



COUNCILLOR Ian Courts
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Local Government Boundary Commission
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Dear Sirs

I am writing on behalf of the Conservative Group at Solihull MBC with respect to the first phase of the ward boundary review, covering the number of councillors required and hence the number of wards.

1. Summary of position

- 1.1. The Conservative group considers that the current number of councillors and number of wards is appropriate and sufficient to lead and manage the democratic control of the Council both now and into the future.
- 1.2. A reduction in councillor numbers would lead to an unacceptable increase in workloads for councillors given the number of committee roles etc required.
- 1.3. An increase in councillors to 54 would potentially lead to democratic difficulties if an election was “drawn” with the largest party or coalition gaining just 27 seats.
- 1.4. An increase in councillor numbers to 57 would increase costs and as with all public institutions’ efficiency savings should be looked to reduce any marginal increase in workload due to a growing population. Such efficiencies are likely to be achieved by improved training and IT systems to manage ward case work better. With growing pressure on the Council’s budgets increasing administration costs, where there are alternatives, should be avoided.

2. Key factors

- 2.1. The Councillors in Blythe ward cope with a current electorate of 11,581. The smallest ward has an electorate of 8,367 with a mean average of 9550. The council’s forecast taking account of all factors is an increase in electorate of 17,615 or 1000 per current ward. This is not radical change.
- 2.2. Councillors’ workload is dictated by three factors
 - 2.2.1. The number of cabinet positions which will not be impacted by an increase in electorate

- 2.2.2. The number of positions on committees and outside bodies which will again not be impacted by an increase in electorate size. There is currently no problem in filling the roles that are required.
- 2.2.3. Ward work by councillors that is driven by several factors
- 2.2.3.1. Big projects such as significant new housing estates & HS2 construction which drive residents' interest and need for Councillor support. Meriden Ward and Blythe ward councillors have coped with that additional workload despite having larger than average electorates.
 - 2.2.3.2. Place based issues relating to things such as potholes, litter, issues with parks, trees etc. Those are not impacted by the electorate numbers
 - 2.2.3.3. Personal issues which are often, but not always related to, challenges such as deprivation, housing, special educational needs, family crises etc. Those are probably population size based and will increase as the population increases.
- 2.3. The cost of an individual ward councillor is not high. An allowance of £11,500 per annum plus, national insurance, expenses, and support costs such as IT and democratic services help, training etc. It is likely that 6 additional councillors would cost circa £80-90,000. That is not an inconsiderable sum as an annual cost, which could be spent on more things close to residents' hearts such as maintaining the public realm or potholes. Additional councillors would also require capital expenditure to accommodate them in the Council chamber, which is already fully utilised.
- 2.4. The Council has a record of improving its IT systems to improve efficiency of services. Improvements in IT have already helped with workload such as enhanced email systems, online meetings with officers which cut travel time, online attendance at scrutiny meetings becoming an accepted practice for those interested thereby reducing travel time etc. There is further scope to improve Councillor efficiency using IT to help manage casework. Training in work process management for those councillors without that previous experience, could also be provided to streamline individuals' workloads.
- 2.5. Whilst the advent of email has made it easier to contact a councillor, it has reduced phone calls. It has also made it easier to respond/contact residents on the issues they raise. The ability of residents to "send a photo" has often reduced the need for a site visit or multiple site visits, responding to issues. Quite a few councillors of all parties live outside the ward they represent, which shows how modern technology enables this.
- 2.6. Finally, the 3-person ward system can help spread the load both to cope with peaks and troughs or where one of the ward councillors has a higher workload due to for example being a cabinet member. Good teamworking at ward level helps with efficient workload management.

Yours faithfully



Ian Courts
Leader - Conservative Group