



**Forest of Dean District Council
Submission to the Local Government
Boundary Commission for England
on Council Size**

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1. Introduction

1.1 In July 2015 Full Council resolved:

That the Council:

(a) Establishes a cross-party working group to work on and oversee the process of the electoral boundary review.

(b) At the appropriate time but no later than May 2016, requests an electoral boundary review of the Forest of Dean District area from the Local Government Boundary Commission for England in time for the 2019 district elections.

1.2 Following this resolution officers contacted the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) to request that a review is commenced. The LGBCE formally agreed to commence this review at its meeting on 19 July 2016.

1.3 The initial stage of an Electoral Review is to determine a preferred council size. This is the number of Councillors required to deliver effective and convenient local government.

1.4 Guidance from the LGBCE states that “All proposals on Council size, whether for changing the existing size or not, should be justified and evidence must be provided in support of the proposal.”

1.5 The Council has therefore prepared this submission dealing only with council size at this stage and it was approved by Full Council on 19 January 2017. The submission makes the case for a Council of 39 councillors retaining elections on an all-out basis every four years. A further submission on the number of wards and number of councillors per ward will be made at a later date.

2. Guidance on Calculating Council Size

- 2.1 The Commission has issued technical guidance which recommends that the following issues are considered when developing a proposal for council size:
- Governance and Decision Making – The model of local governance used by the local authority impacts on the workload of councillors and the working practices of the council. This will therefore have an effect on the number of Councillors required by the Council.
 - Scrutiny Functions – The structure and responsibilities of scrutiny impacts on the workload of Councillors.
 - Representational Role of Councillors – Representation, engagement and leadership in relation to communities affects the workload and responsibilities of Councillors.
 - The Future – Future trends and developments, including Localism and policy development, service delivery and finance.

3. Forest of Dean District Council: An Overview

- 3.1 The Forest of Dean is a geographical, historical and cultural region in the western part of the county of Gloucestershire. It forms a roughly triangular plateau bounded by the River Wye to the west and north-west, Herefordshire to the north, the River Severn to the south, and the City of Gloucester to the east. The area is characterised by more than 110 square kilometres (42.5 square miles) of mixed woodland, one of the surviving ancient woodlands in England.
- 3.2 Approximately 84,500 people live in the district, which has increased by 5.4% since 2001.
- 3.3 The latest growth predictions suggest that the population will continue to increase by a further 0.38% by 2025 to 86,800. Most of the recent growth has been in the towns particularly Lydney and Newent and this trend will continue over the coming years. Lydney's population is expected to increase

significantly, as a result of approximately 1900 houses being built over the period 2011-2026.

- 3.4 The current electorate is 66,941 (taken from electoral register 1 January 2017). The Council presently has 48 members who are elected from 27 wards. 6 of the wards are represented by three Councillors each, 9 are represented by two Councillors each and 12 are single member wards.
- 3.5 The last review of FoDDC's electoral arrangements was carried out in 2001 which recommended that the number of Councillors should be reduced from 51 to 48 and the number of wards reduced from 28 to 27.
- 3.6 Since 2001 the Council has changed considerably to the governance and management arrangements as set out in this report. This has been to ensure best use of resources to meet the changing requirements of the district, the economic climate and in accordance with legislation during the period.

4. Electoral Cycle

- 4.1 Forest of Dean District Council currently elects all members for a four-year term every four years in all-out elections. There is no intention to move away from the current electoral cycle.

5. Managing the Business of the Council

5.1 Leadership

- 5.1.1 Prior to the Local Government Act 2000, Forest of Dean District Council operated a committee system of governance with each committee having its own terms of reference and decision making powers within a particular council service area. Under the Local Government Act 2000, the Council became a 'fourth option' Council, maintaining a modified committee system of governance (with the addition of scrutiny) until 2007.

5.1.2 Following public consultation, in 2007, FoDDC chose to move to have an Executive (Cabinet) with Leader. At that time the Council agreed that the Executive would be appointed by the elected Leader (the 'strong' leader model).

5.1.3 The Executive (Cabinet) currently consists of six Members (although the Constitution allows up to 10): the Leader, Deputy Leader and four portfolio holders. The Leader and Deputy Leader also have responsibility for a portfolio. The portfolios consist of:

- Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Governance, Regeneration and Planning Policy
- Deputy Leader of the Council and Cabinet Member for Shared Services and Growth
- Housing and Wellbeing
- Finance, Asset Management and Performance
- Environment
- Community

However, these are not defined in the constitution and could be changed by the Leader at any time.

5.1.4 The budget and policy framework is determined by full Council. The Executive has delegated authority to take most decisions within that framework other than regulatory and staffing matters excluded by the Local Government Act 2000.

5.1.5 The Executive collectively make all Executive Decisions (Key and Non-Key) on behalf of FoDDC. Although they may delegate these to an officer(s) or joint arrangements with another authority. There is currently no provision for decision making by individual portfolio holders.

5.1.6 With the exception of the Leader, there are no up to date job descriptions or role profiles for Executive members although responsibilities and delegations are set out in the Council's Constitution. The Leader's role is considered a full time one in conjunction with his duties as a Ward Member. Lead Member roles are not considered to be full time but, combined with other committee and ward member commitments, involve an average of 20 – 30 hours per week.

5.2 Regulatory

5.2.1 FoDDC operates two Regulatory Committees; Planning and Licensing.

5.2.2 In respect of planning, approximately 95% of planning applications are determined by officers under delegated authority. The following applications are excluded from the officer scheme of delegation: all major applications; where the recommendation to approve is a significant departure from the adopted development plan or other Council approved policies and/or strategies; applications called in by a Councillor; applications submitted by certain officers or an elected Member; applications affecting the Council's own land or submitted by the Council; and, any other application the Strategic Group Manager responsible for Planning considers should be referred to Planning Committee.

5.2.3 The Planning Committee comprises fifteen members and is appointed by Council on a proportional basis. The Committee is made up of non-executive members. The Council's Constitution requires all Planning Committee members to have received formal training in the planning system before serving on the Committee and to attend ongoing planning training on an annual basis (3 sessions per civic year – or 50% where less than 6 sessions are offered in any year).

5.2.4 The Committee meets on the second Tuesday of every month with meetings generally lasting 2 – 3 hours. Site visits are frequently held prior to the meeting, taking between half – full day.

5.2.5 It is acknowledged that the chairman has additional responsibilities, which demand more of his/her time than the general committee members. This includes attendance at planning pre-meetings, regular contact with the planning officers and attendance at planning team meetings.

5.2.6 In respect of Licensing, the scheme of delegation allows for the following applications to be granted, where no objection is made: personal licence; premises licence or club premises certificate; variation of a premises licence or club premises certificate; variation of a designated premises supervisor; transfer of a premises licence; and, request to be removed as a designated premises supervisor.

5.2.7 The Licensing Committee comprises fifteen non-executive members and is appointed by Council on a proportional basis.

5.2.8 Meetings of the Licensing Committee are held on an ad-hoc basis, as required basis. In 2015/16 there were 10 meetings of the Licensing Committee. To date in 2016/17 there have been 4 meetings. However, a review of Licensing is currently ongoing and there is potential for workload to decrease in the future.

5.3 Audit Committee

5.3.1 The Audit Committee has responsibility for ensuring the Council's corporate governance arrangements are adequate and operating effectively; monitoring the Council's risk management procedures; overseeing the financial processes; approving the annual accounts; and, considering reports from the Council's internal and external auditors. The Committee comprises 7 members and meets four times per year. Regular training and briefings are also held for Committee members, usually immediately prior to their scheduled meeting.

5.4 Standards Committee

- 5.4.1 The Standards Committee has responsibility for ensuring the highest standards of councillor behaviour.
- 5.4.2 The Standards Committee comprises 9 members appointed by Council. The Committee meets on an ad-hoc basis as required. In 2015/16 the committee met 3 times and to date in 2016/17 has met once.

5.5 Demands on Time

- 5.5.1 FoDDC does not currently have up to date formal role descriptions for general Councillors. However, role descriptions are available for the Chairman of Council, Committee Chairman, Leader of the Council, Member Champions and the Chairman of the Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

5.5.2 Role of Member Development Group

The Member Development Group is a cross party working group of 10 members and was set up following the work carried out with South West Councils when the Council achieved the South West Council Charter for Member Development. The Member Development Group meets quarterly and considers training requirements including agreeing a Member Development Programme based on the needs of the individual members and the council. Training and development is a shared responsibility between individual councillors and group leaders of the political groups. In addition, the Member Development Group is responsible for monitoring and evaluation of the policy. There is also a comprehensive Member Induction Programme delivered after each election.

Committee members on Planning and Licensing are required to attend mandatory training sessions before sitting on the Committee and attend regular update and information training during the year.

Appendix 5 in the Constitution sets out the Councillor Training and Development Strategy and Policy Statement of intent for Member Development.

5.5.3 The Independent Remuneration Panel carries out an annual review of Members' Allowances.

5.5.4 The Council appoints Councillors to various outside bodies and partnerships. These appointments are made by Council. There is guidance for Councillors appointed to an Outside Body on their roles and responsibilities which is available in the Constitution. Currently 18 members are appointed to outside bodies.

5.5.5 *Member Champions*

The council has appointed five member Champions in the following areas:

- Children and Young People
- Equalities
- Health
- Older People
- Transport

The Council has also agreed the Champion role Description.

5.5.6 *Portfolio support groups*

Each Cabinet member has the opportunity to set up informal Cabinet Support Groups. At present there is a Planning Policy Cabinet Support Group, members are by invitation from the Cabinet member responsible with the frequency of meetings being determined by the group as required approximately 12 per year. There is also an Asset Management Support

Group holding monthly meetings and an informal Housing Support Group meeting on an ad-hoc basis when required.

5.6 Attracting and Retaining Members

5.6.1 The Council does not play an active role in attracting and retaining members, although historically it has offered information sessions for prospective new members. As the majority of members are affiliated to a political party FoDDC cannot become involved in who will be put forward as candidates. In the 2015 elections all wards were contested and there have been no instances where the Council has been unable to discharge its duties due to lack of councillors.

5.6.2 The current make-up of the Council, tends to be males aged 50+. There is a desire to try and attract a more diverse range of councillors however, how this is to be achieved is yet to be decided.

6. Scrutiny Functions

6.1 The Overview and Scrutiny Committee is appointed to discharge the functions conferred by Section 21 of the Local Government Act 2000 or Regulations under Section 32 of the Local Government Act 2000 on behalf of the Council. In particular it is responsible for scrutinising decisions and decision making, developing and reviewing policy, exercising call-in procedures and investigating matters of local concern.

6.2 The Council's scrutiny procedures were last reviewed and amended in May 2016. The previous structure of a Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Committee with four sub-committees was replaced by a Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Committee and two scrutiny panels (Finance and Performance and Community and Environment), supported by task groups as and when required.

- 6.3 The Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Committee comprises 15 non-Executive members who are appointed by Council on a proportional basis. The Committee meets formally every six weeks. The panels meet every quarter.
- 6.4 The Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Committee exercises overall responsibility for the Overview and Scrutiny Work Programme and ensures that it is sustainable with regard to the support and resources that are available to it and that it is considered in conjunction with other committees of the Council and their respective work programmes in order to minimise duplication of effort.
- 6.5 The workload of scrutiny is manageable largely due to the setting up of task groups which focus the Committee on topics. To date in 2016/17 three task groups have been supported which have considered: Irresponsible Shepherding (Sheep Scrutiny Task Group); Fracking; and Yorkley Court Eviction. On average these have met six times and have taken over 12 months with work still on-going to conclude their work.

7. Representative Role of Councillors

- 7.1 The Forest of Dean is a rural district covering a large geographical area with 41 Parish Councils. It covers an area of 56,161 ha. At its longest point (Beachley point in the south to Chase End Hill Bromsberrow in the north) it measures 52.4km long and at its widest point (Lancaut in the west to Eldersfield in the east) it measures 28.8km.
- 7.2 Each Councillor has their own approach to representation, which relates to their ward, its makeup and the area of the district in which it is situated. Some Councillors will deal with high levels of casework whilst other Councillors will have a lower level. Members feel that the difficulties they face in dealing with ward issues are compounded by multi member wards and the overlap between the tiers of local government.

- 7.3 The most common issues members tend to encounter are planning, housing, neighbourhood disputes, animals (sheep and wild boar) and refuse collections (although refuse collection issues have reduced since the change in collection methods which took place in August 2016). Members have seen an increase in queries in the planning area as the Council makes progress on its Allocations Plan. Councillors generally deal with casework themselves and liaise with officers where required.
- 7.4 In addition to casework, Councillors play an active role in their community. Many Councillors will attend Parish Council meetings within their ward and act as a point of contact between the district and parish. There are a number of parishes in the district embarking on Parish Plans and Neighbourhood Development Plans in which the district councillors are actively involved.
- 7.5 FoDDC has increased the amount of information available online and residents can now access a wealth of information directly via the Council's website. This work is ongoing with the launch of a new website programmed for January 2017.
- 7.6 Councillors believe increased information on the website has not decreased the level of ward casework they receive. Indeed, technology has contributed to increased contact with Councillors being almost instantly contactable via email and mobile telephone with an expectation for a speedy response.
- 7.7 Councillors are often called upon as a last resort when constituents have exhausted all other avenues. There is an expectation from residents that the Councillor is a champion and advocate for their constituents who will work with and liaise with the council and other partners to assist with any problems.
- 7.8 Whilst many FoDDC Councillors are also Town/Parish and/or County Councillors, they are invariably contacted by residents in their capacity as district councillor. District councillors are at the optimum level to respond to the needs of the locality and act as a go-between for the different tiers of local government.

- 7.9 Councillors have a dedicated Members' Room at the Council offices with one PC and stationery. Members are provided with an allowance within which it is intended that an element will be utilised for IT equipment for use with their council business. However, it is acknowledged that the allowance is not necessarily sufficient to cover the real costs associated with IT equipment and consumables which are required to adequately fulfil the role.
- 7.10 With the exception of the Chairman, FoDDC provides no dedicated administrative support to Members.

8. The Future

8.1 Localism, Policy Development and Service Delivery

The Localism Act was designed to give more power to residents, which in turn means that parish councils and local groups are now more active on local matters. Examples include the production of neighbourhood development plans and the registration of local premises as assets of community value. All of these create additional work for councillors, particularly in their role as ward member but also in their roles as decision makers.

Service delivery has changed over recent years, and will continue to change with ever reducing budgets and the sharing of services. The result of these changes is that there are now fewer staff to interact with the public which means that the intermediary role of the Councillor has also increased.

8.2 Partnerships

Many of the Council's services are already shared with partner Councils, through the 2020 Partnership with Cotswold District Council, West Oxfordshire District Council and Cheltenham Borough Council. These include: Finance; HR; Payroll; Procurement; IT; Legal; Building Control,

Environmental Health; and Customer Services. Other services are delivered through private sector partners: Leisure services; Revenues and Benefits.

the next phase of the 2020 partnership will see the sharing of all its remaining services with Cotswold District Council and West Oxfordshire District Council.. The aim of the partnership is to transfer the majority of council employees into a Local Authority Owned Company in September/October 2017, leaving the Council with minimal direct employees.

Whilst this change will see significant financial savings and more efficient services it is not yet clear what (if any), will be the impact on councillors.

However, what is known is that providing services through this new delivery vehicle will require more input for the Leader who will be required to attend at shareholders meetings and there is likely to be a need for an increased scrutiny function.

8.3 Delivery of budget and capital strategy

The reduction of funding has already had an impact on councillors as mentioned above. In addition, the Council has recently adopted a new Capital Strategy with a view to making its capital work more effectively and increase returns on investment. A portfolio support group has been set up and will meet monthly to implement the strategy. The workload of the members on this group, particularly the Portfolio Holder for Finance and Asset Management is set to increase as a result of the strategy.

9. Review of Executive Arrangements

9.1 On 8 December 2016 Full Council resolved:

“This Council recognises the work put in by Cabinet members but resolves with immediate effect to carry out work into preparing options on returning to a Committee system to be presented to Full Council with a view to bring into effect from May 2017”.

- 9.2 Work is therefore ongoing to prepare a report on the various governance options available to the Council and will be presented to Full Council for a decision in April 2017.
- 9.3 The Council size set out in this proposal is considered to be appropriate for either a continuation of the Cabinet system or a move to a Committee system.

10. Conclusions

- 10.1 Forest of Dean District Council considers that the role of Councillors will continue to evolve, with some aspects becoming more complex as partnership working increases and direct service delivery decreases. Elected Members will be increasingly involved with partners as well as attending Committee meetings and having a representational role within their ward and the wider district.
- 10.2 Councillors will need to fulfil the role expected of them by the electorate in terms of representation and problem solving in addition to a more strategic role and representing the Council.
- 10.3 The table below sets out the number of current permanent seats to be filled on Committees and number of meetings per annum. This does not take account of special meetings of standing committees or ad hoc meetings.

Meeting	Seats	Meetings per annum
Council	48	8
Cabinet	6	11
Planning	15	8
Licensing	15	10 (scheduled but not all held)
Standards	9	3
Scrutiny	15	6
Audit	7	4
<i>TOTAL</i>	<i>67</i>	

- 10.4 With a current Council size of 48 members, excluding the Executive (who generally have few appointments to other Committees), there is an average of 1.45¹ seats on committees available for non-executive members.
- 10.5 However, it must be remembered that there are also adhoc meetings of task groups, working groups and portfolio support groups and given the nature of these meetings it is difficult to determine the real seat per member.
- 10.6 All Council meetings start at 7pm, Cabinet at 5.30pm, Planning Committee at 2pm and Licensing at 10am. Meetings of the Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Committee generally start at 6pm but some informal working groups or tasks groups take place during the day. However as many Councillors work and/or have other commitments during the day which means that a move to all daytime meetings would not be possible. It is important that the future size of the council is appropriate to ensure that all meetings, whether evening or day time, will be well attended.
- 10.7 In reaching the optimum number of Councillors of 39, the Council believes that it should be possible to increase the average number of Committee seats per councillor without considerably increasing the volume of work for Councillors.

¹ 67 seats minus 6 Executive seats equates to 61 seats to fill, divided by 42 members (48 less 6 Executive members equates to 1.45 seats per non-executive member.

10.8 A reduction of councillors to 39 would result in an average of 1.85 seats on committees for non-executive members.

10.9 The Council believes that a reduction in the number of Councillors by 9 to 39 would ensure that the governance, decision making and scrutiny functions of the Council would not be compromised and would remain effective whilst still ensuring Councillors are able to fulfil their representational role within their communities. It also considers that 39 would still be sufficient should the model of governance change in the future.

Dear Sirs,

With reference to the work you are currently involved in regarding the size of the Forest of Dean District Council, please find attached the submission agreed by members of the Independent Group within the Council.

On their behalf I would like to thank you in advance for considering our views which differ from those being submitted on behalf of the council overall. Around 25% of council members present at our January meeting did not support the council view.

If you have any questions or points requiring clarification once you have considered our submission I will be very happy to answer them either by e-mail to this address [REDACTED] or by telephone, I am nearly always available on [REDACTED]

Finally, I would be grateful if you could confirm receipt of this e-mail and the attached submission.

Yours faithfully

Philip Burford
Group Leader, Independent Group
Forest of Dean District Council

Forest of Dean District Council
Independent Group
Submission to the Local Government
Boundary Commission for England
On Council Size

1. Summary

- 1.1. On 19 January 2017 a special meeting of Full Council was held to consider a proposal that, as part of the Boundary Commissions' review of ward boundaries within the Forest of Dean District, the size of the council is reduced from its current 48 members to 39.
- 1.2. Members of the Independent Group voted against the proposal because we felt there was insufficient consideration given to the number of councillors needed to run the council.
- 1.3. Since 2007 substantial cost savings have been made within the council but despite member remuneration falling behind inflation these savings have not been reflected in the costs associated with the size of the council.
- 1.4. Over this period the way in which the council operates has changed as has the demands on members. Comparison with other authorities indicates that a modest reduction in the number of members may be appropriate.
- 1.5. Any reduction in numbers needs to be dependent on two vital considerations;
 - a) First, the Council needs to have sufficient numbers of willing and able members to fully conduct the business of the council in delivering services to the district and,
 - b) Second, that the demands placed on individual members in servicing what is largely a very rural district do not become so onerous as to discourage involvement of a good cross section of the community in becoming, or remaining, councillors.
- 1.6. We consider that the worst case for determining the size of a council with no overall control is the number of non executive members needed in the group which forms the administration when the council operates under Leader and cabinet governance.
- 1.7. Key to this is the size of the regulatory, scrutiny and other committees, the level of involvement members are willing and able to commit to and what is a reasonable member workload.
- 1.8. Our conclusion is that while a calculation of council size indicates that 45 members would be needed, the council may be able to operate with 43 or at a push 42.
- 1.9. Below this number we consider that the integrity of the council would be placed at risk, decisions would be difficult to justify and that an adequate level of checks and balances would be lost.

2. Background

- 2.1. On 19 January 2017 a special meeting of Full Council was held to consider a proposal that, as part of the Boundary Commissions' review of ward boundaries within the Forest of Dean District Council, the size of the council is reduced from its current 48 members to 39.
- 2.2. Members of the Independent Group agreed with much of the content of the report put before members but felt unable to support a reduction of this scale and voted against the proposal. The main reason for this position was that the lower number was reached by a negotiation which seemed to heavily based on a desire to cut costs and reduce the number of candidates the major political parties have to find for elections but with little consideration for what is actually needed to run the council.

3. The Need for a Smaller Council

- 3.1. During the period from 2007 substantial cost savings have been made within the operation of the council, the only area in which savings have not been made relate to the cost providing a council of 48 members. It should be noted however that during the same period members allowances have not increased at the same rate as officer remuneration or inflation and that the council no longer provides IT equipment for members.
- 3.2. As part of these efficiency improvements the council has embarked upon a significant number of shared service delivery initiatives, joint working partnerships and organisational changes. These are all intended to seamlessly deliver services to the district while reducing cost. These measures have been generally successful. Demands on members of the council in supporting their electorate have changed and will continue to do so as new ways of working within the council to evolve.
- 3.3. Since 2001 the population of the District has increased by 5.4% to 84,500 people and the Councils' Allocations Plan document, currently under consideration by the Planning Inspectorate, demonstrates that substantial additional housing provision is anticipated during the next ten years. Indeed, as a direct result of the council failing to provide sufficient delivery of housing (as defined by the objectively assessed need) in the past, the ongoing provision is substantially above historical levels and will result in an increased rate population growth, especially during the next five years.
- 3.4. These considerations together could be easily made into an argument for no change in the size of the council but when comparisons are made with other authorities across the country is accepted that a modest reduction in the number of members may be appropriate.

- 3.5. Any reduction in numbers needs to be dependent on two vital considerations;
- c) First, the Council needs to have sufficient numbers of willing and able members to fully conduct the business of the council in delivering services to the district and,
 - d) Second, that the demands placed on individual members in servicing what is largely a very rural district do not become so onerous as to discourage involvement of a good cross section of the community in becoming, or remaining, councillors.

4. **Running the Council.**

- 4.1. The Forest of Dean District does not have a history of a single party or grouping enjoying a large majority of members of the council. Indeed at both of the past two elections there has been no overall control and the largest political group has formed an administration from a minority position. There is no reason to suppose that this situation will substantially change in the future.
- 4.2. Governance is an issue which continues to be debated but currently the Leader and Cabinet model which is operated takes an executive of six members from the governing group away from involvement in the other activities required to run the council.
- 4.3. At present the governing group therefore has to be able to fill, on average, around half of the seats on the regulatory and other committees from a pool of just 14 members (The governing group currently consisting of 20 members, 6 of which form the executive).
- 4.4. While this may provide the worst case scenario in terms of the number of members required to run to council it is clear that a largest political group, or grouping of members, but which represents less half of the council, needs to have sufficient mass to adequately populate an executive and separately the regulatory, scrutiny and other functions of the council. This must be done while the council as a whole maintains political proportionality overall and for each of its individual committees.
- 4.5. It is perhaps not surprising that currently, even with a council of 48, the governing group regularly fails to meet all its obligations.
- 4.6. Until the election in 2015 the executive consisted of five members. In a council of reduced size it is probably reasonable to expect that the current six could be reduced back to five but any further reduction in this number would, we consider, place too much influence in the hands of too few members.

- 4.7. We feel that the main factor in reducing council size is the minimum number of non executive members which can reasonably be expected to discharge the scrutiny and other functions of the council and specifically the functions of the regulatory committees.
- 4.8. In the case of the Planning Committee many of the most difficult cases relate to when it is reasonable to take decisions against policies agreed by Full Council or to take decisions in areas in which policy is silent or outdated. These instances require just a simple majority of the committee and therefore the base point for the size of the council becomes how many members should reasonably be able to overturn the will of council or take decisions on its behalf.
- 4.9. Our view is that in this case, assuming that a full committee is present, the number of members required to take decisions on behalf of Council should not be less than seven. The Planning Committee therefore needs not less than 13 members (in 2007 it was 21 members).
- 4.10. Similar arguments could be made for the Licensing Committee though it is accepted that the frequency of meetings and workload is lower.
- 4.11. The Scrutiny Function is an important one, the Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Committee currently has meetings which are scheduled less frequently than those for the regulatory committees but in addition there are Scrutiny Panels, Working Groups and Enquiries which run in parallel with the business of the main committee and that of the rest of the council.
- 4.12. Involvement in scrutiny is the main way in which back bench members can influence the direction of the council and the way in which it operates. Too great of limitation in the size of the scrutiny function is likely to, and has in the past, given rise claims of member disenfranchisement, we therefore consider that again a reduction to less than 13 members on the main Strategic Overview and Scrutiny Committee is not desirable and that the standing Scrutiny Panels should be not less than 7 members.
- 4.13. The Audit and Standards Committee's have a smaller role in the business of the council, their current sizes reflect this (7 and 9 respectively). The Standards Committee has previously been smaller but this caused operational issues to become evident. It is our view that neither of these functions could be reduced in size and maintain adequate democratic accountability.
- 4.14. Alternate methods of governance are likely to present differing challenges but would, we believe, be able to be delivered by a council sized to meet the above criteria, starting with committee size and in a council with a Leader and Cabinet model but without overall control.

5. Involvement of Members

- 5.1. It is an uncomfortable truth that while some members throw themselves wholeheartedly at their role, others do not and others are selective in what they choose or are able to engage in.
- 5.2. As Independents, generally we have a higher than average engagement in council activity but this is not and cannot be expected to be universal.
- 5.3. If the council is to become more representative of the community we need to accept that some members will have little more engagement than at Full Council and that others will be unwilling or unable to participate in, for example, activities which take place during the working day . Other members will have their involvement limited for business or professional reasons.
- 5.4. An argument is made that if political parties have to find candidates for fewer wards the 'quality' of elected members is likely to rise. This may or may not be true but equally the members elected would have to cover more ground and may not be more willing to contribute to the running of the council alongside their ward responsibilities and day to day lives.
- 5.5. It should also be noted that some of our existing high profile councillors don't enjoy large majorities and might be lost to the council at the next election. Of course new members may rise to the task before them but ultimately none of these things can be guaranteed.
- 5.6. Our belief, therefore, is that it would be wrong to assume that the proportion of members able to contribute as fully as one may wish to the running of the council will vary significantly with the size of the council.
- 5.7. As a rule of thumb and with some evidence to support, we believe that around 25% of members are likely to be fully engaged in all aspects of council responsibility, 25% have little interest in more than attending Full Council and that the remaining 50% fall in stages in between.
- 5.8. In addition to responsibilities in running the council members all have responsibilities to their electorate, doing case work, attending Parish and Town Council meetings and the like.
- 5.9. In a largely rural district members are commonly responsible to three or more parishes, even with the current ward boundaries this can reach to significant areas. Members are not allowed to claim expenses for travelling and other costs incurred in discharging their responsibilities within their own wards.

- 5.10. Some members have to travel for up to an hour to reach the council offices. This is a function of the geography of the district and won't change; it does add to the time demands on members and inevitably leads to a reduced capacity for some to become involved in the running of the council.
- 5.11. It is accepted that some members of the council represent largely urban wards in our market towns. These wards don't cover the same kinds of geographic area as the rural ones and are not located in the extremities of the district; they do however present differing challenges to the members who represent them. It is perhaps also worthy of note that in general members of the District Council who represent the market towns seem to play a big role in the running of their Town Councils but perhaps a lesser role in running the District Council.
- 5.12. Given all of the above it is our view that, on average of those members willing and able to take part in the running of the council, it would be unreasonable to expect a member who does not form part of the executive to undertake more responsibility than 1 seat on the regulatory committees (taken together), 1 seat within the regular scrutiny function and 0.75 seats within Audit and Standards (taken together).

6. Council Size

- 6.1. The calculation of required council size becomes relatively straightforward;
- 6.2. For a group which needs to form an administration from a minority position (of by, for example, just 1 member) but needs to fill half of the committee seats will need;
- 6.3. For the regulatory committees (taken together) 13 non executive members ($13+13=26$ regulatory seats, $26/2=13$ from the group).
- 6.4. Similarly, they will need 13 members to fulfil their scrutiny obligations ($13+7+7=27$ regular scrutiny seats, $27/2=13.5$ from the group)
- 6.5. And, for Audit and Standards (taken together) 11 nonexecutive members ($7+9=16$ Audit and Standards seats, $16/2=8$ from the group, $8/0.75=10.66$ members after applying the weighting for workload).
- 6.6. Clearly then, a group of 13 active non executive members would be sufficient. However, given that 25% of members are likely to be unwilling or unable to be involved, beyond attending Full Council and doing ward work, the number of non executive members in the governing group in this scenario will need to be 17 ($13/75%=17.33$).
- 6.7. If an executive of five is then added, the number of members required in the group rises to 22.

6.8. For this group to represent a minority administration by one member the size of the council has to be a minimum of 45 ($22*2=44$, $44+1=45$).

7. Conclusion

- 7.1. The view taken by the Independent Group at the Council Meeting on 19 January was that by relying on some members to pick up rather more than their share of the work in running the council and that by accepting a small level of regular absenteeism the council might be able to operate with 43 members, or perhaps and at a push if an even number of members were considered acceptable, 42.
- 7.2. Our view is that below this number the integrity of the council would be placed at risk, decisions would be difficult to justify from a democratic view point and that the level of checks and balances which should exist would be lost.
- 7.3. Additionally we consider that if the District had a record of returning a council which had a significant overall majority or that if the council was not so heavily involved in shared services and partnership working there may be an argument for a slightly smaller council. However as neither of these situations apply, or are likely to apply, within the Forest of Dean District a larger than average council seems inevitable.
- 7.4. If the Council were to reduce for the current 48 to 43 this would represent a 10.5% saving.

Independent Group, February 2017

Dear LGBCE,

Please find my submission to the Ward Boundary review in the Forest of Dean District, attached.

Please don't hesitate to come back to me with any further queries.

Yours Faithfully,

Cllr Chris McFarling

To the Local Government Boundary Commission for England.

I am writing to you with reference to the consultation on boundary change for Forest of Dean District Council. At the Full Council meeting of 19th January, 25% of the Council voted against the recommendation to reduce councillor numbers from 48 to 39.

I wish to express my concern at the proposed reduction, and how the report of the Boundary change policy working group was presented.

The report omitted any rationale or reasoning for the proposed reduction in the number of councillors, though 'cutting costs' and 'making savings' was the common unwritten mantra.

The report suggested that councillor workload had increased significantly, and that there was a problem with 3 member wards with no exploration of how these issues might be addressed other than by cutting councillor numbers. Little evidence was presented in support of the proposal, other than to save money. Of course, continuing this line of reasoning to its logical end, the Council would save the most money by cutting councillors out of the council entirely, leaving officers to manage the statutory service contracts themselves.

I was elected in 2015 and have little experience of what the average workload of a FODDC Councillor has been, or indeed is expected to be. What I do know is that I spend many hours on planning applications case work, many hours reading reports which are so easily copied through email to support an argument or point of policy, and an increasing amount of time responding to concerns in service delivery whilst localism, policy change, government cuts and rapid socio-economic change prevail.

I understand that I am best placed to bridge the gap in understanding and communication between residents and Parish Councils on the one hand, and County Council on the other as a District Council intermediary, also providing services and policies itself. There is an expectation that I respond quickly to enquiries from residents of my ward, the electronic facilities having revolutionised communication so; and that I champion their causes and campaigns, that I act as an advocate when representing their needs and concerns.

On average, each FODDC Councillor represents 1760 residents. With 39 councillors, this would increase the number represented by 400 to about 2166 residents. This will mean, on average, a greater potential workload with increased case-work and outreach. This would also further distance the Ward councillor from their residents with finite time reducing councillor accessibility.

At present, the allowance afforded this councillor works out at about £6.90/hour. With government cuts and changes to service delivery, it is likely that residents will increasingly call upon their local councillors to address their concerns and difficulties accessing help and advice. I have no way of knowing whether my workload is average or not. I cannot compare my position with others as no qualification or quantification of work demands is available, nor performance management a guiding influence.

Nevertheless, I believe Councillors are elected to serve, and as a whole we provide a critical service to residents of the Forest of Dean. Reduction in numbers belies other political agendas which may wish to see the dissolution of this District council and the creation of a unitary authority. When

increases in workload cause delays in service, it is likely that councillors will be blamed and their raison d'être challenged.

A reduction in councillors will reduce the diversity of political parties and manifestos available to local residents. It is quite common for Green Party Councillors, for example, to be elected in second place in two member wards. This is not unusual for other minority party representation. I believe a reduction in political diversity weakens socio-political resilience and diminishes the growth of alternative solutions to the big issues of our time.

I strongly believe that by cutting councillor numbers, a cut in a critical local service is being excused in the name of austerity. As the Shadow Secretary of State for Communities & Local Government has stated, "Councils core reason for being is to deliver local services, not central government cuts".

By reducing councillor representation, this proposal is cutting democratic integrity.

I thank you for your time in reading my submission. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you feel it would be helpful.

Yours faithfully,

Cllr Chris McFarling



St Briavels Parish Council & Forest of Dean District council

Dear Sirs

I am concerned about the proposal to reduce the number of Forest of Dean councillors from 48 to 39. Representation by a District Councillor is at the heart of democracy – the base of the pyramid so to speak. If the number is reduced there will obviously be less representation and they will represent a larger section of residents who may have less in common with each other in needs and therefore it will be more difficult to act in favour of all those represented. The workload of the remaining councillors will obviously increase. Currently, where the District councillor role is performed diligently, it is already onerous in terms of workload and with the population growing, is increasing. In my view it will not be possible to fully represent residents if the number of councillors is reduced.

Your faithfully

Nicola Packer

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

[Redacted]

Dear Sirs

Please note that the UKIP group on the Forest of Dean District Council endorse the Submission to the Local Boundary Commission for England put in by the Independent Group on proposed council size

This would see the size of Council reduced from 48 to 43 members

Councillor Richard Leppington

UKIP Bream ward