

Local Government Boundary Commission for England

Council Size Guidance

A guide to making a strong submission

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Introduction

1. This guidance will assist interested parties in preparing their submission on council size to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England ('the Commission') as part of the electoral review process. It highlights the range of issues that the Commission considers when determining council size and will help councillors, officers and others in making strong and well-evidenced submissions.
2. The starting point for every review is to decide the appropriate number of councillors for the authority. While the final decision on council size rests with the Commission, its approach has always been one of dialogue with each council that it reviews. The Commission's view is that a 'good' review is one where the local authority actively engages with the process. Ideally, the Commission's decision will be informed by locally generated proposals and underpinned by sound evidence and reasoning.

What is Council Size?

3. The Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009¹ ('the 2009 Act') gives the Commission the power to review the electoral arrangements of all, or any, principal councils in England.
4. The legislation states that 'the total number of members of the council' forms part of an authority's electoral arrangements. The Commission refers to this more simply as 'council size'. The legislation does not set out how many members (or councillors) each authority (or type of authority) will have. It is the Commission's responsibility to determine the appropriate number of councillors for each authority.
5. The Commission will always recommend a council size that, in its judgement, enables the council to take its decisions effectively, to discharge the business and responsibilities of the council successfully, and to provide for effective community leadership and representation.

General Principles

6. The Commission recognises that there is considerable variation in council size across England, not only between different types of local authority – metropolitan, unitary, shire district and county councils, and London boroughs – but also between authorities of the same type.
7. In the Commission's opinion, local government is as diverse as the communities it serves – providing leadership, services and representation suited to the characteristics and needs of individual areas. The Commission aims to recommend electoral arrangements, including council size, which are appropriate for the particular local authority.

¹ *Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009*, s.55–9
www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2009/20/pdfs/ukpga_20090020_en.pdf

8. 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 ('the 2000 Act') 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, introduced further opportunities for local government to modify governance and management arrangements. In addition, partnership working, developments in service delivery, and digital working have also impacted on local authorities.
9. Many local authorities have not, or have only slightly, modified their number of elected members since they were established several decades ago. This is not to imply that current numbers are inappropriate but, rather than simply assuming that the existing numbers remain appropriate, the Commission recommends that councils think afresh about the matter.
10. An electoral review provides the opportunity for respondents to think carefully about current arrangements in the context of modern governance and service delivery needs; and what these mean for the future in terms of the number of elected members.
11. The Commission wants to see evidence that several different council size options have been explored together with the reasons why a particular figure has, or has not, been selected. This should be done irrespective of whether the respondent arrives at the same or a different number of elected members. The most persuasive submissions are those which, rather than considering whether the current number ought not to be changed, reflect on what number of councillors would be required if the council was being newly established.
12. The Commission does not recommend that any submissions made on council size need to be particularly long. However, submissions should be made on the Commission's Council Size Submission Template and demonstrate careful thinking about the issues. Electoral reviews take place infrequently and the Commission wants local authorities to take the opportunity to ask themselves questions about the important roles of councillors in providing leadership, securing accountability and offering community leadership.
13. The Commission seeks to understand elected member requirements across three aspects:
 - **Strategic Leadership** – how many councillors are needed to give strategic leadership and direction to the authority?
 - **Accountability**
 - *Scrutiny* – how many councillors are needed to provide scrutiny to the authority?
 - *Regulatory* – how many councillors are needed to meet the regulatory requirements of the authority?

- *Partnerships* – how many councillors are required to manage partnerships between the local authority and other organisations?
- **Community Leadership** – how the representational role of councillors in the local community is discharged and how they engage with people and conduct casework.

14. In every review, the Commission will make recommendations that will remain appropriate for the medium to longer term, i.e. to recommend a council size that delivers effective and convenient local government well after the completion of the electoral review. Accordingly, respondents should set out their longer-term vision for operation of the local authority.

Approach

15. The Commission must construct electoral arrangements that reflect local circumstances, and in doing so will neither apply any strict mathematical criteria nor impose a formula for the national determination of council size. It is recommended that submissions clearly demonstrate the characteristics and needs of each local authority, and its communities, and how such factors have informed both the proposed and alternative council sizes considered.

16. The Commission will refer to the CIPFA Nearest Neighbours Model for English authorities to help understand the contextual position of the authority being reviewed. This is a licensed² dataset that shows groups of statistically similar councils and allows the Commission to identify ‘expected ranges’ for both the number of councillors and the councillor-to-elector ratios. This expected range is defined by an upper and lower quintile value with the median providing the midpoint figure. The data help the Commission understand how the authority under review compares with its nearest neighbours and, on occasion to query proposals that appear unexpected when compared with similar authorities.

17. Local authorities should be mindful of the overall appropriateness of the proposed council sizes in terms of governance, specifically in ensuring that an authority is neither too small to discharge its statutory functions nor too large to function in an effective manner and with purposeful roles for all elected members. Accordingly, whilst recognising that such thresholds might vary depending on the type of local authority and its specific setting, the Commission will look for particularly strong evidence in support of proposals that place the authority amongst the highest and lowest levels of similar councils nationwide, especially where authorities would be below 30 or exceed 85 councillors in size.

18. The Commission’s decision about an authority’s council size will mark the formal start to the review process. However, the Commission’s decision on council size will not be formalised until the Final Recommendations are agreed and published. This is because the number of councillors may change marginally (generally ± 1)

² Under the terms of the data licence the Commission is unable to share the CIPFA Nearest Neighbour Model externally although some authorities will have access to the groupings through their own licences. The ‘expected ranges’, however, will be made available.

from the initial decision if it is felt that modifying the number of councillors may provide for a pattern of wards that better reflects the three statutory criteria.

19. The Final Recommendations describe the complete set of electoral arrangements, including ward names and locations as well as the number of elected members, alongside parish warding arrangements. These recommendations will be implemented at the next election by means of an Order laid before Parliament.

Multiple Submissions and Balancing the Evidence

20. Political (or other) groups may present their own submissions to the Commission either alongside or as an alternative to the council's formal submission. It is recommended that all submissions are underpinned by sound evidence and reasoning whether they propose to reduce, retain or increase councillor numbers.
21. All submissions will be considered equally, and decisions will be made based on the strength of evidence put forward.
22. **Where the Commission receives multiple finely balanced proposals, or a single poorly evidenced case, it may request further information from the respondents. If further information is not forthcoming, the Commission reserves the right to put forward its own number based on its own experience and judgement. It may also choose to carry out a period of consultation.**

Making a Submission

23. All submissions made to the Commission will follow the 'Council Size Submission' template. This template presents a broad set of issues for respondents to consider; however, the Commission does not require lengthy responses to every section. The Commission recommends that respondents use the opportunity to consider not just how the council works now but how it is likely to work in the future. Submissions will explain the reasoning that underpins and explains the proposed council size as well as describing the necessary arrangements.
24. The submission will focus on three aspects of councillor roles: Strategic Leadership, Accountability and Community Leadership. However, the Commission will consider any further relevant issues raised outside of these topics.