

Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee



Report of Head of Legal and Democratic Services

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To: COMMUNITY GOVERNANCE AND ELECTORAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

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Community Governance Review – request to review the size of Sonning Common Parish Council

Recommendation: not to undertake a review of parish councillor numbers for Sonning Common Parish Council.

Purpose of Report

1. To invite the committee to consider a request from Sonning Common Parish Council to increase the size of the parish from 12 councillors to 14.

Strategic Objectives

2. Community governance reviews contribute to the council's strategic objective of building thriving communities.

Background

3. Sonning Common Parish Council has requested an increase in the number of parish councillors from 12 to 14 for the reasons set out in the letter dated 15 June 2017 attached.

Size of parish councils

4. When considering the number of councillors to be elected for a parish the council must have regard to the number of local government electors for the parish and any change to that number that is likely to occur within five years. The number of registered electors for the parish of Sonning Common is currently 3,005.

5. Joint guidance issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Local Government Boundary Commission for England in 2010 provides further information on community governance reviews and the factors influencing size and membership of parish councils. On size, the guidance says:

“154. In practice, there is a wide variation of council size between parish councils. That variation appears to be influenced by population. Research by the Aston Business School Parish and Town Councils in England (HMSO, 1992), found that the typical parish council representing less than 500 people had between five and eight councillors; those between 501 and 2,500 had six to 12 councillors; and those between 2,501 and 10,000 had nine to 16 councillors. Most parish councils with a population of between 10,001 and 20,000 had between 13 and 27 councillors, while almost all councils representing a population of over 20,000 had between 13 and 31 councillors.

155. The LGBCE has no reason to believe that this pattern of council size to population has altered significantly since the research was conducted. Although not an exact match, it broadly reflects the council size range set out in the National Association of Local Councils Circular 1126; the Circular suggested that the minimum number of councillors for any parish should be seven and the maximum 25.

156. In considering the issue of council size, the LGBCE is of the view that each area should be considered on its own merits, having regard to its population, geography and the pattern of communities. Nevertheless, having regard to the current powers of parish councils, it should consider the broad pattern of existing council sizes. This pattern appears to have stood the test of time and, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, to have provided for effective and convenient local government.

157. Principal councils should also bear in mind that the conduct of parish council business does not usually require a large body of councillors. In addition, historically many parish councils, particularly smaller ones, have found difficulty in attracting sufficient candidates to stand for election. This has led to uncontested elections and/or a need to co-opt members in order to fill vacancies. However, a parish council’s budget and planned or actual level of service provision may also be important factors in reaching conclusions on council size.”

6. The National Association of Local Councils Circular 1126 recommends:

| Electors | Councillors | Electors | Councillors |
|-----------|-------------|----------|-------------|
| Up to 900 | 7 | 10,400 | 17 |
| 1,400 | 8 | 11,900 | 18 |
| 2,000 | 9 | 13,500 | 19 |
| 2,700 | 10 | 15,200 | 20 |
| 3,500 | 11 | 17,000 | 21 |
| 4,400 | 12 | 18,900 | 22 |
| 5,400 | 13 | 20,900 | 23 |
| 6,500 | 14 | 23,000 | 24 |
| 7,700 | 15 | 45,000 | 25 |
| 9,000 | 16 | | |

Consideration of request

7. The table in paragraph six suggests a parish council size of no more than 11 parish councillors for a parish the size of Sonning Common – it currently has 12. The guidance suggests that a council size of 14 is appropriate for a parish council with an electorate of 6,500 – well above the electorate of Sonning Common which is not predicted to increase to this level within five years.
8. At the 2011 elections 14 candidates stood for election and in 2015 the parish council elections were uncontested. The parish council states that there is interest from a number of residents wishing to become parish councillors but this is no guarantee of future interest. As stated in the parish council letter as recently as 2003 the parish council requested a reduction in size due to problems attracting sufficient candidates for election. A surplus of candidates at an election reflects a healthy democracy and provides the electorate with a choice at the ballot box. In respect of co-option the parish council should have a process to assess candidates if there is more interest than vacancies.
9. The parish council provides evidence to show that it is active. Whilst this may be the case this council has applied the NALC guidance when considering requests to increase councillor numbers unless there are exceptional circumstances. Until a review is undertaken of this approach officers continue to have regard to this.
10. In addition, as part of the 2013/14 review, the council considered a request to increase the parish councillor numbers to 15 (CGR 23). Council agreed to make no change at that time.

Financial Implications

11. Under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007, local authorities have responsibility for undertaking community governance reviews. The process is prescribed and involves officer time and other associated costs, such as postage and printing. These costs can be met from within existing budgets.

Legal Implications

12. The Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee has delegated authority to deal with all matters relating to parish community governance reviews.

Risks

13. There is a risk that someone could challenge the decision of the committee. Officers have considered the request from Sonning Common in accordance with the joint guidance on community governance reviews published by the Communities and Local Government Department and LGBCE in 2010 and applied the NALC guidance to determine whether or not to recommend support for the request to undertake a review of the size of the parish council.

Conclusion

14. Sonning Common Parish Council has requested a community governance review of the size of the parish council. The council has consistently applied the NALC guidance in determining whether or not to increase councillor numbers unless there are exceptional circumstances. This suggests that a council size of 12 is more than appropriate for a parish council with an electorate of 3005. Officers therefore recommend that a community governance review is not undertaken.

Background Papers

- None