

B&NES Liberal Democrats

Mr David Owen
Review officer for B&NES
The Local Government Boundary Commission for England
[By email]

Thursday, 15 June 2017

Dear Mr Owen,

B&NES Liberal Democrat Group submission on Councillor numbers

The Liberal Democrat Group on B&NES Council supported the Council proposal for a reduction by approximately 10% in Councillor numbers – from 65 to 59 – and we endorse the B&NES ‘official’ submission to the Commission. We recognise that a reduction in the number of Councillors in B&NES is inevitable and will represent a financial saving.

We propose that a Council of 59 Councillors would be manageable in terms of the workload of each individual Councillor. However, we would not support a reduction beyond 59, for the reasons outlined below.

Representational workload

We believe that the workload of individual Councillors from the casework or ‘representational’ point of view is particularly high in B&NES and is tending to increase. The burden on each individual Councillor will naturally increase due to population growth and this will be exacerbated if the numbers of Councillors are reduced to a level below 59.

Factors expanding the workload of Councillors include:

- Cuts to local government funding and the resulting changes and reductions to local services: these are resulting in a higher level of casework being received by local Councillors.
- Increasing communication channels, such as email and social media, paired with the increasing expectation of a speedy reply Councillors are much more accessible to residents than previously (e.g. through social media and email) and the expectation of a quick response has been raised.

In addition, there are a number of local factors which we suggest create a higher than average workload for B&NES Councillors. These include:

- Very engaged residents who are more than averagely involved in local issues and public affairs. An example is the recently-formed Bath Deserves Better protest group, which is a multi-issue, coalition, campaign group of very active, engaged and articulate residents who are holding open meetings and asking Councillors (particularly Cabinet members) to attend.

Bath also has many residents' associations including some for very small areas, e.g. the Circus residents' association represents a single, notable street.

- Many local planning considerations which mean that ward Councillors very frequently have to get involved in planning issues even if they do not sit on the development management committee. Local planning issues include: the largest number of listed buildings outside Westminster City Council; the UNESCO World Heritage Site designation for Bath city; official designations including AONB, conservation areas, and green belt. There are also large, high profile development sites across the area including the former MoD sites in Combe Down, Bathwick and Lansdown, development sites at Keynsham, and the Bath Quays regeneration.
- A very high number of licensed premises and other licensing issues locally due to the tourist economy and the high number of students.
- The high number of students locally (25% Bath residents over two Universities and the College) unfortunately has tended to create its own problems and casework issues, particularly around waste, parking, planning and licensing. This includes many applications for purpose-built student blocks, which tend to excite high levels of interest from residents, and the additional, local planning (Article 4 Direction) and additional licensing requirements around houses in multiple occupation.
- Bath is the only part of B&NES with no parish or town council, so half of the authority has only one tier of local government and Bath residents have only their B&NES Councillors to turn to. The authority currently has a balance between representation from Bath and North East Somerset Councillors – 32 and 33 respectively.

Places on Council committees

Out of 65 Councillors in B&NES, there are 9 Cabinet members who are unavailable to sit on other committees. In addition, the two holders of the two annual civic posts of Mayor of Bath and Chair of the Council do not normally sit on committees during their year of office, as these positions are considered to be 'full time jobs' and the holder is expected to be somewhat politically neutral. This leaves 54 Councillors to fill all committee positions. With a Council of 59 Councillors, there would be 48 available to fill other committee positions.

At the Council AGM in May 2017, the new political proportionality table ([which can be seen here](#)) was published. This showed 82 positions on scrutiny, regulatory and governance committees, meaning that most backbench Councillors need to sit on two of the Council's internal bodies. This is before the requirement for Councillors to fill positions on (or attend meetings of) a wide variety of other bodies, including:

- The Standing Committee of Charter Trustees of the City of Bath [7 Bath Councillors].
- Parish Council and Town Councils; there are 51 parishes in North East Somerset, of which 48 have parish or town councils. For example Councillor Neil Butters, who represents Bathavon South ward (which is roughly the size of Bath), is expected to attend the monthly meetings of all six of the Parish Councils in his ward. There are other large wards such as Bathavon North, Bathavon West, and Farmborough.
- Various joint health scrutiny bodies. For example, our health spokesperson Councillor Tim Ball is a member of the Council's Health and Wellbeing Select Committee; he is also an Observer on the Health and Wellbeing Board, a member of the Joint Health Overview &

Scrutiny Committee and a member of the SW Ambulance Service joint health scrutiny committee.

- Three new scrutiny/governance bodies associated with the West of England Combined Authority: a Scrutiny committee; a Voluntary Joint Scrutiny arrangement with North Somerset; and an Audit Committee.
- Avon & Somerset Police and Crime Panel; Avon Fire Authority.
- Corporate Parenting meetings (all Councillors act as Corporate Parents to children in care of the authority); the Adoption and Fostering panels.
- Community Forums for all areas, student community partnership.
- Numerous local 'outside bodies' including charities, trusts, schools, colleges and universities, as well as local community organisations, such as Transition Bath or the Bathampton Meadows Alliance.

Opposition groups are spread particularly thin. The Liberal Democrat Group currently has 16 Councillors – of which two are Mayor and Chair for 2017-18 – and 19 places to fill on Council internal committees alone. There is no slack in the system and disproportionate burdens are created if someone is ill, away or unable to take on many extra responsibilities due to work or family commitments (see also 'Diversity' below).

Please find as an appendix a list of our current Councillors and the roles they fulfil, as an example. This list only covers local government bodies, not parish or town councils or community groups.

If the numbers of Councillors on B&NES were reduced beyond 59, the workload for individual Councillors would be untenable and would mean only those with no other outside responsibilities could consider standing for Council (see also 'Diversity' below). The solution of reducing the size or number of committees would arguably reduce the effectiveness of scrutiny and regulation, make Council processes less efficient and could increase the workload on individual members of each panel (as the same volume of issues would need to be considered).

It is widely considered that the growth in outsourcing of Council services ought to reduce the workload for the Council. However this is not always the case. Outsourcing can actually increase workload due to contractual complexity/opacity and the need for careful scrutiny of arm's length organisations. An example of this is the Council's contract with Virgin Health Care to provide local health and care services, which is a very complex contract covering numerous services and bringing in many partner organisations. In addition, there is a growing trend for services to be brought back in house as promised financial savings do not materialise. An example of this is IT support services in Bath and North East Somerset Council.

Diversity

We believe that B&NES Council, as a modern, forward-looking organisation, should seek to be more representative of the make-up of the community it serves. Diversity is also good for its own sake as 'diverse teams make better decisions'.

Two aspects of diversity are age and occupation. Being a Councillor can take up a lot of time – the Council's evidence shows that 78% Councillors currently spend 3 to 4 hours or more per day on

Council business; a minority spend *at least* as much time as a full time job. Please refer to figure 1 of the March 2017 Council evidence report “Boundary Review – Members Survey Results”:

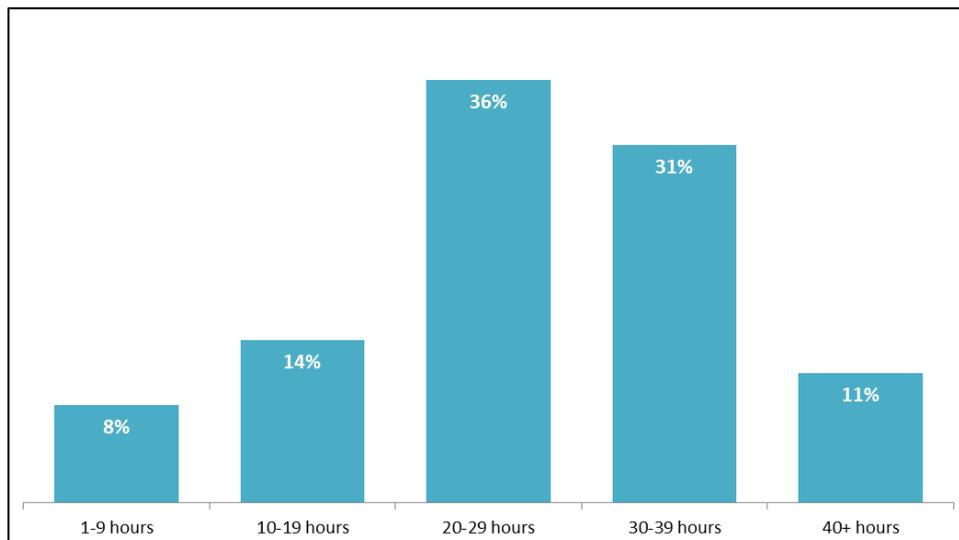


Figure 1 – average weekly time spent on council business; responding to the question “on average how much time do you spend on Council business in a week?”

It’s also worth noting that some of the most time-consuming Council responsibilities – such as the development management (planning) committee – are those that do not come with a special responsibility allowance.

We believe that a drastic reduction, beyond 59, in the number of Councillors would necessarily lead to a drastic increase in the workload for each individual Councillor and that this would be off-putting to those with outside restrictions, such as full time jobs, school age children, other caring responsibilities or disabilities. It’s likely that individuals with such restrictions would be discouraged from standing for election and the diversity of the Council would be limited. We would not wish to see a Council entirely made up of retirees. It’s also likely that any elected Councillor with outside restrictions would be discouraged from pursuing leadership roles within the Council.

For illustration, within our current Liberal Democrat Group of 16 Councillors, we have a number of working-age Councillors, five of whom are in full time, paid employment and four of whom have school age children.

We recognise that there is a need to make a financial saving from the cost of Councillors but on balance we feel that the proper representation of local people has equal weight in considerations. There are other opportunities to make savings on the cost of Councillors without reducing the numbers beyond 59 and thus affecting their ability to work effectively.

Yours sincerely,

Councillor Dine Romero

Group Leader

On behalf of the Bath & North East Somerset Council Liberal Democrat Group

Appendix: List of local government roles currently fulfilled by the 16 Liberal Democrat Councillors.

Rob Appleyard	<p>Member of Planning, Housing and Economic Development PDS Shadow Cabinet member for Economic Development Member of the Avon Pension Fund Committee Member of Avon Pension Fund Investment Panel Member of Development Management Committee (Planning) Member of the Licensing Committee Bath City Forum LD nominee Member Advocate for vulnerable people Member of the Charitable Trust Board and Alice Park Trust sub-committee Deputy Mayor of Bath 2017-18 BathNES Care Network (OB)</p>
Tim Ball*	<p>Member of Health and Wellbeing Select Committee Shadow Cabinet member for Adult Social Services Group Observer of the Health and Wellbeing Board Joint Health Overview & Scrutiny Committee SW Ambulance Service joint health scrutiny committee Member of the West of England Combined Authority joint scrutiny and Member of the Voluntary joint scrutiny arrangement with North Somerset. Member of Charter Trustees of Bath Standing Committee Honorary attendee at the LDF Steering Group</p>
Cherry Beath	<p>Chair of Council 2017-18 Avon & Somerset Police & Crime Panel (OB)</p>
Neil Butters	<p>Member of Communities, Transport and Environment PDS Shadow Cabinet member for Transport Sub on Development Management Committee (Planning) Sub on the Licensing Committee Member of the Avon Fire Authority B&NES representative on LGA Rural Services Network (OB) Bath Transport Commission</p>
Paul Crossley	<p>Shadow Cabinet member for Policy, Localism and Partnerships Member of Development Management Committee (Planning) Group Spokesperson on Development Management Committee (planning) Member Advocate for Sustainable Environment Lib Dem rep on Environmental Sustainability Partnership. Holbourne Museum of Art (OB) Faith Forum (OB) 4 The Circus (OB)</p>
Andrew Furse*	<p>Member of Resources PDS Shadow Cabinet member for Finance and Efficiency Member of Corporate Audit Committee Bath City Forum LD nominee</p>
Ian Gilchrist	<p>Mayor of Bath 2017-18. Sub on Development Management Committee (Planning) Member of Communities, Transport and Environment PDS</p>
Steve Hedges*	<p>Group Chair Deputy Group Leader</p>

Alison Millar*	Chair of Children and Young People PDS Shadow Cabinet member for Children's Services
Michelle O'Doherty*	Member of Children and Young People PDS Member of Charter Trustees of Bath Standing Committee
Caroline Roberts	Member of Development Management Committee (Planning) Member of the Licensing Committee Regular member of the Licensing sub-Committee Member of Charter Trustees of Bath Standing Committee
Nigel Roberts*	Member of Standards Committee Member Advocate for Cycling and Walking
Dine Romero*	Group Leader Shadow Cabinet member for the Leader of Council portfolio Bath City Forum LD nominee Restructuring implementation committee LDF Steering Group University of Bath Court (OB) Initiative for BathNES (OB) Local Government Group (General Assembly) (OB)
Richard Samuel	Member of Communities, Transport and Environment PDS. Shadow Cabinet member for Community Services
Will Sandry	Chair of Planning, Housing and Economic Development PDS Shadow Cabinet member for Homes & Planning LDF Steering Group Member of the West of England Combined Authority Audit Committee Sub on Development Management Committee (Planning) Member of the Licensing Committee Member Advocate for Mental Wellbeing
Shaun Stephenson-McGall*	Member of the Avon Pension Fund Committee Bath City Forum LD nominee Sub on Avon Pension Fund Investment Panel

OB = "Outside Body"

* = Councillor who has significant time restrictions outside of Council work such as a full time job, care responsibilities, school-age children or other restrictions.