

Electoral Review of Cambridgeshire County Council

Submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England by
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Council Size

Introduction

In the previous review of divisions, when the number of electors in the County was around 460,000, a mean number of electors of 6,639 per division was used and produced a council of 69 councillors.

Since then population changes extant and anticipated result in a forecast 525,000 electors. Retaining the previous division size would require a council of 79 councillors.

Against this background the County Council is submitting a recommendation which calls for the size of the council to be **reduced** to 63 or 8,300 per councillor. Whilst this accords with the policy of cutting visible costs irrespective of the consequences, it is fatally flawed.

An alternative view suggested in this brief note recommends instead that the council size be increased simply by 2 to 71.

There are three main reasons why Council size should increase:

- ✓ Equality of representation
- ✓ Financial fairness
- ✓ Supporting the workers, not the shirkers.

The first two of these have been set out in greater detail in the submissions from Cllr. Leeke and Cllr. Downes. They can be summarised as follows:

Equality of representation

Whilst county draft boundaries, base 63, show significant numbers of divisions failing the $\pm 10\%$ test, the draft arrangement provided by Cllr. Leeke shows all 71 potential divisions lying within that limit.

This provides greater equality of representation. Three of the district councils would keep their existing number of councillors, two would receive one additional councillor each.

Financial fairness

It was not that long ago that the council rejected a proposal from the Independent Remuneration Board that basic allowances be increased by 25%. That proposal from the IRB was designed to move remuneration for this council back towards the average for our type of council. This council is cheap to run as regards its councillors.

The reallocation of resources consequent upon the recent return to the committee system made a small reduction in the overall cost of democratic representation. This has reduced the costs of councillors in Cambridgeshire even further.

At the same time workload caused by the new committee system means that the expectation of councillors has increased as few will be able to hide out on the back benches and all will be expected to participate in debate. In a NOC council a greater premium will be placed on attendance at committees and the decision on which way to vote. Councillors can no longer coast secure in the knowledge that the leader or the Leader plus cabinet have made every decision. Workload at council has increased.

At a time when workloads on councillors is increasing there need be no driver to fewer councillors simply because of the cost. Cambridgeshire councillors are cheap already

Supporting the Workers not the Shirkers

The third reason, **supporting the workers not the shirkers**, is the main thrust of this brief submission.

Council work is not just about sitting in meetings. For many residents their most important personal interaction with councillors comes with local casework.

To be effective there has to be an expectation on the part of residents that there is some point in contacting the councillor. Where the reputation is that there "is no point" because "they never do anything" then there seems little point in voting and interest in the democratic process dies. When the opposite reputation has been earned then residents, both those directly affected and all their contacts, readily understand that their vote "makes a difference".

To be sustainable it is essential that the number of potential cases is kept within realistic levels. A good reputation can be demolished by overload just as easily as by indifference. The hamster in its wheel needs to be able to keep up.

I am in a two member division, but the presence of the River Great Ouse makes partitioning of the workload easy to manage. So, in effect, I am a single member covering some 7,300 residents with a few additional opportunities and challenges from neighbouring areas. Some cases require trivial effort on my part, perhaps simply advising someone as to the correct phone number for a particular issue; others can appear seemingly endless (50 plus emails and counting, several meetings, etc.).

Over a period of some 60 days since the 2014 elections, records kept by me indicate that casework is coming in at a rate of approximately 3 every 2 days. Over the same period they involved 124 phone calls, 168 emails, 69 meetings (some trivial taking just seconds, others taking over an hour.) and 6 letters. Some can be solved instantly, but a set of yellow lines in an accident-prone crossroads has recently been installed at the end of two and a half years of chivvying and pushing. Combined with the meeting element of the job it creates a challenging workload.

Whilst the harnessing of social media can facilitate outwards communication it also makes it much easier for residents to contact the councillor. At the same time the reduction in funding for local authorities is leading to loss of services, leading to anguished and heartfelt objections from local people.

Of course for those who make little or no effort to do casework, those who involved themselves in being a county councillor for the money or for the ability to wear civic chains of office, the number of electors in their division is irrelevant. For those trying to provide a service they are crucial. Increase the numbers too far and the whole house of cards would collapse.

A significant increase in residents per councillor at this critical time would easily make this contribution to society completely unmanageable, leading to disillusionment with councillors and the democratic process.

Conclusion

The suggested reduction in councillors to 63 is the agenda of those for whom casework is at best a distraction and at worst something to be avoided.

It is accepted that increasing the number of councillors to the 79 required to maintain the status quo in terms of electors per resident is unachievable in the current financial climate.

It is, however, suggested that the compromise number of 71, (a 3% increase in councillors absorbing a 14% increase in electors) which best accords with the equality of representation criteria, is affordable and is necessary to continue to provide a level of support to residents that in turn underpins the democratic basis of local government in this country.

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Happy to talk if that might help [REDACTED]. Could discuss our "Don't Panic" cards, used between elections.