

[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: 31 October 2021 08:05
To: reviews
Subject: Submission on Council Size
Attachments: [REDACTED] BC 202101 Council Size template (1)-1.docx
Categories: Query In Progress, Submissions, [REDACTED]

Dear Commissioners,

I am grateful to you for asking for views on proposals to decrease the number of councillors and I attach herewith my submission on this proposal.

Kind regards,

[REDACTED]

[Insert name of submission organisation/group/individual here]

Council Size Submission: Template

[Insert Local Authority Name Here]

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How to Make a Submission

It is recommended that submissions on future governance arrangements and council size follow the guidance provided and use the format below as a template. Submissions should be treated as an opportunity to focus on the future needs of the council and not simply describe the current arrangements. **Submissions should also demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been considered in drawing up the proposal and why you have discounted them.**

The template allows respondents to enter comments directly under each heading. It is not recommended that responses be unduly long; as a guide, it is anticipated that a 15 to 20-page document using this template should suffice. Individual section length may vary depending on the issues to be explained. Where internal documents are referred to URLs should be provided, rather than the document itself. It is also recommended that a table is included that highlights the key paragraphs for the Commission's attention.

'Good' submissions, i.e. those that are considered to be most robust and persuasive, combine the following *key success components* (as set out in the guidance that accompanies this template):

- Clarity on objectives
- A straightforward and evidence-led style
- An understanding of local place and communities
- An understanding of councillors' roles and responsibilities

About You

The respondent should use this space to provide the Commission with a little detail about who is making the submission, whether it is the full Council, Officers on behalf of the Council, a political party or group, a resident group, or an individual.

I write as an individual, though one who actively organises my local community in order to respond to TWBC decisions which affect us. I am not a councillor and therefore am not fully conversant with all the intricacies of council processes. The value of my contribution will derive, I hope, from the fact that these comments come from someone outside the magic circle of government and from someone with a long experience of this parish. My family has lived in the rural parts of the parish of Benenden as farmers for three generations. I live right on the edge of the parish, where it touches Biddenden and Tenterden. The borough boundary between TWBC and Ashford Borough Council lies at the bottom of my fields. This is a large parish with a population, according to the 2011 Census, of 2,374. Almost all live in the main settlement of Benenden village, with a smaller concentration of people in the hamlet of Iden Green. I live in what is known as the East End of the village, which is a large rural area covering about one third of the total land area of the parish, but with only 76 households. There is no centre in the East End which, because of its rural location, was chosen in 1906 as the site for an isolation hospital, a sanatorium. We in this rural area suffer from the traditional conflict which goes on between populated settlements and unpopulated rural areas. The democratic system, in a way, works against us, because we will always be in the minority. We can always be outvoted. And this is exactly what has happened in the

present Benenden Neighbourhood Plan (BNP). Benenden is the only parish in the borough to have allocated its own sites for development and the BNP proposes to site almost all new housing designated to the parish in the rural location of the East End. The private, for-profit, Benenden Healthcare Society (BHS) which runs Benenden Hospital, is putting almost all its land up for development. Currently a settlement of over 100 new houses is proposed for the hospital site, on the borders with Biddenden and Ashford Borough Council and three miles distant from the village of Benenden. This figure is likely to be a starting point, not a final number, since the land the hospital put up for development in the first instance included all the hospital site

Reason for Review (Request Reviews Only)

Please explain the authority's reasons for requesting this electoral review; it is useful for the Commission to have context. *NB/ If the Commission has identified the authority for review under one of its published criteria, then you are not required to answer this question.*

This review is being conducted because, as I understand it, TWBC says the Commission insists on it. I have personally learned that it is taking place not because TWBC has informed me (it has not), but because I learned quite by chance. The same is true of the so-called 'public consultation' which took place on decreasing the numbers of councillors and the number of elections. The public, to the best of my knowledge were never informed about it and yet it was called a 'public' consultation. I heard of it by chance, and I asked as many people as possible in my group to consider responding. This is a good example of how TWBC, which theoretically aims to be open and transparent, fails to achieve its goal.

The Context for your proposal

Your submission gives you the opportunity to examine how you wish to organise and run the council for the next 15 - 20 years. **The consideration of future governance arrangements and council size should be set in the wider local and national policy context.** The Commission expects you to challenge your current arrangements and determine the most appropriate arrangements going forward. In providing context for your submission below, please demonstrate that you have considered the following issues.

- When did your Council last change/reorganise its internal governance arrangements and what impact on effectiveness did that activity have?
- To what extent has transference of strategic and/or service functions impacted on the effectiveness of service delivery and the ability of the Council to focus on its remaining functions?

- Have any governance or capacity issues been raised by any Inspectorate or similar?
- What influence will local and national policy trends likely have on the Council as an institution?
- What impact on the Council's effectiveness will your council size proposal have?

It simply boggles the mind that anyone could be suggesting we reduce the number of councillors just when plans are for dramatically increasing the population. What can the goal be? In Kent there are plans for huge numbers of new houses (17,140 in Thanet alone). In our own area of the East End of the parish of Benenden, we are facing an increase of 100 plus, all to be built in one place, creating a new settlement in a large rural area currently home to only 76 households. Our ward, of Benenden & Cranbrook, is represented by three councillors, but given the new houses planned, we could face having around 800 additional houses. Cranbrook has an existing housing stock of 1,979 and Benenden, 320. That means at least 1,600 additional residents and an almost 35% increase in the number of houses. Is this a moment to reduce numbers? We will need more councillors, not fewer.

Local Authority Profile

Please provide a short description of the authority and its setting, in particular the local geography, demographics and community characteristics. This should set the scene for the Commission and give it a greater understanding of any current issues. The description should cover all of the following:

- Brief outline of area - are there any notable geographic constraints for example that may affect the review?
- Rural or urban - what are the characteristics of the authority?
- Demographic pressures - such as distinctive age profiles, migrant or transient populations, is there any large growth anticipated?
- Community characteristics – is there presence of “hidden” or otherwise complex deprivation?
- Are there any other constraints, challenges, issues or changes ahead?

Further to providing a description, the Commission will be looking for a submission that demonstrates an understanding of place and communities by putting forth arguments on council size based upon local evidence and insight. For example, how does local geography, demographics and community characteristics impact on councillor casework, workload and community engagement?

I am not qualified to respond to this as I am not a councillor, but I do know, from local canvassing, that it takes much longer, and is far more expensive in petrol and time, to canvass rural areas than villages and towns.

TWBC underplays this fact by talking about 'Benenden' as if it were a settlement limited to the village. It is not a village for TWBC purposes. It is a parish. The rural inhabitants deserve to be heard and to be represented just as much as anybody else. And they deserve to be kept informed.

Council Size

The Commission believes that councillors have three broad aspects to their role.

These are categorised as: **Strategic Leadership, Accountability (Scrutiny, Regulatory and Partnerships), and Community Leadership**. Submissions should address each of these in turn and provide supporting evidence. Prompts in the boxes below should help shape responses.

Strategic Leadership

Respondents should provide the Commission with details as to how elected members will provide strategic leadership for the authority. Responses should also indicate how many members will be required for this role and why this is justified. **Responses should demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been explored.**

Topic		
Governance Model	Key lines of explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>What governance model will your authority operate? e.g. Committee System, Executive or other?</i> ➤ <i>The Cabinet model, for example, usually requires 6 to 10 members. How many members will you require?</i> ➤ <i>If the authority runs a Committee system, we want to understand why the number and size of the committees you propose represents the most appropriate for the authority.</i> ➤ <i>By what process does the council aim to formulate strategic and operational policies? How will members in executive, executive support and/or scrutiny positions be involved? What particular demands will this make of them?</i> ➤ <i>Whichever governance model you currently operate, a simple assertion that you want to keep the current structure does not in itself, provide an explanation of why that structure best meets the needs of the council and your communities.</i>
	Analysis	<p>Almost all power in the Council is concentrated in the Cabinet, a tiny group of 6 members who are very conscious of their power and status. Currently we have 24 Conservative Councillors and 24 who are not Conservative, so the unrepresentative nature of government in TW is worse than ever.</p> <p>We need not only NOT to reduce the number of councillors (and to consider, in fact, increasing their numbers), but also we need to reduce the power of an oligarchy within the ruling party which currently overrules everybody else. This small group appears to be closely allied to senior TWBC officers. The fewer the number of councillors the easier it is for officers to encroach on those fields of action which should by rights, belong to councillors. It is in fact said that the debacle of the wasted £10 million plus on the TWBC's vanity project at Calverley Square was, and possibly still</p>

		<p>is, strongly supported by officers, if not originally put forward by officers. There appears to be little to no appeal against poor governance. The Overview and Scrutiny committee is chaired and vice-chaired by the ruling party (as is every TWBC committee) and its efforts to review Calverley Square bills appear to be hampered if not blocked. The loss of the District Auditor's office is disastrous for TW.</p>
Portfolios	Key lines of explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ How many portfolios will there be? ➤ What will the role of a portfolio holder be? ➤ Will this be a full-time position? ➤ Will decisions be delegated to portfolio holders? Or will the executive/mayor take decisions?
	Analysis	<p>TWBC's 6 Portfolio Holders need to have shadow portfolio holders beside them and their exclusive hold on power and their reliance on officers should be limited. The pool from which these holders are selected should be increased rather than decreased. Opposition parties should be allowed to chair committees and councillors, not officers, should be the prime movers behind appointments.</p>
Delegated Responsibilities	Key lines of explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What responsibilities will be delegated to officers or committees? ➤ How many councillors will be involved in taking major decisions?
	Analysis	<p>Officers should advise and councillors should not make decisions. As it is at present, all too often, officers in TWBC make decisions unimpeded by any input whatsoever from councillors. In planning for example, in my small area of the East End, there were over 50 neighbour responses (including 2 from councillors) objecting to a planning application from the Benenden Healthcare Society (BHS) who wanted to demolish a Victorian farm yard and create a new housing estate a few metres from the original listed 15th century farmhouse and in a rural area on AONB land. In spite of this, Planning Officers insisted that they would not send the application to the Planning Committee but reserved it for officers to decide alone. In the end, BHS withdrew its application So in this case, they not only delegated themselves the right to</p>

		decide the matter but ignored the opinion of two councillors.
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Accountability

Give the Commission details as to how the authority and its decision makers and partners will be held to account. The Commission is interested in both the internal and external dimensions of this role. **Responses should demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been explored.**

Topic	
Internal Scrutiny	The scrutiny function of authorities has changed considerably. Some use theme or task-and-finish groups, for example, and others have a committee system. Scrutiny arrangements may also be affected by the officer support available.
Key lines of explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ How will decision makers be held to account? ➤ How many committees will be required? And what will their functions be? ➤ How many task and finish groups will there be? And what will their functions be? What time commitment will be involved for members? And how often will meetings take place? ➤ How many members will be required to fulfil these positions? ➤ Explain why you have increased, decreased, or not changed the number of scrutiny committees in the authority. ➤ Explain the reasoning behind the number of members per committee in terms of adding value.
Analysis	I am not familiar with Task and Finish groups but I do know that the Overview and Scrutiny Committee is stymied in its efforts to get to the bottom of the financing of Calverley Square when the council seems to have got through more than £10 million with no clear evidence to show how it was able to spend this much money. I repeat that the loss of the District Auditor to force a sense of personal responsibility on Councillors has been disastrous.
Statutory Function	This includes planning, licencing and any other regulatory responsibilities. Consider under each of the headings the extent to which decisions will be delegated to officers. How many members will be required to fulfil the statutory requirements of the council?

Planning	Key lines of explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What proportion of planning applications will be determined by members? ➤ Has this changed in the last few years? And are further changes anticipated? ➤ Will there be area planning committees? Or a single council-wide committee? ➤ Will executive members serve on the planning committees? ➤ What will be the time commitment to the planning committee for members?
	Analysis	Too many planning decisions are taken out of the hands of Councillors. This is a potentially dangerous situation because there is nothing to prevent officers in the planning department having had close ties with developers before being hired as officers, and nothing to prevent their returning to those developers after serving as officers.
Licensing	Key lines of explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ How many licencing panels will the council have in the average year? ➤ And what will be the time commitment for members? ➤ Will there be standing licencing panels, or will they be ad-hoc? ➤ Will there be core members and regular attendees, or will different members serve on them?
	Analysis	I do not know the answer to this question.
Other Regulatory Bodies	Key lines of explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ What will they be, and how many members will they require? ➤ Explain the number and membership of your Regulatory Committees with respect to greater delegation to officers.
	Analysis	I do not know the answer to this question.
External Partnerships		Service delivery has changed for councils over time, and many authorities now have a range of delivery partners to work with and hold to account.
Key lines of explanation		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Will council members serve on decision-making partnerships, sub-regional, regional or national bodies? In doing so, are they able to take decisions/make commitments on behalf of the council? ➤ How many councillors will be involved in this activity? And what is their expected workload? What proportion of this work is undertaken by portfolio holders? ➤ What other external bodies will members be involved in? And what is the anticipated workload?
Analysis		I do not know the answer to this question,

The Commission understands that there is no single approach to community leadership and that members represent, and provide leadership to, their communities in different ways. The Commission wants to know how members are required to provide effective community leadership and what support the council offers them in this role. For example, does the authority have a defined role and performance system for its elected members? And what support networks are available within the council to help members in their duties? The Commission also wants to see a consideration of **how the use of technology and social media by the council as a whole, and by councillors individually, will affect casework, community engagement and local democratic representation. Responses should demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been explored.**

Topic		Description
Community Leadership	Key lines of explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>In general terms how do councillors carry out their representational role with electors?</i> ➤ <i>Does the council have area committees and what are their powers?</i> ➤ <i>How do councillors seek to engage with their constituents? Do they hold surgeries, send newsletters, hold public meetings or maintain blogs?</i> ➤ <i>Are there any mechanisms in place that help councillors interact with young people, those not on the electoral register, and/or other minority groups and their representative bodies?</i> ➤ <i>Are councillors expected to attend community meetings, such as parish or resident's association meetings? If so, what is their level of involvement and what roles do they play?</i> ➤ <i>Explain your approach to the Area Governance structure. Is your Area Governance a decision-making forum or an advisory board? What is their relationship with locally elected members and Community bodies such as Town and Parish Councils? Looking forward how could they be improved to enhance decision-making?</i>
	Analysis	<p>The power of TWBC Officers is increasing and that of the councillors is decreasing. The process does not appear to be correct. It is also incorrect in a council with 48 seats (24 held by the ruling party and 24 by others), to have all committees chaired by the ruling party, and for that party to also hold all the vice chairmanships. Even within the ruling party, councillors with experience are ignored and those with less experience, given positions of authority. It also appears incorrect to place a non-independent in as mayor in order to give one side 24 votes plus 1, and thereby to overcome the fact that the council is divided equally.</p> <p>With the introduction of Zoom meetings, the planning committee has not been going on site visits and many speak at planning meetings in ignorance of the situation on the ground.</p>

	Key lines of explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ How do councillors deal with their casework? Do they pass it on to council officers? Or do they take a more in-depth approach to resolving issues? ➤ What support do members receive? ➤ How has technology influenced the way in which councillors work? And interact with their electorate? ➤ In what ways does the council promote service users' engagement/dispute resolution with service providers and managers rather than through councillors?
Casework	Analysis	<p>Some councillors have no sense of their responsibility to keep in touch with their electorate. Some are excellent. Others are not.</p> <p>On technology, very few of the residents of this part of the parish (the East End) are adept with technology, in fact they do not merely struggle with it, they are completely cut out of the democratic process if technological ability is an essential requirement for participation. I think this is a failing generally in modern life. Governments completely fail to recognise the large number of people who are not technologically adept. They are creating an underclass by insisting on the ability of people to participate in the process on-line. This is not just a problem of age, though it is certainly partly due to our ageing population. An elderly person down a remote lane in the countryside should not be told that she may read the Local Plan if she travels 20 miles into TW to do so. There is no chance of anyone, old or young, being able to read a document as large as the Local Plan, with all its subsidiary documents, in one sitting in TW, quite apart from the fact that many elderly people do not drive. There is also a large class of younger people who reject the degree of technological complicity so often required by government. There are young people who are NOT on social media etc. There are various reasons for this, one of them being that not everyone is prepared to tick that "I agree" box, without having the slightest understanding as what they are agreeing to.</p>

Other Issues

Respondent may use this space to bring any other issues of relevance to the attention of the Commission.

The main issue for me which is not addressed in this form is the current increasing disenfranchisement of the elderly (many of whom cannot use the internet and may not even

have computers in their homes) and of those younger ones who choose not to put their lives on-line, and therefore shun government demands that they do so.

Although in a rural region, the internet often makes it easier for us to reach urban dwellers (and vice versa), this is only true for those who are happy, or rather resigned, to using it. I do not know the exact numbers, but in my area, the East End of Benenden, I would say about one quarter of our population have been left out of the Local Planning process, thanks to local government demand that we participate in the process on-line. These people have been disenfranchised. Even those of us who do participate on-line, are subjected to convoluted processes and inadequacies. Several key TWBC Local Plan documents failed to appear when they are supposed to appear. Time and again, TWBC was rescued by us pointing out their errors, not by them identifying the errors themselves.

Summary

In following this template respondents should have been able to provide the Commission with a robust and well-evidenced case for their proposed council size; one which gives a clear explanation as to the governance arrangements and number of councillors required to represent the authority in the future.

Use this space to summarise the proposals and indicate other options considered. Explain why these alternatives were not appropriate in terms of their ability to deliver effective Strategic Leadership, Accountability (Scrutiny, Regulation and Partnerships), and Community Leadership.

Any plan to reduce the number of councillors is counter-productive because:

- plans for a big increase in population in the south east
- the inability and/or unwillingness of many in the population to consign their thoughts and preferences to Zoom meetings or to on-line forms
- the encroachment by TWBC officers over duties formerly handled by councillors (decision-making duties)
- the absence of adequate measures to ensure accountability (no District Auditors)
- the absence of any way to ensure a clear disconnect between officers and developers

Our aim should be to provide greater transparency, greater democracy and great responsibility. Reducing the number of councillors will have the opposite effect.

In a nutshell. A population growing as rapidly as that in the south east, where so many houses are planned, needs more councillors, not fewer.