

**SUBMISSION FROM MILTON KEYNES LIBERAL DEMOCRATS  
TO THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND**

**The future size of Milton Keynes City Council**

This submission is made on behalf the Milton Keynes Liberal Democrat Local Party and the Liberal Democrat Group on Milton Keynes City Council. We oppose the Council's decision to recommend an increase from 57 to 63 seats but agree that we should seek a moderate increase due to the expected scale of growth of the city.

Milton Keynes is a dynamic, fast-growing city and will continue to be so. At the last boundary review, it was argued that the Council was about to take on significant extra responsibilities, and therefore needed a large increase of 6 councillors. It is difficult to use the same argument this time with no such expectation, especially when sections of responsibilities have been transferred elsewhere. For example, leisure facilities, community halls and schools. Similarly, the move to virtual meetings has reduced travel and made it easier to combine work with outside jobs and family commitments.

We therefore believe that an increase to **60** seats is sufficient to meet the need. We justify this on the following six grounds.

**REASONS FOR OPPOSING 63 SEATS**

**1** A study of recent LGBCE final reports and draft recommendations suggests that – while every case is considered with due regard to its particular circumstances – there is reluctance on the part of the Commission to increase the number of a Council's seats beyond what can be shown to be necessary to facilitate good governance, to exercise community leadership, and to maintain public confidence.

**2** The Council's majority case concedes on page 3 that the ratio of councillors to electors would – if based on 63 – be at the higher end of its CIPFA Nearest Neighbours benchmarking group.

The Council does have a problem of elected member commitment as demonstrated below, but this is not one that will be addressed by increasing the number of members beyond what is necessary; we suggest it will only be exasperated. Therefore, we believe 60 councillors offers some room for increase without overt expansion of the Council. For example,

- the overall average attendance of relevant members on Scrutiny committees since September 2021 (*i.e* post-pandemic) to the present day suggests a worrying but consistently high level of absences, (see below) with approximately only 25% of cases where substitutes were nominated.

<b>Category</b>	<b>21/22</b>	<b>22/23</b>	<b>23/24 (to date)</b>
<b>Apologies Given</b>	72	57	55
<b>Send Substitute</b>	26	16	14
<b>No apologies given</b>	7	2	4

\*Full Council figures are set out separately as no substitutes are possible.

- The figures for Full Council meetings are as follows,
  - 2022/23 84 apologies,
  - 2023/24 49 apologies.
- We have received evidence of concerns regarding the disappointing attendance of some Council representatives on some external bodies, where again no apologies are offered, nor substitutes provided. This suggests that members are avoiding commitments, which again is unlikely to change even with greater numbers.
- Another indicator points in a similar direction, highlighting the number of training courses and councillor briefings that have been cancelled because of lack of member take-up.

This suggests that whilst councillors are allocated to committees, with a duty to attend, they often fail to fulfil their duty and groups are not providing sufficient coverage. We do not foresee how significant increase in numbers will assist in this.

**3** On page 21 of the Council's case the conclusions of a councillor casework survey are quoted, with no reference to the Council's own data. In 2023 (January to December) whilst councillors suggest high levels of casework a total of 3,858 items of casework were submitted to Councillor Casework. Looking at who undertook this work is it highly relevant that a single councillor submitted 387 referrals to councillor casework, whilst another 2 councillors only submitted a single item each! This surely does not suggest significant levels of casework and certainly cannot easily be reconciled with the average of 30% of councillor time as being spent on casework, as reported within the survey results.

The table below sets out the collective data, showing the top and bottom 10% of councillor referrals. It is highly relevant that the top 10% (approximately 7 councillors), undertake half of all casework.

<b>Position</b>	<b>Number of cases</b>	<b>Representative Percentage</b>
Top 10% of councillors	1,940	Approximately 50% of total
Bottom 10% councillors	18	0.2%

It is telling that whilst the average number of cases submitted per member, per year, was 67, (which equates to an averages 5.6 cases per month, per member), only 17 members submitted 52 items across the year, i.e. one piece of casework per week or more. If the top and bottom 10% of member casework submissions are ignored, the average number of cases per member, per year, is 38, or 0.7 cases per week.

If, for the same period (Jan 2023 – Dec 2023), we were to split this via party the data speaks of very disproportionate numbers, with the other parties, whilst not reporting the highest in numbers of casework, cite the increase in casework as a reason for greater increase in

Council size. Based on the data provided by the Council, means we cannot not support that view.

Party	Numbers of cases	Percentage submitted
Labour	1427	36.9%
Conservative	799	20.7%
Liberal Democrat	1632	42.3%

We say again this does not validate the perception of all councillors being overworked. However, it is worth noting that in 2023 the council undertook a revision of the Environment and Waste contract, and this generated considerably more casework in the period September to October.

When you add the fact that major development, Parks Trust property, and housing association property, (all generators of casework that does not show in Council statistics), have been concentrated in Labour and Lib Dem wards over the past few years, the true figures for those wards are significantly higher than the Council figures. The picture is clear, willingness to do casework is not a cross-council issue.

**4** On page 23 of the Council's case the importance of young families and caring responsibilities is recognised as a significant deterrent to remaining a councillor. However, three other reasons, not related in any way to Council workload, are not considered but known to be relevant:

- the realisation that unless one is in the Cabinet or the Planning Committee the opportunity to contribute significantly to Council policy and practice is very limited.
- in a marginal ward the annual round of campaigning for a political party.
- the impact of personal attacks via social media.

**5** The Council's majority case admits on page 24 that the projected 10% growth correlates only to an additional 3 councillors. It then seeks to make a special case based on placemaking, community cohesion, adoption processes and infrastructure delivery.

Developers operate within a legislative framework that leaves very little scope for elected member initiative. We say that whilst a part of liaison and communication with residents is handled by the developers, and increasingly parish and town councils', there is still direct input from ward councillors on issues that are not managed by the City Council. Albeit these issues are labour intensive for some councillors, in some wards, they are less complex for others. However, this can be disproportionate, especially for those wards where development is halted, completed or been settled for some time, or where working arrangements have been well established.

**6** The Council's case also makes the point on page 25 that growth since the last boundary review in 2013/14 has been higher than was forecast and hints that this might happen again. But current evidence suggests the need to view such forecasts with caution.

There is a consensus among economic forecasters (OBR; OECD; IMF) that vibrant growth in the economy is unlikely to start before 2026. In Milton Keynes the last 60 houses on Brooklands are on hold on account of the builder having ceased trading. MK East is being re-phased due to the impact of inflation on construction costs; the same is true of the large "Food Centre" redevelopment and the very large "Saxon Court" projects.

Further with the recently announced plans allowing developers to alter office and retail units and to work on brownfield sites with more flexible planning permissions may offer more attractive opportunities than greenfield sites but delivers more community engagement and interventions from ward councillors.

#### OTHER ISSUES

7 We are content to remain on a system of election by thirds, and to retain three member wards.

END