

Further Electoral Review of Stratford-on-Avon District Council

Stratford-on-Avon District Council's Submission on Council Size

Introduction

The cross party Elections Reference Group met on 12 September 2011 following a presentation from the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) to the Audit & Regulatory Committee.

It discussed the options available to the Council and reconfirmed its previous preferences for:

- All-out elections in 2015;
- A reduction in the number of councillors to between 35 - 40;
- A baseline of 2,500 electors per ward; and,
- A preference to move towards single-member wards.

On 23 May 2012, the Chief Executive received a letter from the LGBCE asking if Stratford-on-Avon District Council (SDC) would like to be included in the 2013/14 review programme. The Chief Executive replied after consultation with Group Leaders and the Chairman of the Audit Committee that the Council would like to be entered into the 2013/14 programme. The LGBCE rejected SDC's submission and its subsequent appeal but noted that the Council would like to be considered at the earliest opportunity.

In September 2012, a space became available on the review programme so SDC was invited to have a review formally commencing in February 2013.

At the special Council meeting of 17 December 2012 it was decided to move from electing in thirds to all out election commencing in May 2015. Council have also confirmed the preferences as above.

Justification

The Periodic Electoral Review took place in Stratford in 1999. This was before the new executive arrangements commenced and the review considered Stratford on the old 'Committee style' system. Much of the Council's decision making business is by The Cabinet with Overview & Scrutiny Committee holding the Cabinet to account. It is the Council's view that this system requires fewer members.

The Overview & Scrutiny Committee (OSC) consists of 12 members and meets monthly mid-cycle of Cabinet meetings. This helps to ensure there is no delay in dealing with any matters that may be the subject of 'call-ins' (see part two for further information on OSC).

The Council also has an Audit Committee, currently consisting of 12 Councillors, which meets four or five times per year. The Committee audits the Council's financial processes but also has a range of other responsibilities that support governance (more information on regulatory committees of the Council are included in part one below).

Caseload varies depending on the position of the councillor and the ward they represent but the average for a backbench councillor is between 10 and 20 hours (this is explored further in part one below). Housing stock was outsourced under a Large Scale Voluntary Transfer in the late 1990s so the Councillors have less housing matters to deal with; primarily workloads are focussed on planning, environmental and benefits-related issues.

A reduction in the number of Councillors to that preferred by the Council would still allow the capacity to run an efficient Council whilst supporting the Council's future ambitions. The Council's transformation programme has given a greater number of ways for the public to do business with the Council, including via an enhanced website, use of a contact centre and through a network of customer access terminals. These improved communication links, coupled with the provision of more information and the availability of better data, has changed the role for Ward Councillors.

Stratford-on-Avon District is a relatively large rural district with a number of medium and small market towns. Some district wards cover quite large rural areas and multiple parishes, but none have more than five Parish Councils to visit. 41 Councillors represent wards comprising three Parish Councils or fewer. Only two Councillors represent wards with six Parish Councils.

With a ward size of approximately 2,500, mirroring the national average Council size, electors and the continuing use of technology, Councillor workloads would remain manageable, although warding in the more rural areas would have to be carefully thought out.

As further justification for consideration the Council has answered the questions within the LGBCE document – Council size:

PART ONE: GOVERNANCE AND DECISION MAKING

<u>Leadership</u>	
<p>What kind of governance arrangements are in place for your authority? Does the Council operate an Executive Mayoral, Cabinet/Executive or committee system?</p>	<p>The Council operates a Strong Leader/Cabinet model. This provides for quick and accountable decisions to be made, although unlike the former Committee system many of the members feel they do not have a significant involvement in decision making. This can mean a great deal time is spent on Council business by Portfolio Holders and ward business is focussed on by those other Members.</p> <p>The Cabinet consists of eight Members; the Leader and Deputy Leader plus six Portfolio Holders. The Portfolios broadly match the officer structure of the organisation - these being:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Corporate Support Customer Access Enterprise, Housing & Revenues Environment and Planning Finance and Business Administration Technical Services <p>The Leader and Deputy Leader also have some cross Council responsibilities.</p> <p><i>Attached: Cabinet Structure (Appendix 1)</i></p>
<p>To what extent are decisions delegated to Portfolio Holders or are most decisions taken by the full Executive and/or Mayor?</p>	<p>Portfolio Holders have the following delegations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The authority to agree changes to targets in service plans, after consultation with the Leader of the Council, subject to there being no more than 5% variation to the original target or a project target date being put back one Council cycle within the fiscal year;

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The authority to approve virements for revenue budgets within Services between the value of £20,000 and £30,000; • The authority to approve for consultation, draft policies, strategies and action plans after consultation with the Leader and Deputy Leader; and, • The authority to approve the response on strategic consultation documents, after consultation with the Leader, and the final response being circulated to all members through an Information Sheet. <p><i>After consultation with the Finance and Business Administration Portfolio Holder</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Except in respect of contracts to which the full EC procurement rules apply, the authority to approve select lists of tenderers for contracts; and • The authority to approve write-offs. <p><i>To Portfolio Holders representing the Council on the certain partnerships:-</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Approval for representatives to commit resources within the Council's approved budget framework, including virements of capital and revenue budgets. • Approval for representatives to agree terms of reference, memorandum of understanding and partnership actions/work programmes within the Council's approved policy framework. <p>There are some specific decisions delegated to the relevant Portfolio Holder not included here. These delegations are reviewed annually as part of a Leader's report to Council.</p>
Do Executive (or other) Members serve on other decision making partnerships, sub-regional, regional or national bodies?	Yes – these are considered on a yearly basis

<p>In general, are leadership and/or Portfolio roles considered to be full time roles?</p>	<p>See Independent Remuneration Panel reports that assess the time commitment of Members (Appendix 2).</p> <p>The Leader's role is considered a full time role in conjunction with his duties as a Ward Member. Portfolio roles are not considered to be full time but, combined with ward commitments, involve an average of 20-30 hours a week.</p>
<p><u>Regulatory</u></p>	
<p>In relation to licensing, planning and other regulatory responsibilities, to what extent are decisions delegated to officers?</p>	<p>There is a well established scheme of delegation with approximately 90% of planning applications delegated to officers. Only applications, due to their scale of development or those applications which have received a valid material planning reason of objection which is contrary to the officer's recommendation are referred to Committee.</p> <p>In respect of Licensing the scheme of delegation consists of the following:</p> <p>To grant, where no objection is made:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • an application for a personal licence; • an application for a premises licence or club premises certificate; an application for a provisional Statement; • an application to vary a premises licence or club premises certificate; • an application to vary a designated premises supervisor; • an application to transfer a premises licence; and • grant a request to be removed as a designated premises supervisor. <p>Most other regulatory functions are similar with Members involved in the key strategic type applications or appeals. For example, nearly all environmental health and private sector housing regulatory activities are delegated to officers.</p>
<p>How many members are involved in committees?</p>	<p>20 Members serve on the two Planning Committees (plus 14 named</p>

	<p>substitutes); 12 Members serve on the Regulatory Committee; 10 Members in addition to the above Committee are members of the Licensing Pool; and 14 Members serve on the Audit Committee (plus 6 named substitutes)</p>
Is committee membership standing or rotating?	<p>Members are nominated annually by Group Leaders as part of the annual meeting. Licensing Panel members rotate membership from within the pool.</p>
Are meetings ad hoc, frequent and/or area based?	<p>A mixture of arrangements is used. There are two area Planning Committees. All meetings have a set cycle of meetings which are supplemented as circumstances dictate.</p> <p>Members of the Planning Committee do not make decisions on applications in their own ward.</p>
What level of attendance is achieved? Are meetings always quorate?	<p>Meetings are quorate and attendance is generally high - see annual records of attendance for recent years. (Appendix 3)</p>
Does the Council believe that changes to legislation, national or local policy will have influence on the workload of committees and their members which would have an impact on Council size?	<p>Each legislative or policy change has to be considered on its own merits. This Council's position is that after reflecting the changes made, the Council will develop appropriate processes to ensure the Council operates in an effective manner despite being a smaller size.</p>
<u>Demands on time:</u>	
Is there a formal role description for Councillors in your authority?	<p>Yes, the basic defined role for all members is as follows, although those with more specific roles have enhanced role descriptions. (Appendix 4):</p> <p>THE ROLE OF A COUNCILLOR</p> <p>PRIMARY ROLE</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To represent the electorate to the Council. • To participate in community leadership and also in the determination of the strategic direction of the Council.

MAIN RESPONSIBILITIES

- Represent, to the best of ability, the interests of all residents of the Ward.
- When appropriate, represent the interests of individual residents of the Ward in dealings with the Council and/or the Council's partners.
- Provide community leadership by representing the views of the electorate to the Council by:
 - developing an understanding of the relationships which need to be built with the public and all sections of the community to ensure their interests are paramount; and the capacity to put in place the structures and processes required, within the authority and externally, to achieve this;
 - undertaking analysis and exercising dispassionate judgement on the authority's performance and outcomes, both on its own and where it interacts and engages with other agencies, including the voluntary sector and community groups, for the purposes of enhanced effectiveness, quality assurance, continuous improvement, joined up government, and to inform future policies and service developments;
 - focusing outwardly on the needs of those who are the reason for the authority's existence, with political and management structures, resource allocation, systems and processes organised to this end;
 - listening and encouraging feedback and continuous dialogue with all sections of the community; convincing and influencing, using a variety of media appropriately and sensitively; and building and maintaining the networks through which to communicate; and
 - creating specific and purposeful opportunities to listen to the views of

	<p>users, the community, partners, etc as a means of learning how to improve the Council's performance in responding to their needs and interests and, where appropriate, involving them even more actively in decision-making, service specification and redesign.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of a personal training plan and its implementation • As a Member of Full Council:- <p>be responsible for the formal approval of the budget strategy, both revenue and capital, and for setting Council Tax levels.</p>
<p>Do Councillors receive normal training for all or any roles at the Council?</p>	<p>A Member Development Working Group oversees the training and development of Councillors. Standard, specific and tailor made training is offered and is often opened up to other Councils. This is on a reciprocal basis.</p> <p>Further training is identified from the Personal Development Plans undertaken with their respective group leaders.</p> <p>In addition, Members need to complete 12 hours training per year, and to sit on Planning Committee they require, a rolling, 9 specialist hours per calendar year, and Licensing at least a day's training.</p> <p>Bespoke training is provided to members of the Audit Committee, Employment and Appointments Sub committee to enable proper governance of approval of accounts, making Senior Officer appointments and dealing with Officer employment appeals.</p> <p>The Council is one of six that holds the West Midlands Member Development Charter.</p>
<p>Do Councillors generally find that the time they spend on Council business is what they expected?</p>	<p>Yes, in general.</p>
<p>How much time do members generally spend on the</p>	<p>As an estimate, with all figures being inclusive of any external appointments:</p>

business of your Council?	Ward Members: 10 – 20 hours a week depending on Ward. In addition to the above, the following additional hours have been identified: Committee Chairman: 4 hours a Committee cycle (5 cycles); Planning Committee Chairman: 8 hours a month ; Cabinet Members: 10 – 15 hours a week depending on Portfolio Group Leaders: 4 hours a month; and The Leader: 20 hours a week on average.
Does the Council appoint members to outside bodies? If so, how many Councillors are involved in this activity and what is their expected workload?	The Council appoints to a number of Outside Bodies. However, this has substantially diminished over the years. See (Appendix 5) Members are asked to submit information sheets of the meetings they attend.
Does the Council attract and retain members?	The Council works hard to attract new members and open evenings inviting people to become councillors are held before each set of elections. It is rare that a seat goes uncontested as the three main parties are quite active across the District not to mention a healthy number of independents (the Council currently has two fully independent and two from a locally formed party).
Have there been any instances where the Council has been unable to discharge its duties due to a lack of Councillors?	No.
Do Councillors have an individual or Ward budget for allocation in their area? If so, how is such a system administered?	Ward budgets have been considered in the past but rejected since these would be small (and in effect just a token) for a Council with 53 members, it is better for the Council to look at the bigger picture. With single member wards and a reduced Council size this matter could be reviewed.

Part Two: Scrutiny Functions

<p>How do scrutiny arrangements operate in the authority? How many Committees are there and what is their membership?</p>	<p>The Overview and Scrutiny function is a central element to decision-making. The Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee monitors and reviews performance within the Council, makes recommendations on the development of Council policies, holds The Cabinet to account for its actions and deals with items 'Called-In'.</p> <p>The Committee consists of 12 members and meets monthly mid-cycle of Cabinet meetings. This helps to ensure there is no delay in dealing with any matters that may be the subject of 'call-ins'.</p> <p>The detailed overview and scrutiny work is undertaken by Task and Finish Groups whose membership comes from across the Council (except Cabinet members) established by the Committee to look into a particular issue or problem and report back with recommendations. The task groups are purely Member led and Officers are only invited to attend where necessary.</p>
<p>What is the general workload of Scrutiny Committees? Has the Council ever found that it has had too many active projects for the scrutiny process to function effectively?</p>	<p>The Council identifies a set number of Task Groups according to the available resources. There has not been the occasion when there have been too many projects to allow for effective OS work.</p>
<p>How is the work of Scrutiny Committee programmed? Is the work strictly timetabled?</p>	<p>This is considered at each meeting as part of the agenda. Yes work is timetabled. An example of a Work Programme is contained at Appendix 6</p>
<p>What activities are Scrutiny Committee Members expected to carry out between formal meetings?</p>	<p>Principally Task and Finish Group work. One or two have other roles such as attendance at the County Council OSC and attendance at The Cabinet.</p>

Part Three: representational role of Councillors

<p>In general terms, how do Councillors carry out their representational roles with electors? Do members mainly respond to casework from constituents or do they have a more active role including attendance in the community?</p>	<p>Different members have different approaches when dealing with representation. The most common is 'being seen' in their ward, Town/Parish Council meetings, County Council run Community Forums, responding to case work and attending community events.</p>
<p>How do Councillors generally deal with casework? Do they pass on issues directly to staff or do they take a more in depth approach to resolving issues?</p>	<p>The most common issues Members seem to encounter are planning and housing ones. Most are keen to resolve problems themselves and work well with Officers in doing so. Members seek professional Officer(s)' advice as appropriate to ensure they operate in an effective manner.</p>
<p>What support do Councillors receive in discharging their duties in relation to casework and representational role in their ward?</p>	<p>As well as training in soft skills, listening, questioning etc., Members are provided with an iPad or laptop with printer to help them carry out their casework. Committee Chairs are supported through a Chairman's briefing. Cabinet Members have access to secretarial support from the Chief Executive's Unit. Day-to-day issues are normally discussed with Officers and a way forward agreed.</p>
<p>How do Councillors engage with constituents? Do they hold surgeries, distribute newsletters, hold public meetings, write blogs, etc?</p>	<p>Each Member approaches contact with their electorate in different ways: many do hold surgeries but some provide their own newsletter (both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats provide newsletters) or provide reports for local newsletters/parish magazines or attend Residents' Associations to engage with different groups. The kind of contact will be governed by the nature of the Ward and the preferred method of working of the Councillor.</p> <p>Increasingly, initial contact by members of the public is often via e-mail and an exchange of correspondence often takes place.</p> <p>At specific times to deal with particular issues, a public meeting may be called by Ward Members. Many members are now beginning to see the usefulness of social media, particularly by using Twitter and weblogs.</p>

	Members provide an important advocacy role to county/regional and national organisations on behalf of their communities.
How has the role of Councillors changed since the Council last considered how many elected members it should have?	The last time members considered a change in numbers was during the PER in 1999 and was still under the Committee System where members all felt more engaged with the political process. At that time the Council reduced in size by 2 members from 55 to 53. The Council, in adopting a transformation programme, has recognised there is a need to change the way the Council operates to ensure it remains as effective as possible and meets the needs of its residents. A cross party steering group has considered this issue and there has been widespread cross party support for change and a reduction in size of the Council.
Has the Council put in place any mechanisms for Councillors to interact with young people, those not on the electoral register or minority groups or their representative bodies.	<p>From time to time, young people are invited to brief Councillors on issues impacting on them. The Council carries out considerable consultation targeted at minority groups and the young to provide data to Members, such as the Young Persons "Have Your Say" survey 2010 and 2012.</p> <p>Many Councillors are also School Governors. On an annual basis, Members Participate in the Local Democracy Week. Events have included a 'political speed dating', visits to schools, and other such activities to engage young people in democracy. Some Councillors also serve on local Age Concern Groups, as well as engaging with a senior citizen network.</p>

Part Four: the future

<u>Localism and policy development</u>	
What impact do you think the Localism agenda might have on the scope and conduct of Council business and how do you think this might affect the role of Councillors?	<p>The Council area is fully parished so there is unlikely to be the introduction of new parishes as a result of the Localism Act. It is feasible the Community Right to Bid will cause additional work for Ward Members to represent community wishes over community assets. There will be additional issues raised on an ad hoc basis such as neighbourhood plans, although in time this could become more mainstream. It is considered this may be easier to accommodate in a situation where elections are every four years and with the Council having single member wards.</p> <p>It was considered that any additional burden can be successfully absorbed with a reduced number of Councillors.</p>
Does the Council have any plans to devolve responsibilities and/or assets to community organisations? Or does the Council expect to take on more responsibilities in the medium to long term?	The Council is expecting that instances will have to be considered on a case by case basis. Initial attempts to devolve land and offer parishes the opportunity to operate certain services have not met with widespread success.
<u>Service delivery</u>	
Have changes to the arrangements for local delivery of services led to significant changes to Councillors' workloads? (For example, control of housing stock or sharing services with neighbouring authorities).	Not at this stage. The Council has a long history (dating back nearly thirty years) of operating services on a mixed economy basis.
Are there any developments in policy ongoing that might significantly affect the role of elected Members in the future?	The Council is examining the potential for shared services with other local authorities. This may lead to an altered role for Councillors, both in terms of having services operated by other Councils and this Council operating services for others. This may well be through a Shared Service Committee. This is most likely to impact on Cabinet members.
<u>Finance</u>	

<p>What has been the impact of recent financial constraints on the Council's activities? Would a reduction in the scope and/or scale of Council business warrant a reduction in the number of Councillors?</p>	<p>The Council has significantly reduced its expenditure over the past three years. In addition, staffing has been reduced to close to 250 FTEs, a reduction of about three quarters from the time it ran all of its services direct. Transformation of the services the Council offered had been undertaken e.g. staffed One Stop Shops have been replaced by Customer Access Terminals in more locations across the district offering an enhanced access to officers for the public. The Council is also shortly going to launch an enhanced website which will offer improved access to services for the public - a move towards self-defined access to services for the resident.</p> <p>In light of the substantial reduction in staffing it is appropriate to be considering a reduction in the number of Councillors both in terms of the Council's effectiveness and providing value for money.</p>
<p>If you are proposing a reduction in the number of Councillors for your authority, to what extent is this a reflection of reduced activity of the Council overall, an anticipation of efficiency plans a statement to local people, or none of these things?</p>	<p>This is based on a number of factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Cabinet form of governance, impacting on the involvement of backbench/ frontline Councillors; • Transformation of services, including shared services; • Greater use of technology; • Reduced cost of democracy - the costs of democracy are becoming a greater proportion of current Council expenditure; and, • A low population to Councillor ratio - much less than the average for the country.