

# Derbyshire County Council Labour Group

## Submission on Council Size

The Labour Group at Derbyshire County Council, having considered the proposed submission from the Council supporting the retention of 64 councillors, wishes to make the following alternative submission for a council size of 65.

Whilst we agree with much of the analysis in the Council submission, there are a number of issues relating to governance, scrutiny, localism and councillor workload, community identity and representation that we believe require greater emphasis. In our opinion, there are strong arguments for a substantial increase in the size of the council, but this would be a difficult position to justify in the current financial climate.

### **1. Governance.**

The Council submission contains information about the current structure of the Council. However, these are rapidly changing times for local government and the demands and pressures on council leadership are increasing. Among these are:

- the financial situation, with DCC implementing £94m cuts to budgets over a four year period
- service redesign
- major new duties eg. public health
- workforce reduction
- property rationalisation

These changes increase the demands on all councillors, whether they are directly involved in leading these changes, in scrutiny or just in keeping updated.

Furthermore, the Labour Group has started planning for the next DCC elections in 2013. Given the current pace of change, we believe there may be a need for major political and organisational change, which will further increase the governance pressures on elected members.

Obviously at this stage our plans are not fully developed, but the emerging themes are around:

- a resolution to the 'them and us' situation arising from cabinet governance, wherein a small group of councillors have a great deal of information and power and backbench members feel excluded. This may well require more meetings, briefings and training sessions for all members
- a greater devolution of decision-making and resources to a more local level
- a much stronger role for scrutiny (see below)

## **2. Scrutiny**

The old external inspection regimes have been abolished by the current government and councils, including DCC are developing their own performance management and self-assessment frameworks.

This will make the work of scrutiny committees more important in terms of monitoring performance and holding the executive to account. At DCC there has recently been a reduction of Improvement and Scrutiny committees from four to three. The Labour Group believes this is a retrograde step and would look as a matter of urgency to strengthen the role of scrutiny should we become the majority group in 2013.

An immediate step would be to reinstate the fourth scrutiny committee. The scrutiny of all health services, both NHS and public health, needs to be strengthened, particularly in light of the major changes ahead. There is an urgent need to better engage the public in scrutiny reviews. The whole scrutiny function will need to become more outward-looking, identifying best practice in other local authorities and looking beyond County Hall.

All of this will improve governance and develop service delivery. It will also increase the workload of elected members beyond the point at which the current council size will be able to sustain.

### **3. Localism and Councillor Workload**

There is an increasing recognition of the role of councillors as community leaders. The DCC report mentions some aspects of this in relation to Parish and Town Councils, but the Labour Group believes that the community aspects of a councillor's duties have been significantly understated, as exemplified below:

- Local government in Derbyshire is 3 tier – county, district/borough and parish/town. Liaison with the other two tiers is a considerable time commitment. Many county councillors attend parish/ town councils and residents' associations every month to facilitate good communications at the community level. Several county councillors are also elected members of district/borough and parish/town councils.
- DCC is the education authority and many elected members are governors of one or more of their local schools.
- Community groups – members are involved with many voluntary and community groups from youth groups to luncheon clubs, gala committees to sports clubs, community transport schemes to safer neighbourhood meetings.
- Most councillors hold regular surgeries and all will have casework from local residents. In recent times, the financial and other pressures on families have increased significantly and in some communities this has caused an increase in councillor casework.

All of this takes up far more time than the average of 8 council committees quoted in the DCC report. The size of electoral divisions has a direct bearing on the workload, particularly in rural and semi-rural parts of the county, because each individual community has its own range of groups and organisations and rightly expects county councillor support.

### **4. Community Identity and Representation**

Whilst we appreciate that the prime consideration in the review is the equalisation of electorate numbers per division, we believe that electoral boundaries should not be arbitrary lines on the map. They should reflect local perceptions of community identity as far as possible.

The outcome of retaining the status quo, ie. 64 divisions, would most likely be to increase the number of councillors in South Derbyshire by 1 and reduce the number in NE Derbyshire by 1.

NE Derbyshire is currently over represented. The district has a current electorate of 79,014 and is allotted 9 councillors giving an average electorate of 8,779. On a strict mathematical basis NE Derbyshire would have 8.5 councillors. Reducing the number to 8 would, however, simply reverse the problem increasing the average electorate to 9,877, increasing the average size of each division by 1,098.

Whilst an equality of electorate between each division is a major priority for the Commission in undertaking this review, creating divisions that reflect the communities they represent must also carry weight. A reduction in the number of seats in the NE Derbyshire area therefore would not only result in creating divisions that pay scant regard to community identity but is also likely to give rise to the need for a further boundary review within the next 10 years. Continual shifting of electors from one division to another acts as a disincentive for electors to participate in the electoral process as it is difficult to build up the sense of 'belonging' within the division or knowledge of who the local county councillor is.

In terms of community representation, Derbyshire County Council like many others, suffers from a lack of diversity within its elected members. There is an over-representation of older white males. Currently 72% of councillors are male and only 28% are female. 66% of councillors are aged 60+ and 34% are under 60. There are no councillors from a black or minority ethnic group and very few have a disability, as far as we are aware. While there are many potential reasons for this, the workload and time demands of being a county councillor are significant factors. It is very difficult to juggle full-time employment or family/caring commitments with the role of county councillor.

The Labour Group is committed to enhancing the role of members of the council and ensuring that they have the capacity to be community leaders within their own electoral divisions. The current size of divisions is a limiting factor on a member's capacity to perform that role.

There is therefore, a strong argument for substantially increasing the size of the current council.

Derbyshire currently has 9,413 electors per councillor, which is above the national county council average of 8,667. To bring Derbyshire into line with the national average would require an increase in council size to 70. The arguments presented above would certainly justify this in terms of better governance, scrutiny and representation of the public.

However, in the current economic climate the Labour Group acknowledges that there may not be widespread public support for such a move. An increase by 1 division to a council size of 65 would deal with the acknowledged need for a new division in S Derbyshire and would reduce the overall average to 9,281 electors per councillor, thereby moving the council in the right direction.

### **Conclusion**

The Derbyshire County Council Labour Group requests that the Commission consider an increase in council size by 1 division to 65, thus addressing the population growth in S Derbyshire and recognising the governance issues and other pressures outlined in this submission.