

Council size changes: learning lessons from submissions and implementation

Centre for Governance and Scrutiny

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Introduction and context

This paper, the product of research commissioned by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England and carried out by the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny, relates to key aspects of the process of electoral review in England.

It aims to:

- Explore the most effective approaches that councils (and others) have taken to prepare submissions prior to electoral reviews;
- Explore the approaches that councils have taken to implement the outcome of reviews, once concluded.

It supports the revision of guidance on these issues by LGBCE in autumn 2022.

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Methodology

The work had two phases.

Phase 1

During winter and spring 2019/20 CfGS conducted a comprehensive review of submissions made to LGBCE on electoral reviews between 2010 (when the LGBCE took on the duties of the Boundary Committee for England) and the time of the study. Analysis looked primarily at the formal submissions made by councils, but also at other submissions – in particular those submitted by political parties. Our analysis focused on:

- how councils view their size in relation to their effective functioning;
- how local context affects council size;
- what evidence is used to justify a change in council size;
- and what underlying principles and rationale guides the arguments made for a change in council size.

Research on these issues was carried out to inform the objective of being able to draw out common themes with a view to providing to the Commission, and councils, a sense of how submissions might be developed and improved in future.

Phase 2

Research involved a survey, semi-structured interviews and analysis of key documents. The evidence gathering period ran from September to December 2021.

CfGS and LGBCE selected twenty local authorities that had undergone council size change in the past ten years for analysis. Authorities were contacted to request their involvement, and the Leader, Chief Executive, Monitoring Officer and Minority Group leader (as appropriate) were invited to fill out a survey, designed to address the issues raised in the scope below.

The scope of the survey involved:

- The drivers of change – drawing on the first part of our research;
- The practical internal council response to the change
 - Arrangements put in place to manage the transition (and whether these are different where the change in numbers of significant);
 - Any new systems (including arrangements for the use of new technology) put in place:
 - New systems for managing member enquiries;
 - New approaches to committee sizes and structures;
 - New arrangements for member briefing and liaison more generally;
 - New arrangements put in place by political parties for whipping/political management.
- How councils and councillors communicate the change, and how the change affects high level strategy on public engagement;

- Variations in strategy and implementation of change (over time, and by type of council where possible)
- The extent to which councils have seen a change in numbers as an opportunity to reshape the local governance context, namely relationships with electors and voluntary and community sector;
- The way in which councils and individuals within councils have drawn on intelligence, insight and support from other organisations in the sector to support them in making the change. Did these conversations make a difference?

In total the survey received a total of 15 responses from 10 different authorities.

On the basis of responses to the survey CfGS selected eight councils for further study, which involved interviews with a selection of officers and members from each council. These were semi-structured based on the survey scope above, but designed to focus on the most significant aspects of organisational change and their local consequences.

The semi-structured interviews set out to answer the following questions:

- What were your objectives for council size change?
- What arrangements did you put in place to effect the change?
- What was the impact – within the council and beyond – how do you know?
- What were the missed opportunities?

Documentary analysis was also undertaken of governance and organisational documents from before and after the change to understand how a decrease in membership impacts on systems and plans. More information on the document analysis can be found in the appendix.

Findings of fact arising from the research can be found at Appendix 1.

Risks and limitations

The method for both phases involves some important limitations.

- Both phases were primarily desk based, although involved a range of interviews. Both phases also involved the most detailed study being made of a comparatively small range of case study authorities.
- Research was carried out before and during the pandemic. The pandemic's impacts will undoubtedly have shifted councils' assumptions and long term plans. As far as possible the research has sought to take account of this but – by definition – it has not been able to look at reviews carried out wholly since the pandemic given the long lead time for reviews and the hiatus taken by LGBC in conducting those reviews during 2020 and 2021.
- There is also the potential for 'reinterpretation with hindsight' in interviews considering the date at which council size change occurred in some local authorities.

Background to electoral reviews

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) is tasked with carrying out electoral reviews. These reviews are the focus of this research. These reviews look into:

- the total number of councillors elected to the local authority;
- the number and boundaries of wards or divisions for the purposes of the election of councillors;
- the number of councillors for any ward or division of a local authority; and
- the name of any ward or division.

The Commission conducts an electoral review of a council for a number of reasons:

- At the request of the local authority;
- If the local authority meets the Commission's intervention criteria:
 - a) If one ward has an electorate of +/-30% from the average electorate for the authority
 - b) If 30% of all wards have an electorate of +/-10% from the average electorate for the authority
- If the local authority has not been reviewed for 12 years or more; or
- If government decisions result in the creation of new authorities.

There is substantial difference in councillor numbers between English councils. This is largely the result of historical accident¹ - councils which have moved to unitary status as a result of local government reorganisation in recent years tend to be larger than those councils who can chart their establishment to 1972 (1965 in London), within which cohort there is more consistency.

The way in which local authorities conduct their business and provide for the effective representation of their electorate has changed considerably over recent decades. The implementation of the Local Government Act 2000 saw most local authorities change how they made decisions and operate. Similarly, subsequent legislation, including the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 and the Localism Act 2011, has introduced further opportunities for local government to modify their governance and management arrangements. In addition, partnership working, developments in service delivery, and digital working have also impacted on local authorities.

These new ways of working and the novel operating and delivery models in which councillors play a governing role factor strongly in the way that councils describe themselves, their work and – importantly – the role and importance of councillors. This should be underlined by a recognition of an increasingly complex local governance environment for councillors to navigate as well as the need for them to evolve to meet new demands.

¹ Purdam et al, 2008

Practical approaches for councils

Preparation for making submissions: setting the parameters

To start with, it is worth acknowledging that preparing high quality submissions for electoral reviews can be resource-intensive.

An investigation of the time taken to produce high quality submissions falls beyond the remit of this research – although some submissions allude to these resource issues in describing the method by which the submission has been developed.

The resource that councils are prepared to commit connects closely to the value that councils place in an electoral review – whether they see it as something which could contribute to wider improvements (including improvements in local governance and democracy) or a project which could lead to disruption and needs to be “managed”. Of course, these two drivers are not mutually exclusive.

Councils’ mindsets on this matter tends to lead them to either adopt a narrow or broad way of interpreting the task:

- **Narrow:** the submission is a reaction to the instigation of an electoral review. The submissions focuses around providing demographic and other evidence which makes it heavy on data, but light on analysis. It does not engage especially closely with a narrative about what makes the area and its councillors distinctive, or about the future of the area as a place;
- **Broad:** electoral review is taken as an opportunity for a necessary conversation about the councillor role, with a view to concluding whether council size is appropriate given the roles that members play. This work can play into a wider review of governance (which may be linked to the evidence base underpinning the council’s Annual Governance Statement) or a more general review of local democracy.

Our research suggests that there is more local value in seeing the task in a broader sense, as something making a tangible contribution to members’ future role. This central issue of practical utility is something that should influence councils’ approaches to submission in the future.

Overview: having regard to common characteristics for good submissions

On the basis of the themes and findings of fact set out in the main body of this research, we have determined that the “best”² submissions are those which combine the following **characteristics**, comprising a submission which:

² For the purposes of this report a “good” submission is one that engages with the purposes of an LGBCE electoral review and provides useful evidence to support such a review. The use of “success” should be interpreted in the context of this overall objective.

1. **Provides clarity on objectives** – whether the submission is in support of a reduction, increase or the status quo in terms of councillor numbers – all that follows should flow from this central objective. This links to what we commented on about the “value” of the exercise in the introduction, and is covered in more detail in a section below;
2. **Reflects a straightforward, direct “submission style”** which is informed by local evidence and insight;
3. **Puts forth arguments on size which are based on an understanding of local communities** and how those communities are democratically represented – focusing on some of the **key substantive areas** set out in the next section;
4. **In doing so, connects distinctly to a sense of local place, and how the unique attributes of a place influence the work that councillors do**, and the support they provide to local people (as articulated as one of the key substantive areas described below);
5. **Sets out a consistent narrative around the link between councillors’ roles and responsibilities**, the limits and pressures of these responsibilities when compared with the resource that councillors have at their disposal – incorporating:
 - Articulation of the officer resource available to support members;
 - Articulation of the workload put upon members by virtue of unique aspects of the place – principally, the demands of local demography;
 - Articulation of the resource that exists within the member corps itself – the amount of time and capacity for them to do their work alongside (for example) employment and caring responsibilities;
 - Articulation of the use by councillors of tools such as social media and how this affects their work.

There are also common characteristics for the structure and style of submissions. Good submissions:

- Deploy arguments to increase or decrease council size reflecting current arrangements, but also likely future plans or trends;
- Provide robust demographic and electoral data as well as opinions gathered from councillor surveys;
- Consider alternative council size options and their related impacts on council effectiveness – demonstrating that the council has not started with their objective and worked backwards;
- Place the submission firmly in the context of the organisation’s strategic vision for the future and councillors’ role in supporting the delivery of that vision;
- Place the councillor voice front and centre.

Ensuring that submissions are clear about the objectives for change

Councils had a range of objectives driving electoral reviews, and their response to those reviews. Some of those are listed more fully in Appendix 2.

Cost is often cited as a dominant concern – the aim often being to reduce costs by reducing the number of councillors. Overall this seems to have a value that is more totemic than practical – the amounts of money saved (principally, on members’ allowances) are small in the context of councils’ total expenditure. It is however seen as important that elected members are not immune from financial pressures.

This links with a connected reason for change, that the status quo may see councillors having “not much to do” – which is not reflected in independent material such as the LGA Councillors’ Census and member surveys in a range of councils which suggests a substantial, ongoing commitment from members to a wide range of duties in and around the council.

Cost pressures are also experienced around officer support – particularly given that members’ expectations of the level of support they receive from officers may not, some interviewees felt, fit comfortably within the resource available. The logic here is that a reduction in the number of councillors may reduce demands on officer time, which is moot.

A focus *solely* on cost, however, is likely to risk the potential wider benefits of an electoral review not being realised. In two areas – **shifts in operating model and providing for more effective representation** – there are opportunities. These opportunities rest on reflecting on councillors’ current and future roles, and seeing what the evolution of those roles means for numbers. Many councils are beginning to think about changing local expectations – opening up decision-making and participation, in part as a way to understand how local people’s needs and expectations are changing post-pandemic.

In particular, this allows councils (and the Commission) to make more thoughtful and informed judgements on matters such as single, and multi-, member wards. This is about more than just the councillor-electors ratio.

Ensuring that submissions address key substantive areas

The following issues are what we describe as “**key substantive areas**” – components of a submission which councils can use to demonstrate and articulate their understanding of local democratic representation in their place.

Good submissions link key features of these substantive areas, using them to develop a holistic and reflective narrative about the local area and the part that councillors play in empowering and supporting local people. Weaker submissions tend not to do this – for example, instead choosing to summarise demographic information using general language divorced from the context of councillor representation.

By and large, submissions fall short of linking these substantive areas specifically to structural inequality and the work that councillors can do to support and empower local

people to overcome systemic and institutional discrimination – by reason of age, ethnicity or other protected characteristics under the Equality Act. Councillors, as advocates, can and do provide substantial assistance to people otherwise marginalised in this regard. There is an opportunity for councillors’ roles, in submissions, to be framed more explicitly in this context.

The **key substantive areas** are:

The wider national and local policy context. This includes, over the course of the last decade:

- The impact of financial challenges. Good submissions are able to weave an understanding of these external pressures into their submission, explaining their impact on members’ representative role and how council services are constrained as a result. At the time of writing (October 2022) this will connect closely with inflationary pressures and other financial uncertainties;
- Other large-scale national trends. Over the past decade this has included things like the Big Society and the provisions of the Localism Act, the first round of English devolution in 2015-17, through to more contemporary issues such as the Government’s focus on growth and levelling-up.
- The introduction of strategic commissioning or long-term partnership arrangements (a common feature in local authority practice earlier in the 2010s, now less prevalent – these arrangements were seen by some as resulting in a lesser need for councillor oversight);
- Insourcing of services (seen as requiring more, and more effective, councillor oversight);
- Decommissioning of services;
- Increased trading activity and commercialisation;
- Shifts in the local partnership landscape – successful NHS reform programmes, academisation in education, changes to strategic and operational policing arrangements;
- Shifts in the council’s overall operating model in light of some of these pressures and opportunities. This may include reference to “place-shaping” (prevalent in older submissions) or more contemporary phrases with the same general meaning.

Good submissions in this area:

- Demonstrate an acute understanding of how a variety of national and local policy drivers impact on councillors and their roles;
- Articulate a sense of these drivers and the long-term local trends they are likely to influence;
- Highlight the distinctive local impacts of these drivers on the wider community, not just the council as an institution;
- Use this understanding to frame the narratives that follow, rather than using it as the dominant theme in the submission;

- Explore those issues in a non-party political manner.

Local geography and demographics. This may impact on casework, workload and community engagement – for example, references to the different needs of urban and rural wards, the extent to which “place” is important to councillors and the community, the transience of the local population, the presence of “hidden” or otherwise complex deprivation;

Good submissions in this area:

- Provide a clear and succinct profile of the area – describing the community and the way that councillors serve it;
- Use distinctive, rather than boilerplate, language to describe the area – in particular highlighting unique aspects of community identity;
- Engage directly with the “ratio” between population and number of councillors;
- Highlight outliers in this ratio and put forward reasons why those outliers might have positive or negative impacts;
- Places that ratio in the context of wider demographic factors and other elements of the “key substantive areas”, rather than looking at it in isolation;
- Leaven discussion of demographic data with commentary providing more qualitative information about the community, the local democratic culture and what it means for councillors’ roles.

An articulation of **the general role of the councillor in the local area**, and how that role is changing. This should be defined using the voices of councillors concerned.

- **The role of the councillor within the council.** This is influenced by the prevailing culture of the authority. How do councillors exercise a strategic leadership role? What is the distinction between the member and officer roles? How do members exert oversight, either through political opposition or scrutiny? What does the council’s governance model mean for the councillor role? On these points, it may be that the council’s Annual Governance Statement may provide evidence to support contentions made in submissions;
- **The role of the councillor within the community** – working with others to resolve local people’s problems, campaigning, activism, acting as advocates. This will connect closely to the points above on local demographics.
- **The role of the councillor in other institutions** – in areas with combined authorities, or two-tier areas, for example, or in parished areas – along with the role that councillors play on outside bodies;

Good submissions in this area:

- Clearly articulate councillors’ current and changing roles, in a way that reflects the voices of councillors themselves (often evidenced through a councillor survey);
- Use or engage with well-understood typologies to describe these roles, and/or properly explains the roles that they describe – for example, in talking about

councillors' representative roles, their roles on the council as decision-makers and scrutineers, their roles on outside bodies, and so on;

- In doing the above, engage with the respective roles of members and officers;
- Tend to avoid technical “time and motion” evidence about councillors’ time commitments (which focus on “busy-ness” rather than productivity), particularly relating to time spent in committee);
- Demonstrate that this sense of councillors’ roles is something which exists in reality, rather than a narrative created for the purposes of the submission;
- Articulate how councillors play a role in supporting local people to overcome systemic injustice or discrimination, possibly by connecting objectives to an increase in the diversity of councillors themselves;
- Use all of the above (alongside other evidence relating to the key substantive areas) to put forward a consistent narrative around workload;
- Attempt to engage with some of the political and personal dynamics which affect councillors’ roles, specialisation and flexibility – recognising that surfacing these issues in a formal council submission can prove challenging, but that individual party submissions could provide a method of exploring such matters.

Technology and social media.

Good submissions in this area engage with issues around technology and social media in a way that highlights:

- Their potential to assist in democratic conversation;
- Councillors’ proactive use of technology – in making queries of officers, in campaigning and advocacy, and sharing information with their constituents;
- Councillors’ reactive use, where they have to be “available” to answer questions on social media, alongside possible enhanced expectations of member availability by officers and outside bodies;
- The complex impact on councillor time – increasing efficiency but also demands on councillors’ time;
- The asymmetric impact on councillors depending on the communities they represent and their own visibility on, and competence with, social media.

More information about these “key substantive areas” can be found in Appendix 3.

Managing the change itself

The change process – once reviews have been carried out – demands:

- Proper planning;
- A need for pluralism in how members and officers work together to take action. This is a process whose outcomes affects councillors from all groups – as well as the wider public. Treating the process as something different to a typical internal council project is important.
- An understanding of knock-on impacts on change.

There are a range of knock-on impacts of changes in council size that members and officers will need an opportunity to work through. Large numbers of dependencies and externalities will have to be surfaced and understood.

Although we have not looked closely about the manner of public consultation (which is usually managed by both councils and the Commission in parallel) there may be lessons to be learned about couching change in light of wider measures to improve local services – and understanding through this process how local people’s expectations of their relationships with councillors should evolve. Conversations in local communities over the course of the process are likely to provide a strong evidence basis for ongoing council improvement and transformation.

More information on the management of change itself can be found in Appendix 4.

Understanding the outcomes of change

With clearer objectives, councils will be able to be more informed about the outcomes of the process – at present outcomes are difficult to discern (direct cash savings aside). Although a number of interviewees talked about their own perceptions of outcomes, these were often highly subjective and did not reflect a clear analysis, carried out by the council corporately. It may be that the fact that the “project” is seen to “end” at the point that the change is made means that, after that change, people simply move on.

It is likely that the outcomes of change cannot easily be disaggregated from the impacts of wider changes to local governance or service delivery – and the impacts of changes from turnover of councillors after the next election. Councils experiencing electoral reviews seem to (but do not always) experience fairly high member turnover – so any change in culture in behaviour and expectations could be just as much down to the vagaries of local politics as to the review itself.

The perception of interviewees was that having the “right” number of councillors for the amount of resource available seems to make councils more responsive, and better able to meet councillors’ expectations. Streamlined and more confident decision-making was seen to be a feature of those councils which had made a success of this. However, this may be most relevant where a reduction in council size is fairly substantial – changes of only a handful of members seems less likely to bring about this impact.

Changes do not always result in more streamlined operations. While costs generally will not increase the expectations on councillors may do.

In general

Success may be as much about realism, planning, and a recognition of the wide-ranging nature of change as anything else. Councils are likely to make the most of electoral reviews when they recognise that there is significant value in promoting cross-council, and cross-community, conversation about the work that councillors do, how those roles are evolving, and what local people’s (and councillors’) expectations are of those roles and relationships. This is despite their being potentially politically sensitive and bringing with them a degree of organisational risk, and drawing councillors’ attention away from other matters.

Where the focus of a council’s thinking is on a limited exercise led by needs on costs, these benefits will go unrealised, and an opportunity to rethink, redevelop and re-energise democratic systems more broadly may be lost.

More information about understanding the outcomes of change can be found in Appendix 5.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Key findings of fact

1. In all the submissions analysed since 2010 **there is a clear trend for proposing a smaller council or retaining the current size**. Only 9% of all submissions since 2010 have proposed a larger council size. From an institutional perspective change is a difficult and often lengthy process, whereas the status-quo arguably requires less resources and capacity.
2. Considering submissions made by the council itself, 48% propose a smaller council size and 43% propose retaining the current size. Looking at **submissions made by individual political groups (rather than those made by the council corporately) does result in some significant differences** - 77% of submissions made by Conservative groups proposed a smaller council, whereas 25% of submissions made by Independent groups/individuals proposed a bigger council.
3. On the whole, **the format of most submissions tend to adhere to the three aspects of the LGBCE 'council Size Submission' template: governance arrangements, scrutiny functions and the representational role of councillors**. In addition to this, most submissions elaborate on the local context and make the case for the proposed council size supported by evidence.
4. Only 5% of submissions made in 2010-2012 mention austerity, yet in 2016-2019 a quarter made reference to it. **The submissions that specifically mention austerity are 16% more likely to propose keeping their current council size and 8% less likely to decrease it**.
5. Whilst deprivation is both a rural and urban issue, the lived experience of citizens in areas of population sparsity density is illustrated as presenting different types and volumes of casework for councillors. **The nature of need, vulnerability and councillor support is especially complex in these urban and rural environments**.
6. The mention of keywords associated with diversity in submissions have increased over time. This is expected considering wider demographic trends over these periods. Furthermore, **submissions appear to suggest a move towards the deployment of diverse identities, in relation to place and community, and the associated socio-economic realities in framing submissions. And a move away from the established policy perspective focusing overwhelmingly on efficiency, and value for money in framing submissions**.
7. **Submissions mentioning diversity in their electorate are 21% less likely to propose a smaller council size and 20% more likely to propose retaining their current council size**. This presents a significant variance between the deployment of diversity in submissions and the perceived need for greater or lesser representation.
8. There was almost a two-fold increase in mentions of keywords associated with deprivation between 2010-12 and 2016-19. Comparing the submissions that mention deprivation and its associated keywords, to submissions that do not, shows a clear distinction in council size proposed. Those not mentioning it are far more likely to propose a smaller council size. **These submissions indicate a perception that the**

higher levels of deprivation in communities correlates strongly with the need for greater representation.

9. **An area of commonality in submissions is the idea that a larger number of councillors makes it easier for those councillors to carry out their role “part time”, allowing a more diverse range of councillors** to be attracted to the role, including those of working age. This is an argument which has also been deployed in the wider literature.
10. **In submissions that describe the impact of budget cuts, this has been perceived as increasing the workload of members in areas of deprivation.** As cuts have been made to services this has affected the complexity of councillor’s workload which now involves closer work with residents previously carried out by officers.
11. **A considerable element of councillor workload in the form of formal meetings is referenced in almost all submissions.** These might be full Council or Cabinet meetings, or meetings of subsidiary and component Committees and groups. Many meetings have a consultative and coordinating function and include both councillors and council officers.
12. **Meeting length and frequency has been a vexed issue in councils for some time. The nuances of this debate are elided in council submissions** – for example, the presence of SRAs can dissuade councillors from “simplifying” committee structures, as can the fear that a reduction in the number of meetings can lead to a lack of checks and balances. The motivations for councillors either to increase or decrease the amount of work they do “at the Town Hall” is infrequently explored. There is often an overt political dynamic to such issues which makes candid discussion of them difficult.
13. Even if the length and frequency of internal council meetings may have decreased in some areas, **it is common for submissions to reference the increasing commitment and dedication of time to meetings and responsibilities with external bodies and partnerships.** This reflects the presence of new delivery vehicles, and their impact.
14. Matters of personal and professional relationships between members and officers are difficult to articulate confidently and candidly in a formal, council submission. Even in other submissions from individuals and groups, **frank discussion of the nature of the member/officer dynamic is in short supply. But it is clearly central to the way that members operate, and how they envisage their role.**
15. The strategic scope and scale of scrutiny has expanded. **Partnership work – a wider theme in submissions – is here articulated as a complicating factor in the scrutiny role.**
16. **Submissions do not generally make reference to scrutiny being a separate “career path” to executive activity,** or in scrutiny activity being a “feeder” for developing the experience of councillors and “skilling them up” to perform an executive role. **They also do not reflect the position in more contestable authorities, where scrutiny chairs may become executive members on a change in political control.**
17. **Submissions seem to focus on the management of an increased, or static scrutiny workload within a decreasing resource and “member capacity” envelope,** which raises issues about long-term sustainability of the specialist scrutiny role; it is unclear the extent to which there is a threshold, as a proportion of total membership or total population, beyond which delivering an effective and holistic scrutiny function may be more challenging.

18. **There are submissions in which the nature of the relationship between councillors and their communities are expanded upon.** In some instances, it mentions an expectation among local people that they should have more input into policy development and service delivery. Or, public expectations that councillors can ‘fix’ personal and local problems quickly.
19. **Technology and social media are cited in most submissions as significantly changing the nature and spaces of councillor-community engagement** and how council business is conducted.
20. **Most submissions appear to recognise the use of new technologies as a potential to facilitate democratic opportunities at the local level.** With almost all submissions, assumptions of future technological development and its related impacts factors in the rationale of council size change.
21. **Perhaps the most prominent negative impact of technology and social media is the increased accessibility and increased expectations of immediate responses leading to excessive workloads.** Given the speed at which comments and questions can be posted online there is greater pressure on councillors to react at a similar pace to matters which are raised through those mediums. Another negative impact is the exposure of councillors to abuse and intimidation; the need for support systems (within parties and between councillors) is not a prominent feature in submissions although can be expected to increase.
22. **In many of the supplementary member surveys included in submissions are answers that confirm an increased workload** “78% said that they were spending more, or significantly more time communicating with their constituents via email, and 60% said that they were spending more, or significantly more time communicating via social media.” There is also the added concern of potential for controversy when member are using social media without being fully aware of the etiquette or visibility of their posts.
23. When it comes to acting on LGBCE’s reviews, **member ownership (of the submission, and the process that follows) is important.**
24. While there is a clear sequence to change **there may be a danger in treating that change as being like a typical council project.** Change in council size is as much about a shift in roles and behaviours as it is about the mechanical processes around shifts in elections/ward boundaries. It is vital to have regard to the fact that this is a process which is connected to the fundamentals of local democracy – requiring that an approach be taken that is politically aware.
25. **Officers, in particular, may not be sufficiently aware of the impact that changes to council size (and, in particular, changes to ward boundaries) have on the member corps and its capacity** – including the impact of party candidate selections and knock-on impacts on likely member turnover. This is one of a number of externalities of which councils need to be aware when designing the process of change.
26. **Outcomes of reviews not always reflect councils’ objectives.**
27. In many cases **councils do not evaluate the outcome of the process** – possibly because they went into the process with ill-defined objectives, but also for capacity reasons.

28. Where outcomes were identified these included:

- Some impact – difficult to pin down – on the quality of local democratic representation;
- More “streamlined” decision-making, better member accountability and better member-officer relationships (including more manageable meetings);
- More confidence in pursuing organisational change;
- Cost savings;
- Impacts arising from high member turnover;
- Impacts arising from moves to single-member wards;
- Increased member workload.

Appendix 2: Drivers for change, and clarity on objectives

Quotations from interviewees

“The real savings have happened though shorter meetings. To be honest the savings from council size change were negligible.”

“We’ve gone through significant changes in recent times, very ambitious capital programme and transformation. This was starting to take place around the review.”

“The aim was always saving money, and they did save money on councillors allowances £80,000.”

“It was a conservative administration that instigated the review and stated they wanted to reduce the ‘cost of democracy’.”

“The submission is an expression of political will.”

“There were 2 drivers for the change, austerity started to impact on the council’s budget. Knowsley spent more per head of population, because of deprivation. We really depend on government funding because we don’t raise much money through council tax. We needed to cut costs so our workforce has almost halved in the past decade. Another area of spend was councillors, all receiving a basic allowance and officer support. We were reducing leisure centres and libraries so we needed to reduce the member size too.”

“For us it was always going to be smaller because we couldn’t afford to have 63 members.”

“Driving force from officer and members was that workload had reduced. Communicating with the public was becoming quicker and easier. We had lots of backbench councillors without much workload other than ward work...Both administration and opposition back then said lets reduce members, many are twiddling their thumbs – not much to do. We did a review on case work there wasn’t much.”

“We’re a predominantly rural area with one market town, so the case work isn’t heavy. We also don’t have our housing stock as that was sold off in 2001.”

“Council size change was a manifesto promise of [the administration] at the time to reduce the number of councillors”

Across both phases of the project, we sought to identify the objectives that councils, councillors and officers had for change.

We were able to identify the following drivers for change – things that are mentioned by councils in submissions and elsewhere as informing their thinking on what the products and outcomes of reviews ought to be.

Increased complexity in how services are designed and delivered

Complexity is embedded in all of the challenges facing local government today. There is an increasing recognition of the need for councils to embrace complexity and evolve to meet new demands and create new ways of working. Complexity may derive from:

- more partnership working (including the advent in some places of new governance structures arising from the Government’s agenda on devolution since 2015);
- more use of alternative delivery methods and vehicles (including vehicles and approaches designed to maximise income generation);
- a wider use of strategic commissioning; or
- the wholesale adoption of new operating models.

Some councils are seeking to bring about substantial changes to the way that they work. This involves changes to systems for decision-making, oversight and governance more generally.

The pandemic has accelerated some of the major trends in the sector, and changes to governance brought about by Government policy such as the health and care system changes and the proposals in the “Levelling Up” White Paper will further challenge councils to think in fundamentally different terms about the way that they design and deliver services, on their own and with their partners.

For some this is about shifts in delivery arrangements. Until recently, for many councils this may have meant fewer services coming directly under the council’s purview, instead being managed through contracts and commissioning arrangements. Now councils are trying to gain more flexibility to deal with unpredictable situations (and in some cases, the risk of provider and market failure) by insourcing services. Councils are also seeking to work differently with the public, developing new arrangements for participation and engagement. Finally, councils are seeking to trade and enter into commercial ventures to diversify their income streams – although the situation of many councils finding themselves exposed to unacceptable risk in this area may now dissuade some.

Together these kinds of trends could increase the workload on councillors – or decrease it. It is certainly the case that it will demand quite different skills of councillors, and may cause them and their councils to reflect more fundamentally on what the councillor role is. These conversations will inevitably lead to conversations about numbers.

Austerity and associated financial pressures

Financial pressures have put severe pressures on local government, resulting in financial constraints that have impacted council ambitions of delivering thriving communities and inclusive economies, as well as citizen expectations of receiving the same kind of public services in a context of increasing and diverse needs. At the time of writing, inflationary pressures associated with the cost of living crisis are likely to keep this issue at the forefront of councils’ and councillors’ minds.

Some councils have sought to rationalise their services into a “core offer”, or to otherwise articulate a withdrawal from some aspects of their traditional work, in order to stay financially sustainable.

The cost of councillors – while not an overriding consideration for many – was nonetheless seen as important. In the overall context of council budgets, the money spent on councillors (in terms of allowances) is comparatively small. However, we found that expenditure on elected politicians is in some places seen to be totemic – illustrative of the extent to which councillors are seen to be pulling together with the rest of the organisation in finding savings.

In our Phase 2 interviews the “affordability” of having “large” numbers of councillors came up a fair amount, but it was difficult to discern whether concerns were based on (for example) any kind of cost-benefit analysis evaluating the positive impacts of more councillors versus their costs. Obviously talking about the use of such analyses to weigh up the benefits of increased democratic representation is likely to be challenging.

Place is increasingly used in the different conversations councils have had in recent years relating to community, local assets, and about the councils’ and their residents’ roles within that place. In some areas this has resulted in the development of new operating models, as we discussed above. In other places it has provoked a more assertive and confident use of mechanisms such as co-production and deliberation – mechanisms which might include citizens’ assemblies, for example.

A sense of place also informs the perception that more effective representation might be needed – involving a “balancing” of council size in the context of demographic changes in a local area.

In particular, the “ratio” between elected members and electors seems to be an issue to which councillors and councils repeatedly return although there is neither agreement nor consistency in what councils themselves consider to be an appropriate ratio.

Ratios vary significantly across the country.

Fig 1: illustration of elector:councillor ratios (unitary councils), presented alongside demographic comparators (2019-20 figures)³

Local authority	Ratio	Total pop. 2020 ⁴	Under 16 pop. 2020 ⁵	Over 65 pop.	Rural pop. (incl hub)	IMD Average Score 2019 ⁸	Social housing	Authority area m2
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³ The examples given are not from our case study authorities.

⁴<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections/datasets/localauthoritiesinenglandtable2>

⁵ Ibid.

⁸<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/english-indices-of-deprivation-2019>

				2020 ⁶	towns) 2011 ⁷		tenure 2019 ⁹	
Buckinghamshire	2,797	543,973	20.7%	18.9%	49.8%	9.59	13.0%	604.2
Dorset	3,793	378,508	15.8%	29.1%	74.4%	15.735	12.0%	962.0
West Northants	4,073	405,050	20.5%	17.7%	69.9%	15.464	16.0%	501.8
Wiltshire	3,924	500,024	18.9%	21.7%	68.6%	13.447	14.0%	1,257.0

Needs, like demographics, are likely to vary widely between and within wards as well. Councils' objectives are reduction are often about making the councillors corps "more effective", and "better balanced". Submissions sometimes do not explore councillors' roles and responsibilities in detail (we explore this in more detail below).

These themes and trends (and others) have the potential to significantly shift the relationship between councillors, councils and local people. Suggestions and pointers on how councils and others making submissions can best organise and frame their submissions are based on these common themes.

These themes pivot around how to achieve effective local governance - the administrative convenience of existing structures, financial constraints, affective identity and history, convening diverse communities, and establishing an optimal balance between scale (for operating public services) and local democratic accountability.

Political drivers

Majority groups have campaigned on reducing the size of councils, and the cost of local democracy – this is linked to both of the objectives set out above. This is linked to political presentation.

Although usually a less explicit objective, making political management easier may be a driver behind moves to change council sizes. This may not be about seeking to gerrymander (to change boundaries to disadvantage certain parties), although some respondents (both members and officers) did suggest that councils may be drawn to reduce councillor numbers in order to squeeze out smaller parties. Whether these are isolated occurrences or more prevalent is not something we can evaluate through this work.

Support arrangements

One feature that emerged in almost all interviews was the importance of officers being able to support members in carrying out their roles. With many councils now employing fewer officers, some are concerned about the ability to fully support the needs of a large number of members.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/local-authority-rural-urban-classification>

⁹ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/housing/datasets/subnationaldwellingstockbytenureestimates>

Member expectations of the level of support they should receive are difficult to change. In our experience, over the course of the past decade many councils have tried to maintain a level of “service” for members that meet expectations that may have been set when councils were significantly better resourced. In this context councillor-officer ratios may be as important as councillor-electors ratios. What is interesting is that the assumption is that a reduction in councillors will lead to a reduction in overall workload; ward work and decision-making responsibilities will presumably not reduce to accommodate a smaller number of councillors.

“Not enough for members to do”

This may be linked to the comments above about support arrangements; there is a view (not a prevailing one, but one that was expressed to us) that member workload has, in fact, reduced.

The sense of there being less to do came more from officers than from members, and to our mind minimises the significant amounts of ward work that councillors will do in their wards and divisions, some of which may not be automatically visible to senior officers. It is not impossible that a reduction of workload will be a reality for some, but the perception of members with little to do may be more a reflection of political naivete on the part of certain senior officers. The idea of members having little to do is not new – it has been a familiar trope about the councillor role for many years.

Certainly, evidence such as the LGA Councillor Census, and similar “time and motion”-style studies undertaken by individual councils, suggest that the burden of work (especially ward work) is substantial, coupled with growing responsibilities on outside bodies to go alongside traditional roles at the town hall.

Fundamental to making an effective submission is the understanding of councillors’ roles. Putting forward a clear statement of councillors’ roles requires that councils understand how those roles have evolved in recent years. The nature of the councillor role in different areas is central to the workload that councillors transact and the resource that needs to be available to support them. Many submissions measure “busyness” – the number of meetings that councillors attend being a significant evidential feature – rather than make judgements about councillors’ productivity with regard to a clear understanding of what their roles involve.

The LGBCE’s electoral review process is designed to engage specifically with the issue of council size (in terms of number of councillors). Submissions have to lead on this issue.

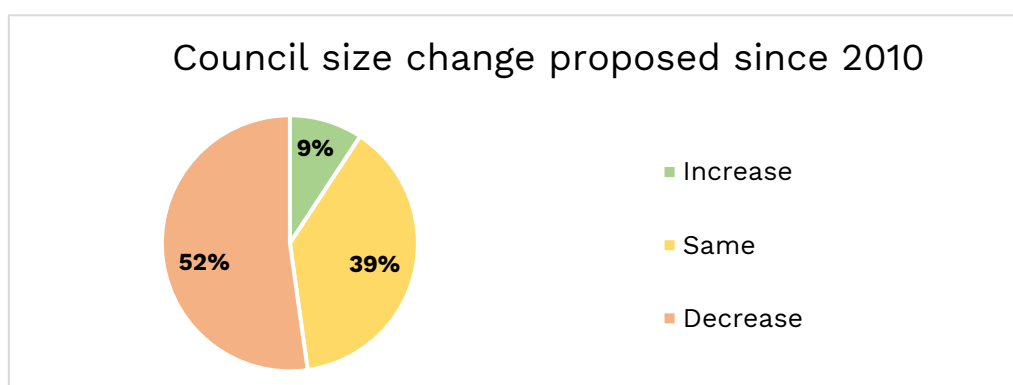
What follows should represent a set of coherent arguments on the reasoning supporting this contention – drawing in contrary views and considering risks, pressures and opportunities associated with alternative approaches. But fundamentally, everything should be drawn back to this central objective.

In our view, better submissions are those whose evidence clearly derives from a wider conversation about governance and the councillor role in the authority. These demonstrate that the council has sought to derive value through the electoral review process in a proactive manner, thinking creatively about the councillor role, now and in the future – rather than treating it as solely a reactive exercise. The objective of this exploratory exercise should relate to better articulating member roles – the objective of the submission should be to use that evidence to justify contentions on council size. This is why clarity on the objectives of different processes is important.

The “improvement” possibilities of a submission pitched in this broad, rather than narrow, way appears to be significant. A wider conversation about governance can support the development of the Annual Governance Statement, which in turn can lead to positive changes to policy development, decision-making and oversight through both audit and scrutiny. A good examination of member roles can lead to a better understanding of the relationship between local people and the councillors who serve them.

Objectives do, inevitably, distil down in some form to overall council size.

In all the submissions analysed since 2010 there is a clear trend for proposing a smaller council or retaining the current size. Only 9% of all submissions since 2010 have proposed a larger council size. From an institutional perspective change is often a difficult and lengthy process, whereas the status-quo arguably requires less resources and capacity.



Lower-quality narratives provide boilerplate information on the council and its area, in a way that is disconnected from the argument for an increase, reduction, or stasis in councillor numbers. In these cases the objective of reduction, stasis or increase appears disconnected from the rest of the document, making it difficult to draw intelligent conclusions.

Less convincing narratives also frame discussion of the objective around subjectively expressed views around council size. Submissions will of course always have a subjective component – they are and should be couched in analysis of the local place – but there is a balance.

Appendix 3: Addressing key substantive areas

This appendix sets out more detail on the “key substantive areas” introduced in the summary at the start of this report.

a. The national and local policy context

This research looked at a decade-long time series, as a consequence many of the national policy issues (along with their local impacts) have changed over time. The better submissions are those which make efforts to engage with and understand those trends. Moreover good submissions interrogate different possible futures, and use an understanding of those futures alongside a sense of the council’s overall objectives, to

build a plausible narrative about how the councillor role might change in the medium term.

Many national and local trends are long term. Effective submissions engage with these long term issues, because electoral review is an infrequent event and the results of such reviews need to engage with the place the area will be in a decade or more, not at the present time.

Finances rightly loom large in submissions. Mentions of “austerity” have increased steadily since 2010¹⁰, reflecting this dominant theme and the urgency of councils’ response to it. In some cases (see below), a direct correlation has been drawn between councils’ financial challenges and the impact that has on councillor numbers – although sometimes with two diametrically opposed conclusions.

One of these arguments is that financial challenges put more pressures on councillors to support local people, whose needs are complex, and where the officer resource to provide this support might be lessened. Conversely, there is another argument that councillors and the council should reduce resource on councillors as part of a demonstration that all are “sharing the load”, with councillors and their roles and resources not being protected at the expense of other services.

This divergence demonstrates the importance of using such wider policy issues to provide context to a more detailed understanding of local need.

b. Local geography and demographics

The ratio between population and number of councillors is an important feature of discussion and decision on overall council size, but an increase or decrease in the electorate does not automatically lead to an increase or decrease in councillor numbers. What is evident in submissions is that it is not just the change in population size that impacts the council’s ability to deliver effective and convenient local governance, but rather the distribution and composition of the local population and their concurrent needs. Essentially, the local area profile is key in understanding the best arrangements for representation.

Particular factors include:

- The differences between city centre wards (many of which are experiencing substantial population increases), inner city wards, suburban wards and rural wards;
- Longitudinal evidence on population, demonstrating change over time – in age, ethnic minority population and diversity, indices of deprivation and so on. Better submissions seek to explore what these demographic shifts mean for councillor workload, and for the wider business and priorities of the council (for example, larger student populations or a population which tends to be more transient, with a large number of people living in private rented accommodation);

¹⁰ The word “austerity” was used because it was by and large the word most commonly used to describe the financial constraints placed on local authorities since 2010. Particularly in the earlier years (2010 to about 2013) the word was fairly politicised and other euphemisms may have been used – this accounts for the increase in prevalence of the word itself in submissions in more recent years.

- The presence of other tiers of government – in two tier areas, combined authority areas and parished areas.

Population change

Focus on demographics is a feature which particularly affects larger urban authorities. City centre, and district and town centre wards have experienced substantial population growth in many areas in recent years.

A recurring theme in the submissions outlines the difference between the rural and urban nature of councils and the issues they face. Geography – particularly transport links, or the lack of them – can impede councillors’ ability to represent and support their residents effectively in some areas. More dispersed populations will inevitably result in additional pressure on councillors.

Alongside the difficulties in councillors travelling across sparsely populated rural wards and ensuring communities are represented, there is also the added risk of many individuals or families in need not receiving due consideration or care because of their geographical isolation. Issues around IT connectivity will compound this.

Finally, a further issue is the way that councillors (and the council) engage with communities with strong local identities in rural areas. These may be a challenge for councillors representing large areas, such as county councillors with large divisions. Many authorities have both urban and rural wards presenting a variety of local needs and priorities.

Diversity and community identity

Community identity is a strong theme in all of the submissions, with a concerted effort made to define identity(ies) within the local area and how their needs and representation differ.

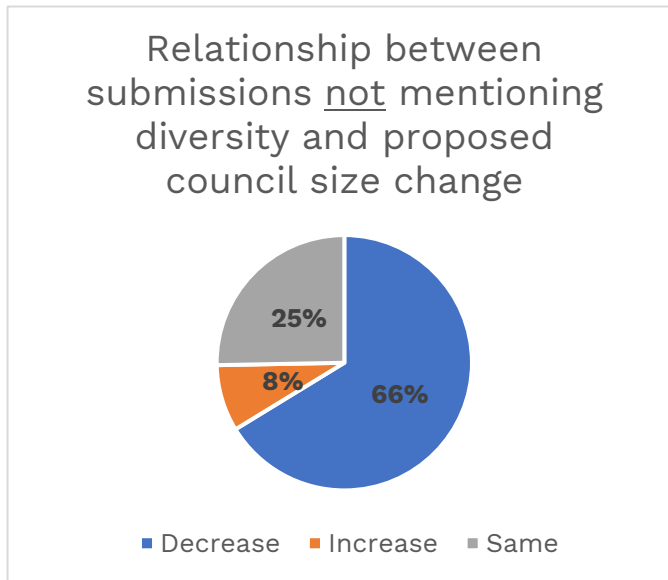
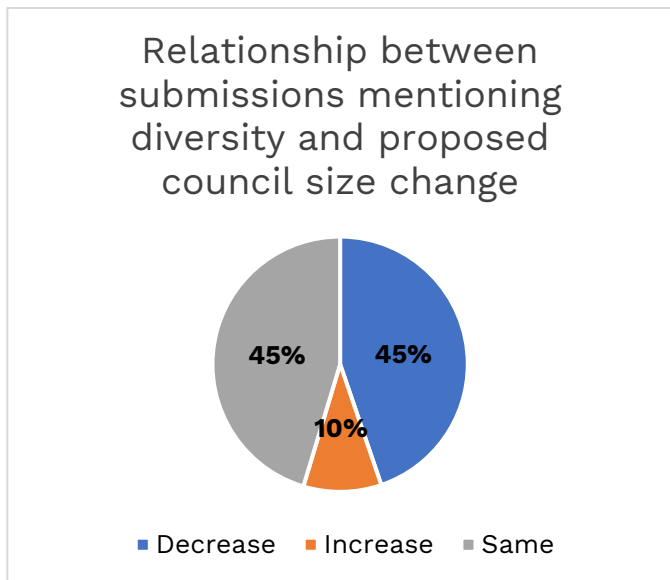
The concept of diversity can be understood through the dimensions of ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age, physical abilities and religious beliefs, amongst other factors. Communities that have diversity also have distinct identities and needs, this in turn places different demands on councillors who must effectively represent the diversity of their constituents.

Over time councils have become more adept at systematically describing the communities they serve, demonstrated by an increase in the extent to which diversity is cited and discussed in submissions. This greater awareness of diversity runs alongside the demographic increase of diversity in many local areas.

There are two forms of diversity – diversity in the councillor corps itself, which is a matter for local parties and the local electorate, and diversity in the needs and expectations of local people. More of the former can of course lead to a better understanding of the latter.

Submissions mentioning diversity in their electorate are 21% less likely to propose a smaller council size and 20% more likely to propose retaining their current council size. This presents a significant variance between the deployment of diversity in submissions and the perceived need for greater or lesser representation. This may demonstrate that the presence of a more diverse population with a wider variety of more complex needs

provides evidence of a greater number of councillors to understand and act on these needs. But it is one of a number of associated variables. It suggests that councils making submissions need to engage directly with that issue in order to understand councillor workload.



Age

Across local authorities there are large disparities in age structures, with London and metropolitan boroughs typically younger than the rest of the country. In contrast, coastal and rural areas, such as those in the South West, have much higher average ages.¹¹

Places with the demands of demographic divergence in terms of age will map poorly onto councils’ existing revenue-raising potential. A greater share of older residents face greater demands on health and social care services, while childcare and education services are likely to be more in demand in younger areas.

Age and transience in local populations are linked - as transient populations can be those with fewer local support networks, younger populations could be more in need of support than more “settled”, older ones. In this sense both groups could require more time of their councillors.

Much, however, depends on other demographic factors. In some areas older people might be more engaged in local politics, more aware of local political structures, and more confident in approaching councillors for help. Hence forming a large proportion of the residents councillors typically engage with.

Deprivation

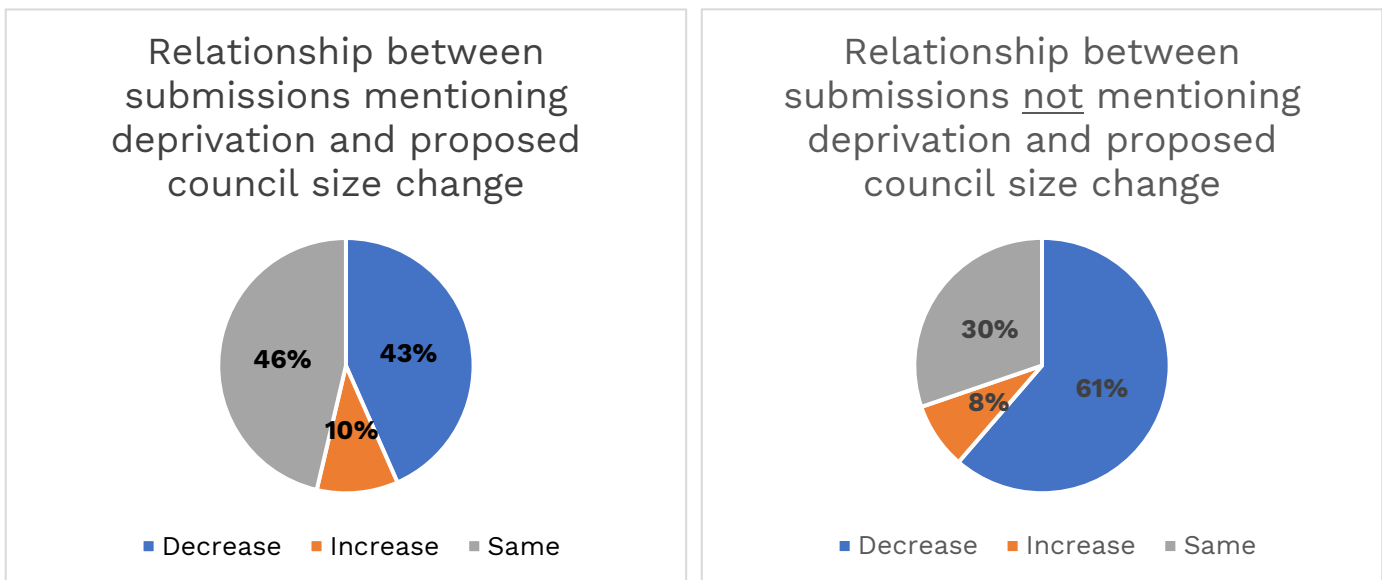
Deprivation within local authority areas is another strong theme repeated throughout many submissions – wards with higher levels of deprivation tend to have higher levels of case work and councillors in deprived wards are required to work more extensively on a

¹¹ <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2019/10/Ageing-fast-and-slow.pdf>

wide range of issues and projects. This links with our comments above on financial issues and, like that issue, mention of deprivation has risen consistently since 2010. It can be expected that submissions will increasingly place deprivation, its causes and consequences, at the centre of their work. This may impact on how submissions describe the impact of structural inequality of local people’s lives, and how councillors can support and empower local people to access the public services they require.

The impact of local government fiscal retrenchment paired with changes to the welfare system is highlighted in submissions as exerting greater impact on already deprived households. This is often due to a greater reliance on a broad range of public services, compared to affluent households who will have the capacity to supplement public services with other forms of provision.

As with diversity, those councils mentioning deprivation tended not to propose reductions, with the complexity around deprivation and its impacts being seen as justification for retaining numbers.



One shortcoming in how both diversity and particularly deprivation are discussed is the lack of connection to councillors’ current and changing roles. The assumption is generally made that “more of the same” (councillors playing roles around community support and advocacy) will provide the necessary support to local people, with this being the central justification against a decrease in council size. This demonstrates the importance of a more holistic approach in submissions on this point as connected to the other “key substantive areas”.

c. Role of the councillor within the council

Councillors’ roles have continued to develop and evolve over the last decade. Service delivery changes (particularly the introduction of strategic commissioning) and the creation of new delivery structures has had an impact on the roles that councillors perform. While the importance of formal, local partnership structures such as Local Strategic Partnerships has waned, there has been a proliferation of new, informal partnership and joint working arrangements (often across large areas). These provide

new opportunities for councillors, but also make work and workloads more difficult to manage. Finally, a council's formal governance option (committee system vs leader/cabinet vs Mayoral) makes a difference to overall roles, if not specifically to workload.

Some submissions attempt to demarcate time spent by councillors on different duties (and these attempts are echoed at national level through research products like the councillor census). In general, such evidence only feels useful when in service of a wider argument connected to other parts of the key substantive areas. In particular, workload studies which focus on "amount of time spent in committee" (often presented in tabular format without much context) appears unhelpful – and counterproductive, in how it focuses unduly on a small element of councillors' overall duties.

Split in workload might, however, be evidenced by the presence of dynamics around joint working in multi-member wards. In such wards, one councillor might sit on Cabinet and others might "pick up" the bulk of ward work on their behalf – or one member might chair a planning committee and deliberately recuse themselves from ward work which relates to those issues. The issue here lies in flexibility, allowing councillors to specialise without hampering the ability of the council as a whole to represent local people. Conversely, in some areas, wards split between political parties – and a more politically contestable council – may make such specialisation more difficult, and councillors less flexible, impacting on workload.

There can appear to be a tension between councillors' broader representative role, and the roles that councillors perform "at the council" on committees, in leadership, on scrutiny, on planning and licensing, and so on.

Issues around direct citizen contact time, citizen trust in local councillors, and citizen satisfaction with council services are prevailing factors. Councillor "visibility" – in the community and in the Town Hall – is important. This may now include presence on social media.

Councillor diversity

Nationally, the councillor corps remains significantly older and marginally more white than the population at large. In April 2019, an audit of local authorities in England by Operation Black Vote reported that while 14% of councillors were from ethnic minority backgrounds (which roughly mirrors that of the 2011 census data) this proportion varies markedly between local authorities¹².

Diversity in age, cultural background and ethnicity is more obviously present in urban authorities (although this is not universal). Arguments around increasing or decreasing councillor numbers with an end of increasing diversity feel like overreach. Or, at least, areas where arguments will reflect a unique geographical and political milieu, from which it is difficult to draw more general conclusions. Council submissions often express an aspiration to enhance diversity in the councillor corps but the practical steps by which this can be achieved tend not to be well articulated. It seems likely that a better link here to wider objectives around equality would be well deployed – as discussed in the earlier section.

A shared notion in many submissions is the idea that a larger number of councillors makes it easier for councillors to carry out their role "part time", which in turn means

¹² Operation Black Vote, BAME local political representation audit 2019.

that a more diverse range of councillors are attracted to the role, including those of working age. This is an argument which has also been deployed in the wider literature.

Councillors' relationships with officers

Matters of personal and professional relationships are difficult to articulate confidently and candidly in a formal, council submission. Even in other submissions from individuals and groups, frank discussion of the nature of the member/officer dynamic is in short supply. But it is clearly central to the way that members operate, and how they envisage their role. This presents a challenge to the drafting of accurate and candid submissions.

Much of these issues hinge on the presence of positive interpersonal relationships, and the extent to which members are encouraged to be proactive in how they seek to problem-solve on behalf of local people.

Delegation is also a feature and is cited in many submissions. Levels of delegation can indicate many things – higher trust in officers (for authorities with expansive schemes), a tendency for members to be more eager to be involved in operational issues (for authorities with restrictive schemes), for example. But reasons for particular levels of delegation may not reflect the detail of these specific relationships. Further, it is difficult to see how the form and nature of officer delegation might vary to the extent of suggesting lower, or higher, councillor numbers – in itself. This is another reason for seeing the components of the “key substantive areas” as a holistic whole.

Councils with clear corporate strategies and a consequent clarity over members' and officers' mutual roles may be those better able to understand how these relationships impact of councillors' day to day work.

Scrutiny

Budget cuts are described as not only impacting councillor workload, but also increasing council business and the necessary scrutiny of that. The strategic scope and scale of scrutiny has, at the same time, expanded. Partnership work – a wider theme in submissions – is here articulated as a complicating factor in the scrutiny role, having an impact on councillors overall roles and workload.

CfGS research has demonstrated year-on-year reductions in the budget available for scrutiny and the officer support associated with the function; the common theme in submissions of the need for member proactivity (and hence workload) in directing and transacting scrutiny work is unsurprising.

Submissions do not generally make reference to scrutiny being a separate “career path” to executive activity, or in scrutiny activity being a “feeder” for developing the experience of councillors and “skilling them up” to perform an executive role. They also do not reflect the position in more contestable authorities, where scrutiny chairs may become executive members on a change in political control.

Submissions seem to focus on the management of an increased, or static scrutiny workload within a decreasing resource and “member capacity” envelope. This raises issues about long-term sustainability of the specialist scrutiny role; it is unclear the extent to which there is a threshold, as a proportion of total membership or total population, beyond which delivering an effective and holistic scrutiny function may be more challenging. It is likely instead, to reflect an approach to workload prioritisation,

and the wider role of scrutiny in each individual authority – frustrating national analysis and categorisation.

d. Role of the councillor in the community and in other institutions

There are submissions in which the nature of the relationship between councillors and their communities are described. In some instances, it mentions an expectation among local people that they should have more input into policy development and service delivery. Or, public expectations that councillors can ‘fix’ personal and local problems quickly.

It is worth noting that council submissions have tended to rely on supposition to articulate the councillor/elector relationship. There remains national research on the member/citizen relationship, but how this translates into different local contexts is difficult to ascertain and, in any case, submissions do not tend to directly engage with this research.

Exploring the relationship between councillors and their communities is an area where improvements could yield fresh and useful findings around local people’s direct expectations of councillors. Allowing councils to better evaluate whether councillor numbers, and council size generally, aligns with those expectations and the council’s own views about the roles that its members perform – as described above. In a way, this evidence, or the lack of it, is the “missing link” in submissions that would provide a more joined up picture on expectations and roles on the ground.

e. Technology and social media

Over the last decade, this component of councillors’ work has become particularly important.

There are a subset of submissions which alight on efficiency as a by-product of new technology – but other submissions recognise that the situation is more complex. Digital means of engagement are identified as raising the profile of councillors and helping to improve accountability by opening decision-making to a wider audience. Whilst digital means of communication and dialogue have not replaced traditional means, they have augmented them, with councillors being increasingly accessible which can positively impact democratic representation but also place additional demands on councillors. In this sense some submissions deploy technology and social media as justifying an increase in council size.

Perhaps the most prominent impact of technology and social media in submissions is the increased accessibility, framed in a negative sense due to the increased expectations of immediate responses leading to excessive workloads. Given the speed at which comments and questions can be posted online there is greater pressure on councillors to react at a similar pace to matters which are raised through those mediums. Another negative impact is the exposure of councillors to abuse and intimidation; the need for support systems (within parties and between councillors) is not a prominent feature in submissions although can be expected to increase.

Demands on councillors’ time through social media are also emphasised in councils with a relatively high proportion of young people in their population, as well as the recognition that in areas of high population growth these demands are only going to increase.

The sense of expectations increasing while councillor capacity decreases can be seen as compelling reason to keep councillor numbers stable.

Appendix 4: Managing the process of change

Quotations from interviewees

“What would I have done differently? I would have started the discussion earlier, it was only a very secure administration that was able to bring changes forward...Because it was perceived as led by the controlling group it wasn't very smooth, opposition groups took issue. There was a lot of anti-change sentiments, but this was a bit offset for a recognition for change being inevitable, especially with changes in technology and the way that members engage with the electorate.”

“From a member perspective, the controlling group that brought in the changes lost control and the group now in power didn't want the change to happen. However we had a big influx of new members too. Many new members came in without even being on a parish council, so we had many inexperienced and independent members. They inherited the system and knew nothing different. They were inexperienced but also mouldable. It forced change in a different way, it was like a fresh start. The election result probably helped the acceptance of the new much reduced membership.”

“Calibre of members was poorer because they were “off the wall” individuals. The electorate just wanted something different. These new members have had a long and hard learning curve. I was optimistic for a brighter and better crop of councillors, but there is not a strong surge of people coming into local politics.”

“Embarking on change with politicians can be challenging, I was surprised how well it went. Getting members on board from day one helped through setting up the cross-party working group, and making sure we had the right members on the group.”

“LGBCE were quite hands off at first and let us think about what we wanted. We formed a core officer team which I led on, we also had democratic services in there and elections.”

“There were group discussions and a cross-party working group which put forward a scheme before council.”

“We could see there were a number of principles to start with – don't look at the boundaries to start with, but we wanted to keep the integrity of certain areas. We knew some had to be kept as discreet entities, so that was our starting block.”

“The way that the public and members interacted has really changed with the digital shift. Which might influence the number of councillors needed. We did a member survey about casework and looking at the amount of time members sat on committees. We also looked at CIPFA nearest neighbours.”

“For officers we had our golden rules and that was expanded upon in the report, the design principles. Early member engagement, and officers marshalling that information and coming up with principles that everyone bought into. Initially members didn't really want a decrease so we had to persuade. We also used mapping

for electoral forecasts see exactly where growth was predicted. That tool we produced was fantastic. We went through possible scenarios and narrowed them down, we ended up with something that all members were happy with. In the end it was a relatively smooth process.”

“It’s about engaging with elected members and getting that buy-in. It was a pretty big change in numbers so I don’t think we could have gone lower and retained political buy-in.”

“Was only a marginal increase in size, I think it was the right thing to do because we were an expanding and growing area. Members needed to do that to effectively represent their communities. It sorted out anomalies and prevented us from splitting communities. Driver was purely population growth and representation.”

“There is an awful lot of work involved in doing the review, I’ve spoken to other CEs and there’s no point going through council size change if you just have 1 or 2 less members.”

“Members saw all the difficulties around ward configuration, there was a new leader by this stage and they wanted to turn back on the process at this point.”

“You need someone who can drive the review, who knows the process and can work with members on it. And can give you the capacity to do the review. You don’t always have the experience to take these things through within the organisation. You need to fully understand the constitution and all the surrounding issues.”

“The issues we’ve had since were down to not laying the groundwork strongly enough with members. There wasn’t enough clarity in members mind, there needed to be more face-to-face engagement with them. We could have used members from other councils that had been through it.”

“Could the council operate on less members? – yes. The problem with the boundary review is they do it on numbers – not the complexity of demographics.”

“I had to convince members to vote themselves out of existence. Members got the principles, but it was difficult to sell. We set up a working group of members, some of them didn’t make it.”

“I was quite surprised how relaxed LGBCE were, I was expecting to be told how to do it but it wasn’t like that at all, they were very much about “what do you want to do?”. I think that is a positive and constructive process. There wasn’t much help offered though in looking to other councils, we weren’t pointed in anyone’s direction.

“Don’t just increase because the population number has increased, consider the characteristics of communities too.”

“Make sure that members are heavily involved, no surprises needs to be the principle everyone should know what the objectives are, so that its cross-party too.”

Member buy-in

Buy-in will usually start with the preparation of a submission in the first place. The process begins with the initial announcement of a review and ends when the results of that review are implemented – events that may be separated by years. Consistent

member leadership, and a clear sense of momentum, throughout this process is important.

This (as we noted in the Phase 1 research) involves active member leadership and involvement rather than just member signoff. Working groups established to manage the submission process can continue operation into implementation, providing a sense of consistency and common purpose (and maintaining working relationships, which may help in managing tensions around the implementation of change plans). This can, however, be exhausting - several councils reported that members (and officers) had at times wanted to turn the clock back, having underestimated the work involved.

In all cases there are nuances about the extent to which members are involved explicitly in leading the discussion – because conversations need to be cross-party and to command confidence, officers do end up taking the lead. Interviewees generally recognised that cross-party consensus (even if not outright agreement) was important. Early conversations – setting parameters, having exploratory conversations – seems to be vital, along with an overall “no surprises” approach.

In all of the case study authorities a council-wide submission was produced to the Commission. This may mask initial political rivalries and desires to achieve partisan advantage which often leads to different political groups producing their own submissions.

In the majority of case studies, the search for consensus among members of different political affiliations was seen as instrumental in securing buy-in for the process of council size change.

Sequencing, and understanding externalities

This is closely connected with the points above on member buy-in and leadership.

It is important to understand how to approach the process – what to look at first, where dependencies lie and how relationships need to develop to accommodate these needs. This was something we explored in Phase 1 in respect of the develop of submissions – a degree of planning is required on the implementation of reviews as well.

Discussion of members’ changing role, and changing expectations, is an important part of this. Implementation will have to pay close regard to the council’s objectives in undertaking the exercise. Councils will therefore have to consider, for example, the level of resource and support that new members can expect, and how they will be involved in decision-making and the overall business of the council, once the change has happened. These shifts in attitude and approach will not happen automatically. Some interviewees spoke about a failure to pay consistent heed to the objectives, and possible outcomes, of a review process – instead focusing on the narrow points around (for example) the administrative organisation of new boundaries.

This includes understanding knock-on impacts beyond the council – including on the assignment of members to outside bodies, and the operation of local political party structures.

Appendix 5: Understanding the outcomes from change

Quotations from interviews

“Change was not as drastic as I thought it would be, but we have gone as low as we can whilst still being able to function as a committee system”

“Having [fewer members] would be tricky to deal with sickness and holidays etc. on a purely practical basis, but if it wasn't a committee system it wouldn't be as bad. If it was a cabinet then it wouldn't be as crucial numerically.”

“In terms of members we lost a few shining stars with the reduction and it's a bit thin on the ground with talent, we've ended up with Chairman appointments that you wouldn't usually go for”

“Another impact is that the reduction might have given the opportunity for independents to have a great influence, we have a coalition now as the [party] undertaking the review have since lost the majority.”

“Smaller numbers make meetings less intimidating and are easier to manage. Our working groups now are safe spaces for discussion. Others have also felt more empowered, decision-making is much quicker.”

“To do the job properly I don't think you could be a full-time worker or with significant caring responsibilities.”

“I don't think residents were too bothered or if they even noticed the change when it happened...We've seen no increase in customer complaints or ombudsman cases, so no indicators that residents don't feel they're getting the level or representation they need. It will be interesting to see how this changes with unitarisation.”

“To be honest there has been no radical change in the relationship between members and officers, it varies from member to member on the degree of support needed. You can run the risk of becoming an officer-controlled council, with officer decisions just fronted by a politician.”

“We have a good balance on SMT with relationships between members and officers. With flooding then covid we really have had to work closely. Members have retained decision making it's not been delegated any different.”

“I think the changes have been very visible locally, I think the loss has been too much.”

“If we did this process of council size reduction again I wouldn't stand, I won't be standing for the new unitary because the workload just isn't manageable. I don't think people appreciate the work we do. That's where it's flawed, you don't get good enough representation. That's when you end up with a political poser and you take away the local element.”

“Change to all out elections has also made it easier in terms of planning, more stable for policy and getting things done. On the flipside there was a concern about the elections team retaining skills if they are only running one every 4 years, but there have been so many unexpected elections recently they've had plenty to do.”

“I think that the council size change has given officers experience in organisational change ready for unitarisation.”

“If remote meeting regulations came in again then perhaps we could operate with less members, as it frees up time and creates efficiencies.”

“Outcomes? Apart from the fact that councillors have more electors to serve, nothing has changed, it really was just less allowances. I don’t think residents have noticed the change to be honest.”

“From an officer perspective, we know how more in-depth contact with more knowledgeable members leads to better decision-making.”

“We have a better understanding of members as we get to know them better, previously I’ve been in councils where you have a very superficial knowledge of them. There is a better level of contact, it has increased the frankness of exchange.”

“The only downside is that I think officers and members are now less distinct, roles are blurred perhaps in a smaller council. However, officers have much less freedom to make decision that members wouldn’t notice, I am less autonomous than I have been previously. Members and officers are much more intimately involved, I also spend more time with the opposition than I have previously.”

“The more back benchers you have the less they are involved in council business. Officers now spend more time speaking to key members, now that backbench members are fewer.”

Generally

It is important to recognise that the outcomes listed above and below are those perceived by interviewees, and our analysis of their opinions and on wider written evidence on their experience. These findings are not empirical, and should therefore be interpreted with caution. We do recommend that, where possible, councils should more consistently evaluate the outcome of reviews, so that a fuller national analysis can in due course be carried out.

With all outcomes (particularly on democratic representation) the difficulty is one of measurement. Interpretation of outcome is in many cases subjective. People may be more predisposed to identify positive impacts if they had ownership of the process – those who opposed a review’s findings may be more ready to identify negative outcomes. This highlights the needs for clear objectives at the start and, where possible, a way for those objectives and outcomes to be evaluated.

Impact on democratic representation

Perhaps the pivotal constraint repeatedly identified across the interviews, was the interplay between pressure on council resources and concerns about representation and the legitimacy of democratic processes.

In a policy arena strongly shaped by national political objectives and a lack of sustainable local government funding, local authority powers to be innovative with their governance arrangements are heavily circumscribed.

Despite more effective representation of the electorate often being a driver for council size change, it appears that in most cases the impact felt by residents is insignificant. When officers and members were asked about the impact of council size change many stated that the effects had been quite negligible in the grand scheme of things; residents' views may, of course, be different – and not all hold to this view, with some councillors in particular believing that their has been a clear impact on representation.

Whilst across the interviews members and officers identified their council size change objective as redressing the imbalances in democratic representation within their local authority, their view was that such relational impacts were on the whole unnoticed by residents.

Better decision-making, better relationships, better resource management

These reasons are closely connected – they all relate to streamlining governance, and business efficiency.

In brief, interviews suggested a prevailing view that for members to be engaged in policy-setting, decision-making, scrutiny and able to carry out their ward work it requires substantial officer support and financial resources. Having the “right” number of committed and able members participating in governance processes is seen essential to the council being able to operate successfully. Equally as important is having a strong officer corps to support members in carrying out their role and implemented decisions.

Some councils did report improvements in decision-making – making meetings more manageable for example (through smaller size), and making decision-making quicker. As we note elsewhere some officers felt that they were able to have more in-depth contact with more knowledgeable members – but this does have a knock on impact on workload.

This suggests an improvement in member-officer relationships, and this was indeed a theme of many of the interviews. It seems logical that a shift in the member-officer relationship makes it easier to build better relationships. This relates to the ‘softer’ more intangible impacts of council size change such as ‘increased understanding’, ‘mutual respect’ ‘relationship building’ and ‘better democratic representation’.

On the other hand some places reported that this shift had led to a looseness in roles – that close working has begotten over-familiarity, and a blurring of responsibility between members and officers. Close member involvement is not always positive – more “hands on” councillors can see it as their role to be more engaged in operational decision-making. It seems that shifts in numbers also involve (as we noted in the sections above) shifts in assumptions about who does what.

There are multiple, often competing, pressures which act upon and shape local decision-making: political group affiliation (members), professional independence (officers), serving or representing the community and, crucially, central government objectives.

More confidence in pursuing organisational change

We have noted above the possibility that change makes it easier to shift to a new business or delivery model for a council. Interviewees were muted as to whether this had in fact come to pass. It seems likely that in some councils the changes had provided a spur to thinking differently about the member role (as we have commented

elsewhere). It is however, more likely that change ensured that the councillor cohort could be more aligned and attuned to organisational change already in progress, or that had already happened.

Cost savings

We found that hopes and expectations of cost savings were not necessarily borne out. Of the councils we reviewed, most had undergone fairly substantial cuts in member numbers, making them outliers - one council cutting 18 councillors reported themselves to have saved around £250k a year.

Impacts of member turnover

A shift in boundaries and a reduction in the numbers of members will lead to high member turnover. Even if the absolute reduction in the number of councillors is comparatively small, there is a tendency for some councillors to take the opportunity to retire, especially if the alternative is to undertake a selection exercise in a new ward – this is likely to be worth further study.

Some interviewees felt that changes to council size and associated ward changes can “shake up” a council’s member corps. An influx of new members can bring benefits and disadvantages – councils generally think that there have been more of the former although this does rely on investment of time and effort in inducting new members.

New councillors obviously bring new perspectives; they may, but may not necessarily, reduce the average age of councillors and bring a more diverse cohort into the authority. They can also bring a wider range of professional skills.

Some impacts have been neutral. Member turnover can have unexpected effects on member balance – there was a sense from some that it had made political balance more precarious, with the “risk” that councils could slip into no overall control or into the hands of an opposition party after a lengthy period of stability. Whether these fears will be borne out in practice remains to be seen – we may here be talking about long term trends, and it seems unusual for councils to undergo significant control changes following an electoral review.

Some impacts have been more clearly negative. Large member turnover can result in comparatively inexperienced councillors being appointed to important positions – as cabinet members, and audit chairs, for example. There is nothing intrinsically bad about this – it reflects local democratic choices - but such members may require more resource and support.

Impacts brought about by changes to warding

For some councils a reduction in members means a reduction in multi-member wards.

Opinion here is divided – for some a move to single-member wards has made accountability clearer, for some it has made it more difficult for councillors to support local people. For similar reasons, a shift from election by thirds to “all outs” has been welcomed by some, not by others.

This can be compounded by associated shifts to ward boundaries. In Phase 1 of this research we identified “place” as a critical component in how councils thought about the communities they served – this is critical to effective responses to electoral reviews.

Consideration of where and how boundaries are defined between wards or divisions is beyond the remit of this research, although it is worth noting that many respondents recognised the importance of this element very keenly, seeing it as risking community cohesion in some cases (while enhancing it in others).

Increased member workload

This is the clear counterpoint from the driver set out in the first section, that members “do not have enough to do”. While not all councils make that determination and not all councils end up with increased member workload, it is clearly a risk that needs to be borne in mind, and mitigated, in planning.

Where it happens increased workload has an impact on equality, diversity and inclusion. Those with caring and professional responsibilities (and other community responsibilities beyond the council) may find them harder to fulfil alongside council (and ward) responsibilities that are more difficult to share with others.

Through the interviews, members identified the trend of increasing workloads over time, especially in local authorities with housing stock and in members that had chosen to serve on parish councils (amounts of ward work may be affected by whether an area is parished).

As we noted in the sections above, with many services increasingly being delivered by non-council providers alongside councils looking to generate income through commercial ventures, the governance context for members is more complex than ever, placing further burdens on their time. Added to this is relationships with adjoining authorities (and this includes councils in a tiered area and combined authorities) as well as joint working with other public service bodies like the NHS. These are long-standing trends, but there has been an acceleration in the complexity of public service delivery in local areas in recent years.

There were also the practical considerations of the council running consistently with less members. There is arguably an absolute minimum number of members – local authorities with small populations and advantageous representation ratios cannot have numbers of councillors reduced below a point at which the council cannot operate.