

IT'S OUR COUNTY (Herefordshire)

SUBMISSION ON COUNCIL SIZE

1. It's Our County (IOC)

- 1.1 IOC is Herefordshire's newest political party and the only one contesting elections in Herefordshire that is strictly limited by its constitution to operating locally (within the county boundary).
- 1.2 Created and registered in September 2010, IOC gained 9 councillors in the local elections 9 months later in May 2011, with five other candidates in second place. This is regarded as something of a coup with such a short period of time between registration and our first election.
- 1.3 Diversity is a corner stone of the IOC approach to local politics – trying to effect change in the public's accurate perception of councillor's being comprised mainly of retired, white men. IOC has achieved some success at this:
- 1.4 55% of IOC councillors are women – 22% of Herefordshire Councillors are women
- 1.5 22% of IOC councillors are of retirement age – 58% of Herefordshire Councillors are of retirement age.
- 1.6 IOC councillors have an average age of 48years (having an age span from 20 – 71yrs) – this statistic is unavailable for the council as a whole.
- 1.7 55% of IOC councillors are attempting to work in paid employment alongside their councillor role. This is in a variety of capacities (full/part time or self employed) – 30% working full time. We have estimated that only 31% of Herefordshire Councillors are working alongside their role as a councillor.
- 1.8 Two IOC councillors currently have unearned income (small pensions). No IOC councillors have a private unearned income.

2. Encouraging Public Engagement in the Democratic Process

- 2.1 In deciding the overall size of the future council, IOC believes a conscious effort should be applied to encouraging the public to become actively engaged with the process of local government.
- 2.2 Nationally we are experiencing the dissatisfaction of the electorate with politics on a local level which has been recently evidenced by the poor turnout in the local elections in May 2012.
- 2.3 Local politicians are seen as increasingly distant from the public and unrepresentative of the society they are elected to serve. This is clearly evidenced in an analysis of the age range and gender breakdown of our current Herefordshire Councillor cohort.
- 2.4 Attracting new candidates to stand as councillors who do not fit the current mould of retired males or people with a private income is increasingly difficult due to the workload that is required of your average unitary authority member. IOC asked all of their councillors to keep an account of hours worked on unitary authority business during two separate weeks since the beginning of 2012. The table appears at the end of this section.
- 2.5 One of the biggest barriers to engaging with the process as an elected councillor is the workload attributed to the role. The councillor allowance is set at a level that does not allow a person of middle age with familial responsibilities an easy to path to election, particularly given the number of hours that need to be devoted. The table clearly demonstrates the hours worked by IOC councillors in their elected roles. Interestingly the councillors with the least hours worked on council duties probably have the longest working week due to their employment commitments.

- 2.6 This represents the strongest reason why there should be no decrease in the numbers of councillors for Herefordshire Council. IOC has seen no convincing argument or evidence to suggest that losing 4 councillors would enable sections of the population who are currently vastly under-represented (working people with families) in the local political framework to engage with it. Indeed the table of hours worked by our councillors suggest the opposite. If anything there should be an increase in the numbers of councillors to begin to reduce the workload to a realistic level.
- 2.7 There would be no need for an increase in the overall councillor allowance budget – a smaller workload would justify a lower allowance.

Name	Week 1	Week 2	Additional information
Cllr Liz Harvey	36 hours	45 hours	Role as councillor is full time also involved with community issues/ organisations.
Cllr Jim Kenyon	20 hours	45 hours	Also owns a brewery & pub and an active member in the community
Cllr Julie Woodward	20 hours	20 hours	Also involved with community organisations plus school governor
Cllr Charles Nicholls	45 hours approx	45 hours approx	Feels that his role as a councillor is full time as his time is shared between ward work, committee work and research on residents issues
Cllr Sharon Michael	15 hours	15 hours	Full time employment and involved with community organisations
Cllr Liz Chave	15 hours	15 hours	Also working several days a week and involved with the community
Cllr Alex Hempton-Smith	22 hours	13 hours	Also works full time hours on a flexible basis. Average working week in total 40-50hrs
Cllr Marcelle Lloyd-Hayes	15 hours	15hours	Also chairman of three charities and involved with community groups
Cllr Mark Hubbard	49 hours	62 hours	Is also a partner in a small holiday let business and chairs two community associations

3. Council Committees

- 3.1 Our current administration gives a very clear indication of how difficult it becomes to maintain good quality governance with so few councillors, as the ruling party has the minimum required majority to form an administration – 30 out of 58 members. The strength of any system is in how well it functions on the minimum required.
- 3.2 There are currently 13 members of the council engaged with Cabinet business. Naturally the party in administration is keen to engage the services of their highest calibre members who have the time to dedicate to these roles. Not expecting these members to take extra duties is very clearly supported in the administration's submission on council size and does not need to be repeated here. Out of a total of 30 members this leaves 17 administration councillors to cover the proportional requirements of all of the other committees appointed by Herefordshire Council.
- 3.3 Proportionality rules are applied to the following committees: Overview & Scrutiny, Planning, Regulatory and Audit & Governance. This requires the current administration to fill 29 places on committees with their 17 remaining councillors.
- 3.4 IOC is extremely keen to maintain a good quality of service. With an administration having to find so many people to serve out of a relatively small pool, means there is no choice

available. Members without the necessary skills or interest are required to take places on committees to make up numbers and the quality of governance inevitably suffers.

- 3.5 A substantial increase in the number of councillors would ease this difficulty hugely – allowing the Council Leader a wider choice and hopefully leading to lower workloads, more commitment to the work allocated and most of all choice not to use councillors that do not possess the skills or ability for the tasks required.
- 3.6 Much has been made in the administration submission regarding the role of the one Overview & Scrutiny committee. The work load of this new structure has become unbearable – there have been 8 meetings of this committee in the first 3 months of 2012. Several of these have been five hour meetings with an informal away day meeting as well. There are now internal discussions about increasing the O&S format to 3 committees in the near future. It is unclear how this will be structured, but it is very clear the current system is breaking under the strain and all parties are dissatisfied with performance. Any increase here will only increase the workload and pressure on individual members. It will also decrease the ability of the administration to effectively manage the quality of their contribution to the work of this committee.

4. Connecting with the Public

- 4.1 Herefordshire is still a county where people know each other. We are relatively small in number and sparsely populated. In the days of District and County Councils in Herefordshire there must have been well over 100 elected councillors performing the duties and responsibilities that are now undertaken by 58. It was almost certain that most members of the public will have personally known or had a relatively close connection with an elected representative. This personal connection is vital to understanding how democracy at a local level functions. It also gives members of the public a more direct route to accessing the services provided by their local authority.
- 4.2 Since the formation of the unitary authority, there has been a gradual disintegration of the trust and respect that existed in the relationship between local councillor and members of the public. There is no evidence to support a connection between the decrease in the numbers of elected representatives and this decline in the opinions of the public, but IOC would argue strongly that the tide needs to turn.
- 4.3 Increasing councillor numbers also increases the ability of those councillors to personally connect with members of the public. The more you increase elected member numbers the more exponential becomes the connectivity.
- 4.4 Knowing your councillor personally feels to IOC a very Herefordshire approach to local politics. It suits our rural county culture and can only increase the visibility and accessibility of elected members.

5. Conclusions

- 5.1 Workloads for councillors are currently too high. The available allowance makes the role extremely unattractive to anyone other than those driven by party political loyalty and those with private incomes or pensions.
- 5.2 The current workload has a damaging effect on who is attracted to become an elected member and as a consequence affects the diversity of members leading to a very monochrome representational democratic system. IOC has managed to break this trend in the candidates it has attracted and succeeded in getting elected. These issues have been identified by our councillors as barriers to others from similar backgrounds from becoming involved.

- 5.3 Our current committee structure allows for no choice of members in appointing to committee places – particularly for the ruling party. Rules on proportionality mean members are shoe horned into committees simply to make up numbers. To maintain quality governance there should be much greater flexibility in the system to allow the council leader to pass over those without the skills or ability to perform the functions required of them.
- 5.4 Herefordshire people like to know who is representing them – personally. Any decrease in the number of councillors makes this increasingly unlikely and should be avoided at all costs. The cultural approach of a rural county should allow for easy access and personal connection to elected members.
- 5.5 An increase in the number of councillors spreads the burden of the workload but crucially makes it more difficult for a small group of individual members to take control of the levers of power. IOC believes this is good for democracy.
- 5.6 For these reasons IOC suggests an increase in the number of councillors to 70. We should like to suggest an even larger increase, but a change of 12 members is probably quite enough for a system that rarely does such large changes.
- 5.7 A Council size of 70 would allow a minimum administration of 36 members more flexibility when filling the 29 places on committees required by the proportionality rules. Whilst IOC believes this is not ideal, a further 20% increase could be applied to the system at the next review. This would significantly reduce the workload and may provide opportunities for those people not ordinarily attracted to consider taking on the role.
- 5.8 Whilst it is clear that the workload does not correlate with the number of constituents in a particular ward, reducing the representation down to one councillor for approximately 2030 voters – based on a voter total of 142,026 – a 25% reduction in potential casework.