

**Holt, Nicole**

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**From:** Councillor Ron Beadle [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** 16 February 2023 09:23  
**To:** reviews  
**Subject:** Response to Boundary Commission re Council Size Gateshead MBC  
**Attachments:** Boundaries Paper Final Draft.docx  
  
**Categories:** Submissions

Dear Boundary Commission England,

Please find attached the response to consultation on Council size at Gateshead MBC on behalf of the opposition Liberal Democrat Group. I understand this is required by tomorrow.

I should be grateful if you could confirm receipt.

Yours faithfully,

Ron  
Cllr. Ron Beadle, Leader of the Opposition, Gateshead MBC

Sent from [Outlook for iOS](#)

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**From:** Ron Beadle [REDACTED]  
**Sent:** Wednesday, February 15, 2023 10:30:27 PM  
**To:** Councillor Ron Beadle [REDACTED]  
**Subject:** Response to Boundary Commission

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To: Boundary Commission England

From: Gateshead Liberal Democrat Group

Date: 17 February 2023

## **Electoral Review of Gateshead Council, Part One (Council Size)**

### 1.0 Introduction

1.1 Gateshead Council agreed its submission at a Full Council meeting on January 26<sup>th</sup>. The Liberal Democrat Opposition is unable to support its recommendation and, in this memorandum, argues for a reduction in the number of Councillors. We respond below in respect of the three broad areas invited, namely governance, scrutiny and the representational role of councillors.

1.2 We have little dispute with the descriptions of current arrangements in the Council's submission and therefore will not repeat these facts here. Instead, we will propose alternatives that, in our view, better serve the future of the Borough.

### 2.0 Governance and decision-making

2.1 The Council's Constitutional arrangements are in a settled state; there is no public appetite for a local Mayoral system or a return to the previous Committee structure.

2.1 However, Cabinet Portfolios do not align with Group Directorates, and this undermines the line of sight between Group Directors and portfolio holders. Nor is there a direct line of accountability from portfolio holders to ordinary members. Portfolio holders have not reported to Full Council for a number of years (as Council Agendas can verify). Consequently, there is no regular system through which portfolio holders are made accountable to backbenchers and thereby to electors. Were portfolio holders aligned to Group Directorates, the Cabinet would reduce to nine (seven portfolio holders plus Leader and Deputy) and this, alongside changes proposed below, would enable direct accountability from Group Directors through portfolio holders to ordinary members and hence, to their electors. The reduction in the size of the Cabinet would also align with the reduction in council size proposed here.

2.2. There is no logical connection between the form of governance and the size of the authority beyond a lower limit that allows for the Leader and Cabinet to be accountable to other councillors. Gateshead is the fifth smallest metropolitan authority by population size in England but elects more councillors than 21 of England's 36 Metropolitan Authorities. Were Council size closer to the councillor – resident ratio of most other metropolitan authorities (see 4.3 below) a Cabinet of 9 members and 42 other councillors would operate similarly to other smaller metropolitan authorities such as Solihull, Bury, Knowsley, St Helens or Calderdale.

### 3.0 Scrutiny functions

3.1 Scrutiny arrangements in Gateshead have three problematic characteristics:

(1) Overview and Scrutiny Committees (hereafter OSCs) are large and unwieldy, taking up too much Councillor time and militating against specialisation.

(2) Most OSCs do not include independent members capable of providing knowledgeable critique.

(3) OSCs do not reflect the Council's organisation structure and thereby miss an opportunity to provide a forum in which Group Directors and portfolio holders would be directly accountable to members.

We will deal with each of these flaws and their relationship to Council Size seriatim.

3.2. The Council has 4 Overview and Scrutiny Committees on which there are places for 72 councillors (18 per OSC). For the past two years the ruling Labour Group has failed to complete its nominations to these committees at Annual Council; they are comfortable with OSCs operating with fewer members. For example, at the start of the 2022-23 municipal year, the Labour group left vacancies on both the Families and the Care, Health and Wellbeing OSCs. This should not be surprising as the numbers on the Council's OSCs significantly exceed those of Parliamentary Select Committees (e.g., the Public Accounts Committee (15 members) and the Home Affairs Committee (11 members)). We see no reason why scrutiny requires far greater numbers (both in proportional and absolute terms) at council level than it does at parliamentary level; by doing so the Council's own structures increase members' workloads unnecessarily. Academic research shows that ideal group size for working teams to be below ten (in Belbin's popular model it lies between 4 and 6). Reducing the size of OSCs with most members serving on one would increase specialisation, enabling more robust and informed governance, especially if aligned with Group Directorates and Cabinet portfolios.

3.3 Three of the four OSCs do not benefit from the presence of independent members, enabling a different perspective to inform elected members. As we know from the Audit and Standards Committee, the Health and Well-being Board and others, the presence of independent members offers ways for senior professionals to make contributions to the local community. Their inclusion on OSCs would provide elected members with independent sources of knowledgeable advice, better enabling them to hold council officers and portfolio holders to account. OSCs comprising 7 councillors (including Chair and Portfolio Holder) and 2 independent specialists would enable far more rigorous accountability than currently pertains. This would also obviate the need for Vice-Chairs and thereby reduce costs.

3.4 Were the Council's OSCs to be built around its seven Group Directorates, then there would be a clear line of sight from delivery structures to accountability arrangements. Combined with smaller more focussed Committees including independent members with appropriate professional experience, this would enable far higher standards of scrutiny going forward, improving efficiency and effectiveness, making better use of councillors' time and reducing the burdens on them. The total number of member places on our proposed OSC's would fall from 72 to 49 (7x7) and this would align with a reduced Council size.

3.5 A number of other committees (e.g. Special Appointments' with 15 members) could operate more effectively with fewer members and reviews of committee size could be undertaken following a decision to reduce Council size. One exception to this is the Planning and Development Committee where the presence of one member per ward has an obvious justification. Nevertheless, the size of this Committee would naturally reduce with a reduction in the number of wards that we are proposing.

#### 4.0 Representational Role of Councillors

4.1 As set out in the Council's submission, Gateshead Council's resources and functions have reduced since the previous Boundary Review. We no longer have direct control over education, leisure services and local environmental services have contracted markedly, as has the capital budget and staffing has reduced from over 11,000 to around 8,000. At a time when every other area of Council resource has been cut, we find it difficult to justify to residents that the number of councillors in Gateshead should remain as it is. This is rendered harder still when we compare Gateshead to other metropolitan authorities.

4.2 The reduction in the size of the electorate from 151,535 in 2001 to 141,945 in 2021 as noted in the Council's submission, is reflected in the wider fall in Gateshead's population from 200,200 in the 2011 census to 196,100 in 2021, the largest rate of decline (2.1%) in Tyne and Wear. Whilst new housing developments exceed proposed demolitions, overall population movement cannot be anticipated with any certainty. However, even if the Council's anticipated increase in the electorate of 9,127 is realised by 2029 and all other authority populations remain unchanged, Gateshead would overtake just one other metropolitan authority (Calderdale) to be the sixth least populated in England.

4.3 The Council's submission describes the number of councillors as 'objectively generous' and the ratio of members to residents as 'somewhat smaller' than elsewhere. Both are understatements. The table below (based on the 2021 census) provides a comparison by population against every other English metropolitan authority. We have used this measure because demands on the authority, and on councillors, reflect their local populations as a whole and not only those registered to vote. Gateshead has the second lowest councillor to resident ratio of any comparable authority, having fewer than half the number of residents per member than seven other metropolitan authorities. The Council's submission makes no mention of the significantly lower caseload that individual Gateshead Councillors therefore encounter than those elsewhere.

4.4 The case made by the Council to retain its current size relies heavily on self-reports of the amount of work that Councillors do. However, no argument or evidence is provided to suggest that these demands are higher than those on councillors in comparable authorities. To argue that Gateshead should retain 66 councillors would require the identification of specific factors that explain a higher demand on members here than elsewhere. No such arguments or evidence are provided. Sadly, deprivation, cuts in spending, the cost-of-living crisis and other pressures indicated in the Council's submission are not unique to Gateshead but characterise metropolitan authorities as a whole. The argument that reducing the number of councillors would deter residents from standing for election would require evidence from other authorities, but none is provided. In short, existing member workloads here do not justify a lower resident to member ratio than elsewhere.

4.5 The Council's submission argues that additional devolved powers to the region will create further workload for members. This may be the case for a small number of members working on regional scrutiny, advice, audit and for the Leader and Deputy. However, it is worth noting that councillors in a number of other metropolitan authorities including Manchester and Birmingham have operated within the context of devolved regional authorities for a number of years. The Council's argument that this will increase the workload on members here does not thereby justify a lower ratio of residents to members than elsewhere.

4.6 There is no risk to diversity from reducing the diversity of the Council. When considering councils with similar population size but smaller numbers of members (45 to 51), Gateshead is significantly

less diverse than Solihull, St Helens and Bury, marginally less diverse than Calderdale and similar to Knowsley. The size of the Council is evidently not a driver of the diversity of its membership.

4.7 Were Gateshead to be at the mean of metropolitan authority ratios (4,860 residents per councillor), Council size would reduce to 40 members. Were it to be at the mean of the 5 Tyne and Wear Authority ratios (3,339 residents per councillor), it would have 58 members. The only reasonable conclusion and one that would improve the return on residents' investment in members, would be a reduction in Council size.

**Table 1: Councillors per resident (2021 Census) in English Metropolitan District Authorities**

<b>Council</b>	<b>Councillors</b>	<b>Residents</b>	<b>Ratio (rounded to 1)</b>
Barnsley	63	244,600	3,883
Birmingham	101	1,144,900	11,039
Bolton	60	296,000	4,933
Bradford	90	546,400	6,071
Bury	51	193,800	3,800
Calderdale	51	206,600	4,051
Coventry	54	345,300	6,394
Doncaster*	40	308,100	7,702
Dudley	72	320,000	4,444
Gateshead	66	196,100	2,971
Kirklees	69	433,300	6,280
Knowsley	45	154,500	3,433
Leeds	99	812,000	8,202
Liverpool	90	486,100	5,401
Manchester	96	552,000	5,750
North Tyneside	60	209,000	3,483
Newcastle	78	300,200	3,849
Oldham	60	242,100	4,035
Rochdale	60	223,800	3,730
Rotherham	59	265,800	4,505
South Tyneside	54	147,800	2,737
Salford	60	269,900	4,498
Sandwell	72	341,900	4,749
Sefton	66	279,200	4,230
Sheffield	84	556,500	6,625
Solihull	51	216,200	4,239
St Helens	48	183,200	3,817
Stockport	63	294,800	4,679
Sunderland	75	274,200	3,656
Tameside	57	231,100	4,054
Trafford	63	235,100	3,732
Wakefield	63	353,300	5,608
Walsall	60	284,100	4,735
Wigan	75	329,300	4,390
Wirral	66	320,200	4,851
Wolverhampton	60	263,700	4,395

- Excludes elected Mayor