

Submission to the LGBCE on the Future Size of Crawley Borough Council

Introduction: The entire Conservative Group at Crawley Borough Council strongly disagree with the Council's recommendation to increase the number of councillors to 39 as part of the current boundary review, feeling that there should be a decrease instead. As the total number of Councillors has to be divisible by three, my observations are that the evidence points to a reduction of councillors to either 33 or 36 members as being the right number required to effectively conduct the business of Crawley Borough Council.

We believe that the proposed increase of two more Councillors for the future Council is not evidenced and would be hard to justify to the public at a time when local government has streamlined amid the need to make efficiencies. The evidence points to a reduction being more appropriate which fits in with the national trend of modest reductions of Councillor numbers. I believe that a small reduction has to be the right way to go, with the only real unanswered question being whether Crawley Borough Council should reduce to 33 (-4) or to 36 (-1) members. Bearing in mind that there has to be a change from the existing 37 and that the alternative is 39 members, the difference in the proposals is a change of either -3 or -6 from this number of 39.

The recommendation by the Council to increase the number of Councillors to 39 is only supported by the controlling Labour Group. The recommendation of the Council's Working Group was a proposal from its Labour members and was carried by a one-vote majority (3-2). This proposal went to the Governance Committee where again it was carried by a one-vote majority (6-5). The Full Council meeting of the 13th December carried this recommendation by a two-vote majority (18-16), split down party lines.

Background: Crawley Borough Council has 37 members, currently made up of 19 Labour, 17 Conservative and 1 vacancy. The current 37 member council came into being at our all-out 2004 election following our previous boundary review. In the 2002 review, the Council increased its size from 32 to 37 members. The then increase in size had cross-party support because two neighbourhoods were clearly under-represented (Broadfield and Pound Hill) and one entirely new neighbourhood (Maidenbower) needed to become its own ward with a large enough population for 3 new Councillors.

Crucially, this 2004 increase in the number of Councillors from 32 to 37 was not to do with the workload of Councillors as the then 32 Councillors were not overworked, but ensuring we maintained Crawley's neighbourhood principle in which the easiest way was to increase by 5 Councillors. Since 2004, the Council has undergone a major transformation that has spanned the Administrations of Labour (to 2006), Conservative (2006 - 2014) and Labour (2014 - present).

The Council: Information provided to me at my request by the Council's Head of People and Technology, states that the Council's workforce was 855 employees in April 2004, immediately before the 2004 elections when the Council expanded from 32 to 37 Councillors. In November 2017, this figure had reduced to 590 employees which is a 31% reduction in the Council's workforce from the time the last boundary review took effect.

While no one is suggesting a similar reduction of Councillors, it is worth noting that if an equally proportionate reduction were to apply to Councillors at this review, the reduction would be from 37 to 25.5 Councillors. What is clear is that the organisation has slimmed down significantly and become more efficient, making it look very perverse to the public and Council staff if there is a completely opposite trend with the number of Councillors increasing as a result of this review. The ratio of staff to Councillors was 23.1 (855/37) when the last review took effect in 2004. This ratio would shrink to 15.1 (590/39) if the Labour Group proposal of 39 was adopted. A Local Authority that has 31% fewer staff requires less Councillors to run it and to scrutinise it, not more.

Such is the reduction in the size of the organisation since 2004 including a halving of Director level posts from four to two and several less Heads of Service, that a new much smaller town hall has been agreed by the Council for the same site, that will also enable housing and private offices to be built on the existing site. A planning application for this was submitted last month. An upsizing in Councillor numbers goes against the trend of downsizing the organisation and downsizing the town hall that the organisation works from.

The Cabinet: In 2000 when the Council's Cabinet was set up with a Council size of 32, the Cabinet consisted of 8 Councillors leaving 24 non-cabinet members. This number remained the same in 2004 when the Council increased in size to 37 members. In 2012, the then Conservative Administration reduced the size

of the Cabinet to 7 members. This number has remained the same since, including under the current Labour Administration since 2014 meaning that we have maintained 30 backbench members to seven Cabinet members.

With the reduction of one member down to 7, the Council's decision-making Cabinet has followed the trend of the organisation in downsizing. No evidence has been presented to support an increase in backbench members from 30 to 32. We managed perfectly fine prior to 2004 when it was only 24 and I feel that either 26 or 29 backbench members can easily hold the 7 Cabinet members to account.

Council Committees: The size of the Council's committees are excessively large, especially the committee that meets most frequently, the Planning Committee. The reason for this given in Paragraph 4.14 of the Council's submission is extremely weak. The purpose of the committee and its membership is to determine planning applications, not so "Councillors can understand the developments occurring within their neighbourhoods". With such a large membership, some members hardly ever speak at all and it can sometimes feel as though some members are there helping to fill the many positions created rather than having an interest in planning.

All Councillors are sent a weekly list of planning applications and are entitled to address the committee on any application, even if they are not a member of the committee. They can also read the reports and raise any questions with officers outside of meetings.

According to the Local Government Association, the average size of a Planning Committee is between 9 and 12 members. At 15 members, Crawley Borough Council's Planning Committee is much larger than average and could easily lose two to four members.

The Council's Overview and Scrutiny Commission (OSC) expanded from 11 to 13 members at the beginning of the 2017/18 Council year placing further demands on members. The membership of this committee used to be 10 for several years, before rising to 11 and now 13. No justification has ever been given for the increasing size of this committee and it could easily lose two members without any adverse impact on its function. Like the Planning

Committee, some members hardly ever speak and may be helping to fill slots rather than genuinely wishing to be on this committee.

Planning and the OSC are the two biggest meeting commitments for members and are both over-sized by between two to four members each. I know from experience that they can be difficult for Group Leaders to find volunteers for and the Council should not be looking to increase the size of its overall membership in order to fill places on over-sized committees. It should simply address the issue of over-sized committees in the first place.

The Council's Governance Committee could also potentially easily reduce in size by one or two members although it is not as badly oversized as the Planning Committee or the OSC.

The Town Hall Working Group and the Economic Regeneration Working Group (formally Town Centre Working Group) also have excessive memberships of 10 and 11 respectively. This contributes to the low attendance as shown in the Council's submission in Paragraph 4.42. Again these working groups could be more focussed with a more manageable and smaller membership.

It is clear that there is much scope within committees and working groups for a significant reduction in their membership which in turn easily enables a reduction in the overall membership of the Council, be that to either 33 or 36. An increase in the number of Councillors will only compound the issue of a failure to address ever growing and increasingly unwieldy committees.

Councillor Community Workloads: The report submitted by the Council rightly mentions in paragraph 5.4 that the role of Councillors has evolved over time. An ever increasing percentage of our constituents are accessing services and information online without the need to contact a Councillor. This paragraph mentions an increased number of emails and (un-evidenced) use of social media as a reason to increase the size of the Council. In reality, very few Crawley Borough Councillors have a consistent and active engagement with their constituents on social media. A majority of Crawley Borough Councillors have no active online social media Councillor accounts and of those who do such as myself, actual constituents contacting us with case work via this source is limited. An online search of Crawley Councillor's social media easily proves this point.

Email traffic has gone up but less than 20% of these emails are actually meaningful. Increasingly, our emails are made up of adverts marketing for external seminars or from other Councillors generating work or responses from each other, often doing a reply-all to all other members creating yet further email traffic. An increase as opposed to a decrease in Councillors can only add to this with more Councillors talking to each other adding to time used to perform the role.

I find the survey findings listed in Paragraph 5.6 as being totally unrecognisable for the 28 Councillors who are not either a Cabinet member (7), the Mayor or the Leader of the Opposition. Based on my extensive 14 years' experience as a Crawley Borough Councillor, I firmly believe that over half of the 28 councillors who don't perform any of those nine roles will spend a total of an average of 10-12 hours or less a week performing the Councillor role, not the average of 41.6 hours as per the survey . Given that a majority of Councillors work full time or are also West Sussex County Councillors, as well as having families, these numbers just don't add up.

I strongly suspect that 'peer pressure time inflation' has created a culture of severely over-estimating one's workload when completing time surveys. For example, very few Councillors could articulate how they spend an average of 4.6 hours every week on 'community development work' in addition to an average of 3.5 hours of attending community events.

While recognising the population increase, I see no evidence to suggest that the trend of better informed residents accessing information and services online will not continue, and in doing so, more than offset any increased Councillor workload due to population increase.

Comparisons with Neighbours: It should be noted that Crawley is geographically very small and urban, meaning that it is very easy and takes very little time for Councillors to get around their wards. It is easier having a larger electorate in a smaller area than a smaller electorate in a larger area. This means that the ratio of electors to Councillors can be higher in Crawley without adversely affecting residents or Councillor workloads.

The table published in the Council submission in Paragraph 8.8 makes no mention as to when these other Authorities last had a boundary review but it

does include recent electorates. As the national trend has been to decrease Councillor numbers, it is very possible these neighbouring Authorities also reduce their Councillors at their next review, or at the very least maintain the existing number and see an increase in the councillor/electorate ratio assuming an increasing population. It is therefore not the best comparison to make, especially if the last review was many years ago for some of these Authorities. Comparisons should be done with recently reviewed Authorities in order to be up to date with comparisons.

Neighbourhood Principle: The Conservative Group are very concerned that an increase of Councillors to 39 will make it much harder (if not impossible) to come up with a viable scheme for wards to match Crawley's neighbourhoods, as we and Crawley residents currently enjoy. The last meeting of the Working Group looked at sample illustrative schemes drawn up the Council's Electoral Services Manager that showed potential schemes of both 36 and 39 members.

The draft 39 member scheme showed more neighbourhoods having to be badly split in order to accommodate an additional ward of 3 members which had a knock on and adverse impact across Crawley, as opposed to a draft scheme of 36 which much more resembled what we have now in most of Crawley. The public are as yet unaware that this review is taking place but they will be very unhappy if new Council wards greatly deviate from Crawley's neighbourhoods, which we strongly believe a 39 member scheme will do having viewed sample schemes drawn up by the Electoral Services Manager.

If we know that a certain number (in this case 39) is more likely to produce a scheme that will very badly correlate with Crawley's neighbourhoods and wreck Crawley's neighbourhood principle, we believe we should seek to address that prior to that stage of the review before it is too late, and that these concerns should be taken into consideration when determining the future size of the Council.

Conclusions: Since the last boundary review implemented in 2004, the Council has made much progress under Administrations of both groups in making efficiencies and streamlining the organisation. This has been reflected in the overall size of the organisation, with a 31% reduction in staff numbers and with a 12.5% reduction of Councillors in the decision making Cabinet. The soon to be

much reduced size and footprint of the new town hall when built will be a physical demonstration of this.

The final part of this jigsaw should be a reduction in the number of Councillors, either to 33 or 36. A 5.4% increase of Councillors to 39 would be wholly inconsistent with the evidenced direction of travel of every other part of Crawley Borough Council. The Conservative Group believe that both Crawley residents and Council staff would be supportive of a small reduction in Councillor numbers and of the £20,000 a year savings in Councillor allowances that would bring from having 36 as opposed to 39 members, but that they would be unsupportive of an increase.

The Council's Governance arrangements need addressing to create manageable sized committees that can provide focus. An increase in Councillors will only lead to even larger committees in order to give Councillors committee places, with an ever increasing lack of focus. A small reduction of either one or four Councillors will provide a catalyst to address this issue with benefits to how committee meetings operate, with more focus and greater opportunities for members to participate as part of more manageable sized and less unwieldy committees.

The main justifications in the Council's submission for increasing the number of Councillors, such as Councillors ward workloads being increased by social media and the Councillor/electorate ratio averages with other Authorities are weak arguments as detailed above. The Councillor survey findings are very hard to believe and I believe are vastly over-inflated. An element of 'Turkeys not voting for Christmas' feels very apparent in asking members to record a time survey in relation to future Council size, although I accept that an exercise of some form should be done.

To conclude, serious consideration needs be given to the future size of Crawley Borough Council. I believe that the evidence I have set out above shows that there should certainly not be any increase at all in Councillors - but that there should be a decrease to either 33 or to 36 members.

Councillor Duncan Crow, Leader of the Conservative Group.