Dear Sir,

Review of the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea

I am writing to argue  for a reduction in the number of councillors serving the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea. I have read the detailed - some might say deliberately obfuscating - submission by the council, seeking to reduce the size of the council from 54 to 51 members.

I would urge a more substantial reduction. I would also urge the commission to avoid considering multiples of three in its decision on overall council size because I will be arguing at subsequent stages that the council has been ill-served by three-member wards in the (relatively short) time it has had them.

Over-representation

Kensington & Chelsea is the most over-represented council in London; in fact, so over-represented are its residents that the number of electors per councillor more closely resembles that of a medium to large district council than a London borough.

Compare the councillor to elector ratio with every single one of the Royal Borough’s neighbours (using December 2011 electorates):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Council</th>
<th>Electors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kensington &amp; Chelsea</td>
<td>1,586</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Westminster</td>
<td>2,028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hammersmith &amp; Fulham</td>
<td>2,397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brent</td>
<td>2,934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wandsworth</td>
<td>3,453</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

To have the same level of representation as Westminster RBKC would merit 42 councillors; as Hammersmith & Fulham, 36; as Brent 29 and as Wandsworth just 25.
Kensington & Chelsea is SUBSTANTIALLY over-represented. Of these boroughs, all but Brent is an inner London borough. Do Kensington & Chelsea residents have any exceptional reason to be more represented than any others? They do not.

Indeed, on any measure - including the council’s own submission - the reverse could be argued. Kensington & Chelsea is the most affluent borough in London. Wealth of residents is not, per se, relevant to council size, except in so far as there is likely to be less need for the assistance of councillors in affluent areas.

Kensington & Chelsea also - consistently - produces the lowest turnout in elections in London. In 2010, on the same day as the general election, less than half the electorate voted. The previous three elections all produced turnouts of below 30%. This apathy can partially be ascribed to the uncompetitive nature of elections in the Royal Borough but again, it hardly suggests an electorate especially engaged with their councillors and desirous of their over-representation.

**Population and electorate forecasts**

The council has again attempted to project its population and electorate to 2017. Unfortunately, the council’s figures have proved to be erroneous in the past - the very fact that a review has been triggered just a decade after last boundary review came into force is testament to that.

What we do know is that the electorate of Kensington & Chelsea has declined in a year and a half from 109,815 to 85,673. This is actually lower than the 91,653 low-point of 1990 when the introduction of the Community Charge/Poll Tax, and the hope of evading it drove thousands of electors off the register.

It is of course unlikely that the electorate has genuinely declined by 24,000 since May 2010 - but it emphasises the problem this borough has with maintaining its electoral register and the vast fluctuations that can occur here.

My point in raising this issue is that the LGCE should take with a pinch of salt any arguments that medium term population growth should be a factor in consideration of this borough’s representation because there are no vaguely reliable estimates.

**The tri-borough arrangement**

I now turn to an issue the council, in its submission, highlighted: the tri-borough co-operation it has with Hammersmith & Fulham and the City of Westminster. This arrangement has come into being since the previous boundary review that came into effect in 2002.

Assume, for one moment, that this arrangement leads, in due course, to a single borough for West Central London (which organisationally has already come into being). The number of councillors this super-borough would have - unreformed (and
assuming we accept the council's preferred size of 51) would be 157, representing an electorate of 317,637.

Croydon is currently London's largest council with 70 councillors representing approximately 250,000 electors. In other words, this super-borough would have twice as many councillors with just a 26% larger electorate.

We do not have a proposal here to create a super-borough, so why I am I wasting time on these extrapolations? Simply to return to my earlier point about just how over-represented this tiny slither of central London is.

The pattern of warding

I welcome changes to the review process that have been brought in since the last London-wide review prior to 2002, to enable the different questions involved to be considered separately.

The pattern of warding is an issue for a later stage of the review save for the fact that it affects council size if the borough retains uniform three member wards. If it abandons this pattern - my preference would be for single member wards - the issue of council size becomes more flexible. We don't need to consider whether 48, 51 or 54 councillors is the right number, but could look at 50 or 45, for example.

The pattern of warding in this borough is significant because of the consequences that came to the fore at the last boundary review. Colville ward had to take a strip of Lancaster Road across Ladbroke Grove: the only section of the ward to the west of the ward. Likewise (though not for electoral equality reasons because there are barely 100 residents in the area) Golborne ward crosses Ladbroke Grove in the far north. Notting Bars/Norland have the most convoluted ward boundary. The creation of Cremorne ward forced the annexation of a chunk of Chelsea a world away from the Worlds End estate that had, essentially, comprised its own ward (South Stanley) prior to that.

These are examples of council size having a significant impact on the pattern of warding.

Other issues

The borough council offers up a number of - largely spurious - arguments to justify only a modest reduction in size, including the number of councillors it has in executive and scrutiny roles. Hammersmith & Fulham operates with 46 councillors perfectly satisfactorily: during the last review submissions were even made by that council for 42 members (I should know - I wrote that submission). District councils manage to function with vastly fewer councillors.

Regardless of whether there are seven or ten members of the council cabinet is irrelevant to this issue: that would leave 30-33 backbenchers on a 40 councillor
model which remains a huge number. It may have an impact on the administration’s mechanisms of political patronage: creating positions for non-cabinet councillors to maintain easier control of them, but that is not a matter for the LGCE.

It is entirely possible for this borough to operate without difficulty with a significant reduction in councillors. The LGCE cannot be held hostage to the way the council’s administration chooses to organise itself: that is the tail wagging the dog.

**My proposals**

I believe the LGCE should be considering a council size in the realm of 40 councillors: an electoral quota of 2,142 electors per councillor. Below 40 councillors and I would agree with the RBKC submission that administering the borough and holding the administration to account. Much above that number the authority will continue to be more over-represented than any borough in London - and I just don’t see how that can continue to be justified.

I am therefore submitting that the LGCE should look at a council size somewhere within the region of 35 to 45 councillors. I leave it to you to determine whereabouts in that range to set the precise number, but I note that you have just proposed a council size of 45 for Tower Hamlets, a council with a far larger population but with a directly elected mayor.

I look forward to participating in future stages of the review of Kensington and Chelsea.

Yours sincerely,

Adam Gray