

BOLTON ELECTORAL REVIEW

COUNCIL SIZE

SUBMISSION BY BOLTON COUNCIL LIBERAL DEMOCRAT GROUP

1. Background

- 1.1 Bolton Metropolitan Borough was established by the merger of Bolton County Borough with a number of other authorities; Blackrod Urban District Council, Farnworth Borough Council, Horwich Urban District Council, Kearsley Urban District Council, Little Lever Urban District Council, the southern part of Turton Urban District Council (south Turton) and Westhoughton Urban District Council. It took office in 1974 with the first elections in 1973. At its establishment the new Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council had 23 wards each with three Councillors, giving a total of 69 Councillors.
- 1.2 Following a boundary review implemented in 1980 the number of wards was reduced to 20, each having three Councillors. That reduced the Council size to 60 Councillors.
- 1.3 The last review of Council size and ward boundaries in 2003 (taking effect in 2004) determined that 20 wards each with three Councillors (total of 60 Councillors) was still appropriate. At that time the target for average voters per ward was 10,500 – a total of 220,000 voters.
- 1.4 The latest available electoral register (March 2020) shows a total of 203,898 voters (average 10,195 per ward). Ward sizes currently range from 9,083 voters (10.9% below the average - Bradshaw Ward), 9,096 voters (10.8% below the average - Tonge with the Haulgh Ward), 9,108 voters (10.7% below the average - Halliwell Ward) to 11,340 voters (11.2% above the average - Crompton Ward)

2. Relevant Changes

- 2.1 Since the last review, the Council has lost control of many of its education functions, both in further education and in primary and secondary education. An increasing number of schools are leaving the Council family, becoming academies. Several Free Schools have also been established. The numbers of Council LEA staff dealing with education have been dramatically reduced.

- 2.2 Many schools have also terminated contracts with the Council for school cleaning and meals, choosing to use outside contractors or to employ their own staff.
- 2.3 Council run housing has been transferred to an independent social housing provider (Bolton At Home). With it went several previous other Council functions such as adaptations for the disabled (Bolton At Home covers this function for private sector housing as well as for social housing).
- 2.4 The work of the former Property Services Division has recently been outsourced to a private company (Robertson). The number of actions requiring attention by the Council has reduced as a result, but it has not yet been operating for long enough to be quantified.
- 2.5 Bolton adopted the 'Leader and Cabinet' democratic structure in the 1990s, abandoning the former Committee structure, although the implications of this had not become fully apparent by the time of the last boundary review which was completed in 2003.
- In 2004 the Council functioned with an Executive (Cabinet) of 8 Councillors including the Leader. There was a monthly Cabinet Meeting. Additionally each Executive Member took decisions at a monthly meeting attended by a member of each opposition party. The number of items requiring a decision varied, but was frequently as high as 12.
- Now, the Council functions with 10 Cabinet Members (the maximum allowed by law). There is a monthly meeting of the Cabinet. Individual Cabinet Member's meetings are programmed monthly, but due to increased delegation to officers, many are cancelled for lack of business. It is rare for any Cabinet Member meetings to have more than two or three meaningful items requiring a decision.
- 2.6 In 2004 the Planning Committee met fortnightly, frequently considering a dozen or so applications at each meeting.
- Initially a fall in the number of applications due to the 2008/9 financial downturn and then increased delegation to officers means that the Planning Committee now meets monthly. Between August 2019 and February 2020 an average of 4.5 applications has been considered at each meeting.
- 2.7 Changes in legislation have led to an increase in the number of meetings of the Licensing and Regulation Committee (6 in 2005/6 increased to 7 plus some sub Committees in 2019/20).
- 2.8 Budget cuts have led to a reduction in the number of Area Forum meetings for each of the 18 Forums. A changed structure makes comparisons difficult, but recent

changes have reduced meetings from four a year to one a year. There has also been a reduction in the number of supporting meetings between officers and Members.

- 2.9 Scrutiny Committees have been reduced in number from five to four, although the total number of meeting has remained about the same.
- 2.10 There has been an increase in the number of meetings in connection with the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, but most of these involve Cabinet Members, not ordinary Members of the Council.
- 2.11 During the period from May 2004 to May 2020 the number of Council employees has reduced significantly due to funding cuts.
The figures for 2004/5 were not readily available for inclusion in this submission, however a more recent piece of work shows that the number of employees reduced from 6,056 in January 2010 to 3,604 in January 2020 – a reduction of 40.5%.
It is generally accepted that there had also been a reduction between 2004 and 2010, but not as dramatic as that between 2010 and 2020.
- 2.12 The Council's revenue budget for 2020/21 is set at £443.6 million.
For the financial year 2004/05 it was £310.2 million. Adjusted for inflation (RPI index used as CPI was not available for comparison), this equates to a budget of £492.8 million at 2020 figures. This shows a reduction of just under 10%. However, a far higher proportion of the budget is ring fenced to schools and has been retained at a relatively consistent amount, so the controllable budget drop has been considerably higher than that.
- 2.13 It is hard to quantify changes in levels of casework and community engagement as this will vary greatly from Councillor to Councillor and between different areas.
However, it is our feeling that casework levels have remained relatively constant during the period.
- 2.14 Feelings of local identity have always been strong in the areas of the other local authorities that merged with Bolton in 1974. There are Town Councils covering Blackrod, Horwich and Westhoughton.
More recently these feelings of individuality have led to the formation of separate local political parties in Horwich & Blackrod, Farnworth and Kearsley and Westhoughton. This has led to the election to Bolton Council of two members of the Horwich & Blackrod First party and 5 members of the Farnworth & Kearsley First Party.

3.0 **Proposal on Council Size**

- 3.1 In view of the significant changes to workload it is felt that there is a strong case for a reduction in the number of Councillors.
- 3.2 With the reduction in services to the public and even greater reductions to the workforce, there is a public perception that Councillors should be sharing the pain, and a fairly generally held belief that there should be a reduction in their numbers and cost.
We share that view, and our proposals attempt to balance changes in workload and the practicability of efficiently running a democratic entity whilst ensuring proper scrutiny of decisions.
- 3.3 We believe it is important that any new structure and Council size should also better enable the work of Councillors in their individual areas and allow a closer representation for the 'outer' areas where local identity is felt to be particularly important.
- 3.4 We believe that all wards should be approximately the same size and elect the same numbers of Councillors. However, we also believe that creating a greater number of smaller wards would allow the many distinct districts in the borough to be better represented and for there to be closer engagement with the community. Smaller wards, each represented by (say) two Councillors would also allow a more manageable casework load and strengthen a ward Councillor's links with his or her community.
- 3.5 We believe that a reduction of 10 Councillors would be sustainable by basing the Council on 25 two member wards (total of 50 Councillors). Elections could be carried out on alternate years (our preferred option) or by all-out elections every four years. This would give a further cost saving.