

Joint submission from the Leader of North Somerset Council and the five political groups comprising the partnership administration

**Council Size**

**Submission:**

**North Somerset Council**

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## How to Make a Submission

It is recommended that submissions on future governance arrangements and council size follow the guidance provided and use the format below as a template. Submissions should be treated as an opportunity to focus on the future needs of the council and not simply describe the current arrangements. **Submissions should also demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been considered in drawing up the proposal and why you have discounted them.**

The template allows respondents to enter comments directly under each heading. It is not recommended that responses be unduly long; as a guide, it is anticipated that a 15 to 20-page document using this template should suffice. Individual section length may vary depending on the issues to be explained. Where internal documents are referred to URLs should be provided, rather than the document itself. It is also recommended that a table is included that highlights the key paragraphs for the Commission's attention.

'Good' submissions, i.e. those that are considered to be most robust and persuasive, combine the following *key success components* (as set out in the guidance that accompanies this template):

- Clarity on objectives
- A straightforward and evidence-led style
- An understanding of local place and communities
- An understanding of councillors' roles and responsibilities

## About You

The respondent should use this space to provide the Commission with a little detail about who is making the submission, whether it is the full Council, Officers on behalf of the Council, a political party or group, a resident group, or an individual.

This is a joint submission from the Leader of North Somerset Council and the five political groups comprising the partnership administration, namely:

- Conservative Party and Independents Group
- Liberal Democrats and Independents Group
- Labour Group
- Green Group
- Portishead Independent Group

## Reason for Review (Request Reviews Only)

Please explain the authority's reasons for requesting this electoral review; it is useful for the Commission to have context. *NB/ If the Commission has identified the authority for review under one of its published criteria, then you are not required to answer this question.*

This submission is in response to the Commission's decision to undertake an electoral review of North Somerset given the time lapse since the previous review concluded in 2014.

## The Context for your proposal

Your submission gives you the opportunity to examine how you wish to organise and run the council for the next 15 - 20 years. **The consideration of future governance arrangements and council size should be set in the wider local and national policy context.** The Commission expects you to challenge your current arrangements and determine the most appropriate arrangements going forward. In providing context for your submission below, please demonstrate that you have considered the following issues.

- When did your Council last change/reorganise its internal governance arrangements and what impact on effectiveness did that activity have?
- To what extent has transference of strategic and/or service functions impacted on the effectiveness of service delivery and the ability of the Council to focus on its remaining functions?
- Have any governance or capacity issues been raised by any Inspectorate or similar?
- What influence will local and national policy trends likely have on the Council as an institution?
- What impact on the Council's effectiveness will your council size proposal have?

Over recent years, North Somerset Council has experienced a measured transference of certain strategic and service functions to external bodies, regional partnerships and joint arrangements. These changes have been and continue to be driven by national policy shifts. The current structure has proven to be resilient and adaptable, particularly during recent years of financial constraint, service transformation, and national and local devolution.

The Council is currently reviewing its internal governance arrangements. This work is being headed by a member working group drawing on political balance and added members with specific interests and expertise. The review aims to maximise member and public engagement.

## Local Authority Profile

**Please provide a short description of the authority and its setting, in particular the local geography, demographics and community characteristics.** This should set the scene for the Commission and give it a greater understanding of any current issues. The description should cover all of the following:

- Brief outline of area - are there any notable geographic constraints for example that may affect the review?
- Rural or urban - what are the characteristics of the authority?
- Demographic pressures - such as distinctive age profiles, migrant or transient populations, is there any large growth anticipated?
- Community characteristics – is there presence of “hidden” or otherwise complex deprivation?
- Are there any other constraints, challenges, issues or changes ahead?

Further to providing a description, the Commission will be looking for a submission that demonstrates an understanding of place and communities by putting forth arguments on council size based upon local evidence and insight. For example, how does local

geography, demographics and community characteristics impact on councillor casework, workload and community engagement?

North Somerset Council is part of the South West of England and situated on the M5 corridor. It serves a diverse area comprising both urban and rural communities. There are many distinct communities within the area which includes 35 rural parishes and four towns of Weston-super-Mare, a large seaside resort; Clevedon, a Victorian seaside town; Nailsea, a new town built around the original village; and Portishead, a seaside town with its own marina and views across the River Severn and the two Severn Bridges.

North Somerset Council plays an important role in the life of communities within the area and provides services to around 201,000 people in partnership with the private and public sectors, the voluntary sector and local people.

The council operates under a Leader and Cabinet governance model.

### Council Size

The Commission believes that councillors have three broad aspects to their role.

These are categorised as: **Strategic Leadership, Accountability (Scrutiny, Regulatory and Partnerships), and Community Leadership**. Submissions should address each of these in turn and provide supporting evidence. Prompts in the boxes below should help shape responses.

### Strategic Leadership

Respondents should provide the Commission with details as to how elected members will provide strategic leadership for the authority. Responses should also indicate how many members will be required for this role and why this is justified. **Responses should demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been explored.**

Topic		
Governance Model	Key lines of explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>What governance model will your authority operate? e.g. Committee System, Executive or other?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>The Cabinet model, for example, usually requires 6 to 10 members. How many members will you require?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>If the authority runs a Committee system, we want to understand why the number and size of the committees you propose represents the most appropriate for the authority.</i></li> <li>➤ <i>By what process does the council aim to formulate strategic and operational policies? How will members in executive, executive support and/or scrutiny positions be involved? What particular demands will this make of them?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Whichever governance model you currently operate, a simple assertion that you want to keep the current structure does not in itself, provide an explanation of why that structure best meets the needs of the council and your communities.</i></li> </ul>
	Analysis	North Somerset Council operates a Leader and Cabinet model. Councillors are actively involved in

		<p>shaping policy, overseeing service delivery, and engaging with regional and national partners. The current model requires nine (9) Cabinet member portfolio holders and forty-one (41) non-cabinet members.</p> <p>Cabinet members are responsible for their own key portfolios (listed in the next section). They work closely with senior officers, attend regular briefings, and engage with stakeholders to ensure policy delivery aligns with community needs.</p> <p>Non-Cabinet members contribute through Policy &amp; Scrutiny committees, regulatory committees, and additional more informal methods within the scrutiny parameters.</p> <p>All councillors are involved in setting the Council's corporate priorities through participation at full Council meetings, budget setting and policy development.</p>
<b>Portfolios</b>	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>How many portfolios will there be?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>What will the role of a portfolio holder be?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Will this be a full-time position?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Will decisions be delegated to portfolio holders? Or will the executive/mayor take decisions?</i></li> </ul>
	<b>Analysis</b>	<p>The nine portfolios are listed in high level terms as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leader of the Council, strategic partnerships, finance, communications, customer and digital services, procurement, legal and governance, people services</li> <li>• Deputy Leader of the Council, children's services, families and lifelong learning</li> <li>• Planning and environment</li> <li>• Homes and health</li> <li>• Highways and transport</li> <li>• Adult social services</li> <li>• Regulatory services, sport and Pride in Place programme</li> <li>• Sustainable places and service transformation</li> <li>• Culture, community services and safety</li> </ul> <p>Decisions will be largely delegated to cabinet portfolio holders in line the constitution and financial regulations. The more significant key decisions are taken by full Cabinet in accordance with this threshold.</p>
<b>Delegated Responsibilities</b>	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>What responsibilities will be delegated to officers or committees?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>How many councillors will be involved in taking major decisions?</i></li> </ul>

	Analysis	Officer delegations are as set out in the constitution and financial regulations. These are kept under regular review to ensure that the scheme remains appropriate and functional.
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**Accountability**

Give the Commission details as to how the authority and its decision makers and partners will be held to account. The Commission is interested in both the internal and external dimensions of this role. **Responses should demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been explored.**

Topic	
Internal Scrutiny	The scrutiny function of authorities has changed considerably. Some use theme or task-and-finish groups, for example, and others have a committee system. Scrutiny arrangements may also be affected by the officer support available.
Key lines of explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ How will decision makers be held to account?</li> <li>➤ How many committees will be required? And what will their functions be?</li> <li>➤ How many task and finish groups will there be? And what will their functions be? What time commitment will be involved for members? And how often will meetings take place?</li> <li>➤ How many members will be required to fulfil these positions?</li> <li>➤ Explain why you have increased, decreased, or not changed the number of scrutiny committees in the authority.</li> <li>➤ Explain the reasoning behind the number of members per committee in terms of adding value.</li> </ul>
Analysis	<p>The council maintains a robust scrutiny function that holds cabinet decisions to account, ensuring they are transparent, evidence-based and responsive to community needs. In more general terms, this includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Policy &amp; Scrutiny Committees – that examine cabinet decisions, policy development, and service performance</li> <li>• Audit and Governance committees and working groups - that oversee financial integrity, risk management, and ethical and governance standards</li> <li>• Regulatory Committees – such as Planning and Licensing, which ensure compliance with statutory duties and local priorities</li> </ul> <p>Councillors outside the cabinet play a vital role in holding decision makers to account. The current council size allows for effective distribution of these responsibilities, ensuring that scrutiny and challenge is both rigorous and representative.</p>

	<p>The current model requires five Policy &amp; Scrutiny committees:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adult services and housing</li> <li>• Children and young people’s services</li> <li>• Corporate, assets, transport and environmental services</li> <li>• Health</li> <li>• Placemaking, economy and sustainable communities</li> </ul> <p>Each committee meets formally three times per year, but its work plan is informed and supported by a range of on-going ‘informal’ activity including task &amp; finish working groups, inquiry days, steering groups for ongoing monitoring and policy development, and briefings. These are used flexibly to best support the priority work areas for each committee.</p> <p>The membership size for each scrutiny committee was reviewed during 2024 resulting in a reduction in numbers from twelve (12) to ten (10) to support more effective governance [note – other than for the Children’s scrutiny committee].</p>				
<p><b>Statutory Function</b></p>	<p>This includes planning, licencing and any other regulatory responsibilities. Consider under each of the headings the extent to which decisions will be delegated to officers. How many members will be required to fulfil the statutory requirements of the council?</p>				
<p><b>Planning</b></p>	<table border="1"> <tr> <td data-bbox="355 1099 542 1467"> <p>Key lines of explanation</p> </td> <td data-bbox="542 1099 1460 1467"> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>What proportion of planning applications will be determined by members?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Has this changed in the last few years? And are further changes anticipated?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Will there be area planning committees? Or a single council-wide committee?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Will executive members serve on the planning committees?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>What will be the time commitment to the planning committee for members?</i></li> </ul> </td> </tr> <tr> <td data-bbox="355 1467 542 2020"> <p>Analysis</p> </td> <td data-bbox="542 1467 1460 2020"> <p>North Somerset Council committee arrangements are well controlled resulting in only approximately 1% of applications are determined by committee (October 2024 to October 2025). This is an increase of approximately 0.2% on the previous 3-year averages.</p> <p>It is possible that this may change as Government is undergoing planning reform where national committee arrangements may supersede local arrangements, but the detail for this is not yet known.</p> <p>There has been a single council-wide Planning &amp; Regulatory committee since July 2014, with no specific plans to return to area planning committees. The committee comprises both Cabinet and non-Cabinet members.</p> </td> </tr> </table>	<p>Key lines of explanation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>What proportion of planning applications will be determined by members?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Has this changed in the last few years? And are further changes anticipated?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Will there be area planning committees? Or a single council-wide committee?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Will executive members serve on the planning committees?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>What will be the time commitment to the planning committee for members?</i></li> </ul>	<p>Analysis</p>	<p>North Somerset Council committee arrangements are well controlled resulting in only approximately 1% of applications are determined by committee (October 2024 to October 2025). This is an increase of approximately 0.2% on the previous 3-year averages.</p> <p>It is possible that this may change as Government is undergoing planning reform where national committee arrangements may supersede local arrangements, but the detail for this is not yet known.</p> <p>There has been a single council-wide Planning &amp; Regulatory committee since July 2014, with no specific plans to return to area planning committees. The committee comprises both Cabinet and non-Cabinet members.</p>
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<p>Analysis</p>	<p>North Somerset Council committee arrangements are well controlled resulting in only approximately 1% of applications are determined by committee (October 2024 to October 2025). This is an increase of approximately 0.2% on the previous 3-year averages.</p> <p>It is possible that this may change as Government is undergoing planning reform where national committee arrangements may supersede local arrangements, but the detail for this is not yet known.</p> <p>There has been a single council-wide Planning &amp; Regulatory committee since July 2014, with no specific plans to return to area planning committees. The committee comprises both Cabinet and non-Cabinet members.</p>				

		<p>Member time commitment to the planning committee fluctuates depending on how many applications are being decided and how directly involved the Member is to the application (in their Ward for example).</p> <p>Members are required to read all material relating to a planning application before making decisions. They may also undertake unaccompanied site visits. The actual meetings are approximately 2-3 hours per month. The Chair and Vice Chair additionally attend 2 x 0.5 hour meetings per month directly related to the committee.</p> <p>On the assumption that Members visit the site, read all the relevant material, and attend committee would suggest the time commitment would be approximately 6-10 hours per month.</p>
<b>Licensing</b>	Key lines of explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>How many licencing panels will the council have in the average year?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>And what will be the time commitment for members?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Will there be standing licencing panels, or will they be ad-hoc?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Will there be core members and regular attendees, or will different members serve on them?</i></li> </ul>
	Analysis	<p>Two meetings of the Licensing Committees are held each year.</p> <p>Licensing sub-committee meetings are scheduled monthly to determine applications and reviews but are only convened if there are matters to determine.</p> <p>The Licensing Committee consists of core members who have received training to ensure informed decision making</p>
<b>Other Regulatory Bodies</b>	Key lines of explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>What will they be, and how many members will they require?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Explain the number and membership of your Regulatory Committees with respect to greater delegation to officers.</i></li> </ul>
	Analysis	<p>Other regulatory bodies include the Audit Committee, and Public Rights of Way</p>
<b>External Partnerships</b>		<p>Service delivery has changed for councils over time, and many authorities, including North Somerset, have an increasing range of delivery partners to work with and hold to account.</p>
Key lines of explanation		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>Will council members serve on decision-making partnerships, sub-regional, regional or national bodies? In doing so, are they able to take decisions/make commitments on behalf of the council?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>How many councillors will be involved in this activity? And what is their expected workload? What proportion of this work is undertaken by portfolio holders?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>What other external bodies will members be involved in? And what is the anticipated workload?</i></li> </ul>

Analysis	<p>Councillors also represent the Council on a wide range of external bodies including, but not limited to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• West of England Combined Authority and other regional partnerships including the Western Gateway sub-national Transport Board</li> <li>• Health and wellbeing board</li> <li>• Community safety partnerships and voluntary sector forums</li> </ul> <p>This external engagement enhances democratic accountability and ensures that local interests are reflected in wider strategic decisions.</p>
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### Community Leadership

The Commission understands that there is no single approach to community leadership and that members represent, and provide leadership to, their communities in different ways. The Commission wants to know how members are required to provide effective community leadership and what support the council offers them in this role. For example, does the authority have a defined role and performance system for its elected members? And what support networks are available within the council to help members in their duties? The Commission also wants to see a consideration of **how the use of technology and social media by the council as a whole, and by councillors individually, will affect casework, community engagement and local democratic representation. Responses should demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been explored.**

Topic		Description
<b>Community Leadership</b>	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>In general terms how do councillors carry out their representational role with electors?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Does the council have area committees and what are their powers?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>How do councillors seek to engage with their constituents? Do they hold surgeries, send newsletters, hold public meetings or maintain blogs?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Are there any mechanisms in place that help councillors interact with young people, those not on the electoral register, and/or other minority groups and their representative bodies?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Are councillors expected to attend community meetings, such as parish or resident's association meetings? If so, what is their level of involvement and what roles do they play?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Explain your approach to the Area Governance structure. Is your Area Governance a decision-making forum or an advisory board? What is their relationship with locally elected members and Community bodies such as Town and Parish Councils? Looking forward how could they be improved to enhance decision-making?</i></li> </ul>

	Analysis	<p>Each councillor serves as a direct link between the council and their ward, providing leadership, advocacy and support. Their responsibilities include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Responding to casework and local ward concerns</li> <li>• Facilitating community meetings and consultations</li> <li>• Championing local initiatives and community projects</li> <li>• Many councillors also hold regular ward surgeries and distribute email and printed newsletters.</li> </ul> <p>The current council size ensures that each ward has adequate representation, enabling councillors to maintain strong relationships with residents and community groups.</p>
Casework	Key lines of explanation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>How do councillors deal with their casework? Do they pass it on to council officers? Or do they take a more in-depth approach to resolving issues?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>What support do members receive?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>How has technology influenced the way in which councillors work? And interact with their electorate?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>In what ways does the council promote service users' engagement/dispute resolution with service providers and managers rather than through councillors?</i></li> </ul>
	Analysis	<p>Many councillors use Facebook and other social media to communicate with residents and provide casework assistance. Social media is widely used by individuals and the council corporately to distribute information and raise awareness campaigns. For example, the recycling and waste team, and highways team also run their own Facebook pages. The council also produces a widely distributed email newsletter – e-life.</p> <p>Councillors manage their own casework with support from the council customer services team. The council does not employ any research or political assistants and members do not receive direct administrative support. The majority of casework is received via email, with a smaller proportion through telephone and face to face surgeries or “on the street” enquiries. Members are provided with basic laptops to access emails and the council intranet infrastructure. If casework escalates into threat and nuisance, legal advice and support is available via the council.</p>

### Other Issues

Respondent may use this space to bring any other issues of relevance to the attention of the Commission.

No other issues

## Summary

In following this template respondents should have been able to provide the Commission with a robust and well-evidenced case for their proposed council size; one which gives a clear explanation as to the governance arrangements and number of councillors required to represent the authority in the future.

Use this space to summarise the proposals and indicate other options considered. Explain why these alternatives were not appropriate in terms of their ability to deliver effective Strategic Leadership, Accountability (Scrutiny, Regulation and Partnerships), and Community Leadership.

The council has reviewed its governance arrangements and councillor workload in light of anticipated demographic and policy changes. After careful consideration, the council proposes to retain its current number of councillors, that number being fifty (50).

The current council size has proven effective in delivering strategic leadership:

- The Cabinet comprises nine members, each with manageable portfolios that reflect the scale and complexity of the authority's functions
- The council has successfully implemented, and continues to implement, major initiatives including regeneration projects such as Birnbeck Pier restoration, digital and service transformation, and climate emergency action plans – a strong demonstration of capacity to lead strategically
- Councillors are supported by a professional officer team, and increasingly also the use of digital tools that enhance their ability to engage with their communities and make informed decisions.

The rationale for this decision is based on:

- Continuity and stability – the current size supports effective governance without overburdening individual members
- Strategic coverage – each portfolio area is adequately resourced, allowing for focused leadership and oversight
- Community representation – Councillors maintain strong links with their wards, enabling them to bring local insights into strategic discussion.

Alternative council sizes were considered but discounted due to the risk of reduced strategic capacity, diminished scrutiny and weakened community engagement. The current size strikes an appropriate balance between efficiency and representation.