

# **ELECTORAL REVIEW OF HUNTINGDONSHIRE DISTRICT COUNCIL**

## **Huntingdonshire District Council's Submission on Council Size**

### **Introduction**

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBC) is an independent body established by Parliament in April 2010. One of its objectives is to work with principal local authorities to help them deliver effective and convenient local government to citizens. Every year, the LGBC assesses electorate data for each local authority in England with the intention to intervene where "significant" electoral inequality exists. There are well established criteria against which to gauge electoral inequality. Huntingdonshire District Council's current electoral arrangements have triggered a review.

An electoral review is an examination of a council's electoral arrangements. This means:

- the total number of members to be elected to the council;
- the number and boundaries of electoral areas (wards / divisions) for the purposes of the election of councillors;
- the number of councillors for any electoral area of a local authority; and
- the name of any electoral area.

The LGBC will aim to ensure its recommendations remain relevant for the long term and recommend a number that delivers effective and convenient local government well after the completion of the review.

The purpose of this phase of the Huntingdonshire District review is to determine the size of the Council. The number of Councillors will be assessed against three broad areas:

- the governance arrangements of the council and how it takes decisions across the broad range of its responsibilities;
- the council's scrutiny functions relating to its own decision making and the council's responsibilities to outside bodies, and
- the representational role of councillors in the local community and how they engage with people, conduct casework and represent the council on local partner organisations.

This document is the Council's submission. It has been informed by:

- briefings given by the LGBCE to the full Council, group leaders and key officers;
- meetings with representatives of all political groups;
- consideration by the Standards Committee, and
- debate at full Council.

### **Huntingdonshire District Council's Submission**

Huntingdonshire District Council is of the view that it needs to retain 52 Members in order to maintain effective and convenient local government. The following paragraphs constitute the rationale, backed up with evidence, for this proposal.

#### *Huntingdonshire District Council*

Of the 201 two-tier District Councils in England, Huntingdonshire is the eighth largest by electorate and 26th largest by area. The electorate at 1st December 2014 was 128,358.

This is projected to increase to 152,600 by 2021, an increase of 19 percent. It is widely recognised that there are significant development pressures in the area, with large scale developments planned for Alconbury Weald, the urban extension to Wintringham Park, St Neots and Wyton Airfield. Some of this development will take place after the review period, but it demonstrates the ongoing pressures on the District.

The Council presently has 52 Members who are elected from 29 wards. Of these nine are in the more urban town locations of Godmanchester, Huntingdon, Ramsey, St Ives and St Neots. Although, the remaining 20 wards are characterised as being more rural, the settlements within their boundaries range in size up to in excess of 7,000 residents, making them comparable with the towns. Four of the wards are represented by three Councillors each, 15 are represented by two Councillors each and ten are single-member wards.

Huntingdonshire District Council currently elects by thirds. The LGBC advises that elections by thirds should only take place if a local authority submits a council size proposal that is divisible by three. The assumption is that all wards will be represented by three Members, thereby requiring an election in every ward each year an election is held. The proposal to retain 52 Members means the Council would move to all-out elections from 2018.

### *Leadership*

The Council has operated a Leader and Cabinet system of governance since 2000, with a trial having operated for two years prior to that. The Council, in 2009, completed a comprehensive review of its democratic and decision making arrangements to verify their effectiveness and ensure they were fit for purpose.

The review in 2009 concluded that the Cabinet should comprise a maximum of ten Councillors including the Leader. This was adopted and ten Members were duly appointed to the Cabinet. With the appointment of a new Executive Leader, from the start of the 2011 Municipal Year, the Cabinet comprised only six Members. The following year, however, owing to demands on individuals' time, it was deemed necessary to appoint an additional Member to the Cabinet. Subsequently, the particular circumstances of the organisation following the complete replacement of the Senior Management Team and the introduction of new working practices, an additional Member of the Cabinet was required, specifically to be responsible for organisational change and development. The current composition of the Cabinet is as follows:

Councillor J D Ablewhite, Executive Leader	Strategic and Delivery Partnerships
Councillor R S Carter	Operations and Environment
Councillor S Cawley	Organisational Change and Development
Councillor D B Dew	Strategic Planning and Housing
Councillor J A Gray	Resources
Councillor R Harrison	Strategic Economic Development and Legal
Councillor R B Howe, Deputy Executive Leader	Commercial Activities
Councillor D M Tysoe	Customer Services

A detailed breakdown of each Executive Councillor's area of responsibility appears at Appendix A. Appendix B contains general role descriptions for Executive Councillors.

None of the Executive Councillors are considered to have a full-time role but considerable demands are placed on them. The Executive Leader's Role Description (Appendix C) was adopted in 2009 and, from 2011, was augmented in accordance with the requirements of the

Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 to include the appointment of the Cabinet and being responsible for all of the authority's Executive functions. There also is a Role Description for the Deputy Executive Leader (Appendix D).

Executive Members serve on other decision making partnerships, sub-regional, regional and national bodies. Appointments are considered on an annual basis. In addition to the roles listed in the General Description, the Executive Leader represents the Council on the board of the Greater Cambridge and Greater Peterborough Local Enterprise Partnership, is a substitute on the Local Government Association's Environment, Economy, Housing and Transport Board, is the Chairman of the East of England Local Government Association and represents the Council on the Shared Services Joint Committee (Member Board) along with the Leaders of the two partner authorities. The Chairman of the Members' Allowances Independent Review Panel referred to below is of the view that "[l]ocal government devolution will in all likelihood place more demands on the post of Leader".

The Cabinet meets every month. With the exception of the annual determination of grants to voluntary organisations, which is delegated to the Executive Councillors for Resources and Strategic Economic Development and Legal, all decisions are taken collectively by the Cabinet.

### *Regulatory*

The Council has a Development Management Panel to determine planning matters that cannot be dealt with through the scheme of delegation. It comprises 16 Members. The Development Management Panel has a high profile reflecting the development pressures across the District and, on occasion, the decisions it is required to take can be contentious.

Meetings are held monthly and although there is extensive delegation of decisions to Officers, they are often very lengthy. Experience has shown that providing interested parties with the opportunity to address the Panel on applications prolongs the process but Panel Members, and the Chairman in particular, strongly support the retention of this facility to aid their decision-making.

The Development Management Panel's work is augmented by the Section 106 Agreement Advisory Group, the Tree Preservation Orders Sub-Group and the Development Plan Policy Advisory Group. While the last two meet infrequently, the Section 106 Agreement Advisory Group has scheduled monthly meetings to review the terms of S106 Agreements prior to their submission to the Panel.

The Council has two further regulatory forums; that is, the Licensing and Protection Panel (taxis, charitable collections and environmental health) and the Licensing Committee (Licensing Act 2003 and Gambling Act 2005). These have identical memberships of 12 Members. Main meetings are held on the same day but, for legal reasons, they are held separately. Each meets quarterly but also has a significant number of hearings to determine individual licensing matters.

The Licensing Sub-Committee held ten meetings in 2014/15 and the Licensing and Protection Applications Sub-Group met on 11 occasions. The number of individual cases considered at each meeting varies.

Before they can take their seats on the Development Management Panel or the Licensing and Protection Panel / Licensing Committee, Members have to attend training. The external expert on licensing, who provided training for Members in June 2015, does not foresee any changes in this area, which will significantly affect workloads. With regard to planning, the Council is in the process of preparing a new Local Plan for adoption. This is likely to take

place in 2016. However, the expectation is that completion of this work will not result in a diminution of activity in this area as there will still be a need to develop the supplementary planning policy framework.

### *Demands on Time*

The Council commissioned an Independent Review Panel (IRP) to review its Members' Allowances in April 2015. The IRP was chaired by a national expert in the field, Dr Declan Hall. The IRP's report on its findings notes that Members':

“expected time input in 2002 was 55 days per year. The evidence strongly suggests that this original estimation is now out of date particularly relating to the increased contact with constituents and the time spent on reading and preparation - all boosted by the now common place reliance on electronic means of communication and working that was not in place in 2002. The 2013 Census of Councillors shows that on average district councillors, who hold no positions of responsibility, put in up to 14 hours per week (equivalent to 90 days per year on an 8 hour day)”.

The IRP heard submissions from Members that the Census findings were replicated in Huntingdonshire. This represents a significant increase in demand on Members' time.

During the Review, all party group Leaders commented on the difficulties they experienced recruiting candidates to stand for election to the District Council. Three Members chose not to stand for re-election in May 2015. This figure is consistent with previous years. There were no uncontested seats at the District Council elections in 2015.

There are nine main Council committees with a total of 96 seats, which are allocated in proportion to the size of each of the political groups, plus a number of smaller sub-groups. The Constitution provides that every Member of the Council shall be appointed to serve on a minimum of one Overview and Scrutiny Panel, Committee or Panel of the Council or the Cabinet. The quorum for committee meetings is one quarter of the whole number of members but not less than three Members. Attendance levels by Members are good. Meetings of full Council, Cabinet, Development Management Panel, Corporate Governance Panel and Overview and Scrutiny Committees take place in the evening. Other meetings are held during the day.

Members have General Role Descriptions (Appendix E) and there are Role Descriptions for the Executive Leader, Deputy Executive Leader and Executive Councillors. In addition to those appended to this submission, there are Role Descriptions for the Chairman of the Council, the Chairmen of all of the Committees and Panels, the Vice-Chairmen and Group Leaders.

The Council appoints Members as its representatives on a range of outside bodies. The list of bodies appears in the Constitution (see Appendix F).

With regard to Members' representative role towards their constituents, the role description emphasises that a Member should:

- ensure that constituents have access to him/her by way of surgeries, use of modern technology, letter and telephone,
- develop and maintain links as required with the local MP, MEPs, county councillors and the towns or parishes situated in his/her electoral ward,
- participate in any political group to which he/she belongs, and
- devote as much time as is necessary and reasonable to fulfil the requirements of the role effectively.

Appendix G contains the complete Protocol for Community Leadership by Members from the Constitution.

At the time of the review in 2002, the electorate was 116,117 (2001) with each Councillor representing an average of 2,234 electors. Based on current electorate figures of 128,358, with 52 Councillors, each Councillor would represent an average of 2,468 electors, rising to 2,935 in 2021 (152,600 electors).

The Council places strong emphasis on “channel migration” with the aim of encouraging its customers to obtain information and services for themselves through electronic means. Councillors, however, believe that while this has realised benefits in terms of reduced transaction costs for the Council as an organisation, it has not decreased their levels of constituent casework. On the contrary, it is commonly found that technology has contributed to increased contact with Councillors because they are readily available via email and mobile telephone there is an expectation of a quick response.

Many Huntingdonshire District Councillors also are Town / Parish and / or County Councillors.

### *Scrutiny Functions*

The Local Government Act 2000 (S 21) required a local authority operating under executive arrangements to appoint one or more overview and scrutiny committees and defines the functions of that committee(s) as:

- to review or scrutinise decisions made or action taken by the executive in discharging its functions;
- to make reports and recommendations to the authority or the executive about the discharge of executive functions;
- to review or scrutinise decisions made or action taken in the discharge of non-executive functions;
- to make reports and recommendations to the authority or the executive about the discharge of non-executive functions;
- to make reports and recommendations to the authority or the executive on matters that affect the authority's area or its inhabitants, and
- to conduct best value reviews if included within its terms of reference by the authority.

Having tried various structures for the Overview and Scrutiny Panels since 2000, the present arrangements comprising three Panels were adopted in 2009. Detailed remits and responsibilities appear in the Constitution (see Appendix H). The Constitution allows for the appointment of up to 16 Members to each of the Panels. In practice, this number has never been necessary and 12 Members sit on each Panel. The Panels have the same full complement of roles but have developed their focus in different directions. The Social Well-Being Panel has, for example, in response to particular local circumstances, undertaken a considerable amount of work on external health services; while the Economic Well-Being Panel has concentrated on the Council's internal finances and governance. The Environmental Well-Being Panel has been occupied with local strategic planning and the range of associated policy provisions.

The Panels meet on a monthly basis, with task and finish groups also convening on an ad hoc basis. At the same time, the Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen variously meet together to co-ordinate and manage the Panels' work programmes. There is a dedicated support

Officer. There is also a nominated member of the Officer Corporate Management Team for each Panel.

The Panels do not generally cancel meetings from lack of business; indeed, they have in the past been criticised for having Agenda that are too congested. The Panels have a Work Programme report at every meeting to enable Members to monitor progress and plan ahead. The work programme also is monitored by the Corporate Management Team so that the flow of internally generated reports is profiled. That said, because they are not able to compel them to attend meetings, Panels are reliant on the goodwill and co-operation of external witnesses. This can mean that Agenda can sometimes be lengthy.

In an attempt to improve outputs, different ways of working have been adopted. The Economic Panel has employed a Select Committee approach to one particular study. In a similar vein, the Chairmen of task and finish groups are now expected to take responsibility for drafting reports on their findings.

In addition, the Council recently has completed a review of the Overview and Scrutiny function and found that it needs to adhere to the present arrangements. There will continue to be three Overview and Scrutiny Panels, each comprising 12 Members.

### *The future*

Constant change has always been a feature of the environment in which local government and its Members operate, and this will continue to for the next few years. The first reason for this change is the continuing financial constraints that are pushing councils in different directions regarding their service provision and delivery models. Secondly, the implementation of the various provisions of the Localism Act 2011 affords them greater scope to undertake a wider range of activities than they have in the past. Thirdly, the emergence of regional and local devolution on the political agenda looks set to take local government into uncharted territory. Although the specific proposals on how local government devolution will take place are not known, what is known is that all the major political parties are committed to moving it forward in some form. As a result, Huntingdonshire District Council and its Members will be operating in a different fashion in five years' time.

The Corporate Plan sets out an ambitious programme of activity for the Council to drive growth and investment in the local economy whilst at the same time challenging itself to deliver good services for a lower cost. A key strand of the future strategic approach is to generate income to meet the funding challenges through the adoption of a Commercial Investment Strategy. This will place additional demands on Members in terms of governance.

Another important element is the development of shared services. In July 2015, the Council formally resolved to enter into a shared service partnership with two neighbouring authorities. Businesses cases for individual shared services are already starting to come forward and others are anticipated in the near future.

One of the Council's four Strategic Priorities is to work with communities to enable them to thrive and get involved with local decision making. This will require Members to maintain democratic engagement levels. The ability to do this would be impaired if the Council had fewer Members.

### *Conclusion*

The *Technical Guidance* states that the LGCB will seek to put the Council's proposal on size into context by comparing it with the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy (CIPFA) *Nearest Neighbours* model. The purpose of this is to ascertain whether an authority's proposal would mean its council size differs to a significant extent from similar authorities (paras. 4.25 – 4.26)

Data on the Council's *Nearest Neighbours* shows that the following have completed a boundary review in the last two years:

- Aylesbury Vale (electorate 135,888) – 59 Members;
- South Kesteven (electorate 105,504) – 56 Members;
- Colchester (electorate 119,851) – 51 Members;
- Braintree (electorate 111,365) – 49 Members;
- Cherwell (electorate - 107,336) – 48 Members; and
- Stafford (electorate - 95,826) – 40 Members.

For completeness, Huntingdonshire's geographical neighbours have also been taken into account. Their figures are as follows:

- Cambridge City (electorate 91,173) – 42 Members;
- East Cambridgeshire (electorate 63,016) – 39 Members;
- Fenland (electorate 73,656) – 39 Members; and
- South Cambridgeshire (electorate 114,298) – 57 Members.

Huntingdonshire's proposal for 52 Members is mid-way between the upper and lower figures for the *Nearest Neighbours* and, with an electorate of 128,353, has strong similarities with the areas of a comparable size; namely Aylesbury Vale, Colchester, Braintree and South Cambridgeshire. There should be no objection to the Council's proposal on this ground.

The Constitution was adopted in 2000 with annual and subsequently biennial reviews of it having been undertaken ever since. It is currently the subject of a fundamental review by external legal experts.

In line with the Council's Auditor's recommendation, the Council has adopted Zero Based Budgeting together with a "Star Chamber". Starting in 2014, all services now will be subject to a fundamental review on a three-yearly cycle.

It is stressed that the Council has continually kept the democratic structure under review to ensure it is adequate. It will be seen, therefore, that the Council has a good understanding of what arrangements are required to secure effective and convenient local government.

The Council does not believe there will be a reduction in the development pressures on the District but it is confident efficiencies can be achieved in most of its areas of activity. The Council further believes that only by retaining the number of 52 Councillors will it be able to ensure that the governance, decision making and scrutiny functions will not be compromised and will remain effective, whilst still ensuring Councillors are able to fulfil their representational role within their communities.