduction in councillors could deliver, although the Panel believed that any cost saving identified would need to take into account increased costs associated with a likely rise in demand on officer workloads.

The Panel was conscious that statistical comparisons with other authorities should not be used alone to determine the number of councillors and the Panel recognised the uniqueness of each area and the need for each council to tailor its services to the needs of each community. An understanding of the varied role of the local ward councillors in Wirral had been considered by the Panel to be equally important when forming its conclusions. The evidence from the comparisons made was that the Council was providing reasonable value for money and Members had not had an increase in their allowances for a number of years.

Councillor Foulkes reported that having reviewed both general and Wirral specific definitions of the role of councillors, considered average hours per week spent on council business, and the variety of factors which affected the ward councillors' workload, the Panel had concluded that the role of the councillor in Wirral was wide-ranging and varied and placed a significant demand on councillors' time. The Panel had been concerned about the impact a reduction of councillors may have on councillors' ability to fulfil their roles effectively. Currently, the community was well represented although the Council was under represented by woman, ethnic minorities and the disabled.

Councillor Foulkes also informed that the Panel was aware of the significant changes facing councils in the future and the uncertainty around councillors' roles as these were adapted to meet new challenges. In this context, the Panel had concluded that any review of the number of councillors in Wirral should not take place until the extent of these changes and their impact on roles was better understood. This had been the unanimous view of the Review Panel.

Councillor Janette Williamson noted that there was cross party acknowledgement that the Council provided good value. This was based on factual evidence and she hoped that more people could be encouraged to stand for election onto the Council.

Councillor Bernie Moody informed that the public did not understand what Councillors did. The Panel's report had been in depth. Therefore, she hoped that

the Council could move forward with people now having a better understanding of the roles of Councillors. She welcomed the report and thanked everyone who had been involved in its preparation.

Councillor George Davies informed that he considered that the Review Panel had completed a good piece of work and it was now on record that good work could be carried out when the political groups worked together.

Councillor Phil Davies also thanked the Review Panel for the good work it had completed including the evidence based analysis of the facts. He informed that as Councillors, they were well placed in the lower quartile regarding funding and ratio of councillors. Compared to neighbouring councils and its comparator authorities, Wirral Councillors represented good value for money. The Review Panel had undertaken some important work which had concluded that reducing 66 Councillors down to 44 was not a particularly smart way forward. The role of the Council was changing massively and would continue to do so. Councillors would have even more important roles to play as government funding continued to reduce, by working in partnership with other agencies and outside bodies.

**RESOLVED: That**

- (1) the findings of the report be endorsed and the recommendation arising from this review be approved; and**
- (2) the Review Panel's report be referred to the Council for its endorsement of its findings.**