

Keal, Simon

From: Dunkeyson, Nicholas
Sent: 26 September 2011 13:21
To: Keal, Simon
Subject: FW: Preliminary Council Size Consultation- Swale Borough Council

From: Ian Russell [mailto:████████████████████]
Sent: 26 September 2011 11:42
To: Reviews@
Subject: Preliminary Council Size Consultation- Swale Borough Council

You have invited observations on the above matter and I would like to place on record the following.

The most recent change, a few years ago, saw a reduction from 49 to 47 councillors.

This review provides a useful opportunity to consider further reduction in the light of –

- * A fundamental review of the voting frequency moving from third's to all Council elections from May 2011

- * Experience of the Executive/Scrutiny model of Council management over several years

- * The on-going need to address the 'cost of democracy' in relation to the impact of this cost on the short/medium-term financial position of the Council

- * The inability of the Council to demonstrate the 'workload' arising for individual councillors. There is no statutory duty to report on casework, or other Council business activity undertaken, so this is not transparent to the electorate without which there is no quantitative and evidence based judgement about the impact of electoral size on councillor workload. This is affected more by the approach of the individual councillor i.e. proactive or reactive.

- * The need for the Council to address the practical issues for delivering the Government's localism agenda and what that means for the electorate within the authority area.

- * The context of the range of decision making powers that are required for the administrative area and the degree to which these can be transferred to the most appropriate level for decision/determination. The evolving 'localism' agenda should, in time, see a transfer of decision making to parish/town council level wherever possible if the process is to be judged as being effective.

- * the need to recognise the very significant changes in citizens access to services and information through the use of technology meaning that for a great many people they have immediate access to all the information they could possibly need about most matters that concern them without the need to contact a Councillor.

Swale Borough Council has achieved the Government standard accreditation for Customer Services. This together with the on-line reporting facilities for complaint/comment, including on matters outside the Council's direct responsibility means that citizens can already get actions/results they want without

the need to contact a councillor at all. It could be argued that following the 'traditional' contact your councillor approach is one that is the least efficient. A fewer number of Councillors does not therefore have a direct bearing on the ability of the electorate to achieve solutions to their issues and problems.

* Reporting on organisational performance is available on-line and thus the citizen has access to the same information that the members have.

* There is a widely recognised difficulty in attracting the best people to stand for political office so this would assist with recruitment for all political parties. With a smaller Council a greater variety of people are likely to be interested in standing for election as the difference they are able to make has greater potential to be seen by the electorate.

Acknowledging all of the above factors, which fundamentally change the demands upon councillors from the electorate, would strongly suggest that there is an ideal opportunity to take a fundamental approach to setting the overall size of the Council and about 25 (one per ward)

should be sufficient to ensure that the Council can be adequately managed, assuming that the present political management structure is retained.

This would allow for a sharpening of member accountability to the Council and its citizens as a reduced Executive size would be possible. The cost of local democracy would also be significantly reduced which would appeal to the electorate, who are paying for this as part of their services and usually do not understand this cost, and the Council as this would have an on-going beneficial reduction in cost needing to be levied from Council Tax. It is assumed that the current arrangements for independent scrutiny of member allowances would be in place to ensure that there is no unnecessary increase in member allowances. This would demonstrate a significant value for money benefit arising from the review.

The single member ward arrangement is recognised as being acceptable by the Commission.