

LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARIES ELECTORAL REVIEW OF BOLTON

PART 1. COUNCIL SIZE

SUBMISSION BY BOLTON LABOUR GROUP

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Bolton Labour Group welcomes the Local Government Boundary Review as an opportunity to re-look at ward boundaries, which was last done in 2003, in readiness for all-out elections in 2004. This exercise needs to take place as there has been an increase in the population in this time, and wards have become imbalanced between their varying electorates.
- 1.2 The number of councillors was established at 60 in 1980, with 3 members each representing 20 seats. This was reconfirmed at the last boundaries review in 2003. The nature of councillors run services had changed significantly in that period, with the Council doing less of some things and more of others.

2. Population of Bolton Metropolitan Borough

- 2.1 In the period since 2003 the population of the Borough has continued to rise.
- 2.2 We are basing our recommendations to the Commission on the actual population of the Borough, rather than the numbers officially registered to vote on the electoral register. It is widely accepted that in many areas, such as Bolton, electoral register populations have declined due to a number of factors, including transient populations, student populations and recent influx of migrants. All of these factors have affected Bolton, meaning that the population has risen but those on the electoral register has declined.
- 2.3 We submit that a true and accurate ratio of how many people are represented by councillors should be based upon the actual population, not the register. A councillor does not discriminate between those who are on the register and those who are not, when asked to represent them, either directly, or through public meetings, petitions or other community participation. Neither would a councillor, in the vast majority of cases, refuse to represent a person who is under the age of 18.
- 2.4 In 2001 shortly before last boundary review, the population of the borough was 261,037. This equated to 4,351 people being represented per councillor. In 2009 this rose to 273,049, or 4,551 per councillor. In 2019 it again rose to 287,550, or 4,792 per councillor. Therefore, roughly speaking, since the last review, that maintained the number of councillors at 60, the number of residents represented by each councillor has increased by approximately 440.
- 2.5 Furthermore, the future projection of the Borough population by 2029, is expected to be in the region of 291,709, which will equate to 4,862 people per councillor.
- 2.6 There continues to be a fast-upward climb in the population of the Borough. Therefore, there may be an argument to increase the number of councillors that would reflect this upward trend, however, we believe that this would be too early to consider, and would not be conducive to our financial situation.

- 2.7 Instead, we believe that the number of councillors should be maintained at the present level of 60. In 2001 an individual councillor representing 4,351 people could be considered a fair ratio. Now that this figure stands at 4,792 people, the ratio argument is considered to be weakened, but not weakened on the side of any argument to reduce the number of councillors.
- 2.8 We understand that some people have argued for a reduction of councillors in Bolton from 60 to 50 as a way of saving minimal costs from the Council budget. This would be a retrograde step in local democracy, at a time when the population is growing. A reduction to 50 would mean that instead of representing a population of 4,792, each councillor would represent a population of 5,751; an overnight increase of around 1,000 residents.
- 2.9 In addition, the future population changes are expected to follow the current trend in favour of an older population, in particular, those over 60. The over 60s have a significantly higher demand on council services, demonstrated through the ever growing pressure on adult social care budgets. Anecdotally, we would also contest that this is the population most likely to contact their councillor for help and advice and in turn are the most likely to vote in local elections.

3.Ethnicity

- 3.1 Bolton Borough is a richly diverse area with a higher than average proportion of BME communities, compared to the rest of England. These communities largely made up of South Asian Indian and Pakistani people, but also include a number of other groups such as Somali and Eastern European.
- 3.2 Often these BME groups are concentrated in particular areas of Bolton, which are usually among the most deprived, but there is clear evidence of increasing social mobility into other less deprived areas.
- 3.3 There are 10 councillors who are from BME communities, which represents just under 17% of the Council. This is marginally under the 21% of the population who describe themselves as belonging to a BME Group.
- 3.4 Therefore membership of Bolton Council is near to reflecting the diversity of the Borough population, and we therefore contend that the current number of councillors be maintained in order to ensure that this diversity in representation is not threatened in any way.

4 Council Governance

- 4.1 The Council has a Leader and Cabinet model.
- 4.2 There are huge time commitments placed upon the Leader, Deputy Leader and remainder of the Cabinet. This not only includes formal meetings, but includes an array of informal meeting and briefings with officers.
- 4.3 The Council currently has 8 political groupings. The council operates an inclusive system where decisions of the Cabinet and of individual cabinet members are done in the presence of representatives from each of the other 7 groups, who may ask

questions. This puts increased responsibilities and time commitments onto the Leaders of all of the Groups, some of which are small.

- 4.4 Scrutiny Committees exist in order to fully hold the decision makers to account. These are chaired by opposition councillors and set their own agendas. Scrutiny Committees are often quite detailed, and have the ability to set up sub committees in order to investigate a particular area of council functions.

5.0 Council functions

- 5.1 The council has lost direct control of some of its functions; housing provision being an obvious example. However, most members experiences are that losing direct control of housing has not altered the amount of housing related queries they receive. As a result, councillors find that their casework relationships with officers at RSLs to be no different in practice to their relationships with officers at the Council.
- 5.2 Another good example would be issues around crime and community safety. Councils have never been a direct provider of police forces, and yet councillors have been and still are often the first port of call from constituents suffering from crime.
- 5.3 Therefore it is not just the services that councils directly provide that lead to casework from the public, as Councillors will often act as sign posters or referrers for other services such as the Police, Health Services, Schools and colleges, and Members of Parliament.
- 5.4 In addition, a number of public bodies such as the Council, the police and housing providers have become increasingly digital in their interaction with customers, which has clearly reduced the telephone or 'front desk' service to the public. As all councillors advertise a direct telephone number to their residents, they have increasingly picked up additional casework from the digitally excluded who struggle to communicate with these bodies by use of digital platforms.
- 5.5 The council has also taken on additional responsibilities, such as public health functions. We are also part of a highly developed sub regional governance model in Greater Manchester. In both the case of the GM Combined Authority and Public Health, the increase in councillors' meetings and time commitments has been notable. Within both growth areas, there are also highly developed models of partnership and integrated working with local NHS Commissioning Groups, which again is fast developing new role for the Council that demands members time and attention.
- 5.6 Therefore there is no argument to be made that would suggest that functions and responsibilities of the Council have lessened to the extent that there should be fewer councillors. The functions and responsibilities of the Council have not lessened, rather they have simply changed.

6.0 Role of councillors

- 6.1 Councillors have a multi-faceted role. They are decision makers and scrutineers at the council, at the same time as representing the views of the constituents to the council. In this way, there is a constant 2-way dialogue maintained. In addition, councillors are community leaders, advocates, and political campaigners.

Meetings

- 6.2 There are a total number of 385 councillor positions on a wide range of bodies. This is inclusive of 162 positions on Council committees, Scrutiny's, and Area Forums; 62 positions on established panels (this does not include any ad hoc panels); 161 positions on various other, mainly outside, bodies and organisations.
- 6.3 It is accepted that some committees meet more often than others, with a particular heavy workload on scrutiny committees, cabinet, cabinet member meetings, planning committee, licensing committee and its 2 sub-committee panels.
- 6.4 There are a number of ad hoc committees, most notably Policy Development Groups (PDGs) PDGs are semi-informal meetings that take place in Bolton in order to discuss, in an all-party inclusive manner, emerging or proposed changed policy positions. These meetings are ad hoc, on an 'as and when needed' basis, but cover the 4 areas of the Council (Corporate, Place, Adults and Children, Health) and have a membership of 17. Potentially PDGs, which meet on a conservative estimate of 4 times a year, could put an additional 272 councillor appointments onto the already 385 positions.
- 6.5 Each meeting requires time commitments for advanced reading of reports that can often be lengthy, as well as commitments to the meeting itself. Members rarely miss meetings but when this happens, their absence is usually covered by a substitute, often at short notice.
- 6.6 Councillors must also commit time to training opportunities that are provided not only by the Council but often by other bodies or voluntary groups. Some council training events are obligatory.

Community Work

- 6.7 Councillors have a key role in being community leaders and advocates for various individuals, groups or causes within their wards.
- 6.8 The majority of councillors are heavily involved in community and residents' association groups, often being active members of these groups as well as the local councillor.
- 6.9 Councillors will often organise, front or advocate for local campaigns that may be single issue based, such as a controversial planning application, or more strategic, such as climate change.
- 6.10 Councillors are often directly supportive and hands on with such events as community litter picking and other voluntary work, or ensuring that they commit time to attend community events.
- 6.11 Many councillors are members of the Boards of School Governors, usually within their wards. Many councillors who are school governors also occupy senior roles, such as the Chairperson, or will lead on a particular area.

Casework

- 6.12 There is no evidence to suggest that casework has diminished over the years. On the contrary, as residents have easier and quicker access to their representatives via social media, the evidence would suggest that casework has increased.

- 6.13 There is no longer any dedicated support for councillors to assist them with casework. The Democratic Services function of the council, pre-austerity and at the time of the last boundary review, had dedicated capacity to assist councillors on a range of ad hoc and administrative issues. This is no longer possible. In addition, Bolton, unlike many other councils, has no dedicated Casework Officers, or other assistance. The only exception is that the Leader has some PA support which is shared with the Chief Executive.
- 6.14 In consequence of this, councillors act as their own secretaries and their own researchers, and have seen a considerable increase in these duties since the last review took place.
- 6.15 Casework consists of communication with residents, usually via email or social media, but often by telephone and letter or meetings. Depending on the complexity of the issue, several lines of enquiry would be opened with officers, which often involves several informal meetings.
- 6.16 Councillors also hold traditional surgeries at set locations, in order to have one to one meetings with residents, sometimes in groups. Some Councillors utilise the concept of street surgeries on particular issues in a designated street. Members will visit constituents' homes, and will 'walk the ward' to look for issues such as fly-tips etc.
- 6.17 In the modern age of changed expectations, there is great demand on councillors to respond quickly in dealing with complaints and issues, and in addition, social media means that members spend a lot more time in direct dialogue with constituents than they did just 10 years ago.

Political Roles

- 6.18 Whilst not directly being a part of the 'job description' of a councillor, it needs to be recognised that indirectly, it is.
- 6.19 The vast majority of councillors in the UK, especially in urban areas, are members of political parties, and with that comes particular roles and responsibilities, many of which are mandatory. These mandatory or 'whipped' political responsibilities can be as time consuming as any other 'council duty'.
- 6.20 Formal Group meetings that take place on a regular basis are actually recognised by Bolton Council as legitimate instruments of the Councils function, and the roles of Groups are accommodated informally through such mechanisms as briefings on items such as the budget, or one to one briefings by senior officers to the leadership of opposition groups on emerging or urgent issues.
- 6.22 Outside of the direct role within the council, councillors are mandated (in the case of the Labour Party) to attend a set number of both branch meetings and constituency meetings, and other committees it may have established. Councillors are expected to give full written reports at these meetings. Councillors also often hold officer positions within the Party they represent.
- 6.23 In addition, there are community and campaigning requirements placed on councillors, and again in the case of the Labour Party, participation in these activities are whipped.

- 6.24 Many councillors struggle to commit to these Party expectations, but failure to commit to a certain level to Party activity can often lead to sanctions against a councillor, resulting in some cases in the loss of that councillor.
- 6.25 Therefore it is important that the political status of a councillor is considered as an extremely important part of the overall function of that councillor, and should be considered in determining the number of Councillors in Bolton.

7.0 Conclusion

- 7.1 We considered recommending that the number of councillors be increased, due to the growing population. Although this would certainly decrease the workload on councillors, at the same time as increasing representation, we do not believe that this could be justified at a time of financial constraint.
- 7.2 We have considered a reduction in the number of councillors, despite the growing population, in order to assist in some small way with managing the constrained budgets. However, we have concluded that fewer councillors, whilst saving some money, would have a negative impact on the Councils role in the community, particularly at a time of increasing demand on services as a result of the increased population and recent cuts to those services.
- 7.3 Councillors provide a service to the people, and a reduction in councillors would mean members would have to prioritise incoming casework and communications with the public. A reduction would in effect represent a cut to another council service, thus reducing the amount of help that is available to residents.
- 7.4 A reduction in Councillors would mean a significant increase in workload, that could potentially deter people from seeking to stand, in particular those with full time jobs or those with caring commitments. This would make the Council much less diverse and much less representative of the communities they aim to serve.
- 7.5 It recommended that the number of councillors in Bolton remain at 60, for the following reasons.
- The population of the Borough continues to climb
 - The workload of councillors has not decreased, due to new functions replacing old functions
 - The dedicated support available to members is non existent
 - There is improved access to councillors via social media
 - Due to austerity, and the reduction of services, the demands on councillor's casework has increased
 - A reduction of councillors would require far greater levels of work for those remaining councillors, including attending all forms of council or community meetings
 - A reduction could damage the diversity of councillors representing diverse communities

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