

Buckinghamshire Council: consultation on council size

My background:

I became a Councillor in 2015, for one of the Districts within Buckinghamshire. My drive to become a Councillor was one of being able to serve the community where I live. Councillors should provide a robust link between residents and local government. I also became a Parish Councillor at the same time. At that point I was not in paid employment. Shortly after being elected, I took up a part time paid professional role. All easily managed, with all meetings being held in the evening. Six years on I am still a Parish Councillor and a Unitary Councillor but no longer have a paid job. That is a fortunate situation as I could not manage to support my electorate and perform the roles I am expected to do with Buckinghamshire Council with the dedication it deserves. Also most meetings are held during the day. Currently I am probably doing 30 hours of work each week on Unitary matters,

It is imperative, as councillors that we are representative of the communities we serve. Councillors should be drawn from the widest range of backgrounds, ages, knowledge, and experience to better represent the communities they serve and that the amount of time required to be an effective Councillor – to prepare for and attend meetings and attend to casework - should not be at a level that is prohibitive, particularly for those who are employed or in a caring role, or just wish for a balanced life. It should not be a full-time role.

How is the Council led, makes decisions, and operates?

- **its decision-making structure, leadership and committees**

Councils should be member led as they have been elected by residents to represent the electorate to spend their money on services they require.

- **any delegation of decisions to council officers**

It is the desire of the Council to be member-led and that will not be able to be achieved where councillors do not have the time to their roles effectively. More councillors = more time!

- **how the Council handles such matters as planning, licencing etc**

These need to remain as local services so that the officers and councillors know and understand the areas that they are responsible for. Planning is a particularly burdensome area and takes up a lot of most councillors time.

- **how the role and responsibilities of parish and town councils will evolve**

I feel that the parish and town councils will see an increase in the level of devolved services from Buckinghamshire Council. While in theory that is great to get services closer to the residents it will be done and managed by people who are largely volunteers and get no allowances.

The way the Council's work is scrutinised by councillors in order to ensure that the Council is properly run and publicly accountable.

- **What is the structure by which councillors scrutinise decisions taken by the Council's leadership?**

It is important the decisions are scrutinised. It is also important that all members regardless of political persuasion have the opportunity to scrutinise.

The Council's interaction with, and representation, on other local and regional bodies

- **which local and regional bodies do councillors represent the community on? How does this important representational role interact with Council decision-making?**

It is vitally important that the council is represented across all outside bodies that cover Buckinghamshire (or part thereof). Of course, that comes with a significant burden on the Councillors in addition to their other duties.

- **how local councillors represent their local communities and provide community leadership for residents.**

Councillors achieve by knowing their ward, the residents, and the businesses well. It is important they can deal with all manner of questions/issues and if they do not know the answers then they know how or where they need to get the information from.

- **how do councillors interact with parish and town councils, as well as residents and local community associations?**

Personally, my view that if a unitary Councillor is not already on the Parish Council(s) they should attend each meeting so they can update the Parishes/Towns on what is happening within their own areas as far as the Unitary is concerned. They should not be a stranger to Parishes/Towns! There is much collaborative working that can be done for the benefit of the residents

- **how are enquiries and issues raised by local residents handled by councillors?**

This probably varies from Councillor to Councillor, but a Councillor has a duty to engage with its residents. That includes listening to them, helping them navigate the local council as and when needed. Obviously across the County the requirements will vary depending on the ward.

- **how do councillors interact with local people? For example, face-to-face, constituency surgeries / email / social media etc**

All of the above. I am happy to put myself forward in most situations to understand issues within my ward, and I am contacted by all of the above methods and work with residents to resolve issues and concerns.

- **the role of councillors on community boards.**

Some Councillors are part of several community boards, this increases the number of meetings that they should attend and that again increases the burden on the Councillor.

Given that each community board has 3 or 4 streams within it (at least) this causes a lot of additional work. However, it is really key that this large unitary authority engages at as many levels as possible with the residents and business within the County.

Do you feel that any the suggested numbers put to us - 80, 98 or 120 – represents an appropriate council size for Buckinghamshire Council from 2025?

Buckinghamshire is a growing county, with unprecedented levels of new housing, major infrastructure projects (HS2, EastWest link etc). Its electorate is due to increase significantly over the next 10 years. It is also vitally important that we have an effective unitary council providing services needed and wanted by the electorate and the link between the council and the electorate is the councillors. Therefore, I believe that the right number for Buckinghamshire is 120, but equally it is important for each one of them be effective.

• If so, why do you feel that your preferred number is the ‘best’ choice? if possible, please refer to the aspects listed in the paragraph above in explaining your choice.

The 80 highlighted by the EY report in 2014 and the 98 in the Bucks County bid in 2016 are quite frankly out of date. Having done this role over the last 18 months the additional workload since May 2021 (where we went from 198 to 147 members) has been immense. We are also expected to know about all areas of the council from Education though to Taxi Licencing, from Adult social care to Planning matters. Add in the issues over the last 18 months of Covid and it has been a doubling of my workload.

. • If you don’t support any of these numbers and want to suggest an alternative one, or if you prefer to express a more general view about the size of the Council but without specifying a figure, please explain why you feel this way. Again, it might be helpful to refer to the aspects listed above.

The difference in costs between 98 and 120 members is relatively small and given the significant changes in the County during the last 5 years the cost is not prohibitive to the council. It have not really been proved with the other Unitary Councils whether their number of Councillors has worked for them.