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Local Government Boundary Commission for England
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Dear Sirs

Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council

Consultation on Council size

I write with over 45 years experience since I was first elected as a councillor on Bolton Metropolitan Borough Council, serving for over 38 years since being first elected in 1975. I have thus experienced a range of administrations and organisational models.

At the time I was first elected Bolton Council had 69 members representing 23 wards along with 10 members representing Bolton electoral divisions on the Greater Manchester County Council. A total of 79 elected members. In essence the Greater Manchester County Council carried out many of the functions now undertaken by the current Greater Manchester Combined Authority although it must also be remembered that the Greater Manchester Combined Authority now has additional powers devolved from central government. It seems likely that the range of devolved functions and duties will increase in the near future.

Also during the period since the Bolton Metropolitan Borough was established in 1974 the population of the Borough has increased by around 10% with substantial further growth forecast under Government policy and not least the emerging Greater Manchester Spatial Framework.

Thus for an elected member of Bolton Council the range both of formal duties and ward casework and representation has increased. Modern technology may have changed working patterns but has not, in my experience, reduced either of these aspects of the role of an elected member.

The introduction of the executive model rather than committee structure may have changed the balance but in general terms the time commitment remains broadly similar and in any event it has not lessened the level of casework. Often members are represented as “community champions”. Indeed during the recent Covid 19 pandemic there has been an increased demand for members to increase their role in communicating key messages to the public. The increased use of social media has further extended this aspect of the role of an elected member.

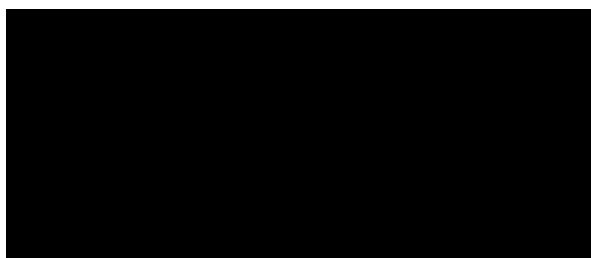
To that end I cannot see any justification whatsoever for any major reduction in the number of elected members and council size.

It is also clear that as the number of smaller parties has increased the current minority control is more likely. If there is to be separations and transparency between the executive and backbench members it is clear that any reduction in council size would make such separation more difficult to achieve. I believe this is of fundamental importance in maintaining that clear distinction within the controlling group. I believe this is important in maintaining a robust democratic process. In addition I consider that roles such the chairman of the planning committee, on which I have served and experienced throughout the 45 years since I was first elected, should be distinct from the role of a member of the cabinet. This model has been adopted by all major parties in control of Bolton over the lifetime of the Metropolitan Borough.

I also note that Bolton Council with 60 elected members is comparable bot to similar councils and to other Greater Manchester authorities. Indeed Trafford with a smaller electorate and population than Bolton has 63 elected members.

I am sure others will submit a more detailed case for the retention of a council similar in size to the current 60 members but offer this as a personal submission based on experience.

Yours faithfully



Councillor Canon Dr John Walsh OBE DUniv(hc)