

South Gloucestershire Boundary review 2017

Phase 1 – Council Size review

Background

1997 review – 1:2,618

Existing arrangements were found to provide unequal representation. After taking submissions, the Commission retained 70 members, and reduced wards from 38 to 36.

Cllr:Elector ratio at the time was 1:2,618, forecast to increase to 1:2,744 by 2020. It was noted that “a 30% increase” had taken place in the past 20 years.

Conservatives proposed 70 Cllrs, based on current electors. They stated they did not trust the resident projection figures, and did not include electorates for all their proposed wards.

As of March 1996 guidance, Unitary Authorities were expected to have 40-80 Cllrs. There was a consensus for no change to South Glos' 70, and the Commission agreed there should be no change.

2006 Review – 1:2,785

Council, Conservatives, and Roger Berry MP specifically backed 70. The Conservatives stated any reduction would mean an increase in ward size, and that due to growing population, there had already been a functional reduction of 5 Cllrs since the last review.

The relatively new Cabinet system was considered as part of the review, and the effect it had on Councillors. Factors specifically considered included, the changing role of Cllrs, their “new and demanding responsibilities”, and the pressure of the representative role. There was reference to the new constitutional role of ‘community champion’. The Commission explicitly noted that they could not have regard for the increased workload on rural Councillors which came from the sparsity of population.

At the time, there was a 9 member Cabinet, 5 Scrutiny Committees, 5 Area Forums, standards, and topic panels. There were concerns that a reduction would result in “unrealistic burdens on individual councillors”.

2017 Review – 1:2,952

The Commission has now been invited in, with the intention of reducing the number of Councillors. Even if South Glos had not invited in the Commission, an assessment would almost certainly have been automatically triggered within the next year due to two wards breaching 30% of the Cllr:Electors ratio (currently 1:2,952). The Commission are required to aim for effective and efficient government, and to take into account decision making, scrutiny & partnerships, and representational requirements.

The principal distinct towns in South Gloucestershire are Thornbury and Yate, although the bulk of the population lives in settlements around the North and East fringes of the city of Bristol, such as Filton, Bradley Stoke, Stoke Gifford, Frenchay, and Kingswood. There are a mixture of 1-3 member wards, representing an average ratio of 1:2,952. The majority of the area is Parished, although an unparished area exists on the east fringe of the city, in the south of South Glos. The population of South Gloucestershire is around 274,700, with some 206,640 electors.

Decision making

At the time of writing, South Gloucestershire operates a committee system of governance, where all seventy members are involved in decision-making processes. There are three Service committees (Policy & Resources, Children Adults & Health, and Environment & Community Services), each of which has 13 members. In addition, there are two Development Control committees (13 members), Regulatory, Licensing, and Audit & Accounts. In total there are some 100 places, meaning that all Councillors are involved in something, and can develop a specialisation related to their field of interest, and some must do double-duty on multiple committees.

A vote was recently passed at full council, instructing officers to look at writing a new constitution, to revert to the old model of Cabinet governance, where fewer Councillors are involved in the decision making. Unfortunately, the specific design intended is not currently available, and if implemented, will not be agreed until March 2017. Due to the new arrangements not being available, specific comments on decision making cannot be made, although general comments based on history, and legal requirements, can be.

As fewer Councillors will be involved in the decision making process than is currently the case, it can be argued that fewer Councillors are needed to fulfil the decision making requirements. However, it needs to be borne in mind that the Councillors left out of decision making will now be required to do additional work holding the administration to account, and that South Gloucestershire has previously had a Leader and Cabinet model, during which all parties agreed 70 members were required to fulfil the decision-making and representational requirements.

Since 2016, individual members have been charged with administering the new Member Allocated Funding scheme, which replaced the old Area Committee Grants. Historically, applications had been technically assessed by officers, and brought to Area Committees for decisions. As of this year, applications are made directly to members, who must themselves perform the background and legal assessments, and make individual decisions. A reduction in the number of Cllrs will mean an increased population over an increased area applying to each Councillor, and the increased responsibility on them to assess the appropriateness of the grants for the area.

Although South Gloucestershire currently has an overall administration, this is a historic anomaly, and only the second in South Gloucestershire's history. It would be dangerous to design a council size specifically around the reduced role the current administration believes Councillors should play, when there will be elections in 2019 with unknown results.

Scrutiny and partnerships

If South Gloucestershire returns to a cabinet model, scrutiny will be required. It has generally not been used explicitly since 2012, as scrutiny currently takes place in committee while decisions are being taken. The proposed model involves a relatively small single scrutiny committee, which will function to commission scrutiny. All councillors will have the option to be involved in the scrutiny process through joining task and finish groups created for specific pieces of work by the committee itself.

Currently, scrutiny takes place in the Health Scrutiny Committee, which scrutinises the work of the local NHS bodies.

A major development in local government around South Gloucestershire is the recent decision to create a new Mayoral Combined Authority. Again, no constitution, roles, or experience currently exist. However, scrutiny of the Mayoral Combined Authority, the Mayor themselves, and South Gloucestershire's leader as a member

of the Authority, will doubtless become a major component of the roles of Councillors in South Gloucestershire in coming years. It is likely that three or four members will be explicitly delegated to the MCA's scrutiny committee, and all members will have the opportunity to scrutinise the actions of the Leader of Council in their role as a member of the authority. The role of scrutiny for Cllrs thus needs to consider both their role scrutinising the potential new cabinet of South Gloucestershire, and also the new roles in the MCA. Scrutiny will likely have more demands than it did when last used in South Gloucestershire, as prior to the 2012 switch, scrutiny committees only scrutinised the actions of South Gloucestershire decision-makers, and did not have the added regional role.

Representational requirements

This would not change from the current requirements, and is the easiest to assess. Councillors currently spend around hours a week interacting with residents, dealing with casework, and taking decisions & scrutinising actions in council meetings, with substantial outliers both above and below this level. The current ratio of Councillors to residents is, on average, 2,952, varying from Frenchay Stoke Park (2109) to Siston (3675).

Any reduction in Councillors will necessarily mean an increase in average workload per councillor in order to retain the current level of representation, and responsiveness. If South Gloucestershire had the same ratio of Cllrs:Electors in 2017 as it had in 1996, there would be 79 members of the council; the last 20 years have already seen a 9 member functional cut in Council size. All three parties represented agreed at the time of the last review that an increase in ward size, with an inherent increase in workload, was undesirable.

Since that time, the average elector per Councillor has increased by 6%, although that growth has been uneven, as seen in the wards which are adjacent to trigger-point for a review. We agree that a review is necessary to correct representational inequalities, and that use of new technologies, and the changed role of local government, can mean the functions being adequately performed with a reduced number of Councillors. In addition, the last seven years of local government have focused on providing better value for money, and reconfiguring services to be available with fewer resources. We believe this does include the representational requirements, and that it would be wrong to consistently cut officer numbers, and services provided, whilst retaining the same number of political Councillors. However, the reduced number should focus on providing effective local government, and not merely be designed with an eye to saving money.

If the council were reduced to 60, this would represent an average of 3444 residents per councillor. Whilst this would represent a 63% increase for the current smallest ward, in most cases it would mean a relatively modest increase. Crucially, it would mean that the new average ratio of Councillors:Electors would be close to the current highest level. This would mean that all residents of South Gloucestershire would have a level of representation between that currently available in the wards of Almondsbury and Siston. These are the two wards in South Gloucestershire with the highest ratio as things stand. We believe that the increased casework and representational requirements that resulted could be handled adequately by Cllrs, as it appears to be in those two wards at present. We do not believe that any further reduction would be advantageous in a single step, although future reviews could consider that if the new level also proved to provide opportunities for increased efficiency.

In the next five years, the electors of the district is projected to increase to 226,553. This would mean a ratio in 2022 of 1:3236 if the current level of members were maintained. If it were reduced to 60, the ratio would be 1:3775. That level is above the ratio in any current South Gloucestershire ward, and will mean residents in the future do not get the level of representation currently available. This will be equivalent to a further natural 'cut' of nearly 7 Cllrs, based on the ratio at the time of the last review, even if the existing number of 70 were maintained. Reducing to 60 would mean a functional reduction of 17, which would be a substantial downward move, in line with recent national trends.

In addition to the ratio, 60 Cllrs would provide enough seats on a 1-3 member pattern to allow new wards to be created which respect community identities. The number of wards in South Gloucestershire has been reduced in each of the last two reviews, and may be cut again this time. Cutting the number of Councillors too far, however, would hamper the flexibility available in creating a warding pattern to reflect the unusual population distribution, where a majority of the population live in a small land area, mainly distributed along the sides of another major settlement (in this case, Bristol), but with distinct towns and communities in the surrounding countryside.

Conclusion

We believe that although the number of Councillors on South Gloucestershire should likely be reduced overall, that the increase in population, historic and anticipated, and the demands of the role mean that the reduction should not be sudden, or severe. A reduction of ten, for around 60 Councillors would seem to be an appropriate move at this time. If further changes are needed in the future, that can be considered at the next review, who will have the opportunity to see how this first

reduction in South Gloucestershire's history has affected the workload, and representational abilities, of the Councillors.