

Rossendale Conservative's (Incorporating council group, association
and MP's)

Council Size Submission

Rossendale Borough Council

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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 Conservative group on the council has been the largest opposition group for the last 12 years. This submission has been drawn together on behalf of the group working in conjunction with the Executive of the local association and in consultation with the two Conservative MPs in the local authority area. Together we have explored what works within the current set up and where improvements can be made in line with future changes.

Reason for Review (Request Reviews Only)

The Commission has identified the Local Authority for review.

The Context for your proposal

Rossendale Borough Council is a small local authority with 36 Councillors across 14 wards. 8 wards have three Councillors, the remaining 6 have two. The Council's last boundary review took place in 2003 which resulted in several wards being split up. Currently the electoral cycle is by 1/3rds however not all wards have 3 Councillors which causes significant confusion in 6 of the 15 wards where they only vote twice out of the three year cycle. There is a mayor in place with a deputy, determined by the controlling group.

There are currently 6 cabinet members and portfolio holders (allowance is made for up to 8) and 4 key committees. 2 of these provide scrutiny (Overview & Scrutiny and Audit & Accounts) whilst the other 2 deliver the functional responsibilities of the Council (Development Control and Licensing). During the recent LGA Peer review it was highlighted that scrutiny of external partners and stakeholders is strong but internal scrutiny is lacking – no cabinet decisions have been called in for 12 years. Whilst elements of scrutiny have been changed such as merging separate committees together this has failed to ensure there is effective and accurate scrutiny of the Council's leadership – especially given that the Chairmanship of all the committees is exclusively in the gift of the controlling group. The three smaller committees rarely hold meetings. Currently the size of the scrutiny committees and the remits they have make it challenging to deliver effective scrutiny of internal workings, and external scrutiny is poorly informed ahead of meetings. Officers rather than Cabinet Members answer questions. Cabinet attend committees but as observers. This doesn't allow for effective scrutiny of decision makers and the size of the committees are not representative of the size of the Council (With 36 Councillors, 6 removed as Cabinet Members 1/3 of the remaining 30 sit on O&S as well as a co-opted member who rarely attends).

This size combined with the number of roles/responsibilities to be filled by members is also a challenge. Within the current structure of the Council there is allowance for:

- Cabinet of up to 10 Councillors including Leader/Deputy
- 53 spaces across committees including 6 Committee Chairs
- 32 spaces on steering/working groups
- 9 member champion roles
- 15 Joint Committee/Partnership spaces
- 14 Outside body appointees

In order to meet this capacity would mean each Councillor taking almost 4 roles. As the majority are concentrated to the largest group it places additional pressure on them, stretching their capacity and lessening their individual effectiveness.

Current committees:

- Overview & Scrutiny made up of 10 members
- Audit & Accounts made up of 7 members
- Development Control made up of 9 members
- Licensing made up of 11 members
- Standard made up of 7 elected members, 2 town council and one independent member
- Appointments & Appeals made up of 9 members

As well as these there are currently 5 other working groups requiring membership.

Meetings are always quorate however it is evidenced that there are regularly multiple substitutes or absences at all scrutiny meetings. This can provide a lack of consistency in the approaches and means scrutiny cannot run over several meetings if membership hasn't remained consistent. Most decisions are delegated with only a handful of decisions coming to Cabinet or Council. The LGA peer review highlighted that when policies and procedures come for review they are usually pretty fully formed and the opportunity for member input/guidance is significantly reduced. There are no planned changes which would have a significant bearing on the role/responsibility of the council or see significant changes to the current responsibilities.

Workload of scrutiny committees tends to be quite heavy but repetitive (i.e. the same reports are brought forward quarterly/annually/bi-annually etc). Open calls are made to Councillors on an annual basis to suggest topics for inclusion. The Committee chair reviews these and then makes decisions with officers on what should be included. This then informs the committee work plan. Sometimes key topics are selected for more in depth 'scrutiny in a day' work plans. Committee reports are usually available a week before but don't explicitly explain why the committee is scrutinising. There is little else expected in between meetings.

Development Control workload tends to be between 3 and 6 planning applications per meeting. Agendas are published a week in advance. In between meetings there are sometimes requirements for site visits. Licensing committees tend to have two different elements but require little work between meetings.

Often the size of the committees can remove some of the focus needed to deliver action and allow for them to become parochial discussions rather than over-arching scrutiny of the Council and its operations across the Borough. The lack of consistency in attendance also means that members often play catch up if they miss work.

There is a formal role profile for Councillors and all new members receive the opportunity for training on committees. There is a mandatory expectation that this is updated every 12 months. As a standard member of the Council the commitment is not usually in excess of 10 hours a week, rising to 15 for Committee chairs and between 20 and 25 hours for a cabinet member. The Council is involved in a lot of outside bodies which require membership (about 25 appointed positions) as well as 9 'Member champions' where the role is specifically about raising the profile of the issue.

Political groups tend to be able to recruit candidates to stand and seek election as Councillors however this has got notably more challenging in recent years, partly because the role of the Council isn't particularly clear in a two tier system.

Casework comes through to Councillors in many different ways. Some Councillors hold regular resident surveys either individually or as a collective from a ward/area. Through Covid some have changed these to surgeries via Zoom. Social media has also been a growing form of communication for Councillors – either via personal accounts or Councillor pages to make it easy for residents to share feedback. A handful of Councillors also operate street surgeries – visiting residents directly to understand the issues which need support and resolution.

Councillors tend to be active within their individual community whether that is by attending resident groups, supporting their local Civic Pride organisation or actively organising and supporting community events.

Email has now become the primary form of sharing these issues directly with officers to resolve. Most Councillors will take a hands on approach and proactively seek the resolution with the resident and officer to fix the problems which arise. Their initial approach will depend on the issue – simple problems will generally refer straight to the relevant officer whilst more complex issues would see the Councillor visit the resident to assess the issue and decide the best course of action to take. Not all issues revert back to the Borough Council for resolution. Roughly 75% of casework would fall into the 'simple problem' bracket with the remaining 25% leading to further work and a more complex review.

Since the last review the role has changed significantly along with how Councillors engage with their electorate. Digital engagement utilising social media channels has become the de-facto method of interaction, closely followed by email. It has also become increasingly common for residents to contact any Councillor they see who is active to deal with issues which arise, rather than seeking out specific ward councillors. This pattern is likely to increase as the Council adopts an increasingly 'digital first' approach to operating over the coming 5 years.

Councillors receive no individual budget for their wards but do have input at 'neighbourhood forums' where small grants are allocated to those who apply. There are also no formal approaches to diverse community engagement and that can be seen by the fact that the make up of the council is not as diverse as the community the Council serves.

Residents would expect to see their representatives at local community groups, resident groups and neighbourhood forums.

Looking to the future there is not likely to be much further structural change in the responsibilities of the Council. Responsibility for housing stock and leisure facilities has been divested to others, maintenance of parks and outdoor spaces is now largely led by volunteer groups however the Council is seeking to take a larger role in the health and well-being of residents.

There are no current plans to change the structure of the organisation from the Executive/Scrutiny model which is the current adopted structure. It should be noted though that the Council actively supports the pursuit of a devolved deal for Lancashire which would see increased powers arrive in the County. The current model would see the Council Leader sitting on the new decision making body with the power to veto if needed. There are no plans for this to include an elected mayor.

The Council will continue to move to a 'digital first approach to its operation which will see future workloads simpler to manage as more of the population become digitally aware.

Based upon the changes over the last few years, the current make up as has been described and the reduced reach and scope of the Council since the last review, combined with the decreased workloads of casework we are proposing a reduced size of Council, moving from 36 to 30 Councillors (based upon the electoral cycle remaining as 1/3rds. Should Council determine a move to an all out election cycle we would propose reducing the Council size to 28 based upon ward sizes and resident counts which could then be achieved). Alongside this we will set out proposals to improve the focus and ability of Scrutiny with a smaller number of members.

This will allow for more effective decision making, clearer focus for those with responsibilities and greater consistency and effectiveness across all levels of the Council. It will also financially support the Council moving forwards both with a smaller number of members/responsibilities but also allowing officers to focus on what is important and arrive at decisions faster.

It is also expected that further changes will see the Council share more responsibilities across a trans-pennine footprint where this is sensible and suitable as authorities seek further ways to continue to deliver effective services and given the size and scope of the

authority. Conversations so far have involved the possibility of sharing senior officers with neighbouring authorities however these will need further review in the years to come. The lasting impacts of the pandemic are still to be realised as well but will lead to more agile and flexible working practices over the next 5 years. A smaller council will allow these decisions to be made quickly and scrutinised properly as the current set up is cumbersome and slow with too many roles and expectations placed on members with limited support to discharge them fully.

Local Authority Profile

Rossendale is a small borough on the Eastern corner of Lancashire sandwiched in the middle of Pennine Lancashire. The current population is roughly 72,000 and has stayed largely static over the last few years – a likely impact of the lack of new homes which have been made available in the Borough over that period. Over the coming years there is an expectation that approximately 3,000 new homes will be built and it is anticipated that the population will grow to around 80,000. This growth would be ahead of both the County and Country expectation with a 12.6% vs 7.2% and 10.3%. The house growth will be approximately 18.2%.

The Borough is predominantly made up of white British residents however there are concentrated pockets of minority ethnicity residents (the largest group is Pakistani) in Rawtenstall and Haslingden.

There are 32,300 dwellings and roughly 85% are owner occupied or private rented. The housing stock is predominantly band 'A' and a little under 4% are vacant. Roughly 15% of the Borough are deemed as living in fuel poverty.

There are only approximately 23,000 jobs available in the Borough and there is little expected to change on this as prime employment land has been earmarked instead for housing. As a result a large number of residents are forced to commute out of the Borough daily for work. Only 40.3% of the population both live and work within the Borough. Another endemic problem is businesses growing and running out of room to continue development in the Borough so having to relocate elsewhere. Earnings are the fifth lowest in Lancashire.

The topography of the Borough sees four main townships – Haslingden, Rawtenstall, Bacup and Whitworth. Whitworth also benefits from a town council of 12 members. This town council will cause a pressure on the review as it will obviously be treated as one area. It's current population is roughly 7500.

These towns are located within the Valley bottom and predominantly connected by a single road along the bottom of the Valley. Public transport is key to commuting quickly but often routes are poorly serviced. We are also the only Borough in Lancashire without a rail link. This leads to large pressure on the road network with the number of people forced to commute out.

There are many further smaller townships, villages and hamlets along with a large farming community located around the Valley outside of the main population centres. One area of note is Edenfield where population growth is expected to be in excess of 50% if the land identified in the recent Local Plan comes forward for development.

There are a smaller number of state pension claimants than the rest of Lancashire however this is expected to grow over the next 15 years to fall in line with the Lancashire average. The birth rates and death rates are roughly stable and broadly in line. Life expectancy has declined over recent years for both male and females and is lower than the national average.

One of the challenges is that each of the towns need different support – the needs significantly vary from town to town. Each presents their own complexities and has different levels of need. The growth in Edenfield will need dedicated support from the Council to ensure the infrastructure is suitable and existing residents aren't forced out by the large scale development.

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.**

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		
<p>Governance Model</p>	<p>Analysis</p>	<p>We believe that the most effective model for operation in the Council is the existing Executive/scrutiny set up but with a stronger presence and role for scrutiny with a smaller group and chairmanship by an opposition group appointment.</p> <p>Under a smaller structure there would be fewer Cabinet members – 5 Portfolio holders alongside the Leader and the Deputy Leader. The Leader would not have a portfolio but the Deputy would. This would allow the Leader to have an overall view of the Council operation without being sucked down specific avenues. This would mean a total of 6 portfolios.</p> <p>Strategic and operation policies would be decided through the cabinet and informed by a new Internal Scrutiny committee. Committee will be formed of upcoming workload covering a 12 month period to allow their work plan to be informed. Committee workload would be split 50/50 between planning and scrutinising future decisions whilst reviewing adopted strategies implementation. The Chairman of the Internal Scrutiny would be present at all Cabinet meetings to report back and inform Cabinet of the committee view. Internal Scrutiny would work to support the executive in their decision making and ensure all avenues have been fully explored in decision making.</p> <p>This would place additional workload on the chairman of Internal Scrutiny however it would link the committee and scrutiny much more closely to the executive and the</p>

		<p>decision making structures of the council whereas they are currently quite separate. This ensures residents voices are much more closely listened to whereas currently most decisions arrive at scrutiny virtually fully formed.</p>
<p>Portfolios</p>	<p>Analysis</p>	<p>There would be a total of 6 portfolios:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Resources and Finance - Operations and Environment - Health and Leisure - Towns and Communities - Corporate Services - Development and Regeneration <p>The portfolio holder will have oversight of their areas of responsibility and be responsible for delivering the strategic aims of the Council and all services for residents which fall under their remit. They will be responsible for providing updates where appropriate and presenting items from their remit to Scrutiny, Cabinet and Council. It is anticipated that with a smaller Cabinet with enhanced roles and responsibilities that these would be full time equivalent commitments. Some decisions will be delegated to the portfolio holders at a threshold set by the executive. Portfolio holders would be expected to provide a summary of delegated decisions for review informally by scrutiny chairs to allow them to decide whether a decision should called in for further review. The current 'Member Champion' roles would be reduced down to 4 with the view that these would be a more structured role directly contributing to the slightly larger cabinet roles. The responsibilities and terms of reference would be clearly defined where this currently isn't the case and allows fluctuation between the effectiveness of the member appointed, with the expectation of each member very loose and poorly defined.</p>
	<p>Analysis</p>	<p>Several elements of the current portfolios would revert to become delegated responsibilities for officers. It's acknowledged that this structure would require a restructure of the SMT of the Council to expand the number of officers by 1 FTE employee. Training and development, Human Resources, Health and safety, payroll (excluding pay reviews) and Equality and diversity would move to become delegated responsibilities overseen by officers and informed to the relevant portfolio holder. Cabinet decisions will include 7 Councillors or about 25% of the new number of Councillors. Decisions over a certain financial threshold or that impact a certain number of residents/geographical area would be taken to full council. All minutes from cabinet would be included in the full</p>

		council agendas for review and noting. The thresholds would be set by the cabinet and agreed by the full council.
Delegated Responsibilities	Working Groups	The current number of working groups be reduced to 3 – retaining the governance and consultation working groups and the grants advisory group. Membership would be capped at 5 decided by political balance and meetings would be 3 times a year.

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.
Analysis	<p>Internal scrutiny would be a new committee set up to properly scrutinise the executive and the decisions taken. This committee would meet 8 times throughout the year, be solely focussed on internal decisions and reviewing internal performance. There would be 7 members of the committee and the chairmanship would be chosen by the Leader of the largest opposition group.</p> <p>External Scrutiny would be another new committee meeting 4 times a year and with 5 members. This committee would scrutinise the external partners of the council, their performance and the funding they receive. Chairmanship would be elected by the committee annually and they would prepare reports to return to the cabinet highlighting key actions/points. Audit & accounts would be retained however meeting frequency would be increased to four meetings a year (quarterly) and the committees remit would be expanded to include quarterly performance review. The committee would be renamed to Audit & Performance. There would be 5 members of the committee and they would have the power to request portfolio holders attend meetings to explain performance and plans to address issues. Committee reports would go to full council for review and noting. The chairmanship would be decided annually by the committee.</p> <p>This would see one additional committee set up as the current Overview and Scrutiny would be broken into two. This allows for greater Scrutiny of the executive and detail to be gathered and reported on. Reports for two committees would go to full council whereas currently no reports from the committees go to full council. This addresses the issue that currently scrutiny agendas are quite full and more emphasis falls on external scrutiny as opposed to internal scrutiny. The smaller make up</p>

		of the committees is roughly proportioned down by the number of Councillors. This allows a more concentrated group to focus and keep up to date on the workload which may move across meetings rather than being resolved in one go as the current expectation is. The right elected members can then sit on committees rather than being unable to because they have been stretched thin by the sheer numbers of appointments.
	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	Analysis	Currently roughly 5-10% of planning applications are taken to committee. This has reduced in recent years however no further changes are anticipated. There would be a standard criteria set for an application to move forwards to committee and a wish to ensure that at least 5-10% of applications continue to go to committee. This would remain as a single Council-wide committee with a membership of 7 councillors. The chairmanship would be agreed by the executive. No Executive member should sit on the committee. The time commitment would be approximately 6 hours per meeting to be reading through papers, undertaking relevant site visits and attending the committee.
Licensing	Analysis	Licensing is currently split into two. These would be put back into one with an ad-hoc arrangement and 7 members in attendance. Per meeting the time commitment would be 4 hours including reading and reviewing paperwork ahead of the meeting. It would be anticipated that at least half of the elected members would be trained to allow meetings to happen quickly when required should core members not be as flexible.
Other Regulatory Bodies	Analysis	The Standards committee would remain with no scheduled meetings (it hasn't met since 2012) and a membership of 5 Councillors to meet as required. The appointments and appeals committee would remain but be reduced to a membership of 3 meeting on an adhoc basis.
	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.
	Analysis	Currently there are 29 appointees to 21 joint partnerships and outside bodies. It is anticipated this will decrease to 20. With the exception of one on the basis of the new Councillor number each would revert to one representative from the Council meaning 21 appointees agreed by the executive with the power to take decision and make commitments on behalf of the council. It would be anticipated that 15 of these would fall under the remit of a portfolio holder leaving a further 6 to be filled by the remaining Councillors.

	For these six workload would be anticipated at 3 hours per member per meeting. There would also be attendance for the neighbourhood forums aside from this.
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Community Leadership

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?

Topic		Description
Community Leadership	Analysis	<p>Councillors carry out their role currently by being accessible for residents via email, phone and letter. Some Councillors hold ward surgeries in local community hubs or carry out street surgeries. They also attend local resident groups.</p> <p>The Council organises community forums in three areas of the Borough – Rawtenstall, Haslingden and Bacup and these cover their surrounding areas. Whitworth Town Council organises community engagement in Whitworth. Currently 11 Councillors would be eligible for Haslingden, 13 for Rawtenstall and 8 for Bacup. These committees have been separated from the main Council structure. They are more of an information sharing forum and the only power they have is to approve community funding requests.</p> <p>Some Councillors seek to engage with residents utilising social media to share updates or sending regular leaflets reporting back to residents. Roughly ¼ of Councillors currently do this.</p> <p>The Council has no current mechanism to support Councillor engagement of younger voters, non registered voters and minority groups. Attendance at the Community Forums is also very limited outside of the resident groups and organisations invited.</p> <p>Councillors would be expected by their communities to attend relevant resident groups to support engagement, capture problems and share updates. This is not a statutory request and not all areas have respective groups. Councillors have no official role at these unless they have been voted into them at the relevant AGMs.</p> <p>If the Council was smaller there would be opportunity to improve the Community forum process and make them advisory panels. A smaller number of Councillors would be in attendance allowing a greater voice for the residents.</p> <p>Proposed polices and developments could be taken to the groups, they would move from a three-yearly to a quarterly meeting and their views would be reported back to the cabinet for consideration. Should the council remain it's current size or increase in size this would potentially lead to the meetings</p>

		<p>being top heavy with Councillors (as they currently are) and lead the outcome of any votes down a certain direction, rather than ensuring residents have a greater voice and say in the direction of their area and the wider Borough. The same responsibilities and opportunity would be afforded for Whitworth but this would be passed through the Town Council to decide the best approach. Their voice would also increase and allow for greater reports back to the Borough Council – currently no meeting reports are viewed by the Cabinet or Council for the work of Whitworth. Another benefit of a smaller council with a smaller demand on time by more considered committees is that adding this as a requirement for Councillors, rather than a request, would add no more to the workload than currently happens.</p>
Casework	Analysis	<p>Councillors take a sporadic approach to casework. Some will take a very involved approach and work with officers to ensure resolution. Others will simply hand it across to officers and expect them to resolve it.</p> <p>Officers fully support members to resolve issues – including provided regular briefings to members on progress, changes in departments and structures.</p> <p>Technology has seen a reduction in Councillors holding surgeries and an increase in engagement through social media and instant messaging. Over the last five years casework has decreased through letters and phone calls and now mainly arrives via email. Instant messaging is the growth area – especially for Councillors who choose to promote and share their work across social media. This will move to become the primary method over the coming years as residents expect their representatives to be readily available and easily accessible.</p> <p>The Council is improving its digital accessibility over the coming years as well as supporting training of residents on how to best use these tools to resolve issues – self support will become the primary method which will support councillors and see a reduced workload – especially as more become computer literate.</p>

Other Issues

Whilst it has been referenced in the report it is worth explicitly mentioning that the future governance of the County as a whole is currently being reviewed to ensure greater devolution of powers to Lancashire. The current preferred model is a county deal without an elected major. This would see an executive populated by the Leaders of the Councils across the Greater Lancashire area. This would see more responsibility for the County but not for the Council. As part of the deal there is no plan for the Councils to see responsibilities shifted to the Lancashire wide panel.

Summary

Within this submission we have clearly explained how the current structure of the Council is making it too large and committee heavy, however the committees have little impact on the overall direction of the council and are often ineffective.

In exploring solutions and developing our proposal we have looked at the possibility of retaining the current Council size or reducing it by 3 to 33. However we feel this won't resolve the underlying issues and would still have a top heavy Council disproportionately sized to neighbouring authorities, especially understanding that the Borough is the smallest in the area.

Our proposal is to reduce the Council size to 30 (28 should Council decide to move an all out election cycle) and decrease the executive cabinet accordingly. This will allow a newly reduced cabinet to be more agile and effective. In line with this we're proposing to accordingly shake up the committee structure – adding a further scrutiny committee to support a more focused executive properly delivered for residents. There would also be an increased role for the community forums to provide advice and have their views shared with the Cabinet. This would increase the opportunity for resident engagement and allow them to properly shape the direction of the Borough and decisions taken by the executive.

The requirement on individual Councillors would remain the same as it currently is even though the areas they serve would be increased. This has been achieved by making the committees more focussed and smaller, reducing the overall number, decreasing the number and requirements on members from outside bodies and working groups, more than halving the member champions and making the roles more specific as well as focussing and reducing the Cabinet to bring it more clearly in line with the current set up. This, combined with the technological changes already highlighted, will see the workload levels maintained in-spite of larger wards.

Overall we feel this will allow a more focussed, leaner council. It will reflect the expectation and set up of the officers more closely and deliver significant improvements for Rossendale, as well as bringing representation more closely aligned to neighbouring authorities on the balance of Councillors to electorate.