



Bedford Borough Conservative Group

**Submission to the Boundary Committee For
England – Electoral Review of Bedford Borough –
Consultation on Council Size**

September 2009

Council Size

The new Unitary Authority came into being on 1 April 2009 and as the new 36 Councillor model has been put into practice, our concerns have grown.

Currently, we have 36 Unitary Councillors covering 26 Wards with a combined electorate of 116,423 (as of 1 September 2009), reduced from 54 Councillors, and these 36 Unitary Councillors cover the same geographical area as before.

Inevitably, the responsibilities of each and every Councillor have expanded substantially to include all services and functions formerly provided by Bedfordshire County Council.

We believe there is a strong case for increasing the Council Size on the following basis.

1. Comparison to other Unitary Authorities in the East of England

A comparison with other Unitary Authorities in the East of England is a useful starting point. In the table below, it is clear that other Unitary Authorities with similar population levels are substantially larger in Council Size than Bedford Borough.

Peterborough and Southend-on-Sea have only a marginally bigger populace than Bedford Borough, yet their respective Council sizes are 57 and 51 – much larger than 36.

In Thurrock, the population is actually smaller than Bedford Borough, yet the Unitary Council there elects 49 Councillors – 13 more than Bedford Borough.

Unitary Authority	Population (2007 estimates)	Council Size – Number of Councillors
Bedford	154,900	36
Central Bedfordshire	252,100	66
Luton	203,800	48
Peterborough	163,300	57
Thurrock	150,000	49
Southend-on-Sea	162,000	51
Average (excluding Bedford)	186,240	54

In response to the first point, Bedford Borough Council has inherited all the responsibilities of both Bedfordshire County Council and the former Borough Council, meaning that Unitary Councillors now have to undertake the following duties:

- ✓ Attend all Full Council meetings, and pre-meetings as required.
- ✓ Attend Council Committee meetings, Sub-Committee Meetings, Advisory Groups, pre-meetings and site visits as required.
- ✓ Attend Outside Body, Fire Authority, Police Authority and other meetings as required.
- ✓ Attend School Governor Meetings.
- ✓ Attend Political Group Meetings, Working Group and Local Constituency Association Meetings.
- ✓ Fulfill their leadership role within their local Community Network.
- ✓ Attend Parish, Town & Urban Community Council meetings in their Wards.
- ✓ Engage with and be advocate for community organisations.
- ✓ Broker local solutions to local issues.
- ✓ Handle correspondence of constituents.

At the time of writing, less than six months have passed since the creation of the new Unitary authority. However, it is becoming clear to us already that the workloads and time-commitments of all Unitary Councillors are being stretched to unacceptable high levels.

Since the reduction of the Council size to 36, we have noted the growing levels of absenteeism at Council Committee meetings. At the time of writing, we have observed the following since 1 April 2009:

- Planning Committee - met 4 times; three of the four meetings were missing 22%, 56% & 33% of its appointed membership.
- General Purposes Committee - met twice; one of those meetings was missing 57% of its appointed membership.
- General Licensing Sub-Committee – met 4 times; two meetings were missing 50% of its appointed membership.
- Adult Social Care Policy Review & Development Committee – met 4 times; 2 meetings were missing 14% & 1 meeting was missing 29% of its appointed membership
- Environment, Regeneration & Corporate Services Policy Review & Development Committee – met twice; 1 meeting was missing 29% of its appointed membership.
- Scrutiny Committee – met 3 times; one meeting was missing 29% of its appointed membership.

2. **Recommendation 2** – We believe the Council Size should be increased on the following basis to ensure that the 2,500 Elector per Councillor criteria is adhered to as closely as possible:

Change	Impact on Council Size
Merge Clapham & Oakley Wards – 2 Cllrs for new Ward	0
Increase De Parys to 2 Cllrs	+1
Increase Great Barford to 2 Cllrs	+1
Increase Kempston E to 2 Cllrs	+1
Increase Kempston N to 2 Cllrs	+1
Increase Queens Park to 2 Cllrs	+1
Increase Wilshamstead to 2 Cllrs	+1
Reduce Wootton to 1 Cllr	-1
New Council Size	41 Councillors