



# Wythall Residents Association



Hon Secretary:

Mr A J Pappin, [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED]

## Wythall Residents Association thoughts on Council Size.

### Summary

Wythall residents association is a small independent group with a catchment area that is coterminous with Wythall Parish Council, i.e. the three wards of Drakes Cross and Walkers Heath, Hollywood and Majors Green and Wythall South. We hold two of the five seats within those wards. Wythall is geographically distant from Bromsgrove town, with no public transport linking it to the administrative hub.

In principle, we are in agreement with single member wards, however we feel that a supporting protocol would need to be developed to ensure that residents are adequately represented and supported when either a casual vacancy arises or when a member is absent for any reason.

In principle we are in agreement with reducing the number of members. When determining the ideal number we have considered both the current member workload, the impact of emerging changes in legislation and opportunities where we feel that members could contribute more to managing the business of the Council.

### Recommendation

We recognise that over recent years there has been a reduction on workload / committee involvement due to the cabinet system and increased officer delegation; however we believe that to some extent this can be offset by the recognition, over recent years that local councillors need to engage more with their local communities to effectively represent their interests and the interests of the Council

We therefore feel that an increase of 15% on the 2011 councillor / electorate ratio would be manageable. Projecting this forward to the estimated 2017 electorate, this would equate to a council size of 36 members

### Managing the business of the Council.

The contribution that members make to the decision making process varies by party and individual. One outcome of the cabinet system is that fewer members are directly involved. The 'strong leader' approach that Bromsgrove has adopted is perceived as autocratic and a robust scrutiny process could provide a healthy balance; this is one area that we feel should be developed further.

We consider that the level of delegation to officers is about right. Members may call in planning applications that would otherwise be delegated to officers. There are on average two or three applications per meeting that have been called in. In many cases these do result in the officers' recommendation being overturned.

One current area of duplication of effort for both councillors and officers is where there is a multi member ward and a resident has raised the same issue with more than one member. This is particularly an issue where the members involved do not belong to the same political party. Single member wards would prevent this from happening.

- Scrutiny of the Council, outside bodies and others

Scrutiny provides an effective mechanism for ensuring that the council delivers value for money services for which it is responsible and which the community needs. We consider that the Council would benefit from increasing the number of start and finish task groups and that it currently under utilises the wealth of knowledge and experience that members could contribute. This is particularly relevant at a time when we need innovative solutions to address the dilemmas of providing more with reduced resources. The Council's scrutiny process does include health.

Many Councillors are members of more than one tier of local government. The Council is represented on many outside bodies, which can result in a conflict of interest especially with local trusts such as housing associations and the arts complex. Reducing the number of councillors would potentially increase the proportion of 'dual hatted' members; Council decisions could be questioned, if there are insufficient non-interested members.

## **Representational Role**

- Engagement

Councillors mainly engage with electors on a one-to-one basis or through Parish Council or PACT meetings (Police and Communities together). We also engage through newsletters, public meetings, telephone enquiries and by personal contact. We do not use surgeries.

Issues and complaints are dealt with either directly with officers or by representing residents at council meetings. Time that is spent 'on the ground' engaging with residents is difficult to quantify or to define what the 'ideal' would be. The key is to ensure that we are visible, accessible and can respond rapidly to any local resident problems. We are both representing Electors to the Council and the Council to Electors.. We would consider that the time that we spend engaging with our current resident base is about right.

- Councillor profile

Following the elections in 2011 there is a significant increase in the number of younger councillors who manage to juggle work and council duties. We consider this to be a benefit to both the Council and residents, providing a more balanced and representative member base. We would like to see the trend increase. There is a danger that by increasing the ward sizes, and hence the workload per councillor, the average age of members would increase, as the task of balancing a work and council duties becomes untenable. We believe that there is a risk that reducing the number of councillors significantly could preclude younger working candidates from standing for election in future.

- Technology improvements

There have been significant changes in technology since the last boundary review. The onset of electronic communications has provided efficiencies in the way that councillors can work. Email contact with officers saves considerable time; sending emails to officers in the evenings, to reach their in tray next morning. For pure service issues, we do act as a go between, however with modern technology, this is not particularly time consuming.

## **Impact of changes in legislation on representational role**

- **The localism Bill**

The implementation of this bill is still at its embryonic stage. At this time we are unsure of what the long term impact on workload may be, however, we would expect to increase. We will need to add time and value to neighbourhood plans and also support local communities in any other initiatives such as right to buy or right to challenge. We consider that there will be an increase in workload to achieve the desired outcomes of the new localism bill, however, it is too soon to quantify how much.

- **Planning**

Bromsgrove district contains a high proportion of green belt land that is under increasing threat from developers which is exacerbated by changes in planning legislation and the need to build more houses. This has a double impact. As councillors, we need to ensure that our emerging local plan and any future review of the green belt is robust, is in the interests of our residents and adds value to our communities. We consider that this will have an ongoing positive impact on work load as there will be a need for additional training, time to consult with and support our residents. This will result in an increase in workload to support our residents with planning issues for the foreseeable future.