

Submission to LGBCE

Reference: Stevenage Borough Council (SBC)

From: Liberal Democrat Group, Stevenage Borough Council

We have carefully read the template and other documentation supplied to us by LGBCE and also the submission from SBC on behalf of the Labour and Conservative Groups.

The demographic, geographic, historical, factual information in pages 1 – 36, supplied by SBC, is not disputed by us. That covers the vast majority of that document and explains why this submission is brief and to the point.

Within that, however, we wish to make the following points:

Council size

There is a case for increasing the council size from 39 to 42. We wish to retain the elections by thirds, thus the council size has to be whole number multiple of 3. The case for an increase in size is:

- (a) Work load for individual councillors has increased hugely in recent years.
 - (i) The growing availability and use of e mail and social media and other electronic communications has meant that residents are able to access their local councillor far more easily than previously was the case and also has meant that residents are far more aware of received local issues. This is referred to on page 33 but the extra workload generated is not.
 - (ii) In addition, some councillors organise residents' meetings, rather than just attend them. It is not the case that these residents' meetings are organised by the residents, as wrongly stated on page 33.
 - (iii) We also attend those community events which are organised by SBC officers e.g. Pop Up Community stalls. In addition, ward surgeries are organised by the councillors, not by SBC.
 - (iv) Frequent and regular written communications are now more widely expected by residents, quite separate and outside of election times e.g. newsletters, calendars/contact cards, notifications about residents' meetings and surgeries.
 - (v) Casework has also increased enormously in the last 10 (approximately) years. Part of the reason for this is the same as in (i) above (ease of electronic communication). 10 casework issues per councillor per week is now not unusual.
 - (vi) There are many more meetings called by SBC than ever in the past – briefings and information meetings can now average one or two a week.

It is self-evident that spreading the growing work load amongst more members will produce a better outcome for council taxpayers.

- (b) There will likely be a very large population growth in the Town Centre in the next 5 years as the thousands of flats there, planned and currently in construction, become occupied. Whilst it is appreciated that we are not currently considering warding arrangements, it is likely that a new 'Central Ward' will be required, if the neighbouring wards are not to become too large. Allowing for this with a council size of 42 would seem prudent.

Governance arrangements

We favour the Committee system rather than the current (since 2000) Executive/Scrutiny model. That would be a total of perhaps 4 main committees (e.g. Finance/Economy, Environment, Housing, Community) each meeting usually once per cycle. The main committees would be supported by perhaps 2 or 3 sub-committees, each also normally meeting once per cycle and reporting recommendations to their main committee who would, in turn, report to full council.

The statutory committees e.g. Planning, Licensing, Standards, would be unaffected by this change and would report also to the relevant main committee or direct to full council, as appropriate, depending on the standing orders in place.

Some of the reasons for this change are:

- (a) Decision making is currently a matter entirely for the Executive. The other 31 (backbench) councillors play little or no part in the process, since it has already been decided by the Executive.
- (b) With a Committee system, all 39 councillors would be able to input to the decision making process as a matter of right, by contributing to the discussion at sub-committee, main committee and full council.
- (c) Decisions would be considered by a wider number of councillors and consensus and ownership of such decisions would be routine. At the moment, backbench councillors have decisions imposed upon them by 8 members.
- (d) Backbench councillors are not routinely or promptly aware of tasks or decisions undertaken or made by the Executive. Examples are numerous – e.g. backbench councillors are not told about openings or events or consultations, even when these are known by council officers and therefore by Executive members. All that backbench councillors see (possibly, some time later) is the resulting photo and/or story in local media.
- (e) All this leads to a situation in which 31 of the 39 councillors are less able than they should be to pass information on to, and explain issues to, their constituents.
- (f) The current Scrutiny function is not fit for purpose. There is time (one meeting per cycle) to scrutinise in detail very little and in any case all the chairs of all scrutiny functions are imposed and held by the majority ruling group. That is, not just the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Select Committees, but

also all the working parties and groups which, from time to time, are set up. A clearer case of marking one's own homework would be hard to find.

It is clear that a change to a Committee system would have many advantages, not least of which would be greater and more timely accountability to the voters.

Cllr. Robin Parker C.C.

Leader, Liberal Democrat Group

On behalf of the SBC Liberal Democrat Group

14.10.2021.