

PROPOSALS IN RELATION TO COUNCIL SIZE

Introduction

1. The Boundary Commission's technical guidance document sets out the following key criteria for determining the size of the Council:
 - The governance arrangements of the Council and how it takes decisions across the broad range of its responsibilities;
 - The scrutiny functions relating to its own decision making, and the Council's responsibilities to outside bodies; and
 - The representative role of Councillors in the local community and how they engage with people, conduct case work and represent the Council on local partner organisations
2. This submission addresses each of these key criteria to justify the proposal for a reduction in the number of elected Councillors for Harrogate Borough Council from the current 54 to 40.
3. The last review of electoral arrangements took place over 1998/1999 prior to the introduction of the Local Government Act 2000 and the implementation of executive arrangements, which brought significant changes to the way in which the Council operated. Those arrangements have now been in place for 15 years and we can take fully into account that impact and with streamlined decision making, we do not need as many Councillors as historically to manage our business. The time spent in decision making meetings has been significantly reduced for the vast majority of members.
4. We have also taken into account advances in use of technology. Communication in the past 15 years has moved from being largely paper based to almost wholly through electronic channels. This means that many residents who may obviously have used their local Councillor to access information can now do so directly. All Councillors are able to view agendas, reports and minutes online.

Executive process

5. The Council has chosen to operate Executive arrangements. It has stream-lined decision making with extensive delegation to individual Councillors and Officers. Full Council takes only those decisions it is required by law to do so, and those of significance in terms of policy, budget and implication for the district. The Cabinet, which currently comprises six Councillors, has scheduled monthly meetings and meets on an ad-hoc basis as necessary, to take other decisions if they are urgent. Between 1 September 2014 and 31 August 2015, it met on 14 occasions to consider 90 reports – an average of 6.43 per meeting.
6. It is not considered that the reduction in the size of the Council envisaged would have a significant impact on the operation of the Executive in the context of these statistics bearing in mind the current frequency of meetings and the extensive delegation already in place to individual cabinet members and officers as contained in Section 8 of the Constitution – Responsibility for Functions. These arrangements

would, however, be necessarily reviewed prior to 2018 to ensure that executive decision making remained timely, transparent, effective and accountable.

7. The day-to-day operational business of the Council is conducted without the requirement to engage the majority of Councillors. Full Council agrees the policy framework as set out in Article 4 of the Constitution, which includes a corporate plan every four years and a budget annually and the Cabinet working with the Management Board is empowered to deliver it. Councillors are kept informed of decisions through the publication of agenda, minutes, individual executive decisions and the publication of the forward plan. The Overview and Scrutiny Commission through its Performance Panel considers performance quarterly to hold the Cabinet to account.

Quasi Judicial processes

8. The Council has a Planning Committee, currently comprising 16 Councillors. The Committee meets every two weeks to consider those applications not determined by the Chief Planner or the Chief Planner in consultation with the Chair of the Planning Committee under delegated powers. The number of planning applications received and included in the returns to the Department of Communities and Local Government for the last three years is:-

2014/15 – 2016

2013/14 – 1946

2012/13 – 1934

Of these, the percentages dealt with under the respective arrangements are generally as follows:-

Planning Committee – 8%

Chief Planner in consultation with Chair of Planning Committee – 34%

Chief Planner – 58%

These figures are often reported in two categories – 8% dealt with at Committee, 92% delegated.

9. A Planning Referral Committee, comprising 16 members exists to determine those applications of district-wide significance or those development control matters referred to it by the Planning Committee or the Solicitor to the Council. There have been six meetings of the Planning Referral Committee in the last 12 months to 31 August 2015. The Members Working Group, established to assist with the current electoral review has formed the view that where possible, there should be fewer members serving on Committees and specifically in respect of the Referral Committee, the size should be reduced to around 8 members.
10. A Licensing Committee of 15 members is scheduled to meet five times per year, and is responsible for any matter which falls within the remit of the Licensing Act 2003 and in accordance with the Council's approved statement of licensing policy. The Committee is also responsible for recommending a gambling policy to the Council. A sub-committee made up of three Councillors deals with licensing applications. On average, the sub-committee has deliberated on 18 applications annually over the four year period to and including 2014/15. Members of the

Licensing Committee are also appointed to Panels to determine homelessness appeals, applications for discretionary rate relief and to consider taxi hearings. In the last 12 months to 31 August 2015 there have been 11 meetings for these purposes.

Scrutiny process

11. In response to the Local Government Act 2000, the Council created 3 Commissions to undertake the Overview and Scrutiny function. Since 2000, the Overview and Scrutiny function has been refined and, as a consequence, there is only now one Overview and Scrutiny Commission, comprising 15 Councillors, which meets on average between 10 and 12 times per year. From 1 September 2014 to 31 August 2015 the Commission met 13 times and considered 79 items, an average of 6 items per meeting. The Overview and Scrutiny Commission is supported by a Performance Panel of seven members with five scheduled meetings per annum. The Panel oversees the management and monitoring of performance within the Council. A Councillor Call for Action Panel comprising seven members also exists, though has never met. The Commission is also supported by Task and Finish Groups to undertake reviews. The nature and scope of the Task and Finish Groups varies though each submits reports regularly to the Commission and presents its outcome of the review.
12. The Council also has an Audit and Governance Committee consisting of seven councillors which is scheduled to meet five times per year to provide independent assurance to the Council on the adequacy of the risk management framework and the internal control environment in addition to overseeing the financial reporting and annual governance processes. It also oversees Internal Audit and External Audit, helping to ensure efficient and effective assurance arrangements are in place.

Decision making generally

13. All of the above illustrates that from a political and managerial perspective the Council has very streamlined decision-making processes in place. Council meetings rarely last for more than two hours; Cabinet meetings 45 minutes; the Overview and Scrutiny Commission around two hours and the Planning Committee three hours. Other committees exist for the purposes of Human Resources, General Purposes, District Development Purposes and the Harrogate International Centre, though some meet infrequently and/or are constituted by fewer members. It is not considered that 54 councillors are required to run the business of the Council in the way it has chosen since implementation of the Local Government Act 2000. This is reflected in part by the fact that 11 councillors do not sit currently on the Cabinet or any of the main Council committees (Overview and Scrutiny, Planning, Audit and Governance and General Purposes).

Representational role of councillors

14. Harrogate District is a relatively large district with an urban/rural split. The principle urban areas are Harrogate, Knaresborough and Ripon, with Harrogate currently served by 13 two member wards and Ripon and Knaresborough each by 3 two member wards. The rural areas of the District are served by 16 single member

wards. Some of the latter cover substantial rural areas and multiple parishes. However, Harrogate town and the 13 wards that serve it is not parished (save for part of the Pannal Ward) and both Ripon City and Knaresborough Town have 1 parish (city) council serving their electorate currently of approximately 12,300 for each settlement. The current average electorate per councillors is 2,229. This is forecast to grow to 2,387 by 2021.

15. The Council nominates to 56 outside bodies. These include partnership bodies, management committees/trusts, governing bodies and local societies, etc. These appointments are made on the basis of office, ward or area or by reference to political proportionality. The workload associated with the appointments varies significantly. The number of appointments to each group is normally determined by the constitution of the body itself and varies between 1 and 4 councillors.
16. Different councillors make different arrangements for discharging their representative role. This may involve local surgeries, attendance at public meetings as well as contact (face to face, written, electronic) with local residents and also with other service providers. Members are kept advised of Council developments via topical seminars and electronic briefings. Most communication is via email.
17. There is an expectation for rural Members to attend meetings of the parishes taking place within their ward. The effect of a reduction in Borough Council Members will increase the number of parishes in a rural member's ward. How it specifically affects a Member will depend on his/her approach to parish liaison and how the spread of parish meetings actually fall. The Council will need to examine these obligations and the options available for allowing a district councillor presence, which could include the grouping of parishes for these purposes. This would need to be undertaken in tandem with the Council's wider ambitions in respect of parish consultation, including the contribution of the Administration in meeting annually with three geographic groupings of parishes within the District, which itself is under review in terms of format, focus and effectiveness.
18. Caseload varies throughout the District but, given its overall relative affluence, is considered to be less than in areas with higher levels of deprivation. The results of a recent survey showed that on average, those councillors responding to the survey spent 29% of their time fulfilling the representational role as a councillor. As would be expected, this suggested an increase over that drawn from a previous survey, reflecting the emphasis placed on the representational role by the Local Government Act 2000. Changes have occurred in the way in which members of the Public Access Information and comments received indicate that these have had an effect on the number of enquiries received from members of the public. The public is more able to find out information for themselves than was the case when the council size was last reviewed. The use of the internet has replaced a proportion of direct contact and the amount of information available electronically has grown enormously with websites such as the Council's providing extensive information which previously residents may have turned to their local councillor for. Telephone calls from members of the public are being replaced with email enquiries.

19. It is worth reflecting on the fact that Harrogate District has 519 parish councillors spread across 87 parishes or combined parishes. Whilst parish and district council roles are different, it is fair to say that many residents have ready access to a local parish councillor, who often has good knowledge of how the district council works and can help individuals resolve problems. The Borough Council also operates in a two tier area with 18 county councillors also covering upper tier functions across the Harrogate District.

Justification for a new council comprising 40 members

20. As representatives of their political groups and with the benefit of their own experience, the working group established to inform the current electoral review concluded that, with this knowledge and with the benefit of the recent survey of Members, there should be fewer members serving on committees. Specifically the Planning Committee should remain unchanged with 16 members, though its companion, Planning Referral Committee, could be reduced in size to around 8 members. The initial view of the Working Group was that the review should look to result in a council size of between 45 and 54 members with committee sizes reflecting council size.
21. One of the principles determined by the Working Group was to protect, as far as was possible, the current urban/rural identities of wards for the urban settlements, especially so for Ripon and Knaresborough which were seen as building blocks for the remainder of the District in terms of the elector/member ratio. This was also seen as important in the context of members representing either an urban or rural ward rather than a mix of the two to allow for an improved focus and representation of a single community interest with, as a consequence, the most effective use of a member's time.
22. The forecast electorate for the District to 2021 was 128,902, based on the following figures:

Harrogate Town	60,996
Ripon City	13,037
Knaresborough	13,682
Rural areas	<u>41,187</u>
Total	<u>128,902</u>

23. When examining Ripon City and Knaresborough Town as the basis of building blocks for the remainder of the District, the Working Group considered the move away from two member wards in favour of single member wards for both these settlements and across the entire District. The Working Group considered that four members each were sufficient to service the needs of Ripon City and Knaresborough Town and that the corresponding electorate of approximately 3,200 per member was acceptable bearing in mind its view that it did not consider members to be currently over burdened with an electorate responsibility of 2,229, which in any event was predicted to rise to 2,387 under the projected forecast to 2021. Applying the above elector ratio to Harrogate would give rise to 19 members for the urban area of Harrogate with a further 13 members for the rural areas of the district, giving a total Council membership of 40. This number would provide the Council with sufficient members to manage the business of the Council; an average electorate of around 3,200, which would allow councillors to fulfil their

representational roles; and the potential for discrete representation of the Council's main urban areas of Harrogate, Knaresborough and Ripon.