



Electoral Review

Wealden District Council

Stage One - Council Size

**Submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for
England
(July 2015)**

Introduction

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) is an independent body that is responsible for conducting boundary and electoral reviews of principal authorities in England. The Commission is carrying out an electoral review of Wealden District Council in a coordinated process alongside simultaneous reviews of all the districts and boroughs in East Sussex as well as East Sussex County Council.

The electoral review will examine whether the boundaries of wards (divisions for a county council) within the local authority area need to be altered to ensure fair representation at the local government elections. In the case of East Sussex it has been identified that the county and two of the five districts/boroughs have triggered the intervention criteria of the Commission.

East Sussex County Council and Hastings Borough Council both meet the criteria for electoral inequality due to 34% and 38% of divisions/wards respectively having a variance of greater than +/- 10% and in Wealden there is a single ward (Uckfield Ridgewood) that has a variance of greater than 30%. The other Districts/Borough in East Sussex are also likely to become subject to an electoral review in the near future due to significant electoral imbalances between wards.

It was, therefore, agreed that a County wide review would take place to ensure economies of effort as well as providing opportunities for a co-ordination of boundaries between the tiers of local government in the County.

The table below sets out the current imbalances in the County and Wealden.

	East Sussex County Council	Wealden District Council
Number of divisions/wards >10%	15 (34%)	9 (26%)
Number of divisions/wards >20%	2 (5%)	2 (6%)
Number of divisions/wards >30%	0 (0%)	1 (3%)

The main reason for electoral inequality arises from additional developments being constructed since the last review and the movement of people across areas.

The review will take place in two stages:

Stage 1 – Council Size (the subject of this submission)

The LGBCE will come to a view on the total number of councillors to be elected to each of the Councils in future. They will do this after considering the Council's submission on council size.

Stage 2 – Ward Boundaries (consultation September to November 2015)

Having decided on the Council size the Commission will consult on where the ward boundaries should be re-drawn. This consultation is open to all and the Council will put forward proposals as part of that process.

Review Criteria

The review will only be considering the size of the Council and internal ward boundaries. It specifically excludes all forms of outer boundaries (District and parliamentary) as well as any

unitary status issues. It will also not deal with any community governance reviews (parish boundary reviews) – of which there are none currently being undertaken in Wealden.

The first part of the review will determine the number of councillors to be elected to the Council in the future. To do this the Commission will make its judgement by considering three areas:

- **Governance arrangements** – how decisions are taken across the broad range of the Council's responsibilities.
- **Scrutiny functions** – how the scrutiny functions relate to the decision making and responsibilities to outside bodies.
- **Representational role of councillors in the local community** – how councillors engage with people, conduct casework and represent the council on local partner organisations.

Background

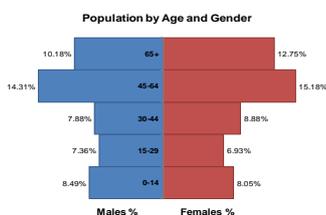
Wealden - Profile

Covering 323 square miles, Wealden is the largest district in East Sussex.

With two-thirds of the district covered by the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the South Downs National Park, as well as 34 conservation areas and over 2,500 listed buildings, Wealden has to place a high value on protecting the countryside.

In 2013 Wealden had a population of 152,578 (ONS mid-year estimates) (62,676 households) with half the population living in five main towns: Crowborough, Hailsham, Heathfield, Polegate and Uckfield. The rest live in villages and hamlets in some of the most attractive countryside in the South of England.

As can be seen from the diagram the largest age band is 45 to 64 and the average (mean) age of the population is 44 (Data taken from the 2011 ONS Census).



The health of people and life expectancy for both men and women in Wealden is also generally better than the England average.

By 2021 the total population is projected to increase by 7.6% to 164,219. This is an increase of 11,641. The projection takes into account the housing to be developed in that time period. In Wealden it is expected that 4,447 additional dwellings will have been built by 2021. There is also expected to be a further 1895 dwellings built by 2027.

Most growth is proposed in the form of sustainable urban extensions to promote sustainability, ease of access to services and reduce the carbon footprint of development. The significant growth will be within Hailsham and Uckfield with additional growth at Stone Cross and Polegate. Lesser and proportionate growth proposed for Crowborough (300 dwellings) owing to environmental and economic constraints.

Previous Review

The last electoral review took place in 2000 when the Council decreased in size from 58 to 55 councillors. Since that time the Council has changed considerably and is now a smaller enabling authority which has delivered significant innovations over the last few years and serves the District more efficiently. Also since that review the governance of the Council has changed with a Cabinet and Scrutiny system introduced in 2001.

Review Process

The process that the Council used to formulate this proposal is set out below;

- The Overview and Scrutiny Committee tasked a Working Party to consider the numbers of Councillors required to ensure appropriate levels of governance, scrutiny and community leadership for Wealden District Council from 2019. The Working Party had Members from each of the political groups represented on the Council and met to consider the evidence and made a recommendation to the Committee on the future council size. The Working Party was supported by Charles Lant, Chief Executive and Gabriella Paterson-Griggs, Democratic Services Manager.
- The Overview and Scrutiny Committee considered the report of the Working Party and made a recommendation to Cabinet based on the findings.
- Cabinet considered the draft submission on 15th July and forwarded its recommendation for consideration at Full Council on 29th July 2015.

Proposal

Currently Wealden District Council has 55 elected Members in 35 wards. The proposal is to reduce the Council size to 42 Members from the local government election due in 2019. The Council considers that this number will ensure appropriate levels of governance, scrutiny and community leadership for the Council from 2019.

In coming to this conclusion the Council took into consideration a number of factors.

Member Seminar

On 25th February following Full Council, Members were addressed by representatives of the Local Government Boundary Commission, Alison Lowton (Lead Commissioner) and Tim Bowden (Review Manager), and the Project Manager for East Sussex, Derek Stevens.

The key stages of the review were identified and Members went on to consider the first of the key issues i.e. the number of Councillors required to run the council from the next full District Council elections scheduled for May 2019.

Following a general question and answer session Members worked on tables each led by a member of the Working Party with officer support. Members were initially asked to consider the general question based upon their experience of the last four years (in some cases significantly longer) of being a WDC Councillor whether they felt the Council needed more Councillors, fewer Councillors or about the same. The answer was overwhelming support for the view that the member functions of the Council could be undertaken with fewer elected Members.

Members were reminded by the commission that they must be satisfied that the number of Councillors proposed going forward must be sufficient to ensure that three specific functions can be carried out namely Governance, Scrutiny and Community Representation.

Members then went on to consider that question in the light of likely future policy developments e.g. localism, and transformation, the possibilities of further shared service and or devolution of powers, outsourcing and service delivery changes, corporate plan commitments and of course a future of continued financial constraint due to deficit reduction.

Feedback was varied however when asked to consider whether any or all of the likely impacts would lead to a different conclusion Members still felt on the whole that the Council could support its functions with a reduced number of elected Members.

When asked to consider numbers, feedback from tables ranged with estimates between 25 and 48 with those supporting the greater numbers feeling that development management obligations were still onerous.

All Member Survey

All Members were asked to complete an online survey to ensure that Councillors had the opportunity to give their views on what size the Council should be in the future. The questions asked and analysis of results of the survey can be seen in Appendix A.

In summary the majority of the respondents believed that the Council needs between 41 and 45 Councillors in the future. In terms of attendance at meetings 65% spend 1-3 hours per week on average at Council meetings and 43% spend 1-3 hours a week attending non-formal Council meetings.

Dealing with constituents takes on average 3 – 5 hours a week and community obligations approximately 1 - 3 hours per week. 57% of the responders considered that the role of a Councillor had changed since they had first become elected mainly based round fewer meetings to attend and outsourcing of services. 50% felt that the workload had decreased or stayed the same again with attending fewer meetings being the main reason given.

Those who had seen their role increase had become a Portfolio Holder or Committee Chairman. The Parish Council expecting more of Councillors and the use of social media leading to an increased expectation from residents were also cited as reasons.

No Councillors were dissatisfied with the level of support provided to help them undertake their role but a number of them went on to say that better contact with officers would further support them. Engagement with constituents is mainly through telephone, emails and attending community events.

When asked to select the statement that best described the role the Council will have in the future 57% felt that it would have an increased “enabling” role with fewer directly employed staff, more contracted-out services and more shared services. This was followed by 26% considering that the role would continue as it is.

No Councillors considered that the community would be best served by three member wards and 70% thought one member wards were best although there were caveats given that stated it did depend on the geography of the ward.

An option was given for any further comments and a number of these related to the Council being able to operate with fewer more committed Councillors and that Councillors should be more involved in Council matters and that there needs to be a sufficient number to ensure effective scrutiny.

Governance and decision making arrangements

The Council introduced the Leader and Cabinet model in 2001. Since that time there have been a number of Committee restructures and following the most recent, across the board, review in 2013 the same structure has been in place. All of the Council’s meetings are webcast live and recordings are available for six months on the Council’s website.

The Cabinet is responsible for the strategic management of the authority within the budget and policy framework agreed by the Full Council. The six Cabinet members have individual decision

making powers within their portfolios and also work with the non-executive Members through Cabinet Advisory Groups (one per Portfolio).

The Full Council meets four times a year and approves the budget and policy framework and considers draft policies and discusses other matters of significant interest.

The other Committees are:

- Overview and Scrutiny Committee – specific responsibility for overseeing and scrutinising all external and service functions of the council; undertaking reviews of the functions and performance of external organisations and partnership organisations; assisting the Council and the Cabinet in the development of its budget and policy framework.
- Audit and Finance Committee – specific responsibility for approving the Council’s statement of accounts, budget monitoring, risk management, internal and external audit reports etc.
- Personnel Committee – responsible for pay, pensions and appointment of Corporate Directors.
- Planning Committees North/South – two committees both dealing with the consideration of planning applications in the north and south of the district.
- Licensing Committee – to undertake the Council’s functions as a licensing authority and to determine applications through a sub-committee.
- Standards Committee – to promote and maintain high standards of conduct by councillors and consider alleged breaches of the code as reported by the Monitoring Officer.

In considering the Council size, how it might structure its representation on the existing committee arrangements under reduced numbers was looked at as set out in the table below.

	Committee Numbers				
Committee	Current (55)	45	42	40	35
Cabinet	6	6	6	6	6
Overview & Scrutiny	15	12	11	10	10
Audit & Finance	10	10	9	8	7
Personnel	7	6	6	5	5
Planning Committee North	12	10	10	10	8
Planning Committee South	12	10	10	10	8
Licensing	15	12	12	10	10
Standards	7	6	6	5	5
Total Cttee Places	84	72	70	65	59
Ratio of members to committee places (excluding Cabinet)	1: 1.625	1: 1.79	1: 1.78	1: 1.75	1: 1.83

All of the above options assume the next Council operates with the existing committee structure. No changes to committee structure are currently proposed.

However, the table demonstrates the impact of the options on the existing structure. This shows that each committee could operate effectively with a reduction in the number of members. In each example, excluding Cabinet and Cabinet members from the calculations applicable to the other committees, a ratio of under two committee places per Councillor is shown, which demonstrates that the existing governance arrangements could be accommodated without creating any significant burden on a reduced membership.

In looking forward, whilst this demonstrate effectiveness within the current governance arrangements, it would be expected that options would be explored and reviewed for committee

and meeting structures as part of the next four year Council as required. It would be unusual if committee structures did not change again over that period.

Scrutiny

Scrutiny in Wealden works alongside the Cabinet and helps to make sure the Council is delivering services efficiently and effectively, and that the Council is responsive to the needs and opinions of Wealden's residents and organisations. The Overview and Scrutiny Committee also receives and considers any call-ins of Cabinet or individual portfolio holder decisions that are made.

The Committee meets up to six times a year and sets its own work programme as well as undertaking a number of task and finish reviews each year – these range from short and quick reviews to deal with a very specific topic to those that consider a wider-ranging issue in more depth.

The table above shows that whilst the number of members on that Committee would be reduced, there would be no impact on the frequency of meetings, the size of the agenda and therefore the overall effectiveness of that Committee.

Representatives on Outside Bodies

Wealden District Councillors sit on a wide range of external bodies as part of the Council's partnership working arrangements. There are currently 47 Member appointments made to 37 outside bodies.

Community Representation

Regarding Community Representation, the broad and high level feedback from the Member workshop and the survey appears to support the view that due to a range of factors the number of Members overall can reduce. The principal drivers cited included the changing way in which the Council operates, in particular due to the outsourcing of key contracts, the reduction in staffing numbers and the advent of the customer contact centre.

The workshop also raised the role of Localism and Parish Councils. Whilst the overriding view was that localism hadn't seen a transfer of functions down, what had occurred was an increasing of the efficiency and effectiveness of Parish Councils. This had seen some reduction in the workload on District Councillors as Parish Councils were now able to deal with more enquiries directly.

Discussion also highlighted that some Parish Councils were leading the way in which they worked with their District Councillors through allowing Members in multi-member wards to rota their attendance at Parish meetings, or by receiving updates reports from District Councillors early on the agenda. These have had a positive impact on the time commitment for District Councillors. Parishes are also now kept informed on a more regular basis through the parish bulletin, parish conference and parish alerts.

Another significant factor was the role of technology meaning that the role of the Councillor had changed as there was more interaction via email and less face to face contact with residents. This was seen as a major efficiency driver in the way Councillors dealt with resident enquiries, as well as being significant in diverting many enquiries away from Councillors as residents either contact the Council directly (be that through social media, email or the Contact Centre) or simply find the information themselves through the website.

The combination of all these factors led to a conclusion that the ratio of Councillors to residents could increase substantially as Members could now be much more efficient in the way they managed their contacts with local residents.

CIPFA Family and other LGBCE Reviews

The current composition of the Council is 55 Councillors covering 35 wards with 39 Parish and Town Councils and 3 parish meetings.

The proposed council size set against the 15 'nearest neighbours' authorities as set out by CIPFA - the local authorities that share similar characteristics with Wealden – is within the range of those councils. Out of the 15 one is currently under review (Lewes DC) and four have recently been subject to a boundary review and have each reduced the council size as shown in the table below:

Authority	Original Size	New Size	Change
Suffolk Coastal DC	55 Cllrs 34 wards	42 Cllrs 26 wards	-13 Cllrs - 8 wards
Stratford-on-Avon DC	53 Cllrs 30 wards	36 Cllrs 36 wards	-17 Cllrs +6 wards
South Hams DC	40 Cllrs 30 wards	31 Cllrs 20 wards	-9 Cllrs -10 wards
West Dorset DC	48 Cllrs 33 wards	42 Cllrs 24 wards	-6 Cllrs -9 wards

Reviews undertaken by the LGBCE in the last year have been analysed for District Councils and of the 32 reviews carried out 24 of the Councils have had the number of Councillors reduced by, on average, nine. The range for the reductions goes from -1 to -17 Councillors. Seven of the District Councils reviewed have had no change and one Council has had an increase of two Councillors.

Electoral Forecast

In 2021 the electorate is projected to increase to 130,228 in Wealden from the current number of 119,172 entries on the electoral role. The electoral forecasts for all the authorities in East Sussex were calculated for the review by East Sussex County Council taking into account data supplied by each District and Borough Council. These have been submitted to the Commission separately and the methodology accepted.

The projected electorate by year is shown below including that for the County:

Authority	Estimates	Projected Electorate						
	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Wealden	119,172	122,936	124,372	125,625	126,821	127,962	129,071	130,228
East Sussex	395,013	411,949	415,482	418,775	422,245	425,916	428,895	431,902

Currently with 55 Members the overall electors per councillor is 2,166 at the time of the next election when the new Council size of 42 would be implemented this would rise to 3,046. However, as set out earlier, with the increased use of technology and social media Members can now be much more efficient in the way they manage their contacts with local residents.

Other Council Sizes considered

The Working Party proposed and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee concurred to recommend to Cabinet that the Council size be reduced from 55 to a number within the range of 40 - 45 Members from 2019 (with the final number being at the lower end of the scale).

Taking this into account the effect of the change on stage 2 of the review was considered as well as the opportunity for a co-ordination of boundaries between Wealden and the County Divisions.

Reason for Council size of 42

The principles that were taken into consideration in coming to a decision on the Council size were to adhere as far as possible to the co-ordination of boundaries with the County divisions and to have single member wards wherever possible.

The County Council proposal, at present, recommends that the Council size stay the same at 49 Councillors and the number of councillors within each district/borough remain the same but that there only be single-member divisions. Currently in Wealden there are 14 County Councillors over 11 Divisions. This would therefore change to 14 Councillors over 14 Divisions. If the District Council were to reduce to 42 councillors this would enable each County division to encompass three complete District wards.

Effective local government is best achieved where boundaries between the tiers are co-terminus. Split electoral areas increases the challenges involved in creating and maintaining local relationships.

If for any reason the number of County divisions increased/decreased in the Wealden District the Council would like to be able to revisit the Council size to determine whether the principle of co-terminus boundaries could still be achieved.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Following consideration of the information available and the views of the Working Party and Overview and Scrutiny Committee as well as the feedback from the all Member seminar and the results of the Member survey it was considered that a reduction in the number of Councillors was appropriate.

It is, therefore, recommended that Wealden District Council size be reduced from 55 Councillors to 42 Councillors coming into effect in May 2019.