

# **CITY OF BRADFORD MDC**

## **Elected Member Review 2016**

### **Commentary by Sir Rodney Brooke CBE DL, independent adviser**

#### **1. Introduction.**

In order to ensure the political independence of the review of elected members the Council asked me to supervise the process of the review and provide a commentary on its results. I was formerly Chief Executive of the West Yorkshire County Council, the City of Westminster and the Association of Metropolitan Authorities and have acted as consultant to many local authorities. A Bradford resident for over forty years, I am currently the Chairman of the Bradford Council's Independent Remuneration Panel, which recommends the appropriate level of remuneration of Bradford councillors. Through the Panel and otherwise I have a good knowledge of the working of the authority. I am not and have never been a member of any political party.

As well as discussions with Council officers, I have met a number of members including the Leaders of the political parties. I have examined the questionnaires completed by members of the Council, the results of the semi-structured interviews with elected members and the results of the survey of the public. I have suggested areas of further enquiry now pursued and included in the report. I have commented on the draft of the final report and my comments have been taken into consideration.

#### **2. Overseas experience.**

The report makes no reference to overseas experience. I do not think that this is a serious problem. The different practice, responsibilities and areas of overseas local authorities make comparisons unhelpful. The UK has fewer and larger local authorities than almost any other Western country. Average council sizes vary from relatively small councils in France, Italy and Spain to councils of over a hundred members in Sweden. The number of electors per councillor in France and Sweden varies from 256 to 118,209 people per councillor. I do not think that research into overseas comparators would be helpful.

### **3. The Local Government Boundary Commission**

In terms of number of councillors per elector, Bradford is not out-of-line with other similar authorities in the UK. In 2002 the Local Government Boundary Commission for England recommended that Bradford should retain 90 members. The current ward electorates do not reveal deviations from the average which would prompt a Commission review. Moreover, the Bradford population is growing. It is of considerable ethnic diversity and includes a number of very distinct communities. As a local comparator, the Commission recently reviewed the membership of Leeds City Council and confirmed the existing membership of 99 councillors. A review of the boundaries of Parliamentary constituencies is scheduled to be completed by 2018.

### **4. Financial considerations**

Like most metropolitan authorities, Bradford faces acute financial pressures which have necessitated substantial cut-backs in services. Over the last five years the search for savings has prompted the council to constrain the overall total of members' allowances and expenses. One of the reasons which prompted the current review was the result of public consultation on budget proposals, when members of the public proposed savings by reducing the number of councillors. This is an understandable reaction. However, the annual cost of members' allowances and expenses is £1.8m, less than ½% of the council's budget of over £400m. While it is absolutely right that every penny of public spending should be justified, reducing the number of councillors would have only a minuscule effect on the Council's financial requirements. It would also increase councillor workloads, which would make it more difficult for many to serve as councillors.

Reducing the level of individual allowances would make it more difficult for those without independent means to serve on the Council. As the 2007 Government appointed Councillors' Commission said: 'If it is important that there are no financial incentives to being a councillor, it is equally important that there should not be a financial disincentive.' It is clearly desirable that service as a councillor should not be confined to retired people or to those with independent means. Councillors are far from over-rewarded for the time they spend on council business. The result is that the national average age of councillors is 61. Bradford is

fortunate in that its councillors have a much lower age profile. A reduction in the quantum of members' allowances would be likely to make councillors less representative of the electorate as a whole. Moreover, reductions in individual allowances would barely have a perceptible impact on the Council's budget.

## **5. The role of councillors**

The council has a responsibility for the overall welfare of the city. It must promote the well-being of the community, its economy and its citizens. Bradford has suffered a period of economic decline and has experienced racial tensions. But the city benefits from its multi-cultural community, its international links, the youth of its residents and its location in the West Yorkshire sub-region.

All councillors play some part in the running of the council or the scrutiny of its activities. As well as overall responsibility for the city's welfare, the council runs services crucial to its residents. The responsibilities placed on local authorities continue to increase. The Localism Act 2011 devolved services to local authorities. The Council has assumed major new responsibility for health and wellbeing and has to relate to the organisational complexity of the local health service. Financial austerity brings substantial and unwelcome challenges to councillors. They are faced with unenviable choices. Demand for local authority services continues to grow. In particular there is exponential growth in the number of old people and a corresponding increase in demand for social care. There is understandable reluctance to reduce significantly spending on children's social care given the current public concerns. The strain on and competition for resources increase the demands made of elected members.

The traditional media created a sense of place and a civic consciousness. The decline of the printed media brings to the fore the community role of councillors. They are a key link between the electorate and the council. They must be available and accountable to their constituents. They are increasingly expected to use social media. As well as the council meetings which they attend, 69% of Bradford councillors are appointed by the council to serve on other bodies, such as school governors. The council appoints members to 61 external bodies; councillors may serve on as many as eight external bodies. The

position of councillor also prompts other appointments. Councillors are expected to show up at local meetings. They must have a relationship with parish councils in their constituency. The public survey makes clear that the electorate expects councillors to hold non-council services to account as well as to help individual constituents to resolve problems with public services and to represent their community to the council. 28% of those responding to the public survey contacted a councillor in the previous five years, some more than once. Evidence shows that casework continues to increase.

National research shows that the average councillor spends 25 hours a week on the role. The local research shows that Bradford councillors conform to the national average. They work more than half-time on the role. Members with portfolios or other positions of authority on the council spend proportionately more time on their role as a councillor.

## **6. Ward representation**

Like many local authorities, Bradford is divided electorally into wards which each return three members. Councillors' periods of office end after four years' service. Only one-third of councillors are required to seek re-election annually. This has the advantage of avoiding cataclysmic changes in Council membership, when all the experienced councillors might lose their seats. It has the disadvantage that the wishes of the electorate may take four years before they are fully gratified.

One way to reduce the number of councillors without changing the council constituencies would be to reduce the number of councillors for each ward. This would preserve the present geography of representation. However (as well as continuity), there are distinct advantages in the three-member ward. It does permit a sharing of workload, so that, for example, a member of the council whose time is consumed by service on the executive may be able to leave the bulk of constituency work to a ward colleague. Equally a similar arrangement may permit a councillor to continue in employment. Councillors should be reasonably representative of the people they serve. It is clearly undesirable that only retired people can serve as councillors.

## **7. The future workload of councillors**

At a time of substantial change, it is difficult to predict the future. However, there is no reason to suppose that the workload of councillors will diminish and several reasons for believing that it will increase. The workload of councillors has almost doubled in the last fifty years and the survey of members shows that almost all Bradford councillors think that their workloads will continue to increase.

The population of Bradford is increasing. Members face a more demanding and informed electorate, which has higher expectations at a time of sharp decline in the Council's resources. The increased ease of communications, in particular email, adds to the councillors' workload. They are increasingly expected to use social media to communicate with their constituents. The devolution agenda and the formation of regional and sub-regional bodies may prompt the movement of some powers to regional or sub-regional level. Attendance on such bodies can be expected to demand a greater time commitment from leading members without necessarily reducing the time commitment of other councillors. Moreover as the council is obliged to shed services, councillors may be expected to take a community leadership role in prompting volunteering and in organising replacement services within their constituencies. A reduction in the number of councillors would diminish the connection between the council and the electorate and increase the workload of those remaining, which might prompt a consequent and counter-productive increase in remuneration.

## **8. Conclusion**

There is no definitive answer to the question 'what is the correct number of councillors for Bradford?' But it is clear that comparators, workloads and future trends present no current case for reducing the number of Bradford councillors. A reduction in the number of councillors would have no significant impact on the council's budget. Moreover the public survey shows that the overwhelming majority of the Bradford electorate does not support a reduction in the number of councillors.

## **9. Recommendations**

- 9.1 Given the view of the majority of the electorate, demographic growth, the growth in councillor workloads and the current uncertainties there should be no change in the number of Bradford City elected members.
- 9.2 In view of the increasing demands on elected members, the Council should continue to support councillors in using a range of methods to engage with the public, including social media and online communications.
- 9.3 The Council's development programmes should address the developing roles of councillors in community leadership, negotiation, mediation and advocacy.
- 9.4 Development programmes for Council employees should develop their political awareness and their understanding of the role of councillors.

**Rodney Brooke**

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