



Cannock Chase District Council Labour Group

Electoral review of Cannock Chase

Submission to the preliminary council size consultation

The group of nine Labour councillors on Cannock Chase District Council wishes to make a submission to the first stage of the electoral review of Cannock Chase, that being a preliminary consultation on the size of the council.

We wish to submit our view that the ideal number of councillors for Cannock Chase District Council going forward is **36**. We have set out our full reasoning behind this opinion below but in short, we believe a reduction of five compared with the current size of our council would recognise the changes to the role of a councillor since our last review in 2000 whilst also recognising the need for our district, with its pockets of deprivation, to be well served by councillors.

It is clear that the Cannock Chase District suffers from greater levels of deprivation and poorer health outcomes than many of our neighbouring council areas. This is particularly true for many of the wards represented by members of our group, such as Cannock East, Cannock North, Cannock South and Hednesford North. This deprivation has a clear knock-on effect on demand for council services, and therefore the caseload of councillors. For this reason, we believe that a drastic reduction in the number of councillors would have a negative effect on our deprived communities without providing any tangible benefits for the district at large.

The Commission should also be aware of the fact that there has been substantial housebuilding in our district in recent years and there will be a further boost to our population in the coming decades. As demonstrated by the electorate figures, the last six years has seen a large number of new houses constructed, particularly in the Hednesford Green Heath and Norton Canes wards. In the coming years, the redevelopment of the site of the former Rugeley Power Station will see around 1000 homes built in the Brereton and Ravenhill ward, in addition to further homes, most likely in the Hednesford, Heath Hayes and Norton Canes areas. Again, a substantial reduction in the number of councillors could soon leave some councillors representing very populous areas, whereas if numbers were kept at a reasonable level, the housing growth would be manageable from a casework perspective.

The advent of social media, and of other forms of technology used by councillors today, is often cited as a reason for council sizes to be reduced. It is certainly true that emails have made interactions between councillors, residents and officers far quicker and simpler than letters and phone calls alone. It is also beyond doubt that the use of technology by councillors and officers has increased substantially since the last electoral review of Cannock Chase in 2000. However, we would like to raise the other side of these

technological developments which make councillors' roles more challenging. Increased usage of social media means that councillors are effectively contactable 24 hours a day. Whilst this has technically always been the case, the scrutiny of councillors has become far greater through social media and most residents' expectation is that councillors will respond to public queries at almost any hour of the day. This means, for example, that councillors could be kept just as busy and receive just as many queries when they are on holiday as when they are not. Many councillors appreciate this ability to be in close and widespread contact with residents online, but it does underline the need for councillor numbers to be considered carefully so as not to overload members.

From our perspective, the typical amount of casework being dealt with by a councillor in our district at any given time has either remained consistent or increased since the last review in 2000. Whilst some council services have been outsourced, councillors still field queries relating to these services. Many queries from residents relate to local authority housing which in the case of Cannock Chase, remains under council ownership and control. Additionally, the expectations of councillors' ability to assist with matters not within the remit of Cannock Chase District Council have increased, leading to additional pressures on councillors. Members of our group have commented that the frequency and extent of contact between councillors on our council and members of the public is noticeably greater than at other local authorities they have worked with in a professional capacity.

It is also important to point out that councillors on our authority handle their own casework: we are a direct point of contact for residents, we identify the correct officer(s) to raise a query with, we chase up responses where necessary and we report back to residents. In many authorities, particularly larger unitaries, councillors have access to teams of officers who assist with casework from start to finish. They may also have access to digital reporting systems, accessible to members and officers alike, which keep a record of cases raised. Councillors on our authority do not have access to anything like this and we are unlikely to for the foreseeable future due to financial constraints. Given that this has an implication for our workload, we believe that this should be taken into account when the size of the council is being considered.

A key objective of our group, and we believe the wider council, is to attract a greater number of younger councillors. As the vast majority of younger councillors work full time in addition to their council role, modernising the council is an ongoing priority. Recent changes made have included moving the start time of the vast majority of meetings from 4pm to 6pm and making greater use of virtual meetings where possible. If the number of councillors was substantially cut as part of this review, efforts to diversify the council might be undermined as increased caseloads could put off people in full time employment from standing for election.

When considering our view on the council size for our authority going forward, we considered other reviews of district / borough level councils conducted by the Commission in our region in recent years. We note that on the most recent figures

available, our proposal of 36 councillors would leave us with 2075 electors per member. This would represent a very similar figure to Malvern Hills, Newcastle-under-Lyme and the neighbouring authority of South Staffordshire after their reviews were concluded. 2075 electors per councillor would also be far higher than in neighbouring Lichfield following their last review. As previously stated, this figure per councillor would quickly rise due to ongoing housebuilding in the area.

The final matter we considered is our preference on whether the council should retain the system of electing by thirds or to change to four-yearly all-out elections. We believe that sticking to electing by thirds is best for our district as it enables our residents to have their say on the direction of the council on a regular basis and therefore gives councillors a powerful incentive to keep in regular contact with residents. We were informed by the Commission that should we wish to still elect by thirds, the council size should be divisible by three and we have borne this in mind.

Overall, we feel that a council size of 36 would recognise the changing role of councillors and provide value for money for residents whilst also ensuring that the members of the council are able to meet the needs of our district. We look forward to continuing to contribute to this electoral review as it progresses.

Yours faithfully,

The Cannock Chase District Council Labour Group:

Councillor George Adamson
Councillor Tony Johnson
Councillor Muriel Davis
Councillor Sheila Cartwright
Councillor John Preece
Councillor Paul Witton
Councillor Frank Allen
Councillor John Kraujalis
Councillor Josh Newbury