

COUNCIL SIZE SUBMISSION BY THE CONSERVATIVE COUNCILLOR GROUP

26 April 2019

As the majority party and administration, we endorse the background information and projections provided by the London Borough of Wandsworth. The Council's submission does not recommend a number of councillors because of a tradition in Wandsworth for political unanimity on matters of this kind, unless reports are taken through committee. It was not possible to secure agreement from the minority party.

This submission provides the missing recommendation and is intended to add value to other aspects of the Council's paper. In our view, the evidence and financial context support a reduction in council size.

Governance model

Pre-consideration

The pre-consideration of decisions in Wandsworth is unusual, and possibly unique, in replicating the ethos of the old committee system within a cabinet and strong leader model. Recommendations pass through the Overview and Scrutiny Committees (OSCs) before they reach the Executive for collective approval. No decisions are delegated to the Leader of the Council, or to individual members of the Executive, while urgent decisions are the formal responsibility of the chief executive and directors.

Accordingly, the volume of papers handled by the six OSCs can be larger than in other local authorities. The chairman and deputy chairman of each committee attend agenda-planning and call-over meetings with officers, typically followed by a pre-meeting within each group. The decision-making process is shown in the appendix.

Fewer OSC cycles

The model was established after the last set of boundary changes and was designed to operate on a base of 60 councillors, with six committee cycles each year. A cycle consists of a meeting of every OSC and sub-committee, followed by a meeting of the Executive, followed by Full Council. The Annual Council meeting and other Executive meetings fall outside these cycles.

There were originally seven OSCs, which were later reduced to six and then five, before recently returning to six. In 2014, the committee cycles themselves were reduced to four, cutting the number of meetings by a third. The reduction in cycles and committees has demonstrably reduced the workload for councillors. This

remains true for the administration in the current term, despite the smaller size of the majority group, while the opposition has enjoyed a multiplier benefit from increasing in number.

The reduction in cycles also created a three-month window in regular OSC business (from March to May) alongside the traditional summer break. Overall, it strongly supports a reduction in the size of the Council.

Marginality

The last election reduced the size of the majority group. This has resulted in fewer backbenchers, requiring more members to serve on multiple committees. It has also produced a smaller pool from which committee chairmen and members of the Executive can be drawn.

It is not possible to predict the marginality of the Council over the lifetime of any new boundaries and administration majorities are likely to fluctuate. Therefore, we do not believe that marginality should be a consideration in setting the number of councillors, save in one respect: there is a baseline of around 53 councillors below which the model would be unviable, were the main parties to approach parity.

With 53 members, a group of 27 would have a majority of one. It would need to appoint a Mayor, an Executive (9), regulatory chairmen (2) and OSC chairmen (6), before any of the other committees or deputy chairmanships are considered. That accounts for 18 councillors, leaving only a third of the group (9) to examine decisions without holding a significant role themselves and, potentially, all but six majority group councillors holding an additional or special responsibility allowance.

On these grounds, we consider 53 to be the minimum council size compatible with the current Wandsworth model.

Future governance model

Both of the political groups support the pre-consideration of decisions through the OSCs, which gives backbenchers and the opposition far more influence and involvement than is the case in post-decision scrutiny. At the same time, the benefits of a cabinet model are retained. Fundamentally changing this governance model would be unwelcome on all sides, as well as disruptive.

Under the harmonising influence of shared services, which are explained below, the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames is moving towards (and partly beyond) Wandsworth's approach by readopting the committee model. This is another reason why pre-consideration of decisions should endure over the course of new boundaries.

There are other, smaller changes that could be considered. Fewer councillors on each OSC would reduce double or triple-hatting, but leave the number of administration members with a significant role unaltered at 18. An identical proportion of backbenchers would not address the problems arising from marginality. Smaller committees would also reduce the range of views and experience available at meetings, while making it harder to reflect the political balance of the Council in the membership of OSCs, both individually and collectively.

Another option is to reverse the changes made in 2018, by returning to five OSCs and removing a member of the Executive. This would improve the balance to 11 councillors without a significant role in a group of 27, which is still low as a proportion and in absolute terms. It would not reduce workload beyond the number of meetings held, because the same number of papers would be required. Achieving fewer papers would necessitate more delegation of powers or reducing the scope of the pre-consideration of Executive decisions. Neither is supported or desirable.

The workload of the regulatory committees for licensing and planning applications is determined by external factors and legal requirements. Consequently, there is limited ability to change their structure.

Reduced workload

The effect of removing two of the OSC cycles in 2014 can be summarised as follows:

	Per Cycle*	Cycle of 6	Cycle of 4	Difference
OSCs	5	30	20	-10
Other committees	3	18	12	-6
Executive	1	6	4	-2
Full Council	1	6	4	-2
TOTAL	11	60	40	-20

* The table shows meetings related to a complete OSC cycle, excluding other Executive or Full Council meetings.

This single change produced 20 fewer meetings per year. A full comparison between the 2002 model and the current system of six OSCs is included below as an appendix, which finds a proportionally similar result. The number of meetings fell by 32% overall between 2002 and 2019. Accounting for the size of committees shows a workload decrease of 31% over the same period.

Since 2002, the total number of Executive meetings has actually halved from 18 to 9, with a similar drop for Full Council from 10 meetings to 6 per year. These are large, consequential differences.

Appointments to external bodies

Outside appointments have reduced, although past papers make it difficult to calculate a total, because only certain appointments needed to be formally listed. One reason for the reduction is a change to the Council's grants system, which removed the need to appoint a councillor to an organisation in receipt of a grant. For example, both the board of the Battersea Arts Centre and the Wandsworth branch of Age Concern no longer have council appointees.

National changes to the guidance on school governors, combined with academy conversions, have also removed most local authority appointments to schools. It was previously common for Wandsworth councillors to sit on at least one, if not two,

governing bodies. Now this has essentially reduced to legacy cases, where councillors were 'rolled over' during reconstitutions to sit as co-opted governors.

Staffing and shared services

There has been a substantial reduction in Council staff from greater efficiencies, shared services with other boroughs and additional outsourcing. This has reduced councillors' direct oversight of management functions, both within the Executive and for scrutiny purposes. The standards and outcomes of services now occupy the greater share of members' attention.

The Shared Staffing Arrangement (SSA) with the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames is outlined in the Council's submission. It has fundamentally altered the Council's structure, from a joint chief executive down, with many staff now based in Richmond. Other shared services include the Regulatory Services Partnership (RSP) and the South London Legal Partnership, both based in Merton. None existed at the time of the last boundary review. The RSP covers our functions related to trading standards, licensing, environmental health, private-sector housing and pest control.

Alongside a reduction of staff in remaining Wandsworth-only areas, Enable Leisure & Cultural was created in 2015, removing functions for parks, leisure centres and the arts from the Council's direct control to a staff mutual. Libraries are a prominent part of our service mix for many residents and are now run by Greenwich Leisure. Many schools are also academies, with only a limited role for the local authority.

The changes to operating models make it difficult to compare employee totals precisely. Wandsworth's 2001/02 budget book shows 6,520 employees, from which schools-based staff should be excluded. The combined total for schools-based staff and Children's Services was 3,161. Estimating based on the current Children's Services levels, the Council directly employed approximately 4,000 staff in 2001/02, compared to around 3,000 now, including the SSA, which covers two authorities.

Even compensating for the fact that the 2001/02 figures represent total headcount, while the current figures show FTEs, this still a dramatic reduction. New public health functions were added over this period, but were successfully absorbed within the existing structure and the Health and Wellbeing Board. The number of functions delegated to officers has increased in this time, again reducing the role of councillors.

Casework and technology

When the last boundary review was undertaken, the system for casework predominately consisted of receiving post, sending letters and conducting paper-based research. That pattern is now almost non-existent. Email is not only more efficient, but allows residents' issues to be forwarded with a couple of clarifying lines, and responses to be forwarded or copied back. This is far quicker and simpler, while the volume of unprompted casework has not increased.

When undertaking research, information that was previously difficult to obtain can be found online in seconds. Councillors' access to email and systems has also improved significantly in the last year, with iPads provided to each member and online portals accessible from any computer. The iPads have simplified surgeries, allowing emails to be written and sent on the spot. Council and committee

documents are provided via a dedicated iPad app, helping to reduce paper at committees and removing postage issues.

Wandsworth does not allocate ward budgets or support ward forums, which is a notable difference to some authorities. Most councillors rotate their surgery duties through the central, multi-ward arrangements, although a minority have reverted to ward-only surgeries or hold extra sessions under party-political branding, which fall outside the Council's remit. The central arrangements allow the most efficient coverage. For example, Earlsfield and Wandsworth Common wards share one-hour surgeries at Earlsfield Library. The six councillors (two are from the minority group) have a rotating schedule, each attending around three surgeries annually.

We have not attempted to estimate the average number of hours spent on casework, surgeries or other ward meetings. Assessments of this kind are of limited value, as some councillors are prone to self-generating work, or expanding it to fill whatever time they have available. Our judgement is that casework has reduced, not least because the widely used *Report It* app allows residents to report many problems directly to the Council, without the need to involve councillors. As interactive technology develops further, monitoring of issues will improve and residents will be able to resolve even more problems for themselves.

Several members of the minority group share the view that casework has reduced. At 9.01 pm on 18 December 2018, a long-serving Labour Councillor emailed all Wandsworth members and some senior officers, proposing that we “reduce the Council from 60 to 40 councillors” because “there is not sufficient councillor work at ward level”. This overlooks non-ward functions, which fall disproportionately on the administration, but a reduction of around a third in casework time is plausible.

Quantification

The preceding factors all support a reduction. Some can be quantified accurately and some cannot, unless implausible metrics and assumptions are introduced. Individual councillors view their role in different ways and take different approaches, with certain activities impossible to objectively determine as civic engagement, political campaigning or personal leisure.

An attempt to combine any such figures within an algorithm for council size would be nonsense. However, we believe these preceding factors, taken together, would support a reduction to the baseline of 53 councillors. This would produce a ratio of 4,286 electors per councillor on the borough's current electorate.

Growth and relative size

Population growth

The Council's submission projects this electorate to grow by 21,437, an increase of 9.4% by 2025. This growth favours a higher council size than the baseline. An increase in either electors or the general population correlates to an increase in councillors' workload, although the relationship isn't linear.

There are fixed factors, either at ward level (e.g. ward panels for policing) or at council level (e.g. committees) where work does not increase. Larger, variable factors include casework and the number of local groups, like residents' associations. Given the bulk of the projected increase is driven by large developments, it should also be noted that development can generate work in itself, through the planning phases or liaison activity during build-out phases.

Adjusting for population growth, a council of 53 would have a ratio of 4,690 electors per councillor by 2025. We consider this too high compared to Wandsworth's current ratio of 3,786 electors per councillor and compared to other London boroughs.

Elector ratios

The most recent LGBCE review outcomes have supported projected ratios of 3,035 in Camden, 3,058 in Islington, 3,520 in Harrow, 3,697 in Hounslow, 3,724 in Ealing, 4,295 in Hillingdon, 4,385 in Barnet, and a ratio as low as 2,774 in Westminster. Our immediate neighbours are presently lower still, with the exception of Lambeth.

If the Council reduced to 53 members, Wandsworth could have the highest ratio in London by 2025. The disparity in representation would be greater compared to the rest of Inner London, where Tower Hamlets is an outlier with 4,323, not least because it has a directly elected mayor. There is no harm in being distinctive, but there may be a loss of representative strength.

Another factor is the ability of members to get around their wards, which are already large in Wandsworth. As the number of electors per councillor increases, this becomes harder and wards become more impersonal. This would remain true under two or three member wards because of the way councillors tend to divide work between themselves.

Finding a balance

It is necessary to seek a balance. An increase of 500 electors per councillor to 4,286 is manageable for the reasons outlined above and would constitute a 13% rise. Looking at London comparators, this would place the borough near the top of the emerging range, whereas a 24% increase to 4,690 seems excessive.

The number of electors per councillor can be mapped against council size as follows:

	Current ratio	Ratio by 2025*
53 Cllrs	4,286	4,690
54 Cllrs	4,206	4,603
55 Cllrs	4,130	4,520
56 Cllrs	4,056	4,439
57 Cllrs	3,985	4,361
58 Cllrs	3,916	4,286
59 Cllrs	3,850	4,213
60 Cllrs	3,786	4,143

* Based on the Council's projected total electorate of 248,575.

Obligingly, the projected ratio for 2025 can be maintained at exactly 4,286 electors per councillor with a council of 58 members. We believe this size would strike a reasonable balance between reduced workloads, a rising population and the needs of representation. It also provides contingency for councillors on maternity leave or with long-term sickness.

Other sizes are not unreasonable, but are less satisfactory. Taking a 20% increase in the ratio as a limit, the range between 55 councillors (+19%) and 57 councillors (+15%) is worth consideration, although it still seems inappropriate compared to other boroughs. We can see no case for 59 councillors or the status quo, however, given the Council's financial situation.

Conclusion

The reduction in funding to local government has meant becoming ever more efficient as a council. Despite saving tens of millions over the last decade, difficult savings are still required in Wandsworth, equivalent to over £40m per annum by 2022. We believe a reduction in council size is reasonable, evidenced and makes the right statement of values in this context.

Symbolism is important. Having insisted that our services do more with less, it would be wrong to continue doing less work with the same number of councillors, even when the cost is minimal. The status quo of sixty members is not privileged and cannot represent the status quo for wards because of the uneven concentrations of population growth. Regardless of council size, ward boundaries will have to be redrawn significantly. Nor should we ignore the potential to find better ways to represent communities through some two-member wards.

The Council's governance model was designed on the basis of six committee cycles and 60 councillors. There are now four committee cycles and still 60 councillors, which creates a strong presumption for a reduction. Alongside factors like a lower casework burden, this would justify reducing the number of councillors to 53 within the constraints of the model. However, this reduction must be balanced against the growth in population and the ratio of electors per councillor.

A council size of 58 meets these criteria, maintains strong representation and is appropriate compared to our neighbours.

APPENDIX

Comparing meetings in 2002 and 2019

Using the Council's online archive of meetings, with the missing information sourced from official borough diaries, it is possible to compile an accurate picture of the workload under the original OSC system and now. Although appointments to committees have increased by 14% to 226, mostly because of changes to licensing, the number of meetings has fallen by 32%, from 116 to 79 annually. The number of Full Council meetings has almost halved.

Multiplying committee sizes by the number of meetings provides an alternative view of workload. This shows a similar fall of 31%, from 1,416 to 982, which is equivalent to councillors collectively having 434 fewer evenings occupied by meetings.

Committee basis in 2002

Overview and Scrutiny	Size	Meetings	Work
Corporate Resources OSC	10	6	60
Education OSC	10	6	60
Environment and Public Services OSC	10	6	60
Housing OSC	10	6	60
Planning OSC	12	6	72
Regeneration and Transport OSC	10	6	60
Social Services OSC	10	6	60
<i>Sub and other committees</i>			
Audit Sub-OSC*	3	2	6
Education Performance Standards Group	7	6	42
Finance Sub-OSC	4	6	24
Performance Review Sub-OSC	4	1	4
Service Changes Review Sub-OSC	3	6	18
Executive and Council			
Executive	8	18	144
Full and Annual Council	60	10	600
Regulatory Committees			
Planning Applications Committee	10	12	120
Licensing Committee [†]	6	n/a	n/a
Other			
Audit Committee*	4	3	12
Standards Committee	3	2	6
Staff Management and Appeals [†]	4	2	8
General Purposes Committee [‡]	10	6	n/a
TOTAL	198	116	1,416

Committee basis in 2019

Overview and Scrutiny	Size	Meetings	Work
Adult Care and Health OSC	9	4	36
Community Services and Open Spaces OSC	9	4	36
Education and Children's Services OSC	10	4	40
Finance and Corporate Resources OSC	12	4	48
Housing and Regeneration OSC	12	4	48
Strategic Planning and Transportation OSC	9	4	36
<i>Sub and other committees</i>			
Grants Sub-OSC	8	4	32
Education and Standards Group	10	4	40
Children's Social Care Group	10	4	40
Health and Wellbeing Board	5	4	20
Executive and Council			
Executive	9	9	81
Full and Annual Council	60	6	360
Regulatory Committees			
Planning Applications	10	12	120
Regulatory Licensing Committee	6	1	6
Licensing Committee	15	n/a	n/a
Licensing Sub-committee [†]	3	n/a	n/a
Other			
Audit Committee	5	3	15
Standards Committee	6	1	6
Joint Pensions Committee [†]	6	3	18
General Purposes Committee [‡]	13	4	n/a
TOTAL	226	79	982

* There was both an Audit Committee and an Audit Sub-OSC in 2002.

† Rotating membership or substitute members appointed to cover absences.

‡ The work calculation is not included because members of the General Purposes Committee are drawn from councillors attending the Corporate Resources OSC, which sits on the same evening.

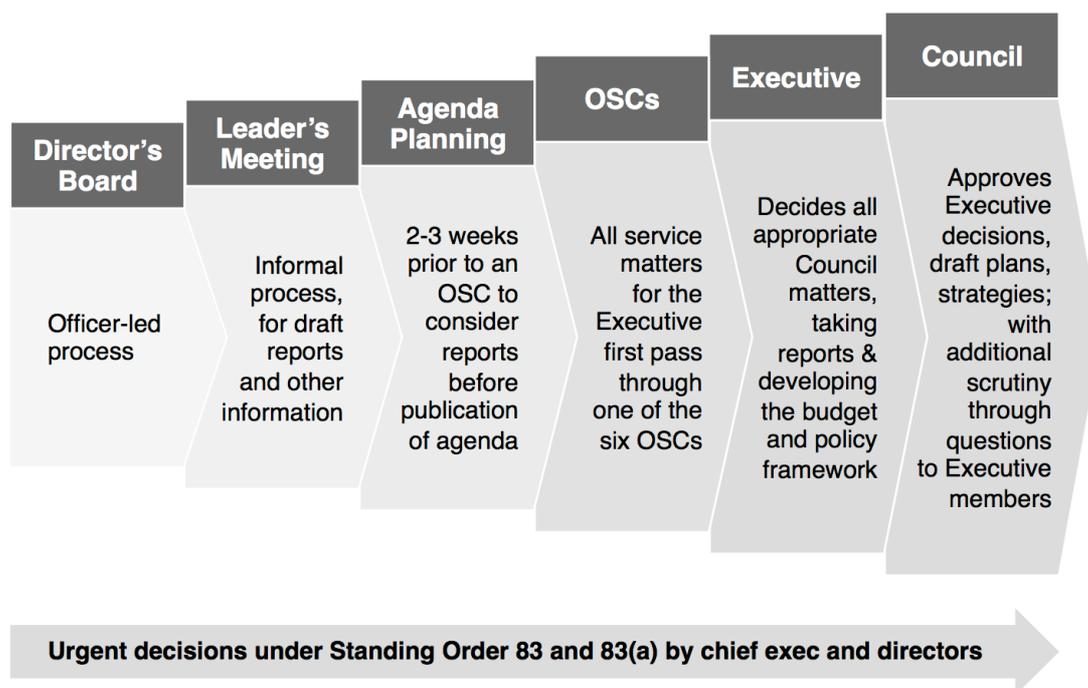
The tables above capture the bulk of the work undertaken by non-Executive members, apart from Licensing Committee and sub-committee meetings. When Wandsworth's model was established, the licensing regime was in transition to local authority hearings, with the DCMS White Paper proposals of April 2000 leading to the reforms in the Licensing Act 2003. This workload was anticipated within the governance model, but the system was not implemented until 2005.

It would be anomalous, therefore, to compare licensing in 2002 with 2019. Taking figures from just after the transition, the main Licensing Committee sat once in 2005, 3 times in 2006 and 7 times in 2007, before reverting to a typical pattern of 3 meetings a year. This pattern has held for 2018 and 2019.

The licensing sub-committee sat 48 times in 2005 and 29 times in 2006. It was scheduled to meet 30 times in 2018, but only 20 meetings were required. During 2019, it is scheduled to meet 24 times, but 5 of the 10 meetings to date have been cancelled, postponed or had their agenda withdrawn. This demonstrates that the workload across licensing is lower than anticipated in 2002, is lower than when the system was introduced and is continuing to fall.

As a result, the exclusion of meeting and work figures for licensing does not distort the totals shown. Although other committees and outside bodies could be listed for 2019, these mostly involve members of the Executive, particularly for the other joint committees with Richmond. The effect of excluding them is offset by similar appointments in 2002, which are also not shown and would be difficult to source in full. Housing Panel arrangements are unchanged and link to the annual Borough Residents' Forum.

The decision-making process



This process represents a single OSC committee cycle, from the Director's Board and its internal inputs, which include the procurement board, SSA programmes and the property board, to Full Council. The OSC meetings are held in February, June, September and November.