

Lichfield District Council

Current Review timescale		
Stage	Date start	Date finished
Preliminary period	February 2013	August 2013
Preliminary meetings with Group Leaders, full Council, parish and town councils and officers	April -May 2013	
Council size submission due	Early July 2013	
Council size dialogue meeting with group leaders	Late July 2013	
Initial Council size LGBCE mtg	13 August 2013	
Council size consultation	3 September 2013	14 October 2013
C-size decision LGBCE mtg	12 November 2013	
Stage 1 consultation start	26 November 2013	3 February 2014
Tour	February 2014	
LGBCE analysis and deliberation	March 2014	
Draft recommendations consultation	29 April 2014	21 July 2014
Tour	August 2014	
LGBCE analysis and deliberation	September 2014	
Final recommendations published	14 October 2014	

## The Local Government Boundary Commission for England

# Council size

*Helping you make the strongest possible case to the Commission*

- A guide for local authority elected members and staff

## **About this briefing**

The first part of every electoral review is a consideration of council size.

This briefing is designed to assist members and staff of local authorities who are preparing submissions to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England on council size (the total number of councillors who represent the local authority) as part of an electoral review.

The note indicates the kinds of issues the Commission will consider in its deliberations on council size and should assist you in making the strongest possible representation to us.

## **Background**

Before the Commission considers possible changes to ward boundaries, we will initiate discussions with the local authority about its views on council size and invite written evidence during a preliminary phase of the review.

Once we have considered the evidence provided to us during the preliminary stage, the Commission will hold a public consultation on council size to assess local opinion.

Following the Commission's consideration of the evidence received during the preliminary phase, and any views expressed to it during public consultation, we will publish a decision on the future size of the council before starting our work on ward or electoral division boundaries.

## **Preparing your council size submission**

The Commission has no preconceptions about the right number of councillors to represent an authority. We do not compare authorities directly with each other, we have no targets or thresholds for council size, and we recognise that every local authority will represent local people and deliver services in different ways. We therefore make recommendations on the basis of the evidence we receive during the electoral review.

The Commission aims to recommend a council size that allows the council to take decisions effectively, manage the business and responsibilities of the council successfully, and provide effective community leadership and representation.

Whilst it might appear simplest to retain the current council size, the Commission does not consider this is, in itself, a compelling reason to maintain the existing arrangements. Similarly, an increase in council size due, for example, solely to reflect population growth or a reduction in numbers solely to achieve financial savings are both arguments that have previously failed to satisfy the Commission that such changes would promote effective and convenient local government.

Instead, the Commission will form its view about the right council size for an authority by considering three areas:

- We will look at the **governance arrangements** of the council and how it takes decisions across the broad range of its responsibilities.
- The Commission will look at the council's **scrutiny functions** relating to its own decision making and the council's responsibilities to outside bodies.
- We will also consider the **representational role of councillors in the local community** and how they engage with people, conduct casework and represent the council on local partner organisations.

The questions outlined below are the kinds of matters the Commission considers before reaching a decision on council size. In doing so, we recognise that each area has its own geographical, community and organisational characteristics. Accordingly, some of the questions, and prompts, may not be appropriate to the circumstances of your council or the area you serve. You should think of them as a range of considerations that will help lead you to identify the appropriate number of councillors for your area. They are also intended to help you and present to us a clear reasoning for the number you suggest.

This is not an exhaustive list and the Commission will consider any further issues you wish to raise. We do not expect local authorities to provide lengthy responses to every question (or necessarily even respond directly to all of the questions) and you can set out your submission in any way you wish.

Finally, you should consider the questions not simply in the context of the council's current arrangements, but also likely future trends or plans. In every review it carries out, the Commission aims to ensure its recommendations remain relevant for the long term. As such, councils are advised to give consideration to Part Four of this guide (The Future) in its responses to all the other sections.

We hope these questions and prompts will help guide your thinking on this important issue.

## Part One: governance and decision making

The Commission aims to ensure that councils have the right number of councillors to take decisions and manage their business in an effective way. We therefore look at how decisions are taken across the authority to assess the volume and distribution of responsibility amongst elected members and staff.

### Leadership:

- What kind of governance arrangements are in place for your authority? Does the council operate an executive mayoral, Cabinet/Executive or committee system?
- How many portfolios are there?

- To what extent are decisions delegated to portfolio holders or are most decisions taken by the full Executive and/or Mayor?
- Do Executive (or other) members serve on other decision making partnerships, sub-regional, regional or national bodies?
- In general, are leadership and/or portfolio roles considered to be full time roles?

In looking at these matters, the Commission is trying to determine how work and responsibilities are distributed across the council. For example, how many councillors are involved in taking major decisions on behalf of the authority and what is the volume of those responsibilities? What does being a portfolio holder actually involve and what responsibilities are delegated to officers, other members of the council or other committees? Overall, want to assess the role councillors play at every level of decision making at the council.

Evidence could be provided, for example, about the official/constitutional responsibilities of portfolio holders and/or a description of the day-to-day management of the council.

#### Regulatory:

- In relation to licensing, planning and other regulatory responsibilities, to what extent are decisions delegated to officers?
- How many members are involved in committees?
- Is committee membership standing or rotating?
- Are meetings *ad hoc*, frequent and/or area based?
- What level of attendance is achieved? Are meetings always quorate?
- Does the council believe that changes to legislation, national or local policy will have influence the workload of committees and their members which would have an impact on council size?

Evidence of the level of delegation to officers of quasi-judicial and other decisions helps the Commission understand how many councillors might be required overall to deliver effective and convenient local government. You may wish to refer to the authority's policy on delegation and statistical evidence relating to the number of decisions taken by committees and/or individuals. This is an important issue for the Commission as filling committee places and being able to discharge regulatory responsibilities are relevant factors in determining council size.

The Commission is also interested in evidence that demonstrates trends in the workload and what your expectations are for the future. Reference to changing national policies and frameworks may influence the level of work you will expect of elected members in the future.

#### Demands on time:

- Is there a formal role description for councillors in your authority?
- Do councillors receive formal training for all or any roles at the council?
- Do councillors generally find that the time they spend on council business is what they expected?
- How much time do members generally spend on the business of your council?
- Does the council appoint members to outside bodies? If so, how many councillors are involved in this activity and what is their expected workload?
- Does the council attract and retain members?
- Have there been any instances where the council has been unable to discharge its duties due to a lack of councillors?
- Do councillors have an individual or ward budget for allocation in their area? If so, how is such a system administered?

The Commission is interested in the time and commitment pressures on elected members and how they might relate to the number of councillors required in the future to deliver effective and convenient local government. We are also interested to know whether these commitments are increasing or decreasing.

Evidence to support views here might include any peer review activity undertaken recently or feedback provided directly by members. Similarly, member development programmes might be useful in illustrating your point of view.

The issues raised in Part One of this guide will help you to make a judgement on the number of councillors required to discharge decision making responsibilities in an effective way. This forms a useful starting point in your overall assessment on council size.

## Part Two: scrutiny functions

**Every council has mechanisms to scrutinise the executive functions of the council and other local bodies. They also have significant discretion over the kind (and extent) of activities involved in that process. In considering council size, the Commission will want to satisfy itself that these responsibilities can be administered in a convenient and effective way through the number of councillors it recommends.**

- How do scrutiny arrangements operate in the authority? How many committees are there and what is their membership?
- What is the general workload of scrutiny committees? Has the council ever found that it has had too many active projects for the scrutiny process to function effectively?
- How is the work of scrutiny committee programmed? Is the work strictly timetabled?
- What activities are scrutiny committee members expected to carry out between formal meetings?

Evidence might include the practical role members play in scrutiny work and the activities and time commitment given to projects or commitments on outside bodies. A description of the kind of support members generally receive from staff as part of committee work (e.g. preparation of reports) will be helpful to the Commission in understanding the impact of scrutiny on the overall number of councillors needed to deliver effective and convenient local government.

The issues discussed in Part Two, combined with the conclusions you drew in Part One of your considerations should help identify number of councillors required not only to take decisions effectively but to ensure that the council is able to support its scrutiny functions and the other responsibilities councillors will have on bodies outside the council.

### **Part Three: representational role of councillors**

**The Commission understands that there is no single approach to representation and members will represent and provide leadership to their communities in different ways. However, we are interested in hearing about the extent to which members are routinely expected to engage with communities and how this affects workload and responsibilities. In particular, if the council has defined a role for elected members, the Commission would find that evidence interesting.**

- In general terms, how do councillors carry out their representational roles with electors? Do members mainly respond casework from constituents or do they have a more active role in the community?
- How do councillors generally deal with casework? Do they pass on issues directly to staff or do they take a more in depth approach to resolving issues?
- What support do councillors receive in discharging their duties in relation to casework and representational role in their ward?
- How do councillors engage with constituents? Do they hold surgeries, distribute newsletters, hold public meetings, write blogs etc?
- How has the role of councillors changed since the council last considered how many elected members it should have?
- Has the council put in place any mechanisms for councillors to interact with young people, those not on the electoral register or minority groups or their representative bodies?



- Are councillors expected to attend meetings of community bodies such as parish councils or residents associations? If so, what is the level of their involvement and what role are they expected to play?

The Commission is interested in assessing what impact the number of councillors might have on the way local communities are represented. How much time do councillors spend on casework and ward activities in general and what support networks exist in the council to help them discharge their duties?

You should now consider what impact the representational role of members of the authority has on the conclusions you drew in the first two parts of this guide. Your judgement should be a realistic reflection of councillors' roles in their communities and may, or may not, increase the number you came to after Part One and Part Two of this guide.

## Part Four: the future

**The Commission understands that the role of local authorities is constantly changing. In particular, changes such as the introduction of elected mayors in some parts of England have significantly altered the nature of decision making and role of elected members. Equally, many local authorities have not seriously considered the size of their council since the introduction of Executive/Scrutiny functions over a decade ago. The pace of change for authorities is likely to continue into the foreseeable future. That is why you should consider future trends and developments when coming to conclusions on council size.**

In Parts One - Three, we set out a number of questions about how the council and councillors currently operate. If proposing a change in council size, we would also be interested in knowing what changes might be made to current arrangements, which might affect the number of councillors needed.

In particular:

### Localism and policy development

- What impact do you think the localism agenda might have on the scope and conduct of council business and how do you think this might affect the role of councillors?
- Does the council have any plans to devolve responsibilities and/or assets to community organisations? Or does the council expect to take on more responsibilities in the medium to long term?

### Service delivery

- Have changes to the arrangements for local delivery of services led to significant changes to councillors' workloads? (For example, control of housing stock or sharing services with neighbouring authorities).
- Are there any developments in policy ongoing that might significantly affect the role of elected members in the future?

### Finance

- What has been the impact of recent financial constraints on the council's activities? Would a reduction in the scope and/or scale of council business warrant a reduction in the number of councillors?
- If you are proposing a reduction in the number of councillors for your authority, to what extent is this a reflection of reduced activity of the council overall, an anticipation of efficiency plans or a statement to local people? Or none of these things?

The Commission aims to recommend electoral arrangements – including council size – that will deliver convenient and effective local government for the long term. It is therefore important that the overall number of councillors you propose will be right for your authority in the future. It could mean that the number you put to the Commission is different from the analysis you built up in the first three parts of this guide. Provided you have firm evidence and a strong rationale for such a difference, the Commission will give it serious consideration.

The Commission is interested in hearing firm plans for the future and evidence of trends that may affect the number of councillors required. Observations on possible developments are less likely to be persuasive.

### **Further reading**

You may find it helpful to read the Commission's technical guidance on electoral reviews which covers our policy towards council size and the rest of the electoral review process. This can be found on our website at [www.lgbce.org.uk/guidance-policy-and-publications/guidance](http://www.lgbce.org.uk/guidance-policy-and-publications/guidance)

The Commission also produces guidance aimed at members of the public who wish to engage with the electoral review process. This is also available on our website.

The Commission publishes all submissions it receives throughout an electoral review. Our website therefore includes previous examples of council size submissions made by local authorities across England. Our staff will also be able to advise you on previous submissions that you might find interesting.