

Electoral Review
Preliminary Consultation on Council Size
DRAFT County Council Response

Introduction

1. The County Council was notified on 28 July 2010 that the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) would be conducting an electoral review of Staffordshire, starting in September 2010 and concluding in August 2011. The County Council has been selected for a review as the levels of electoral representation in individual divisions had changed since the last electoral review, completed in 2004.
2. When the 2004 review had been conducted, it had been predicted that electoral quality would increase in Staffordshire and that – by 2006 – only 15 of the 59 County Divisions would have an electoral variance greater than 10% from the mean number of electors per Councillor. In December 2009 25 divisions showed a variance greater than 10% including 2 Divisions showed a variance of more than 20% and thus triggering the review by the LGBCE.
3. The review will cover the entire county and the review process is governed by statutory criteria which set out the principles for determining the total number of Councillors and the number, boundaries and names of the divisions required. These criteria include establishing patterns of representation that provide electoral equality both between individual divisions and districts (including an improvement over 5 years), provide effective and convenient local government and reflect community identities and interests.
4. There are distinct stages to the review process, where the LGBCE will consider evidence from a range of stakeholders, including the County Council before making recommendations to Parliament. At this preliminary stage submissions, backed up with evidence, need to make proposals on the total number of Councillors required to ensure the statutory criteria for the review are met.
5. This submission sets out the County Council's view that the geographic and socio-demographic characteristics of the county, allied with the role requirements for elected Members within the County Council's political management arrangements and communities mean that a total Council size of 62 Councillors would continue to provide effective and convenient local government for Staffordshire that reflects the distinct identities and interests of our communities. This view has been endorsed by the current Members of the County Council, a majority of whom when surveyed agreed that 62 remained the optimum number of Members.

About Staffordshire – the context

6. Staffordshire is a county with a long history and one of many contrasts, all of which have had an impact upon the county, its landscape and its people. It covers an area of 1,012sqm (2,623KM²) and has an estimated population of 828,900 people and it is estimated that the population will rise to approximately 909,000 people by 2026.

7. Staffordshire's communities are extremely diverse, over 80% of the area of the county is classed as rural with specific needs around rural deprivation, access to services and transport that need to be addressed. Conversely, around 75% of the population live in the county's towns and large villages and, although the county is on the whole relatively affluent, there are areas of deprivation, particularly in Newcastle-under-Lyme, East Staffordshire and Tamworth, although there are pockets of deprivation across the county, which can be very intense and highly localised.
8. This diversity, particularly between rural and urban areas, has a direct impact on how patterns of representation need to be established to fit with the statutory criteria of the review, particularly around reflecting communities' identities and interests and providing effective and convenient local government. The total council size provides a framework for how this can be achieved.
9. Whilst there are unique local circumstances and needs that will ultimately influence the review for Staffordshire it is useful to make a comparison with other similar authorities to provide some context. The current County Council size of 62 gives an average of 10,656 electors per Member. This is an above average ratio amongst the shire counties that make up the County Council's statistical 'nearest neighbour' group (Table 1) and the council size of the other authorities in the group ranges from 52 to 84. The nearest neighbour model takes into account similarities not only of population but also geographical size, population density and socio-economic factors and the County Council's comparative position within this group suggests that the current council size of 62 is well within an appropriate range to reflect the County's particular needs.

	Electorate	Members	Electorate per Member
Essex	1,045,682	75	13942
Kent	1,033,206	84	12300
Lancashire	893,179	84	10633
Staffordshire	660,683	62	10656
Leicestershire	504,149	52	9695
Derbyshire	593,571	64	9275
Nottinghamshire	593,213	67	8854
Worcestershire	486,593	57	8537
Norfolk	650,961	84	7750
Gloucestershire	461,461	63	7325
Lincolnshire	541,513	77	7033
Northamptonshire	508,549	73	6966
Somerset	399,560	58	6889
Cambridgeshire	448,688	69	6503
Warwickshire	400,000	62	6452
Cumbria	392,931	84	4678

Table 1 – Electorate to Member Ratios – Nearest Neighbour Group

The Role of Staffordshire County Councillors – Introduction

10. Staffordshire County Council is a Member led organisation, the 62 elected Members are at the heart of setting and driving the authority's overall policy and for taking the key decisions to implement that policy. Council Councillors provide the key link with residents and communities that the County Council

provides services for by giving them a voice into the formal decision making processes.

11. The roles that Members undertake are essential to how the Council achieves effective and convenient local government. As well as filling the required places on the Council's committees and other decision making bodies, Members play a key role in their individual divisions. This work has a several strands, including the County Council's developing devolved budget arrangements, community engagement work and their representative role through their contact and casework with individual residents. In addition, most Members are part of a political group which will require them giving up their time to attend group meetings and to take part in campaigning activity, which Members estimate takes up around 10 hours of their time in a given month.
12. These different roles for Members are formalised in the role descriptions that the County Council has developed for elected Members; these cover both specific areas of responsibility such as Cabinet Members and Committee Chairs and set out some of Members' responsibilities in taking a leadership role in their Division. This includes championing the interests of the local community, regular liaison interested parties and providing a channel for two way communications about council decisions affecting the local community. The role descriptions are appended to this submission.
13. Fulfilling these roles requires significant commitment from Members, who give up their time voluntarily and, other than receiving allowances, on an unpaid basis. For some Members, particularly those who undertake Cabinet or Civic roles, this commitment is at least the equivalent of a full time job, for others they fit their Council duties around employment or other responsibilities (including with District and Borough Councils). Any change in the total number of Members will have an impact on the demands on individual Members. Further detail is provided below to demonstrate how the County Council's political management arrangements and community roles for Members mean that the current number of 62 Members ensures that the demands on Members are at an appropriate level to ensure efficient and convenient local government.

The Role of Staffordshire County Councillors – Political Management Arrangements

14. The role of a County Councillor is a complex one. To support members, they are invited to participate in the Member Development programme. There is a rolling programme of development activities for Councillors which is predominantly based on the needs identified through the member Personal Development Plan (PDP) process, where members are encouraged to look at their skills, experience, personal goals and areas for development.
15. The Member development process also requires significant time commitment for elected Members. Following the June 2009 County Council elections the County Council ran a comprehensive induction programme for newly elected Members which included a range of full and half day sessions covering a range of essential issues which involved a total time commitment for elected Members of around 7 or 8 full days over their first six months. In addition, since September 2009 the Member development programme has included 23 half day sessions run by Member and Democratic Services and other Directorates also run a range of briefings and other sessions. Members are also given the

opportunity to take part in external development events such as the Leadership Academy programme and have access to online learning modules and one to one IT support and training.

16. The Member development programme is supported and actively promoted by the political group leaders and there has been very positive engagement by Members. Some essential sessions – such as training for quasi-judicial roles or code of conduct – are highlighted as compulsory for Members. Other sessions are provided on an optional basis or are targeted towards specific groups and there is normally an opportunity for Members to attend at least one session, with a half day commitment every month.
17. The County Council has adopted the Leader with Cabinet model of Executive arrangements with a Leader appointed by the Council every four years and a Cabinet appointed by the Leader. The maximum number of Cabinet Members is set by the Council and there are currently 10 Cabinet Members (including the Leader). The decisions of the Cabinet are scrutinised by eight overview and scrutiny committees with between 8 and 13 Members and the Council's regulatory functions are covered by an Audit Committee, Planning Committee (with specialised panels to deal with particular areas of work), Pensions Committee and Standards Committee.
18. There are a range of additional responsibilities involved in being a Cabinet Member which result in them dedicating a significant quantity of time to their County Council duties. As well as attending formal meetings of the Cabinet and any scrutiny Committees they are asked to attend, Cabinet Members attend regular informal meetings with the Council's Senior Management Team, meet regularly with the senior managers and play an active role in developing policy for the services under their responsibility. Cabinet Members also represent the County Council locally, regionally and nationally through partnership arrangements, outside bodies and through working with other organisations including with central government. Cabinet Members estimate that their time commitment can be up to 50 hours a week and is certainly at least the equivalent of a full time job.
19. Cabinet Members may not sit on overview and scrutiny committees and do not as a rule sit on the County Council's regulatory committees. Under the current arrangements, this leaves 52 Members to fill the council's 138 committee places. In addition Members also take part in other arrangements such as Policy Advisory Groups, which are short 'task and finish' working groups that form part of the Council's scrutiny arrangements and the Corporate Parenting Panel, which advises the Cabinet on the Council's responsibilities in respect of looked after children.
20. In the 2009/2010 Municipal year there were 181 places available on 23 non-executive committees, panels or working groups meaning there were – on average – three appointments for each Member. There were 144 meetings that took place during the year and a recent survey of Members has shown that Members estimate that they attend, on average, three or four Committee meetings a month, that they spend about two hours travelling to and from each meeting and around three hours preparing for a meeting. In total, allowing for the fact that most committee meetings occupy around two to three hours, it is reasonable to assume that most non-Executive Members spend around 28 hours directly involved in Committee work in every month. This commitment will

increase further for those Members who chair committees, with attendance at agenda planning and other briefing meetings an essential aspect of this role.

21. In addition, all Members may represent the County Council on outside bodies which cover a range of issues from the regional level such as West Midlands Council to local liaison committees relating to developments such as quarries as well as the Police and Fire and Rescue Authorities. Across all of the 91 bodies which the County Council appoints to there are 252 seats, so on average each member sits on four outside bodies however in practice, Cabinet Members tend to sit on more outside bodies than non-executive Members.
22. The frequency with which outside bodies meet varies from one or two meetings a year for some of the local bodies to the requirements for the Police and Fire Authorities, which may involve as much, or indeed more, as their County Council committee work. Police Authority Members attend 5 meetings of the Police Authority per year, plus four development days and will also be a Member of several of the Authority's 15 Committees, panels and groups. Similarly, Members of the Fire and Rescue Authority attend six meetings of the Authority a year plus five Development Days and attend meetings of the nine committees, panels and groups. Members of the Police and Fire authorities also undertake locality based work and responsibilities on these authorities' behalf.
23. A reduction in the number of elected Members would make it extremely difficult for the County Council's current political management arrangements to continue to operate. A reduction in the number of elected Members would make it difficult to fulfil the required Committee places and other appointments; an effect which could well be exacerbated through the political balance rules. This would either then place an unreasonable additional burden on those Members who remained or there would need to be a reduction in the number of committee places which would compromise the County Council's ability to operate efficient and convenient local government.

The Role of Staffordshire Members – Community Work

24. A key aspect of the work of Members is the role that they play directly in the communities that they represent. This is at the heart of how the identities and interests of these communities are provided for by the County Council and is part of the current Administration's commitment to Members being at the centre of the relationship between the Council and local communities. This is demonstrated by an organisational shift to provide stronger focus around customer service and insight and a community engagement framework that articulates a strengthened role for Members. Other recent shifts in the responsibilities of Members include a greater role in budgetary decision making in areas such as highways and youth service provision through the Staffordshire Local Community fund. All of these different strands of work represent a growth in the time commitment for Members in undertaking a community leadership and liaison role as well as the traditional calls on their time in representative roles.
25. Members are increasingly becoming more directly involved in the County Council's consultation activity taking place within their divisions and districts. This may take the form of written or face to face briefings and the intention is to become more sophisticated about joining together public consultation

processes and ensuring Members have a full picture of what is happening in their area. This also becomes a two way process as the Members' local knowledge will be used to contribute to and facilitate access to relevant community groups.

26. Members estimate that they spend, on average, around nine hours a month involved in meetings with County Council officers relating to their division. This has increased through the expansion of local budgeting work Members are involved with, particularly with highways and youth provision. Members may also take up roles such as becoming school governors or being involved in other County Council local delivery bodies such as Community and Learning Partnerships, which support local delivery of the extended schools agenda. In addition, Members also spend an estimated three hours a month dealing with grant funding applications through the Staffordshire Local Community Fund.
27. A number of Members hold regular surgeries in their division in addition to their contact details being available to their constituents through the County Council's website. Members estimate that they spend around 15 hours a week dealing with queries from local residents either by telephone, email or in person. Members in parished areas also spend around 8 hours a month attending parish council meetings and some rural Members, whose divisions cover large geographical areas, spend considerably more time. Many rural Members also find it necessary to hold multiple surgeries in different parishes or areas of their divisions. In addition to parish councils, Members also meet on a regular basis with other organisations such as residents associations and community groups. Much of this work is, by its nature, in the evenings and may, particularly in rural areas of the county, involve a considerable amount of travel.
28. It is worth noting that the diversity of the County's geography also has a significant effect on how Members' represent their individual divisions. Some of the issues highlighted above demonstrate that there are clearly different challenges for those Members who represent large, rural areas with a low population density than for those who represent urban areas. In order to effectively represent their division, rural Members have to undertake a considerable amount of travelling between different parts of their division and have to deal with the often quite distinct needs and characteristics in these different areas. While urban Members do not face the same challenges in respect of travel, due to the fact that the areas of greatest deprivation are generally found in these urban areas, they do face challenges in reaching and understanding some of the issues in the communities they represent. The current electoral geography of the County also means that there are some areas where Members represent divisions that have both an urban and rural element which not only means they have to deal with their distinct challenges they may have, on occasion, to balance competing demands for their time and resources.
29. As well as the primary purpose of resolving individual residents' issues, Members are encouraged to feed in trends in case work and local concerns as a vital source of local intelligence for the County Council itself. This contributes to the County Council's approach to providing efficient and convenient local government by informing the work of scrutiny, strategic planning and the council's response to local concerns. Regular events titled Our Place, Our Priorities provide opportunities for Cabinet Members and local Councillors to

work through key issues around certain themes and the actions being taken to address these.

30. Any reduction in the number of Members would have a significant impact on their ability to effectively represent their local communities. The time commitment, particularly during evening hours, for elected Members is significant without compromising the key principle that serving as a County Councillor should be as accessible to as much of the eligible population as possible. A reduction in the number of Members, and the consequent additional representational demands would place a severe strain on the individuals concerned. The current council size of 62, as well as ensuring the workload for individual Members is not beyond what is achievable, provides an adequate number to ensure that individual communities and their interests are effectively represented.

Conclusions

31. The evidence above shows that Members spend in excess 100 hours a month on their County Council duties, a figure which will be significantly higher for Cabinet Members. Any reduction in the number of Members would not only have an impact on the workload of the individual Members themselves but will also directly affect the communities they represent. A reduction of the number of Members would mean that, under a new scheme of representation that ensured electoral equality, individual Members would be required to represent an electorate in excess of the current average of 10,656. It is the County Council's view that this would not only put an intolerable burden on the capacity of Members to effectively undertake its work but that it would not be possible to provide a coherent scheme that effectively represents community interests and identities.
32. It is possible to argue that there is a case for an increase in Council size; the current elector-member ratio is significantly higher than many similar sized County Councils; in fact if the ratio was to reduce to the average level for similar County Councils (around 8500 electors per Member) council size would need to increase to 77. As demonstrated above, Members face significant time pressures that an increase in their number would help to alleviate. There also are some areas within the County where the last boundary review, in order to ensure electoral equality, created some additional challenges by combining different communities with different needs. However bearing in mind all of the factors outlined, in particular that the County Council is demonstrating that it can operate effective arrangements with 62 Members; it is the County Council's view that an increase is not required at this stage.
33. In order to have a meaningful impact on how Staffordshire's communities were represented, an increase in council size (or in fact a reduction) would have to result in a significant reduction in the elector to Member ratio which can only be achieved by moving to between 70 and 80 Members which would lead to an unreasonable increase in the 'cost of democracy'. If the Council size was to increase by 15 Members, this would increase in the cost of Members allowances – which was £778,136 in 2009/10 – in the region of £181,000 based on the current basic allowance and an average of current mileage and other allowances claimed by Members. The Council also provides Members with a range of IT equipment and there would also be an increased initial set up cost in 2013 following the County Council elections of around £7,500 for the 15 new

Members in addition to any changes resulting as seats changing hands as a result of the election.

34. As well as these direct and measurable costs, the Council would also incur additional indirect costs as a consequence of having to support an influx of additional new Members on an ongoing basis. It is likely that any increase in the number of Members would also lead to changes in the County Council's political management arrangements such as an increase in the number of committees. This would mean additional Special Responsibility Allowances and an increase in the workload of officers who support Members directly, particularly those in Member and Democratic Services both in terms of committee support and through the one-stop-shop support offered to Members.
35. The County Council is committed to ensuring that the office of Councillor is accessible to as much of the population as possible and actively promotes the opportunities available. However, it is also recognised that it is political parties that provide the vast majority of candidates for elections. At the last County Council elections in June 2009 only 23 of the 267 candidates did not represent a nationally recognised political party with 181 standing for one of the three main parties. Local parties already sometimes face challenges in finding people who are willing to stand for election, which is evidenced by the fact that 45 Members elected in June 2009 were already serving on District and Borough Councils. An increase in the number of Members would put further pressure on political parties and could lead to more 'dual hatted' Members facing excessive demands on their time. There is also the possibility that parties would be unable to nominate a full slate of candidates and would have to concentrate their resources where they were most likely to be effective; there is a risk that this could lead to the uncontested elections, which would render improvements in electoral equality irrelevant.
36. It is the County Council's view that the evidence set out above demonstrates how the current council size of 62 provides efficient and convenient local government for Staffordshire. By taking into account all of the outlined geographical, political and representational factors that impact on the work that elected Members undertake, it is the County Council's view that this shows that this size continues to be sufficient to represent the interests of the county's local communities and that any change would compromise either the efficiency and convenience of the County Council's operation or would have an adverse effect on the coherence of the identities of the communities Members represent.
37. The County Council's current electoral arrangements include three divisions with two Members, which were established following the previous review of electoral arrangements in 2004. The County Council's view, based on the experience of how this has operated in practice, is that these arrangements do not provide the most efficient and cohesive scheme for representation. This view is endorsed by Members who represent dual divisions who have commented on the particular difficulties that they face representing a larger area with a greater population and electorate. Having two Members makes it difficult for the public to easily identify who 'their Councillor' is and Members find that there can be difficulties in equitably dividing case work between them, particularly where representation is split across different parties. As a result of this, the County Council believes that the future scheme of representation should be based on 62 Members representing 62 divisions.