

LICENSING AND REGULATION COMMITTEE

11 February 2004

ELECTORAL REVIEW – MICHELDEVER PARISH

REPORT OF CITY SECRETARY AND SOLICITOR

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RECENT REFERENCES:

None.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

A request has been received from Micheldever Parish Council for an electoral review. The Parish Council wants to decrease the number of Parish Councillors from ten to eight. The reason given for this request is that the Parish Council has experienced ongoing difficulties in co-opting the full quota of 10 Councillors. The Parish Council believes that this is partly due to some Parish Councillors considering that they are subject to unacceptable restrictions because of the guidance contained in the national Code of Conduct. Currently, the Council is operating with two vacancies (i.e. with eight councillors), despite advertising for new Councillors on parish noticeboards since September 2003.

The current Parish electorate of 934 is represented by 10 Councillors. The Director of Development Services population forecast shows no material change over a five year period – 1204 in 2004 to 1224 in 2008. The dwelling stock is only likely to change from 525 to 535 in the same period.

As can be seen from the list below, which details other parish councils with 8, 9 or 10 Councillors, the size of the electorate varies significantly. These variations have evolved over many years, hence the wide disparity in councillor:elector ratios.

- Badger Farm (8 councillors) – 1935 electorate
- Cheriton (9 councillors) – 491 electorate
- Compton & Shawford (9 councillors) – 1218 electorate
- Hursley (9 councillors) – 677 electorate
- Otterbourne (9 councillors) – 1208 electorate
- Soberton (Soberton Health & Newtown ward) (8 councillors) – 950 electorate
- South Wonston (8 councillors) – 2123 electorate
- Southwick & Widley (9 councillors) – 516 electorate
- Sparsholt (9 councillors) – 827 electorate
- Swanmore (10 councillors) – 2247 electorate
- West Meon (9 councillors) – 604 electorate

After receiving the request from Micheldever Parish Council, a review of all parish vacancies was undertaken and nine of the 43 Parish Councils in the District currently have one, two or three vacancies, all of which the respective Clerks are seeking to fill by co-option. There have been no other requests to reduce councillor numbers on a permanent basis.

The City Council has powers to undertake an electoral review under S.17(2) of the Local Government and Rating Act 1997. As the request only deals with the number of councillors, the City Council may decide the outcome without needing to apply to the Secretary of State for confirmation. In undertaking a review, the Council has to have regard to the need to reflect the identities and interests of local communities and to secure effective and convenient local government.

There is no doubt that when the national Code of Conduct was introduced in 2002, a number of parish councillors did resign across the country. This was principally because they considered that the Code placed unreasonable limitations on what they could say and do, or because the amount of information that they were required to declare in the Register of Interests, was considered out of proportion to their limited powers and functions locally (there were few resignations on this point in the Winchester District). However, since that time, elections and co-option have generally restored numbers and the casual vacancies which do occur seem no more than in past years.

The case presented by Micheldever Parish Council is that such vacancies are a constant problem which local efforts to recruit cannot solve. Therefore, as their experience has shown that eight Councillors seems an adequate number in both representational terms and for the effective conduct of parish business, the Parish requests that the number of Councillors should be reduced from ten to eight on a permanent basis.

Whilst having some sympathy for the difficulty faced by any council when recruiting councillors, the level of vacancies at Micheldever is not that different from other parish councils and the period of vacancy involved is relatively short. Also, the Clerk has confirmed that two new people were co-opted in October and November, albeit that this 'gain' was offset by two others leaving in the same period. However, such circumstances do show that there are people willing to offer themselves for co-option, even though the uptake may not be immediate. With regard to the Code of Conduct, this gradually appears to be less of an issue, as Parish Clerks and Councillors learn to work within its provisions and still provide a full representational role to the community.

A final point is that, immediately prior to this report being printed, the Clerk has informed the Council that a further co-option has taken place, bringing the number of Councillors to nine.

In summary, it is not considered that the overall situation is such that a formal reduction in numbers should be recommended, particularly as there is no evidence that the interests of the local community or effective local government would be better served by fewer parish councillors.

RECOMMENDATION:

That an electoral review of Micheldever Parish Council be not undertaken, because there is no evidence that the interests of the local community or effective local government would be better served by a reduction in the number of Parish Councillors from ten to eight.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS:

1 **CORPORATE STRATEGY (RELEVANCE TO):**

1.1 Helping Parish Councils assists with the aim of partnership working.

2 **RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS:**

2.1 Officer time (minimal) and external advertisement costs of any agreed change (under £500) can be met from existing budgets.

BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS:

City Secretary and Solicitor's file.

APPENDICES:

None