

Telford & Wrekin Council Local Government Boundary Review 2021

Council Size Submission

The submission by Telford and Wrekin Council to increase the size of the Council from 54 Councillors to 56 in our opinion is not supported by the evidence available on the Council's website. There are several inaccuracies in the document which do not bear scrutiny. We have only used information from the public sites on Telford and Wrekin's website and have been surprised and disappointed at the inaccuracy of some information that has been supplied. We request that The Commission verifies the accuracy of the information supplied by Telford and Wrekin Council to justify such an increase. Total population increases can be different to elector increases.

The current average number of electors per Councillor, according to the Council, is 2,467 which is below the mean for comparative authorities using the CIPFA data included in the LGBCE briefing pack. The projected increase after 5 years in electors per councillor (according to The Boundary Committee members' briefing) is projected to be 2,629 (+6.6%) which equates to an increase of 162 electors per Councillor if the membership of 54 is retained. This increase will still be approximately 10% below the current median for comparative authorities, which strongly weakens the argument to increase the size of the Council. An increase of less than 162 electors over a 5 year period is hardly excessive and is compensated by the increased use of modern methods of communication and working which have become embedded during the COVID pandemic. We accept that the growth in population is an estimate; however there is ample tolerance to ensure that Telford and Wrekin is unlikely to exceed the comparative average in the next 5-10 years.

Councillor workload should rightly be considered as part of the process; however it is clear that a relatively small number of Councillors are covering Council business. Smarter working, for example opposition members chairing scrutiny meetings, would be more democratic and make the Council more accountable to electors. Yet an analysis of the meetings (excluding 20/21 due to the pandemic) held over the last 4 years makes interesting reading:

Cabinet has only met on average 10 times a year since 2017. The Planning Committee has seen a reduction in the number of planning meetings a year of over 40% in the last 5 years with an average of 3-4 applications a meeting; less than half the number at the last Boundary Review. The Licensing Committee has only met twice a year on average in the last 3 years and it is the same for the Standards Committee.

Over the last four years the total number of committee meetings held (not scheduled as many had been cancelled surprisingly before the pandemic!) were;

76 in 2016/17 75 in 2017/18 59 in 2018/19 51 in 2019/20

Total scrutiny meetings were as follows:

23 in 2016/17 22 in 2017/18 18 in 2018/19 13 in 2019/20

Analysis of actual meetings held as opposed to scheduled meetings indicates that the Councillor workload has reduced over the last few years, negating the need to increase Councillor numbers despite the projected increase in population and by definition electors.

The increase in remote working due to the pandemic and improved connectivity enables Council work to be conducted much more efficiently. Two thirds of the current Councillors are not in paid employment. As one of the few Councillors that works full time as well as being a Borough and Parish Councillor, the author is well aware that time management is key to getting the job done. Ward work does vary dependent upon demographics. However the alteration of ward boundaries to better reflect communities and even out representation should mitigate the pressure on individual Councillors. The Co-operative Council model has been in operation for several years and is ideally suited to the modern way of working with ward issues being flagged directly to the correct department or officer either by ward members or residents themselves via the Telford and Wrekin Council smartphone app. As a non-cabinet member for over 10 years I do not accept that Council business takes an average of 20-25 hours a week.

At first sight it may seem logical that an increase in population should require an increase in Council size. However on analysis there is no requirement to

increase the size of Telford and Wrekin Council. The current warding arrangement results in a large disparity regarding representation with Brookside 14% below the average and Horsehay and Lightmoor 18% above the average. These issues can be addressed by the ward boundary changes that follow the setting of the Council size. As we have seen, the workload of Councillors has reduced over the last few years and calls for an increase are more likely to be political rather than based on the evidence.

Cllr. Nigel Dugmore

Conservative Group Leader