

**Ward Boundary Review  
of South Cambridgeshire District Council**

**Stage 1 – Council Size**

**Submission to the Local Government  
Boundary Commission for England**

**[24 September 2015]**

## 1. Executive Summary

Having considered the future arrangements for Council size, the Council is recommending that 45 Councillors would provide efficient and effective representation to the public, although it strongly emphasises that, in view of the rural nature of the district and the significant number of communities that make up South Cambridgeshire, any number below 45 would not be preferable by way of ensuring democratic representation to the district's residents. In developing this submission the Council took as its starting point the existing number of Members and then considered whether the evidence supported a variation of that figure.

The Council's Leader and Cabinet governance model means that the majority of decisions are taken by the Leader and seven Portfolio Holders who make up the Council's Cabinet, with the nine Members of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee having the main responsibility of holding these decision takers to account, although it is recognised that all Members are also obliged to carry out this role. The Council's decision-making and committee structure is set out in more detail in the body of this submission document.

South Cambridgeshire District Councillors have a high profile within their local communities and there is an expectation from the majority of Parish Councils in the district for District Councillors to attend most, if not all, of their meetings. Initial modelling has suggested that, although a reduction in Council size will make meeting this expectation more challenging, it may be possible with a Council of 45 Members for Councillors to maintain a presence at Parish Council meetings, thereby fulfilling this expectation.

As further justification for consideration, the Council has answered the questions within the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's guidance document on Council size as part of this submission.

## **2. Introduction**

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England has confirmed that South Cambridgeshire District Council is in its ward boundary review programme for 2014/2015. The first stage of the review is to decide how many Councillors, in total, should make up the Council in future.

In considering Council Size the Commission considers the following four parts:

1. Governance and decision making – what is the right number of councillors to take decisions and manage the business in an effective way?
2. Scrutiny functions – what is the right number of councillors to administer South Cambridgeshire’s scrutiny responsibilities in a convenient and effective way?
3. Representational role of councillors – what is the right number of councillors to represent and provide leadership to local communities in South Cambridgeshire?
4. The future – what governance changes are being considered and how to these impact on the number of councillors needed in the future?

This document represents the Council’s submission on Council Size after consideration of these four factors.

### **3. South Cambridgeshire in Context**

South Cambridgeshire is the second largest district in Cambridgeshire covering approximately 350 square miles of countryside. It is also the second most populated district after Huntingdonshire and the district completely surrounds Cambridge City. It shares its boundaries with Huntingdonshire, Fenland and East Cambridgeshire to the north. In the south the district has boundaries with North Hertfordshire, Central Bedfordshire, Uttlesford and St. Edmundsbury.

South Cambridgeshire is relatively rural with most of the population living in villages or rural areas – there are currently no towns in South Cambridgeshire. Some communities are very isolated as a result of this rurality, which does provide challenges in terms of service provision and democratic representation. Cambourne is currently the largest village in the district with approximately 8,820 people, Sawston is the second largest village with approximately 7,160 people and Cottenham is the third largest village with approximately 6,100 people. Cambourne, Sawston and Cottenham are currently ranked 13<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> respectively of the largest settlements in Cambridgeshire. However, future development will be focussed around the fringes of Cambridge and in a new town (Northstowe).

South Cambridgeshire is a rural district with a population of 153,300 residents. This population is expected to increase significantly faster than the national average and by 2026, the population is expected to increase by 15.1% to 176,500 residents.

South Cambridgeshire as an area is considered as significant to unlocking economic growth regionally and nationally, as has been demonstrated by the successful allocation by government of significant funding through the Greater Cambridge City Deal of which South Cambridgeshire District Council is a key partner. Employment sites in the district are also attracting international companies such as Astra Zeneca, which is a clear indication of the economic growth that can be expected in the very near future.

## **4. Part 1 – Governance and decision making**

### **4.1 Leadership**

#### **4.1.1 What kind of governance arrangements are in place for your authority? Does the council operate an executive mayoral, Cabinet/Executive or committee system?**

South Cambridgeshire District Council operates a Leader and Cabinet model of governance. The responsibilities of Cabinet Members for 2015/16 is set out at **Annex A** and the Council's governance/committee structure is set out at **Annex B**.

#### **4.1.2 To what extent are decisions delegated to portfolio holders or are most decisions taken by the full Executive and/or Mayor?**

Cabinet meets approximately every six weeks, but a significant number of decisions are made independently by Portfolio Holders. Portfolio Holders themselves usually hold meetings to consider items and make decisions. The normal access to information rules apply to these meetings, which are held as public meetings, and involve opposition spokespersons, monitors from the Scrutiny and Overview Committee and any other Member of the Council wishing to attend.

#### **4.1.3 Do Executive (or other) members serve on other decision making partnerships, sub-regional, regional or national bodies?**

The Leader of the Council is a member of the Greater Cambridge City Deal Executive Board, which is a formal joint committee with delegated executive decision-making power made up of members from South Cambridgeshire District Council, Cambridge City Council, Cambridgeshire County Council, the Local Enterprise Partnership and the University of Cambridge.

The Portfolio Holder for Strategic Planning and Transportation is Chairman of the Northstowe Joint Development Control Committee, which consists of representatives from South Cambridgeshire District Council and Cambridgeshire County Council. The Joint Development Control Committee has delegated development control decision-making powers in respect of the new town of Northstowe.

Members also represent the Council on a second Joint Development Control Committee for Cambridge Fringes, which consists of representatives from South Cambridgeshire District Council, Cambridge City Council and Cambridgeshire County Council and has the same delegated authority to make development control decisions for a prescribed area within the Cambridge Fringes.

Membership of other decision making partnerships, sub-regional or national bodies by Members of the Council include those set out in **Annex C**.

#### **4.1.4 In general, are leadership and or portfolio roles considered to be full time roles?**

The positions of Leader, Deputy Leader and Cabinet Portfolio Holder, although not deemed as being considered as full time positions, do require a substantial commitment given the level of responsibility and significant additional time that needs to be spent to undertake those roles effectively.

## **4.2 Regulatory**

### **4.2.1 In relation to licensing, planning and other regulatory responsibilities to what extent are decisions delegated to officers?**

With the exception of the Licensing Act, which states that if an objection is received to an application it must go to a Committee or Sub-Committee, all licensing matters are determined by officers with a right of appeal to an Appeals Sub-Committee.

In accordance with the Act, decisions affecting licensing conditions or policy making are all made at Committee level. Meetings of the Committee are held on an ad hoc basis whenever required, with Appeals Sub-Committees being much more frequent in response to any appeals submitted.

A significant number of decisions are delegated to officers in respect of development control and planning, as per a detailed scheme of delegation. The Planning Committee still meets on a monthly basis and on average will consider ten applications at each meeting, which themselves can last up to four hours and, in some cases, beyond that.

### **4.2.2 How many members are involved in committees?**

The Civic Affairs Committee consists of 12 Members.

The Corporate Governance Committee consists of 9 Members.

The Employment Committee consists of 9 Members.

The Licensing Committee consists of 15 Members.

The Planning Committee consists of 12 Members.

6 South Cambridgeshire District Council Members sit on the Northstowe Joint Development Control Committee.

6 South Cambridgeshire District Council Members sit on the Joint Development Control Committee – Cambridge Fringes.

### **4.2.3 Is committee membership standing or rotating?**

Committee membership is standing, although use of named substitutes from each political group is permitted.

All members and substitutes of the Employment Committee, Licensing Committee and Planning Committee have to have received specific and recent training on the functions, law and decision-making powers of each committee before they are able to act on that committee. Training for the Planning Committee is also applied to Members of the Joint Development Control Committees.

### **4.2.4 Are meetings ad hoc, frequent and/or area based?**

The Civic Affairs Committee usually meets a minimum of 4 times a year.

The Corporate Governance Committee usually meets a minimum 5 times a year.

The Employment Committee meets at least once a year but additional meetings may be necessary on an ad hoc basis.

The Licensing Committee meets on an ad hoc basis as a full Committee, but more regularly in the form of Appeals Sub-Committees.

The Planning Committee meets on a monthly basis.

The Joint Development Control Committees tend to meet approximately six times a year.

#### **4.2.5 What level of attendance is achieved? Are meeting always quorate?**

Attendance levels for all meetings that Members were summoned to attend in 2014/15 are set out in **Annex D**.

Meetings of regulatory committees are always quorate.

#### **4.2.6 Does the council believe that changes to legislation, national or local policy will have influence over the workload of committees and their members which would have an impact on council size?**

This would most likely impact the training that Members on certain committees would need to attend, rather than have influence over the workload of Members and the committees or bodies that they sit on.

### **4.3 Demands on time**

#### **4.3.1 Is there a formal role description for councillors in your authority?**

The Council has adopted a role description for its elected Members, together with role descriptions for key elected Member roles in the authority, as part of its Constitution. These role descriptions are set out at **Annex E**.

#### **4.3.2 Do councillors receive formal training for all or any roles at the council?**

The Council has a Member Development Strategy and Member Development Programme in place and is committed to providing opportunities for its elected Members to undertake training and develop on a wide range of topics and subjects.

Formal training is put in place for all Members of regulatory committees, for which attendance is mandatory before they are able to act on the Committee.

Formal leadership training is offered to all Members of Cabinet.

Formal chairmanship training is offered to Chairmen and Vice-Chairmen of committees.

In terms of training in general, there is an expectation that Members have to take part in significant amounts of training in order to be able to carry out their roles effectively, a lot of which is continual or reoccurring.

There is also pressure on Members to ensure that they keep themselves up to date when changes occur, such as the introduction of new legislation, regulations or guidance.

**4.3.3 Do councillors generally find that the time they spend on council business is what they expected?**

Of those Members who answered this question in a recent survey, 24 Members indicated that the time they spent on Council business was what they expected, whereas 17 Members stated that it was not what they expected.

**4.3.4 How much time do members generally spend on the business of your council?**

Of those Members who answered this question in an initial survey, 21 Members indicated that they generally spend over 30 hours a month on Council business. Further clarification was sought from the Council's Civic Affairs Committee on this issue, so a further survey highlighted that the following time was spent on Council business by those Members who took part in the survey:

10-20 hours per month	1 Member
20-30 hours per month	1 Member
30-40 hours per month	3 Members
40 – 50 hours per month	5 Members
50-60 hours per month	2 Members
60-70 hours per month	2 Members
70-80 hours per month	4 Members
80 – 90 hours per month	2 Members
More than 100 hours per month	4 Members

**4.3.5 Does the council appoint members to outside bodies? If so, how many councillors are involved in this activity and what is their expected workload?**

Yes, a list of outside bodies and the number of nominees is attached at **Annex C**.

Members are expected to attend meetings and provide reports back to the Council on any areas of relevant interest in respect of the outside body they are appointed onto. This is facilitated by the Partnerships Review Committee which regularly receives reports from Members appointed to outside bodies. Cabinet Members also report any relevant issues from Outside Bodies to meetings of Cabinet.

The frequency of meetings for each Outside Body will be different in each case, so the expected workload will vary depending on which body the Member sits on.

**4.3.6 Does the council attract and retain members?**

The average number of candidates that stood for seats at the Council's 2012, 2014 and 2015 elections is 3.74, which suggests that the Council continues to attract Members to stand for election and subsequently become District Councillors.

No seats have been uncontested at South Cambridgeshire District Council since 2006.



Four Members stood down in the 2015 elections, two of which were very long standing Councillors who decided to retire. The majority of Members in the last three elections have stood again to contest their seats.

**4.3.7 Have there been any instances where the council has been unable to discharge its duties due to a lack of councillors?**

No.

**4.3.8 Do councillors have an individual or ward budget for allocation in their area? If so, how is such a system administered?**

No.

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## **5. Part 2 – Scrutiny functions**

### **5.1 How do scrutiny arrangements operate in the authority? How many committees are there and what is their membership?**

The Council has two scrutiny committees, the Scrutiny and Overview Committee (which focusses on the Council's service delivery, performance and budget from an internal perspective) and the Partnerships Review Committee (which focuses on how effective the Council works with other bodies and organisations within the District).

Both bodies consist of 9 Members and meet a minimum of four times a year.

### **5.2 What is the general workload of scrutiny committees? Has the council ever found that it has too many active projects for the scrutiny process to function effectively?**

The Scrutiny and Overview Committee's workload is reflective of decisions scheduled to be taken by Portfolio Holders or Cabinet as part of pre-decision scrutiny. In reviewing the performance of services it also adds items to its work programme independently. To assist with this, the work prioritisation flowchart attached at **Annex F** is used.

More in depth scrutiny reviews are carried out in the shape of informal working groups or Task and Finish groups, which enable the Committee to consider more items of business and manage its workload effectively.

The Committee has a manageable work programme of active projects and the work prioritisation flowchart assists in ensuring that the Council's scrutiny and overview process functions effectively.

Scrutiny Monitors are also appointed to attend Portfolio Holder Meetings and undertake a scrutiny and overview role at those meetings by way of providing challenge and holding decision-takers to account. Scrutiny Monitors can subsequently report any recommendations they may have made at those meetings into the Scrutiny and Overview Committee as part of a standing item on the agenda for its meetings.

The Partnerships Review Committee's work programme focusses on how South Cambridgeshire District Council works with partner bodies and organisations in the district. External speakers are usually invited to provide the Committee with an opportunity to ask questions about priorities and performance. A standing item on the agenda for meetings of the Partnerships Review Committee is to receive update reports from Members of outside bodies.

Training facilitated by the Centre for Public Scrutiny has been provided for all Members of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee and Partnerships Review Committee, focussing on how to effectively challenge decision-takers, questioning skills and using evidence to come to conclusions.

**5.3 How is the work of scrutiny committees programmed? Is the work strictly timetabled?**

The work of the Scrutiny and Overview Committee is programmed in consultation with the Chairman, following requests received from officers and Members of the Committee for items to be included on the agenda for meetings. The work prioritisation flowchart assists in the consideration of these items. The work programme is also considered collectively as a Committee at each meeting.

The Partnerships Review Committee considers its work programme at every meeting, with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman having the discretion to consider key items of business and invite external speakers to attend.

Pre-scrutiny work has to be strictly timetabled in order to ensure that recommendations can be fed into Portfolio Holders or Cabinet before decisions are taken.

Task and Finish Groups will always have terms of reference agreed at the outset of each review. This will include confirmation of a completion date which is strictly adhered to in order to focus the group's work.

**5.4 What activities are scrutiny committee members expected to carry out between formal meetings?**

Scrutiny and Overview Committee members would be expected to monitor the work of Cabinet and Portfolio Holders in between formal meetings of the Committee, especially the Scrutiny Monitors.

Those involved in Task and Finish Groups would also be required to read, digest and analyse information relating to the subject being reviewed.

## **6. Part 3 – Representational role of councillors**

### **6.1 In general terms, how do councillors carry out their representational roles with electors? Do members mainly respond to casework from constituents or do they have a more active role in the community?**

Councillors can opt to carry out their representational role within communities in any way which suits them. Generally this would consist of attending meetings of Parish Councils and responding to casework from residents. The majority of Members are very active in their communities and will spend time attending Parish Council meetings and a range of local forums and interest groups in their capacity as local District Councillor.

### **6.2 How do councillors generally deal with casework? Do they pass on issues directly to staff or do they take a more in depth approach to resolving issues?**

Members operate in different ways depending on the individual, however, generally casework would initially be dealt with by a Member once a query is received by a resident. They would normally contact Council officers for assistance if they required technical advice or if the issue was an operational matter.

### **6.3 What support do councillors receive in discharging their duties in relation to casework and representational role in their ward?**

Members receive no direct support in discharging these duties, although the advice of professional officers at the District Council is always available to Councillors and issues are often referred to officers as and when necessary in order to seek resolution.

### **6.4 How do councillors engage with constituents? Do they hold surgeries, distribute newsletters, hold public meetings, write blogs etc?**

Councillors engage with their residents using all of the above methods, depending on the individual. Social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, is becoming a very popular way of Members engaging with their residents.

### **6.5 How has the role of councillors changed since the council last considered how many elected members it should have?**

The Council implemented a Leader and Cabinet model of governance at the same time as the previous review took place in 2001/02. The role of Members will therefore have changed since the last review in accordance with the revised model of governance.

The introduction of the Leader and Cabinet model has resulted in less meetings of Full Council and other bodies that would have previously had decision-making powers.

Social media and improved technology has meant that Members are more able to communicate with their communities, which has changed the way in which some Members operate as a District Councillor.

**6.6 Has the council put in place any mechanisms for councillors to interact with young people, those not on the electoral register or minority groups or their representative bodies?**

The Council actively supports the South Cambridgeshire Youth Council and provides opportunities for engagement both informally and formally.

No formal mechanisms are in place to support those not on the electoral register or minority groups, other than appointments to outside bodies that may provide links into representatives of these groups.

**6.7 Are councillors expected to attend meetings of community bodies such as parish councils or residents associations? If so, what is the level of their involvement and what role are they expected to play?**

A recent survey to both District Councillors and Parish Council Chairmen/Clerks suggests overwhelmingly that there is an expectation for District Councillors to attend meetings of Parish Councils.

Most District Councillors make an effort to attend all, if not the majority, of meetings of the Parish Councils within their respective electoral wards. Their main role at these meetings is to ensure that Parish Councils are accurately informed of District Council issues.

## **7. Part 4 – The future**

### **7.1 Localism and policy development**

#### **7.1.1 What impact do you think the localism agenda might have on the scope and conduct of council business and how do you think this might affect the role of councillors?**

The Council already has effective working arrangements in place with localities and communities, specifically through Parish Councils and other community groups. Members and officers meet regularly with representatives of Parish Councils formally through Parish Forum meetings. Parishes are also consulted on specific proposals and the Council provides a regular information bulletin aimed solely at Parish Councils, in addition to informal liaison that takes place frequently with Parishes on local issues.

#### **7.1.2 Does the council have any plans to devolve responsibilities and/or assets to community organisations? Or does the council expect to take on more responsibilities in the medium to long term?**

The Council has actively empowered communities and Parish Councils by encouraging and enabling them to own and be responsible for facilities in their areas that are considered to be community assets, through a range of methods including advice from officers and community grant funding. This support and way of working with Parish Councils and community groups has long been an integral part of the culture of South Cambridgeshire District Council.

The District Council's only significant assets are the administrative headquarter building, South Cambridgeshire Hall, and its Council housing stock. It also owns a housing company, Ermine Street Housing Ltd.

### **7.2 Service delivery**

#### **7.2.1 Have changes to the arrangements for local delivery of services led to significant changes to councillors' workloads? (For example control of housing stock or sharing services with neighbouring authorities)**

The Council has joint working and shared services arrangements in place with partner Councils for a number of key services including waste and recycling, legal services, ICT, building control, internal audit and payroll. Members of South Cambridgeshire District Council still take decisions and undertake the overview and scrutiny role from the perspective of the District Councils interests in the joint arrangements. This has not, therefore, impacted the workload of Councillors.

The Greater Cambridge City Deal is a significant partnership arrangement that impacts South Cambridgeshire District Council. Some Members of South Cambridgeshire District Council are also Members of the City Deal Executive Board and Joint Assembly, which each meet approximately ten times a year. Members of these bodies have noticed a significant increase in their respective workloads.

The Council has placed more emphasis on commercialisation and creating alternative and sustainable income streams. This has required more training to be put in place for Members who themselves need to understand this different approach to service delivery.

**7.2.2 Are there any developments in policy ongoing that might significantly affect the role of elected members in the future?**

Significant new development proposed in South Cambridgeshire, together with the development of the new town of Northstowe, will have an impact on the role of Members both locally in their communities if affected by new development and for those that sit on the Planning Committee, Northstowe Joint Development Control Committee and Cambridge Fringes Joint Development Control Committee.

**7.3 Finance**

**7.3.1 What has been the impact of recent financial constraints on the council's activities? Would a reduction in the scope and/or scale of council business warrant a reduction in the number of councillors?**

The Council has consistently had a Medium Term Financial Strategy in place which reflects the need to make significant efficiency savings. Savings targets have continually been met year on year, but this is an ongoing challenge.

The Council is seeking alternative and sustainable income streams and a number have already been identified. Ermine Street Housing Ltd (the Council's housing company) and the Commercialisation Programme are two such examples.

Despite the curtailing of some non-mandatory services, the additional funding streams outlined above, together with significant partnerships such as the Greater Cambridge City Deal, does not suggest a reduction in the scope and/or scale of Council business.

**7.3.2 If you are proposing a reduction in the number of councillors for your authority to what extent is this a reflection of reduced activity of the council overall, an anticipation of efficiency plans or a statement to local people? Or none of these things?**

The Council, in considering its Council size as part of the Boundary Commission's review, has accepted that a reduction in Councillors is an unavoidable requirement. However, it does have grave concerns that the rurality of the district will put significant pressure on Councillors' ability to provide sufficient democratic representation for the rurally isolated residents and communities South Cambridgeshire. The Council therefore recommends a Council size of 45 and strongly advises against any reduction below this figure.