

6 August 2008

Electoral Review of the County Council



Report of Lesley Davies, Acting Director of Corporate Services

Purpose of the Report

- 1 To update the Council on the review of its electoral boundaries.

Background

- 2 I reported to the Council on 26 June 2008 the background to the proposed review. The Boundary Committee for England formally announced the start of the Durham Unitary Authority Review on 15 July 2008.

Review Timetable

- 3 The Boundary Committee's latest projection for the Review Timetable is as follows:

Stage 1 (Council size) 15 July 2008 - 15 September 2008 (9 weeks)

Stage 2 (Preparing council size recs. and publishing) 16 September 2008 - 21 October 2008 (5 weeks)

Stage 3 (Consultation on electoral arrangements) 21 October 2008 - 12 January 2009 (12 weeks)

Stage 4 (Preparation and publication of draft recs.) 13 January 2009 - 7 April 2009 (12 weeks)

Stage 5 (Consultation of draft recs.) 7 April 2009 - 1 June 2009 (8 weeks)

Stage 6 (Preparation and publication of final recs.) 2 June 2009 - 18 August 2009 (11 weeks)

- 4 This timetable is unlikely to change any further.
- 5 At the end of the Review process the Committee must submit its final recommendations to the Electoral Commission and there then follows a six week period for final representations before the Commission makes the necessary Order on a new Electoral Scheme.

Publicity

- 6 The Boundary Committee has issued a press release to announce its first stage of public consultation as part of the Durham Review which has been reported in local press and other media. Together with our colleagues in the Borough/District Councils and Parish/Town Councils, publicity material from the Committee is being displayed in all of our public information outlets and the Review is also prominent on our websites.

Stage 1 Consultation

- 7 The Boundary Committee has invited anyone to submit their views on what they think might be the most appropriate number of Councillors for the Durham Unitary Authority.
- 8 In addition to ourselves, the Boundary Committee has also formally notified the following organisations and individuals:
- MPs with constituency interests
 - Headquarters of the main political parties
 - Local Government Association
 - Borough/District Councils
 - National Association of Local Councils
 - Durham Association of Local Councils
 - Parish/Town Councils in County Durham
- 9 As Members will be aware, a series of public and stakeholder events is taking place between 29 July and 27 August so that people can find out about and have their say on our local area proposals. At these events, people will also be asked for their views on how many Councillors there should be in the area.

Boundary Committee Guidance for Stage 1

- 10 When making its recommendations for change, the Boundary Committee must take into consideration the following statutory criteria which are set out in Section 13 of the Local Government Act 1992 (as amended by the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007):
- The need to reflect the identities and interests of local communities
 - The need to secure effective and convenient local government
 - The need to secure equality of representation
- 11 In their earlier presentations to Members and Officers the Boundary Committee representatives emphasise the following factors in relation to future council size:
- An effective and efficient governance structure
 - Electoral equality
 - Effective community representation, engagement and empowerment

According to the Boundary Committee, balanced against the strategic decision-making and scrutiny roles of councillors are the representational aspects of councillors' roles and how effectively they both engage with their constituents and represent their constituents' views. Any proposed council size must be able to show that there are enough councillors to represent electorate effectively, taking into account any local area committee framework, the responsibilities to be devolved to them and the number of unitary councillors needed for each.

Unitary Proposal

- 12 In its Proposal for a future Unitary Structure for County Durham, the County Council suggested that, as a short term interim arrangement, the New Unitary Authority could operate on the basis of two councillors per existing County Electoral Division. At the same time, it was acknowledged that in due course the Boundary Committee would need to determine an appropriate level of representation. That said, we suggested in our Proposal that an authority of between 90 and 110 councillors, each representing in the region of 4,000 electors would be in order.

All-Party Member Working Group

- 13 An all-party Member Working Group has now been established to consider and report in due course to Full Council on our submission for Stage 1 of the Review.
- 14 The Working Group has been appraised on current electorate data, as well as progress/developments with other Unitary Reviews taking place elsewhere in the Country whose timetables are a little more advanced.
- 15 Members of the Working Group have been asked to open dialogue with their respective colleagues on the questions of council size and single/multi-member Divisions.
- 16 In the meantime, if any Member would like any further background information on the Review they should contact my office.

Conclusion

- 17 Members are asked to note the current position with the Review and a report from the Working Group will be submitted to Full Council in due course in order to determine our response to Stage 1.

Background Paper(s)

Letters dated 9 and 15 July 2008 from the Boundary Committee for England.

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Appendix 1: Implications

**Local Government Reorganisation
(Does the decision impact upon a future Unitary Council?)**

Finance

Staffing

Equality and Diversity

Accommodation

Crime and disorder

Sustainability

Human rights

Localities and Rurality

Young people

Consultation

Health