

Electoral Review – Dover District Council Labour Group Submission on the Number of Councillors

This is our submission in response to the proposal to reduce the number of councillors on Dover District Council.

We have looked at the facts and figures since May 2011, so these figures reflect not only the two and a half years of this council, we have also gone back through the records for the whole four years of the previous council.

It should be said at the outset that the Labour Group, for the reasons stated below, is not convinced that the number of councillors needs to be reduced. Reducing the number of councillors will not improve the governance or management of the Council, and the cost savings will be minimal.

The guiding principles when deciding the number of Councillors should be:

- a. To achieve good and efficient governance.
- b. To carefully scrutinise the Council's decision making.
- c. To enable councillors to undertake their representational role within their communities and in partnership with other public and private bodies.

The Labour Group feel that the case for a reduction in the number of councillors has not been made. In particular, the population of the District is going to rise significantly in the coming decades. This is not the time to significantly reduce the number of elected representatives.

We also feel that the methodology used to provide the evidence for change is severely flawed for 2 reasons:

1. The calculation of workload using the number of Committee places.

In the officers paper the Director of Governance has calculated figures on the average number of committees that a councillor is appointed to, as a guide to workload. This is not very helpful, as the workload and responsibilities vary so much that there is no equivalence that can be usefully compared.

For example; the Planning Committee meets about 12 times per year and each meeting lasts several hours. The papers for the meetings are lengthy and complicated and there are also site meetings and subcommittees.

Those councillors on Licencing or Governance have a much less onerous task. Usually only 5 meetings per year with shorter and less complicated agendas.

Instead of looking at raw number of committees we should examine the actual workload of councillors and the future trends.

If we analyse the operation of some committees we will get a better idea of their workload;

The Election Matters Committee.

Since May 2011 this ad hoc Committee has met 5 times, sitting for a total of 2 hours and 12 minutes.

The General Purposes Committee

This ad hoc Committee has met 12 times since May 2011 for a total of 7 hours and 22 minutes.

Joint Staff Committee

During this period this committee should have met 26 times, however 23 of these scheduled meetings have been cancelled because of a lack of business. The 3 meetings since May 2011 that did take place lasted for a total of 3 hours and 5 minutes.

Joint Health Committee

The Joint Health Committee has met 19 times since May 2011 for a total of just under 9 hours.

Thus, the members who sit on these committees have a much reduced workload as compared with say Planning or Scrutiny.

Recommendation 1

- a. That the Election Matters Committee and the General Purposes Committee be merged.**
- b. That the Joint Health and Joint Staff committees be merged.**
- c. That the number of committee places on the Election Matters, General Purposes, Joint Staff and Joint Health be rationalised and reduced by 10. If we take 2 as the average number of committees this results in a 'saving' of 5 Councillors. (See Table 1)**

Licensing Committee

The Licensing Committee, by law, has to meet 5 times per year to approve the minutes of the licencing panels. It has met 32 times since May 2011 but these meeting are always very short – average 3 minutes; total 1 hour 31 minutes.

The Licensing Panel hearings with 3 members take place about 3-4 times per year so most members only attend 2 per year at most.

Recommendation 2

That the membership of the Licensing Committee be reduced to 12 members, from the current 15. (See Table 1)

Scrutiny Committees

We believe, very strongly, that two Scrutiny Committees are required to adequately hold the Cabinet to account, and to ensure that we maximise the potential benefits from internal processes and external partnerships.

The Council is under huge financial pressure, as well as having an increasing number of service delivery areas where performance is failing to meet targets. In this climate the Council leadership is ever more inclined to undertake high risk strategies to achieve

Government imposed savings, while trying to maintain the quality and quantity of services. These strategies need careful scrutiny.

The Scrutiny Committees can also learn from other council's experiences and practices to seek new ways of saving, and delivering efficient services.

These pressures will pertain for several years to come whichever Party is in Government, so the importance of Scrutiny will remain.

Until recently the Scrutiny Committees only examined policy post decision. Recently they have been empowered to undertake pre-decision scrutiny. This will add a substantial amount to the workload.

Recommendation 3

That the Council continues with 2 Scrutiny Committees of 10 members each. (See Table 1.)

2. Comparisons with Other Districts

The Director of Governance has also sought to compare Dover District Council councillor numbers with other councils – both nearby and further afield.

As with the workload calculations we don't feel that these comparisons are very helpful. There are so many variables that simple arithmetic comparisons are almost useless.

Coastal areas have a whole set of economic and transport problems caused by the fact that half of the town centre 'catchment areas', are in the sea. Thus, amenities like department stores, theatres and leisure centres have a smaller potential customer base and are more likely to be unviable.

The DDC area has had many of its traditional employers close or move away. For example the 3 coal mines shut; the large paper mill moved; the numbers employed in freight management at the Port has reduced; our biggest employer, Pfizer, ceased doing research and manufacturing in East Kent.

Thus we have been faced with huge regeneration problems, on top of the extra deprivation our residents endure.

Like some Councils, we face huge problems of unviable and closed shops in our town centres. Canterbury and Sevenoaks do not have these types of intractable problems.

Unlike Canterbury, for example, our main tourist attraction, Dover Castle, is not in the centre of town. The hundreds of thousands of tourists that the Castle attracts do not visit the local shops or contribute to the local economy.

The Council most like Dover, Thanet, had an electoral review and increased the number of councillors by 2 to 55.

Dover District should be looked at as a unique place with its own challenges and opportunities. This review should examine the question of the best number of councillors on the evidence presented above and not on simplified comparisons with other Councils.

Other Considerations

1. Council Funding

In recent budgets the Government have announced huge changes in the way that local Government will be funded. For example, several significant Government grants will be abolished and Councils will be able to keep a large proportion of the Council Tax that they collect. These changes will have a large impact on the way the Council is managed.

2. Councillor's Workload

Many of the policies of the Conservative Government have put additional pressure on family's benefits and living standards. They have also exacerbated the negative effects of the housing crisis by introducing policies that stimulate increases in house prices and rents. They have also reduced spending on physical and mental health services causing further problems, particularly in low income areas.

There has been a rise in the number of people employed in the 'gig' economy with insecure and fluctuating pay packets. This is causing a rise in the number of people in crisis, homeless and facing poverty.

One consequence of these changes is the growing number of people contacting their Councillors for support and help. Many of these cases are complex and involve interaction with multiple agencies.

The introduction of Universal Credit, with its long initial waiting time, will also add to the difficulties that low income families face.

If the number of Councillors is reduced significantly this caseload could become intolerable.

In rural wards the number of deprivation related cases is likely to be lower. Having said that a reduction in the number of Councillors will increase their workload because they will be expected to attend more of their Parish Council meetings, e.g. the Parish Council meeting load of 3 Councillors will soon fall on 2.

3. Growth in number of Project/Policy Advisory Groups.

As the Council comes under more pressure so the number of project working and task groups has increased.

At the moment there are 8 such groups, 6 of which have been formed in the past year or so.

The reduction in the number of officers will mean that, as the Council wishes to maintain momentum on partnership projects like Port expansion and public health improvements, we will need more input from Councillors.

The proliferation of multi-agency work and joint projects with KCC, regional bodies and the town/parish councils will increase the workload of councillors to sit on the many co-ordinating group.

4. The Implications of British Exit from the EU

Dover is the largest port for freight in the Country. The Port is also severely constricted in terms of available land on which articulated lorries can park in time of crisis. Even short periods of disruption caused by industrial action or bad weather in the Channel, can cause Operation Stack to come into force. Within hours queues of lorries on the motorways stretch for miles causing widespread disruption to the commercial and community life of the town.

As Dover tries to prepare for the exit from the EU and during and after the exit day, there is going to be extra work for officers and councillors to ensure that the changes are handled smoothly.

5. Growth in Population

The housebuilding plans envisage 400-500 new homes per year for the next 7 years, and possibly beyond then. This will add an estimates 5000+ voters. If the Council remains at 45 councillors this represents 2000 voters per councillor. If the number drops to 37, this represents approximately 2400 voters per councillor.

Reductions below 37 will place a heavy burden on individual councillors.

Concluding Recommendation 4

That, in order that the Council can govern itself properly, and that councillors can perform their many Council, casework, Party and other public responsibilities, the overall total of Councillors remains at 45.

In the event that the Commission feels that a reduction is justified, on the basis of the narrative and figures presented above, we feel that the number of Councillors should not be reduced below 37.

Additional Note

The Labour Group Leader has held discussions with the UKIP Group of 2 Councillors. In these discussions, and in the Council Chamber, they supported the view that the number of Councillors should not go below 37.

Table 1 - Labour Group - Possible Alternative Committee Sizes & Structure

Dover District Council Size: 37 councillors

Committee Name	Number of Members	Number of Scheduled Meetings per year
Cabinet	7	11
Council	37	5

Committee Name	Number of Members	Number of Scheduled Meetings per year
Dover Joint Transportation Board	7 (Fixed Membership)	4
Electoral Matters Committee & General Purposes Committee (Merged)	5	Ad hoc
Governance Committee	7	4
Joint Staff Consultative Committee & Joint Health, Safety and Welfare Consultative Committee (Merged)	5	4
Licensing Committee	12 (4 Sub-Committees)	4
Licensing Sub-Committees	See above	Ad-hoc
Planning Committee	10	13
Regulatory Committee	5	6
Scrutiny Committee x2	2 x 10	2 x 11 (22)
Total	71	57 + ad-hoc

Ratio of Committee Seats to Members: 1.91 seats per member

Joint Committees (Fixed Memberships)

Committee Name	Number of Members	Number of Scheduled Meetings per year
East Kent Shared Services Committee	2 Executive Members (2 members per participating authority)	1 + ad hoc
South Kent Coast Health and Wellbeing Board	2 Executive Members (KCC Sub-Committee)	6
Total	4	7 + ad-hoc