

# Canterbury

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## Comment text:

Hi Alison

Attached is the initial submission of the Canterbury Labour Group and Canterbury District Labour Party to the current review, providing our views relating to the size of Council and the numbers of members per ward.

I hope it is clear and useful to you. If you have any questions about it, please don't hesitate to contact me initially, as I am coordinating the responses on behalf of Group and Party.

Regards

Dave Wilson  
Canterbury Labour Party Local Government Committee

M: [REDACTED]

## Attached Documents:

- LGBCE Canterbury Labour initial submission 230506.pdf

# CANTERBURY DISTRICT LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE & CANTERBURY CITY COUNCIL LABOUR GROUP



## 1. Introduction

This is the initial response to the first phases of the Local Government Boundary Commissions for England (LGBCE) review of Canterbury City Council wards, on behalf of Canterbury District Labour Party, represented by the Local Government Committee and the City Council Labour Group.

It addresses the size of the Council, in terms of Councillor numbers, and the question of what the preferred number of Councillors per ward might be.

## 2. Phase One: The size of the Council

### 2.1. Current position

There are 39 Councillors at present, a number which was reduced from 50 in 2014 on the basis that the then ruling Conservative Group claimed to want to reduce the cost of running the Council.

According to LGBCE statistics<sup>1</sup>, in 2021 of the 181 District Councils within Counties (Tier 2 Districts), Canterbury is 66<sup>th</sup> smallest in terms of Councillor numbers, and has the 11<sup>th</sup> highest ratio of electors to councillors.

In 2022, Canterbury had 107,940 electors making it the 35<sup>th</sup> largest District Council in England. That equates to 2767 residents per Councillor, based on the December 2021 electoral roll.

The mean ratio of residents per Councillor for District Councils was 2078, indicating that Canterbury residents are significantly worse represented (in numerical terms) than the vast majority of citizens in English Tier 2 District Councils.

Canterbury Labour believes that this is inimical to effective representation of the residents, to the effective working of the Council, and that it places an unreasonable workload burden on Councillors.

### 2.2. Factors to consider

LGBCE uses three factors in its assessment of Councillor numbers required, based on the requirement for “effective representation”, measured by LGBCE on the basis of three criteria: decision making, scrutiny and partnerships; and Representational requirements.

However, LGBCE has not specified what it means by “effective representation” which makes setting out an argument for any specific solution quite difficult.

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<sup>1</sup> LGBCE Spreadsheet from <https://www.lgbce.org.uk/resources/electoral-data>

### 2.2.1. Decision making

The suggestions in the guidance seems to be that a Cabinet system requires fewer Councillors than a Committee system, with backbench Councillors largely confined to a limited Scrutiny function and to representing their residents as intermediaries to the Council.

However, as the largest Party in the Council elected on 4<sup>th</sup> May 2023, Labour has already tabled ideas with the Council officers which will significantly increase the engagement of backbench (non-Cabinet) Councillors in decision making, through expanded Overview committee functions and additional Working Groups.

There is also a commitment from both Labour and the Liberal Democrats to re-instate a committee based system at the earliest opportunity, which will be in 2026 – that is, before the decisions of LGBCE are implemented. We believe that these commitments support the basis for increasing Councillor numbers so as to support decision making and Scrutiny activities, as set out below.

Against that, increasing the number of Councillors will increase the total cost (broadly, at current rates, by £6,000 for each additional Councillor). We do not believe this is a material consideration which LGBCE should take into account.

### 2.2.2. Elector / Councillor ratios

Based on the following factors, the Labour Party believes that Councillor numbers should be brought into line with the average for England – that is, 2078 electors per Councillor. On LGBCE's initial basis of elector numbers in 2022, that would result in 52 Councillors forming the new body in 2027. We believe that this should be the starting point for any discussion about Councillor numbers, with any variation from it needing to be clearly set out and justified.

Having said that, we believe that using the December 2021 electoral roll as the basis for forecasting elector numbers is fundamentally flawed. We consider that the December 2019 roll should be used, since it can be demonstrated that elector numbers grew significantly prior to the December 2019 general election, and are therefore a more accurate guide. December 2021, by contrast, is a date about as remote from an election in the District as it is possible to get, resulting in the lowest possible baseline of elector numbers. Since that is avoidable, and since accuracy in the forecast is fundamental to achieving effective representation, we submit that the December 2019 electoral roll should be the basis of the calculation of future elector numbers.

If that is impossible for regulatory reasons, we contend that at the very least the discrepancy between the rolls in December 2021 and December 2019 should be used as the basis for the Council officers' forecasts.

Finally, there is, of course, massive housebuilding planned for the District which will significantly increase resident numbers in key areas of the District between the selected date used as a baseline and the implementation of the LGBCE decisions in 2027.

We want to see an open discussion of these projected increases between the Council officers and LGBCE with engagement with political representatives from all Parties on the Council.

### 2.2.3. Scrutiny and Partnerships

The Council elected in May 2023 has begun to reconfigure the Council's democratic processes and structures as part of a commitment to improved oversight and accountability. The comments which follow reflect those new arrangements, some of which are at the time of writing formally unconfirmed by Council.

**Cabinet** in a coalition will comprise 9 Councillors (including the Leader) to ensure a fair cross-Party spread of functions. Under current Councillor numbers, that means that approximately 25% of Councillors are Cabinet members. If LGBCCE proposed reducing Councillor numbers further, that would make effective independent scrutiny almost impossible.

**Overview** will be carried out by two advisory committees of around 12 backbenchers, which are politically balanced. That implies 24 Councillors occupied in Overview work, with the balance of backbenchers as potential substitutes.

**Scrutiny** would be a single stand-alone committee, chaired by a member of the main opposition Party, again with 12 Councillors.

That makes a total of 36 backbench appointments required.

In addition, **Working Groups** would be created to carry out time limited reviews. Officers have indicated that they can deal with a maximum of six of these per year. Working Groups are politically balanced and chaired by a member of the Administration party (or parties) and currently usually comprise 5 or 6 Councillors. That is another 36 posts to be filled by Councillors (although Working Groups can include Cabinet members).

In addition, there are seven **Statutory or arm's length committees** independent of Cabinet for a number of functions. Other than planning and licensing they can be drawn from the whole Council, including Cabinet, though we consider that to be less than ideal.

- Appointments – 5 councillors
- Audit - 8
- Governance - 8
- Standards - 5
- Licensing / Licensing sub. - 8
- Planning - 8
- Whitstable Harbour Board – 5

Thus the total number of committee positions outside of Cabinet to be filled will be 129, which is around 4 positions per backbench Member.

There is therefore a good case for increasing the number of Councillors to deal with this workload, in order to satisfy good governance and decision making, effective scrutiny and support effective representation.

#### **Partnerships**

The Council does not currently have many "partnership" arrangements – for example, where Councillors sit "ex-officio" on third Party Boards. We are therefore not arguing that this has an impact on Councillor numbers at the present time.

### 3. Phase Two: Warding patterns

The LGBCE will consider wards containing 1, 2 or 3 Councillors, in any combination across the District.

We believe that there is a good case for multi-member wards in the majority of cases, since that provides resilience should a Councillor be absent due to sickness or holidays, or having to stand down mid-term for some reason.

However, the effect of a smaller ratio of electors to Councillors (if that was proposed or accepted by LGBCE) is to increase the geographical size of the ward. We are concerned about the practicality of this. Current experience suggests that the 3 member wards in Gorrell and Barton may be excessively large, making Councillors remote from voters and with the geographical areas difficult for Councillors to cover or to be sufficiently familiar with.

Such large wards also result in the erasure of distinct communities (for example, central Whitstable) which are merged into relatively heterogenous wards. In Barton, as another example, there is no commonality between the communities in the Spring Lane and Querns areas and the Old Dover Road/Nackington Road areas. In addition, such large wards (especially when not focussed on a recognisable centre, as in Barton) make it almost impossible for individual Councillors to be recognised as valid community leaders, or to be familiar with every area or residents' association or development within their ward

Heron ward, the other 3 member ward in the current arrangements, may suffer less from this problem because it is entirely in a densely built up area focussed on central Herne Bay. But it is still a large ward by most standards and there is no logic to its geographical boundaries when the two adjacent wards have single member representation.

On the other hand, rural wards suffer the reverse problem. The diverse geographical spread of the villages means that two or three member wards would cover massive physical areas, again eroding the ability of Councillors to adequately represent their electors.

Taken together, this suggests that for Canterbury district:

- Three member wards have proven largely difficult to effectively represent and should not be adopted
- Two member wards should be the norm in the urban areas and larger villages
- Single member wards are the least-worst fit for the rural parts of the District

For clarity: we understand that how these arrangements pan out once the process of setting ward boundaries begins may mean that the final result does not deliver exactly the number of Councillors initially estimated as required, or the preferred ratio of electors to Councillors.