

Local Government Boundary Commission for England
1 Windsor House
50 Victoria Street
London SW1H 0TL

By email to:- brendan.connell-french@lgbce.org.uk

January 8 2024

Dear Sirs

Colchester City Conservative Group
Submission on Council Size

Please find below a submission on the future proposed Council size of Colchester City Council for and on behalf of the Conservative Group on Colchester City Council.

The Conservative Group gave this submission considerable thought and has thoroughly debated and researched the issue of proposals to review the numbers of councillors to serve constituents in the City of Colchester.

Colchester was recently awarded City Status and with that requires longer-term strategic thinking and planning for the governance of the council along with delivery of large-scale projects and changes to public services to its residents.

The Conservative Group continue to support the need to change to 'all-out elections' (a change from the existing election cycle by thirds currently in use), to help deploy these fundamental changes to our City Council, and to provide much needed savings to the taxpayer, more so now than at any other time. Changing the electoral cycle to "all-outs" every four years was stated as something the Council should "very seriously consider" by a LGA Peer Review conducted in 2022-2023.

With growth in our community will no doubt come increases in workload, from officer time to prepare meeting documents and agendas to councillors providing support for constituent concerns within their wards. This growth, specifically in workload, can be better managed however through the ongoing changes within the Council, from a new strategic management team to the inclusion of better technologies developed specifically to support the growth and needs of public services.

Other groups within the City Council appear to want to take the 'bandage' approach to this growth, simply asking for more councillors will not aid in longer-term objectives to provide a well-oiled machine for the future of our City. The taxpayer deserves every opportunity to allow cost-cutting savings that improve services and deliver a better council for the future.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours faithfully,

Paul Dundas
Conservative Group Leader

Colchester City Council Conservative Group

Submission on Council Size to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England

1. Background

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England advised Colchester City Council in January 2023 that a review of the Council's electoral arrangements would take place because the Commission has identified the authority for review.

2. Introduction

Colchester City Council's ("the Council") Conservative Group supports the Commission's request that a review is undertaken and is pleased that this review is taking place as part of a larger Boundary Review process.

The Conservative Group is proposing to retain the number of councillors currently at 51.

The submission as to proposed council size is based on the following:

- Significant changes in the way the Council is managed and operates.
- Significant changes in the way elected councillors operate and communicate with their electorate.
- Significant financial savings for Colchester Taxpayers.
- A need for the Council to "do less" if it is to balance its budget, a point made by the Council's CEO which is widely acknowledged but often forgotten.

The Conservative Group sought consensus with the other political Groups on the Council however, the outcome was not successful with other Groups in the Council wanting to increase councillor numbers

3. Governance Arrangements

The introduction of the Local Government Act 2000 saw the Council adopt the Strong Leader and Cabinet Political Management model. The Cabinet currently consists of eight members, the Leader plus seven portfolio holders (one of which is also the Deputy Leader of the Council).

The Council's Scheme of Delegation sets out the extent to which decisions are delegated to the relevant portfolio holders and in Colchester the Leader of the Council.

This change continues to reduce workload for councillors (excluding the Strong Leader and Cabinet members).

Attendance at council meetings is generally good as the Council operates a system whereby councillors can nominate a member of their political group to attend a meeting if they are unable to attend themselves. With this substitution system and the fact that meetings are organised and publicised well in advance, meetings are quorate.

4. Local Authorities

Essex County Council (ECC) division boundaries across the City provide for only one elected representative for each of its divisions.

Colchester City constituents are represented today by 51 City councillors -v- 8 ECC councillors.

ECC councillors are able to provide the required support for constituents across the City with significantly less (43) council members.

ECC is responsible for more public services than the City council.

Principal Responsibilities	
Colchester City Council	Essex County Council
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Planning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Highways, minerals and waste planning
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Housing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Education
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Waste Collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Waste disposal
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Social Care
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Infrastructure
	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Highways maintenance
C 670 staff, 51 Councillors	C 7500 staff 75 Councillors of which [8] represent Colchester

5. The number of meetings

The joint submission discloses that the number of meetings increased from 71 in the year ending 31 March 2018 to 89 in 2023, falling back to 80 in 2024. Despite this the meetings are generally well attended and there is little evidence of a need for more Councillors to man the committees. The Conservative Group points out that two committees, on policy and sustainability, are not statutory requirements and may need to be dissolved as part of the CEO's programme to "do less".

In addition, Colchester has spawned a large number quangos and subsidiary companies¹. The majority of appointments to these bodies come from the ruling LibDem group, with only a small minority going to other parties. Any excess Councillor workload would be better dealt with by sharing the appointments among the political groups on merit rather than increasing the number of Councillors.

6. Council Website

The Council has put significant resource into its website: www.colchester.gov.uk

The Council's website is designed not only to be a tool for signposting residents to information that may assist but also providing services online saving residents the need to visit the Council's offices or approach their councillor.

¹ including One Colchester, Town Deal Board, Heart of Greenstead board, Colbea, SELEP, the BID, We are Colchester, the NEPP, the TCBGC joint committee, Colchester Borough Homes Limited and Colchester Commercial Holdings Limited.

The Council has and intends to invest further in its website to ensure more residents have access to the information and services they require at their fingertips.

7. Communications

The way Councillors communicate with their residents is continuing to evolve and change.

The Council's recent survey of councillors showed that 28% are now using social media when contacting or consulting their constituents.

The survey showed that councillors are using personal canvassing (29%) and leaflets (29%) as a source of communication with their electorate.

Workload is driven by the complexity of the council, not by the number of constituents each councillor represents.

An increase in councillors will result in more time needed to spend on internal communication.

Email traffic statistics illustrate only 5% of our emails relate to direct constituent concerns, 95% relating to other councillor responsibilities such as governance.

8. Cutting the Cost of Politics

The Council continues to work to find significant efficiency savings year on year with more to be identified in the future.

The Council is asking every department to do more with less and it sends out the wrong message to residents and council staff if councillors are not willing to do the same.

The cost of politics in our town should not be immune from the need to find efficiency savings.

Any increase in the number of councillors will have a direct cost impact on the taxpayer and impact the services The Council is able to provide to the residents of the City.

Funding from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) to develop a new software application known as 'TaskSmart' is helping council teams manage tasks coming through.

'TaskSmart' provides council teams and councillors with data and better insights to better manage, save time and costs relating to management of tasks.

9. New Technologies / Online Meetings

Since the COVID pandemic in 2020/2021 there have been significant changes in the way the Council operates with regard to Councillors.

Although committee meetings have returned to "in person" as necessitated by the Local Government Act a very significant number of meetings which used to be "in person" and necessitate Councillors travelling to central Colchester from various parts of the city are now online.

These include committee briefings and chair briefings, many training sessions including planning and licensing, Chief Executive briefings, capital programme meetings and briefings, meetings with S106 and other financial officers, budget workshops, general Councillor workshops and a whole array of ad-hoc discussions. Furthermore, Cabinet members now have many of their meetings and discussions online.

This has vastly cut down the number of times the typical Councillor is required to attend the Town Hall and vastly reduced travelling time. This means they now have more time for attending to other matters.

10. Committees and Panels

The only increase in the number of committees or panels since the last review in 2016 has been the addition of the Environment and Sustainability Panel in 2018/19. The only other change has been the abolishment of the Revolving Investment Fund (Trading Board) panel which has been replaced with the Policy Panel. The Council has been functioning with no complaints about workload on committees/panels even with the addition of one panel.

The current ratio of committee/panel places to Councillors is 1.39 with many members only needing to sit on one panel and almost none needing to sit on more than two. Most of these meet 7-8 times in a calendar year and typically last 2 hours although prior preparation work and reading is required.

Likewise, there has been no increase in working groups or other ad-hoc panels with the only working groups in the last few years being on the Town Centre Economy, 1918 100 years, Election Cycle and Waste Strategy. There has been no significant increase in the Council's representation on outside bodies. The only active working group we are aware of is Waste Strategy.

11. Committee Membership

The committee structure is currently as follows with total membership over the years:

Committee / Panel	2016	2018	2021	2024
Cabinet	8	8	6	8
Governance & Audit	6	7	9	7
Licensing	10	10	11	12
Local Plan	10	10	9	10
Planning	10	10	9	10
Scrutiny	7	7	8	7
RIF/Policy Panel	6	7	9	7
Environment & Sustainability			7	10
Total Places	57	59	68	71

The significant change is the addition of one panel. There are no plans to introduce any new committees and in fact merging the Policy Panel and Environment & Sustainability Panel is being mooted.

There have been no complaints since the current setup was put in place in 2018/19 with no evidence of Councillors being overworked.

We would argue that with the average Councillor being required to sit on 1.39 panels this is not an unreasonable burden and in no way supports the need for more Councillors being required. If panels are merged this will likely drop to 1.20.

12. Public View

There is no desire or need we can identify from residents for more Councillors. In fact, the subjective public view in Colchester seems to be that we already seem to have too many. We can find no evidence residents feel they are underrepresented or need more City Councillors to represent them.

13. Population Growth

At the last review conducted in 2014-2015 and issued as final order on July 15 2015 the Council was reduced in size from 60 to 51 Councillors. The 51 Councillors were considered appropriate by the Boundary Commission for the period the review was likely to be valid for, i.e. beyond 2020 and took account of anticipated housing and population growth.

The final report issued on March 23 2015 stated an anticipated electorate for the Borough of 144,964 by 2020. However, according to figures supplied by Colchester City Council the actual electorate in 2020 was 131,340. Even by 2023 this had still risen to only 137,096 still *below* the number expected in the previous review by 2020.

14. Tendring Colchester-Borders

The population and housing growth numbers derived from Colchester's current Local Plan make frequent reference to the Colchester Tendring Borders Garden Community. This is a joint project with Tendring District Council.

The Councils have an agreement to share 50/50 the numbers of houses built there as a contribution to the house building targets. However, the vast majority of the actual physical site is located in Tendring District.

It is not expected that 50% of the physical houses or residents will be in Colchester and become new Colchester voters. In fact, based on the information available, it is possible the land in Colchester may well be developed in a commercial way as part of the University of Essex. We would urge the Commission to be cautious in regard to any anticipated numbers affecting Colchester from this scheme and consider disregarding them.

15. Conclusion

Conservative Group sought consensus with the other political Groups on the Council however, the outcome was not successful.

The Conservative Group has spent considerable time debating and researching the issue and the submission is based on the results of the same.

The Conservative Group has long argued for the Council to move to holding elections every four years but this move has been blocked by opposition parties. The Conservative Group understands that the Local Government Boundary Commission for England has advised the Council that in this case, every ward should have three members.

The Conservative Group recommends that the future size of the Council should be 51 councillors and can find no evidence there is need for an increase.

In support of this recommendation the Conservative Group puts forward this submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England for consideration.