

**Submission to the LGBCE**

**Newcastle City Council Electoral Review Stage 1: December 2023**

**1 Overview**

- 1.1 Newcastle has experienced an appreciable increase in population in recent years, which has been ahead of the prevailing national trend. We contend that this should not automatically require more councillors, provided that the principle of electoral equality is maintained.
- 1.2 We consider that there is no appreciable demand for significant change from the council's existing constitutional arrangements: electors in the city have previously clearly rejected the option of an elected mayor in a referendum (2012; 62% No, 38% Yes).
- 1.3 The current arrangements of 26 wards each electing three councillors are well established in Newcastle and – in theory if not in current practice – allow for a system which affords broad equality of electorate whilst enabling broadly coherent electoral areas corresponding to geographical community boundaries in most areas of the city.
- 1.4 However, it is acknowledged that some of the city's local community identity areas are larger than can be contained easily within a single ward: these include the communities of Fenham, Gosforth, Jesmond, High Heaton, and Kingston Park, as well as the combined Great Park area of recent residential development and the northern village parishes.
- 1.5 We consider that Newcastle's current elector-councillor ratio is appreciably below the mean for other core cities and metropolitan authorities. We contend that arrangements which bring Newcastle closer to the mean for comparable authorities ought to be considered, providing they maintain effective and equitable local government whilst also maintaining effective and equitable representation for local communities within Newcastle.

## 2 Efficacy

- 2.1 Liberal Democrats believe strongly in the principle that the city council's executive function should be subject to appropriate arrangements for scrutiny which enable representatives of each of the city's wards and communities to represent community and constituent interests.
- 2.2 We are minded to favour an increased role for ward committees in determining local community priorities and oversight of local service delivery, community capacity building, and neighbourhood planning. We feel that this is feasible through arrangements which are broadly in line with the current ward electorates, but recognise that this is not automatically dependent on maintaining the exact number of councillors and wards
- 2.3 We consider that it is important that there should be appropriate opportunity for non-executive "backbench" ward councillors to ensure local communities have suitable representation to scrutinise the the city council's executive cabinet and to hold it to account, thus providing appropriate constitutional "check and balance".
- 2.4 Newcastle has developed effective scrutiny structures which perform well and are well-regarded within local government, together with credible and effective quasi-judicial committee arrangements. We are opposed to any attempts to dilute the effectiveness of scrutiny arrangements and believe there is an important role for independent expertise within these.
- 2.5 Our submission takes account of significant recent trends in local government and public service delivery in the city:

### 2.6 **Devolution**

- 2.6.1 In recent years there has been a growing trend towards enhanced regional-level devolution which have involved the establishment of sub-regional and regional structures. These are currently organised at sub-regional level (North of Tyne) but will transition to regional level (North East Mayoral Combined Authority) later this year.
- 2.6.2 We consider that there is not considerable public enthusiasm for an elected mayor in the city, and we also consider that the new devolution arrangements are likely to give more power to council leaders on the proposed Combined Authority Cabinet. We believe that it is appropriate for robust scrutiny arrangements to be incorporated into the new

structures, requiring effective representation from local authority councillors on new scrutiny committees.

2.6.3 We are unpersuaded that currently proposed arrangements for scrutiny of the regional combined authority arrangement are sufficiently clear or robust. This is concerning given that the new arrangements involve potential tax-raising powers as well as powers over spatial planning and housing land allocation. We consider that it is particularly important that the scrutiny arrangements for the new authority include both majority and opposition party representation.

2.6.4 Nor are we persuaded that currently existing arrangements for scrutiny of the Police and Crime Commissioner's functions and the functions of the Joint Transport Committee are adequate or sufficiently effective. As it stands there will be less scrutiny of transport arrangements under the new arrangements than at present. This is not conducive to effective governance of transport at a time when there are numerous significant challenges and shortcomings in transport delivery. The same applies to oversight and scrutiny of the Police and Crime Commissioner, where current arrangements are ineffective and unchallenging.

2.6.5 Alongside this, we consider that the governance of local health services is under-performing, with concerns identified by regulators in respect of the performance and governance culture of the Newcastle Hospitals NHS Trust, the North East Ambulance Service, and the local mental health trust (CNTW). In this context, we consider there is a clear justification for robust scrutiny arrangements to allow local elected representatives to monitor and challenge local NHS providers via local authority health and wellbeing scrutiny arrangements.

## **2.7 Reduction of council functions**

2.7.1 Over the last decade or so, there has been a significant reduction in the number of functions delivered by the city council and a corresponding reduction in the number of council employees: the total council workforce has reduced by more than half over the past two decades. Services such as education, parks maintenance, and city centre management have passed to other organisations. Service delivery in areas such as highways maintenance, street cleaning, and community safety is considerably less than in previous years. Whilst this is not a welcome trend, the constraints on the council budget mean that the council has fewer functions, fewer staff, and fewer resources.

2.7.2 In this context, we consider that it is reasonable for local citizens and council taxpayers to question why the level of service they receive has dropped appreciably at a time when the council tax they are asked to

pay has escalated considerably. We feel it is legitimate to ask whether it is reasonable for citizens and council taxpayers to expect to see a reduction in their council services at the same time that the number of councillors is protected from similar reductions and efficiency savings.

## **2.8 Councillor attendance and participation**

- 2.8 The council has continued to discharge its business effectively despite less than full participation in recent years as the result of long term illness and incapacity. Council business has continued without significant adverse effects, despite a number of (majority party) vacancies on scrutiny committees.
- 2.9 We consider that this weakens the argument put forward previously by the council that the existing number of councillors should be maintained to ensure effective governance. If anything, smaller scrutiny committees can ensure more informed and robust participation and governance by members by developing deeper specialist knowledge by regular committee member attendance.
- 2.10 We have considered these trends carefully in forming a view that there is not a compelling case for retaining the current council size in order to discharge its current oversight, scrutiny, quasi-judicial, and general committee functions.
- 2.11 Proportionality can continue to be achieved if the existing committee structure were to be reduced by one or two places on most committees. There would be negligible overall effect on effectiveness given that some committees have had unfilled positions for many months. Consideration may usefully be given to the creation of one or two independent member places on scrutiny committees to allow for co-option of individuals with particular subject or sectoral expertise who may be able to offer useful insight.

## **3 Council size**

- 3.1 Newcastle's current council size (78) and councillor-electors ratio (3849:1) is broadly comparable to that of other English metropolitan authorities. Only a few large cities have a larger number of councillors. The remaining metropolitan authorities have fewer councillors than Newcastle. Of these, only nine have a lower elector-councillor ratio.

(see table 3.1 overleaf)

Table 3.1 Metropolitan authority population (2021) and elector-councillor ratio

	Councillors	Population (2021 census)	Elector-councillor ratio
Birmingham	101	1,144,900	11,039
Leeds	99	812,000	8,202
Manchester	96	552,000	5,750
Bradford	90	546,400	6,071
Liverpool	90	486,100	5,401
Sheffield	84	556,500	6,625
<b>Newcastle</b>	<b>78</b>	<b>300,200</b>	<b>3,849</b>
Sunderland	75	274,200	3,656
Wigan	75	329,300	4,390
Sandwell	72	341,900	4,749
Dudley	72	320,000	4,444
Kirklees	69	433,300	6,280
Wirral	66	320,200	4,851
Sefton	66	279,200	4,230
Gateshead	66	196,100	2,971
Wakefield	63	353,300	5,608
Stockport	63	294,800	4,679
Barnsley	63	244,600	3,883
Trafford	63	235,100	3,732
Bolton	60	296,000	4,933
Walsall	60	284,100	4,735
Salford	60	269,900	4,498
Wolverhampton	60	263,700	4,395
Oldham	60	242,100	4,035
Rochdale	60	223,800	3,730
North Tyneside	60	209,000	3,483
Rotherham	59	265,800	4,505
Tameside	57	231,100	4,054
Coventry	54	345,300	6,394
South Tyneside	54	147,800	2,737
Solihull	51	216,200	4,239
Calderdale	51	206,600	4,051
Bury	51	193,800	3,800
St Helens	48	183,200	3,817
Knowsley	45	154,500	3,433
Doncaster	40	308,100	7,702

- 3.3 Although Newcastle is a major city, albeit with a population some way below other core cities, its elector-councillor ratio is not comparable. By comparison, some other metropolitan authorities have fewer councillors than Newcastle yet have a larger population.
- 3.4 **Newcastle's elector-councillor ratio is below the mean for English metropolitan authorities, and is an outlier compared to other core city metropolitan authorities. A council size of 72 (i.e. 24 wards) would result in a elector-councillor ratio of 4,169:1, more closely in line with the ratio of other metropolitan authorities.**
- 3.5 To argue that Newcastle should retain 78 councillors should require the identification of specific factors that explain a higher workload on members here than elsewhere. No argument or evidence has been identified to suggest that these demands are higher than those on councillors in comparable authorities. No such arguments or evidence are provided. Deprivation, cuts in spending, the cost-of-living crisis and other pressures are not unique to Newcastle but are common across metropolitan authorities.
- 3.6 An argument that reducing the number of councillors would deter residents from standing for election would require evidence from other authorities, but none has been identified. Existing member workloads here do not justify a lower resident to member ratio than other major cities which face comparable issues and socio-economic challenges.
- 3.7 Additional devolved powers to the region may create further workload for members who are members of the new Mayoral Combined Authority (likely to be the leader and deputy), but this is unlikely to be greater than for their current membership of the current North of Tyne authority. Furthermore, such devolution arrangements already operate in the areas of Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester, Bradford, Liverpool, and Sheffield. As shown above, each of these has a significantly greater elector-councillor ratio than Newcastle. We consider this is not a valid argument to justify maintaining the current elector-councillor ratio.
- 3.8 Nor do we consider that there is a risk to diversity from reducing Council size. Newcastle has seen a significant increase in its proportion of female, minority ethnic, and LGBT councillors in recent years. Many metropolitan authorities are a smaller size but continue to have diverse representation, including Kirklees, Oldham, Rochdale, and Coventry. Council size appears not to be closely linked to diversity of membership.

## **4 Conclusion**

- 4.1 A reduction in council size to 72 councillors / 24 wards would mean Newcastle continues to be below the mean elector-councillor ratio for metropolitan authorities (4169 versus 4860) and would permit the council to function effectively without adverse impact on diversity or community representation.**
- 4.2 The proposed reduction would give council taxpayers suitable reassurance that efficiency savings should be applicable to councillors as well as to council services, and that councillors are not preserving their own positions at a time when council tax continues to rise and council services continue to fall.**
- 4.3 In these circumstances, we consider that there is a more pressing burden of proof on those wishing to make a justification for keeping the status quo and the current over-generous ratio of electors to councillors than on those proposing a case for change.**

**Newcastle Liberal Democrats, December 2023**