



Further Electoral Review of Oxfordshire County Council

Oxfordshire County Council's Submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission on Council Size

Introduction

This statement sets out the Council's view of the appropriate size for the authority; that is, the appropriate number of councillors to allow local democracy, the council and individual councillors to operate most effectively.

The appropriate size for the authority will depend on the authority's structure and the variety and extent of roles that councillors of the authority are required to undertake in order to deliver effective local government. This statement provides an account of the authority's structure and councillors' roles, and then assesses the implications in terms of Council size.

Background

Oxfordshire County Council introduced a new political management structure in November 2001 - a Leader and Cabinet System - following extensive local consultation. In August 2009 the Council reinforced this commitment by adopting a Strong Leader model.

The current Political Management Structure

The full Council of 74 members meets six times a year, with extraordinary meetings as necessary. Each member represents 6,668 electors on average based on the present electoral registers provided by the District Councils.

The Cabinet comprises 10 members including the Leader and the Deputy Leader. Individual members hold portfolios and take decisions individually and collectively. The Cabinet Members are publicly and politically accountable for the development and performance of services within their portfolio. The Cabinet meets formally every month. Each Cabinet Member is scheduled to take delegated decisions in public each month. The Cabinet also meets together informally two weeks before a Cabinet meeting.

There are five Council scrutiny committees which meet six times a year. The current councillor membership of these committees is 10/11 members. In addition the Council undertakes the scrutiny of health services in Oxfordshire, which involves working with other organisations. The Joint Health Scrutiny Committee has 7 county councillors and five district councillors and 3 co-opted members.

These committees monitor the actions of the Cabinet and the other committees and may call them to account. They also undertake wider reviews of policy development and of the performance of services provided for Oxfordshire by the Council and other public bodies, either on their own initiative or at the request of the Cabinet. These reviews are either undertaken by select committee or by task group.

On average Scrutiny meetings last about two and a half hours. Meetings are longer (3 hours approx) if undertaking reviews using the select committee format. Extra meetings for Task Group Reviews are needed between the scheduled Committee Meetings as and when necessary. Reading time is needed between meetings. This is for the agenda papers but also for government briefing and consultation papers and related documents, which are circulated to members as and when necessary (e.g. national changes to health services etc). Depending on the subject areas and national changes this reading can be extensive.

There are five committees dealing with regulatory and non-executive functions:

- Planning & Regulation Committee – dealing with development control & planning applications, various licensing and registration matters and public rights of way functions. Meets nine times a year with a membership of 15 councillors.
- Audit Committee – To monitor the risk, control and governance arrangements within the Council. Meets six times a year with a membership of nine councillors and one co-opted member.
- Pension Fund Committee – managing the pension fund for employees of the County Council and other participating organisations and authorities. Meets four times a year with a membership of seven councillors.
- Democracy & Organisation Committee – dealing with staffing, elections, outside bodies and employment matters. Meets twice a year with a membership of 15 councillors.
- Standards Committee – promoting and maintaining high standards of conduct by members. Meets twice a year with a membership of seven councillors and 4 Independent members.

In some cases these committees appoint sub-committees to deal with specific matters such as appeals, pension benefits, appointments, gradings, and assessments and hearings.

In addition members are involved in Working Groups with officers, usually on specific projects or issues.

Roles and Functions of all Councillors

The Council's Constitution is clear about the roles which Oxfordshire County Councillors are expected to fulfil:

- (i) collectively be the ultimate policy-makers and carry out a number of strategic and corporate management functions;
- (ii) contribute to the good governance of the area and actively encourage community participation and citizen involvement in decision making;
- (iii) effectively represent the interests of their electoral divisions and of individual constituents;
- (iv) respond to constituents' enquiries and representations, fairly and impartially;

- (v) participate in the governance and management of the Council;
and
(vi) maintain the highest standards of conduct and ethics.

Members' Representative Role

In addition to undertaking a variety of roles within the political management structure, all members undertake a significant representative role: representing the authority in its relationships with other bodies, and representing their divisions and their constituents.

Leading the community and working with local stakeholders

This has placed an emphasis on partnership working and there are various major partnership bodies operating in Oxfordshire on which the Council is represented (and takes a lead role). Representation is through both Cabinet and non-Cabinet members. These include:

- Joint committees and joint working/partnership arrangements (e.g. Oxfordshire Partnership, bilateral meetings with district councils etc)
- Member champions (currently Older People, Olympics, Heritage, Bus, Cycling, Motorcycling, Heritage and Risk Management)
- Almost 200 outside bodies ranging from major national and regional bodies to those of a more local nature.
- Youth and community organisations.
- School governing bodies.

Divisional representatives

This is a key role for all councillors, whether in rural or urban areas. The Council has identified the "attendance by a member in the capacity of county councillor at parish and town council meetings within the relevant member's division" as an approved duty under the Members' Allowances Scheme. There are 317 parishes in Oxfordshire – 236 parish councils, 14 town councils and 67 parish meetings. The majority of Oxford City is not parished but there are a number of community groups across the city. As Oxfordshire has this mix of very rural areas and growing urban areas, some divisions can cover large geographical areas which include a large number of parish councils (currently there are six divisions with between 16-20 parishes). All councillors are expected to keep in touch with parish/town councils and community groups. This creates pressures on members' time in travelling and attending parish/town council meetings, community groups and contacting their constituents.

Impact on Council Size

Since the last review in 2002/03 the Political Management arrangements have evolved, taking account of legislative changes and local circumstances.

During a survey of Oxfordshire County Councillors, undertaken in October-November 2010, 55% of respondents indicated that on average they spend 10-20 hours a week on their formal council role, with 20% spending between 30-39 hours a week i.e. Cabinet Members, Group Leaders etc. Also 63% of councillors indicated that on average they spend 10-20 hours a week on their local role. This demonstrates overall

that over half of councillors spend between 20 – 40 hours a week on their county councillor role. See Annex A for an extract from the survey results.

Changes in the local government climate – with a greater emphasis on localism and partnership working – does have implications for appropriate council size. So too does the current Cabinet-Scrutiny model, which envisages responsibility for decision-making in fewer hands yet with robust scrutiny. This suggests that a reduction in council size is appropriate, while recognising that the essentially rural/urban nature of the county requires a meaningful level of local representation. Viewing this alongside the evidence that current councillors are working significant hours in their role, there are therefore risks in reducing the council size too drastically.

The Council is also mindful of the current financial climate and the implications of cost-effectiveness of its democratic arrangements.

Conclusion

Therefore, taking account of Oxfordshire’s local arrangements for statutory decision-making functions (i.e. Cabinet, Planning, Audit, Democracy & Organisation Committee etc), robust scrutiny and effective representation and partnership working, the County Council considers that the council size should be in the order of 63/64 councillors, based on single member wards as agreed by the three main political parties.

The Council size and the resultant number of electors per councillor would be 7,831 based on current registers and 8,374 based on predicted registers 2016 and would more closely reflect the national average of 8,500 electors per councillor. This size of council would have divisions that equated to the area represented by four district councillors instead of the three district councillors at present and it would be possible to create single member divisions that would approximate to district ward boundaries.

On the current electorate the district allocation would be:

Cherwell	14 councillors
Oxford	14/15 councillors
South Oxfordshire	13 councillors
Vale of White Horse	12 councillors
West Oxfordshire	10/11 councillors

This will ensure that the executive and non-executive functions of the Council can be fulfilled, together with the requirements of effective scrutiny and joint working. This also ensures that there is a reasonably sustainable level of representation across the County to meet the expectations of communities/constituents and the business of the Council.

Charles Shouler, Conservative Group
David Turner, Liberal Democrat Group
Roy Darke, Labour Group
Lead representatives for the three main political groups on the County Council







November 2010

[View the full responses for this question.](#)

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Your Time Commitments

It would be useful for the Panel if you could indicate approximately how much time a week you spend on your local role (eg. attending local meetings, meeting and consulting constituents, dealing with constituent casework etc):

Option	Results
2 - 5 hours	 3% (1)
6 - 9 hours	 26% (10)
10 - 14 hours	 36% (14)
15 - 20 hours	 26% (10)
21 - 29 hours	 8% (3)
30 - 39 hours	 3% (1)

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14A

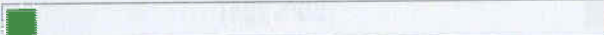




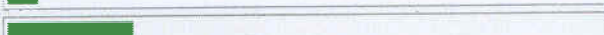
Comment:

This question has been answered 13 times.

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How much time a week do you spend on your formal council role (eg. preparing for council meetings, attending council meetings, dealing with council business, representing the Council on other bodies etc):

Option	Results
2 - 5 hours	 5% (2)
6 - 9 hours	 13% (5)
10 - 14 hours	 26% (10)
15 - 20 hours	 31% (12)
21 - 29 hours	 5% (2)
30 - 39 hours	 21% (8)

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