Notes from the Polling Places Review Working Group

Meetings of the above working group were held on 23 November and 3 and 10 December 2020 and considered the following matters in considering the future size of the council. Members considered a number of alternative options for ward size which included retaining the current number and both reducing and increasing the council size.

Executive Arrangements

It was noted that both legislation and the Council’s Constitution enabled the Elected Mayor to appoint between two and nine elected members to serve on the Executive, which would impact on the number of elected members available to undertake both the Overview and Scrutiny function and Statutory Committee decision making. This was the factor used to start consideration of the future Council size.

Members were reminded that since approximately 2008 the Elected Mayors had authorised members of the Executive to take individual delegated decisions, which were within the approved budget and policy framework and corporate priorities.

Whilst the current elected Mayor had recently reduced the number of Councillors on his Executive to four, previous Elected Mayors had appointed up to seven elected members onto the Executive.

It was also noted that of the 36 appointments to outside bodies, 16 were executive appointments made by the Elected Mayor and took up by only members of the Executive.

Structure of Overview and Scrutiny and Statutory Committees

Members considered whether the current structure of three Overview and Scrutiny Committees each with nine members appointed to each was appropriate to hold the Executive to account and to scrutinise performance and develop policies.

It was noted that during the current Administration the majority of reports considered by the Committees were for noting only, with the main exception being the budget and policy framework development undertaken on the Local Plan and Supplementary documents and the Council’s Medium Term Financial Strategy.

However, in previous Administrations, the Opposition had used the current Overview and Scrutiny structure effectively to develop their policy ideas over a number of Council priorities.

It was also noted that the call in provisions of Executive decisions as set out in the Council’s Constitution had not been used in this Administration and had been rarely used in previous Administrations, however, this may not be the case in the future.

It was also noted that 78% of members who responded to the recent members’ survey agreed that reducing the number of Committees from three to two would reduce the effectiveness of the function. It was felt that reducing the number of non-executive members of these Committees would increase the work load of these councillors and the effectiveness of the function.

The current poor performance and the financial position of Nottingham City Council was noted and it was considered that maintaining overview and scrutiny capacity would ensure that the situation in Nottingham would not occur in Mansfield. The Committees, particularly Overview and Scrutiny (Corporate Resources) has an important role to ensure that the Council’s Transformation programme and significant budget savings would be achieved.

Members agreed that in an authority with strong Executive arrangements, it was important to maintain the capacity of Overview and Scrutiny, for future Administrations to hold the Executive to account and take a more proactive involvement in the development of Council policies. Members did not wish to reduce the potential effectiveness of the function by reducing the number of elected members for the service once the elected mayor had made appointments to the Executive. Members considered reducing the number of Overview and Scrutiny Committees to two and also increasing the number of Councillors sitting on these Committees to 11 but it was considered that this would significantly increase the workload of these Committees and the members appointed to them and impact on their effectiveness.

Details were provided of the total number of seats within the Council’s Committee structure, together with the allocation of these seats across the Council’s non-Executive. It was noted that there was an unequal distribution of seats across the available members, with some members sitting on multiple committees and some on none. Members felt that with the further move to more evening meetings, this unequal spread across Committees would improve to ensure a more even spread of Committee membership. Members considered that the decision to postpone the Annual Council to 2021 meant that there had been no review of members appointed to Committees which would likely have changed given the new 6pm start times of meetings.

Community representation and leadership

Members noted that the 2021 electorate of the district was 81,738 which equated to an average of 2,271 electors for each elected member based on the current 36 members. The forecast electorate for 2027 was 87,560 as calculated by the Council’s Planning Policy team.

Members agreed that the increase in the forecast electorate would increase the demands placed on members to represent this forecast increase.

Members noted the reduction in number of officers in the authority from 693 FTE’s to 610 FTE’s since 2017 and commented that this had impacted on members, in that there was less officer support available to members, to deal with constituency matters. The forecast increase in the electorate would further increase this demand on members to deal with constituency matters. Members considered the increase in the member/electorate of differing council size and noted that the increase in electorate would be representative of approximately another two ward members.

It was acknowledged that the affluence and deprivation of a ward would potentially impact on the caseload of those members who represented these areas, with a heavier demands for assistance from councillors in those areas with higher levels of deprivation.

Members did have concerns that increasing the number of electors to be represented by councillors would impact on the quality of the representation provided and the ability to deal effectively with matters raised. It was noted that there are already four wards with a similar number of forecasted electors in 2027 operating currently. Those members of the Committee elected to those wards noted that they were able to sufficiently deal with enquiries from their constituents and it was noted that not every elector was going to contact their local ward councillor for advice.

Whilst members acknowledged that the use of technology such as newsletters, social media and more recently virtual meetings had changed and increased the options available to members to engage with their communities, there was still a need for more traditional methods to be used such as ward walks and surgeries, as not all constituents had access to or were comfortable in using IT. This use of more traditional methods was more time consuming but suitable methods of engagement for dealing with specific sectors of the community.

Members had noticed an increase in contact from both constituents and businesses for support during the Covid 19 pandemic and it was agreed that both the social and economic impact of the pandemic would be felt for a number of years.

Ward arrangement

Members noted that all of the elected members who responded to the member survey supported the retention of single member wards. The reasons were increased accountability and transparency of response to matters raised by the community. They were also deemed to be less confusing for members of the public as elected members were easily identifiable. At a ward level there was less political input and duplication of efforts, if the same matter was being investigated by more than one ward councillor.

Council size

Members noted that the member survey had indicated that 71% of the members who responded thought that 36 councillors should be retained. Only 4% thought there should be a decrease and 25% thought the number should increase.