

# **Submission to Local Government Boundary Commission for England**

## **Review of Colchester Borough Council**

### **Submission from the Liberal Democrat Group regarding council size**

#### **Summary**

The Liberal Democrat group proposes that the number of councillors on Colchester Borough Council should remain at 60. We considered the three options: increasing the numbers of councillors, keeping the current complement or reducing the complement. Given the continuing growth that the Borough is experiencing the roles of councillors and the desirability of effective local representation, we feel maintaining the current number of councillors is the best way forward for the Borough.

The group is of the opinion that increasing the number of councillors would not be a realistic proposition. On the other hand we also are of the view that while there may be superficial benefits to reducing the number of councillors, such a move would lead to a reduction of representation for the people of Colchester at a time when the Borough is facing significant challenges.

The group is of the opinion that in the absence of a more fair and effective electoral system for local government, elections to Colchester Borough Council should remain on the current model of elections by third using single member plurality. The group would review this position if councils in England were allowed to use the Single Transferable Vote system as used by councils in Scotland and Northern Ireland.

#### **Detailed response**

##### **1. Size of electoral wards**

At present an average three-member ward in Colchester contains 6,528 electors. With no change in the number of councillors, a three-member ward in 2020 is likely to contain 7,248 electors. Currently only two three-member wards in Colchester contain this number of electors and none of the two or single-member wards do. On its own this 11% growth would be a significant change in the nature of electoral wards, but any cut in the number of councillors would change this even more dramatically. For instance, reducing the number of councillors to 51 in 17 wards would lead to an average ward size of 8527 by 2020. This would, we suggest, represent a radical shift in the nature of democracy and representation within the Borough.

Current levels of representation have enabled councillors to function as integral members of the community and to develop close relationships with residents. While some of this may be inevitably lost as a result of the

Borough's rapid growth, to reduce the number of councillors would be to artificially hasten this process, separating councillors from the communities they represent.

Colchester Borough is one of the fastest growing areas in the country<sup>1</sup>, and has been for the past decade. One reason Colchester has been able to accommodate this growth is because councillors have been close to these new communities. At the last review, new wards (e.g. Highwoods and Mile End) were created to ensure growth areas were properly represented.

## **2. Participation and ward size**

Evidence suggests (see, for example, Hansen, Palfrey and Rosenthal, 1987 or Oliver, 2000) that voter turnout in elections reduces as constituency size increases. To reduce the number of councillors at a time when the Borough is experiencing dramatic levels of growth would, dramatically increase ward sizes which could then lead to a reduction in voter turnout. This impact could then be compounded by changes in ward boundaries, breaking down old connections and familiar relationships. On this evidence councillors could be elected on low turnouts,

## **3. Effective representation of communities**

Colchester has developed as a patchwork of small communities, each with a separate identity and different needs. The current electoral boundaries and ward sizes allow for these communities to be represented separately, normally by councillors who are local to that area. By maintaining the number of councillors at 60, we feel that these local links and historic wards could be mostly maintained, allowing over the longer term communities of interest to be represented at the Borough level without diluting their identity.

Broadly, an average ward size of around 7,250 electors would allow rural communities like Tiptree and Wivenhoe to make up single wards, while maintaining the existing urban distinctions between communities and allowing for distinct representation for areas such as Shrub End, Mile End and Berechurch. Colchester has a strong tradition of local communities having their own identities, as can be seen in the number of active parish councils, local plans and village design statements. We feel it is important for these areas to be represented as distinctly as possible and not to have their identities subsumed into the oversized rural wards that would result from a reduction in the number of councillors.

However, if the size of the average ward is increased much beyond 7,250 then wards will of necessity have to be larger than the currently recognised communities of interest within the Borough. This could lead to problems in ensuring the equitable representation of different areas, particularly if communities have to be divided to fit within the new electoral map and/or the voices of small areas are drowned out by the (possibly radically different) concerns of larger areas that they have been electorally tied to.

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1 See, for instance, <http://www.lsh.co.uk/campaigns/uk-vitality-index/fastest-growing> which ranks Colchester as the 7<sup>th</sup> fastest growing area in the UK.

#### 4. Councillor ward workload

The last review established a baseline of 1992 electors per councillor. At present the 60 councillors represent 130,550 electors with an average of 2176 electors per councillor. With no change in the number of councillors, the Borough's projected population increase makes those figures 144,964 and 2416 respectively in 2020. This represents an 11% increase in the number of electors per councillor, and effectively means that even with no change in the number of councillors, each councillor can expect their representational workload to increase by a similar amount.

If the number of councillors is reduced, then councillor workload will similarly increase. The table below gives some examples, from the 2013 baseline:

Number of councillors	2020 Electorate per councillor	% Increase from current workload
57	2543	16.9
54	2685	23.4
51	2842	30.6
48	3020	38.8
45	3221	48

Anecdotal evidence from councillors in wards that have experienced significant growth in recent years (such as the Liberal Democrat councillors in Mile End and Stanway wards) suggest that representing areas with significant growth requires extra time commitment from councillors. From the early stages of the planning process through to dealing with the concerns of residents moving into new estates councillors regularly face additional tasks.

When surveyed as part of this review, councillors generally felt that their workload was much as expected. A dramatic increase might therefore discourage people from standing for election, or require an increase in the allowance for councillors to take account of the extra workload.

#### 5. Workload within the Council

The current system effectively gives each councillor one formal role within the Council itself in addition to their ward work. This serves as an effective way of ensuring all councillors have a voice within the system, but also that the workload is shared equitably.

These responsibilities constitute a minimum for each councillor. The current number of councillors allows for

committees such as Planning to be large enough to include a cross-section of councillors from across the borough, allowing different urban and rural views to be expressed. On top of their formal committee assignment, each councillor will likely have to attend other meetings: substituting at a meeting for another councillor who is indisposed; attending meetings to speak up for residents; sitting on a Task and Finish group, attending Neighbourhood Action Panels and attending briefings for their own committee assignments. Many councillors also regularly attend meetings of panels and committees (particularly Cabinet and Scrutiny), to ensure they keep up with council affairs as a whole.

The current number of councillors provides a large pool of experience and ensures no individual councillor feels overworked. However, if the number of councillors is reduced and their ward workloads are drastically increased, then that may no longer be the case, and effective representation and scrutiny within the Council could be significantly diminished.

This Council has chosen to keep services in-house rather than outsourcing them and becoming a commissioning council. Councillors can therefore have more work in their wards dealing with council officers. Colchester's adoption of Zonal working also means that councillors have an active role in the management of their local area, which adds to their workload and would obviously require an increased amount of their time if numbers were reduced. But in our experience these policy choices combine to deliver an effective way of engaging with residents and over the long term encouraging community action.

## **6. Demographics of councillors**

At present the membership of the Council is relatively diverse, with a number of councillors combining these duties with full-time employment. However if the workload was to be increased dramatically, we do not believe that it would be as easy for an individual to combine being a councillor with working full-time. As the remuneration for being a councillor does not seem likely to dramatically increase, it means that being a councillor could well be restricted to those who have a significant private income, are retired or are willing to give up full-time work to be a councillor. This would be harmful to the Council's ability to represent the public of Colchester if a large number of those residents are excluded from representing their neighbours through no fault of their own.

Our commitment to diversity suggests therefore that the current size of the Council is about right.

## **7. Cost**

Some have suggested that reducing the number of councillors could save money. While we do not believe that expense is a valid argument for changing democratic structures, we do not believe this argument to hold up in any case. An increase in workload for councillors could well lead to the independent panel that determines allowances deciding that a commensurate increase in them is required. Furthermore a dramatic increase in the workload, particular for senior councillors in more hands-on positions, could lead to the effective full-time professionalisation of the role and councillors becoming eligible for pensions (as already happens in other authorities), which would dramatically increase costs beyond their current levels.

## **Electoral period**

We believe that Colchester is currently best served by maintaining election by thirds. This ensures that the Council is regularly judged by the electorate and that there remains a close and continual relationship between councillors and those who elect them.

We also believe that given the current options for councils, this remains the most democratic choice. Under election by thirds, to gain a majority on the Council, a party must gain and retain support from the electorate. While the system of single member plurality is not the best system for a multi-party democracy, it is preferable to the multi-member plurality system that would have to be used for 'all up' elections, which can allow one party to get absolute control of the Council for four years on a very small percentage of the vote. For instance, our calculations suggest that under the current boundaries and election turnouts, a party receiving the support of just under 10,000 voters spread out across eleven three-member wards could win 33 seats on the council, thus earning a majority despite having the support of less than 10% of the electorate.

We would like to see a fairer system adopted for local government elections in Colchester, on the lines of the Single Transferable Vote system used in Scotland and Northern Ireland. Until that option becomes available we will stick with what we consider to be the least worst of the options available. With this and the advice of the Commission in mind, this submission has been based on Colchester having a pattern of three-member wards, where one seat will be elected at each year in the electoral cycle.

## **Conclusion**

The Liberal Democrat group believe that it is in the best interests of both the people of Colchester and the effective and efficient functioning of Colchester Borough Council to maintain the number of councillors at the current level of 60. We feel that this is justified in the light of the growth experienced by the Borough in recent years and expected to continue in the future. A freeze will mean that the workload of councillors will increase at a manageable rate and ensure that communities of interest within the Borough can be properly represented at a time of many challenges.

## **Sources cited**

Hansen, Stephen, Thomas R. Palfrey, and Howard Rosenthal. "The Downsian model of electoral participation: Formal theory and empirical analysis of the constituency size effect." *Public Choice* 52.1 (1987): 15-33.

Oliver, J. Eric. "City size and civic involvement in metropolitan America." *American Political Science Review* (2000): 361-373.