



Report to Scrutiny Management Committee

11th November 2013

Report of: Director of Policy, Performance and Communications

Subject: Summary of the evidence presented to Scrutiny Management Committee in relation to the size of Sheffield City Council and proposed submission on council size

Author of Report: Victoria Penman, Policy and Improvement Officer
0114 27 34755
victoria.penman@sheffield.gov.uk

Summary:

Sheffield City Council will be the subject of an electoral review to be carried out by the Local Government Boundary Commission. The first part of this review will decide the number of councillors to be returned to the Council, and the Council is developing its submission to inform the Commission. On 11th July, Scrutiny Management Committee heard evidence from organisations and members of the public as to the most appropriate number. This report summarises the evidence received by the Committee.

The report is accompanied by the draft submission on Council size which has been informed by the evidence heard by the Committee.

Type of item:

Reviewing of existing policy	
Informing the development of new policy	
Statutory consultation	
Performance / budget monitoring report	
Cabinet request for scrutiny	
Full Council request for scrutiny	
Community Assembly request for scrutiny	
Call-in of Cabinet decision	
Briefing paper for the Scrutiny Committee	
Other	X

Scrutiny Management Committee:

- i. is asked to note and approve the contents of the report;
- ii. is asked to provide views or comments on the draft submission on Council size ;
- iii. is asked to approve the draft submission on Council size and refer it to Full Council prior to its submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England.

Background Papers:

None

Category of Report: OPEN

Sheffield City Council electoral review: update on review preparation and discussion paper on Council size

1. Purpose

- 1.1. This report provides a summary of the evidence received by the Scrutiny Management Committee both in writing and verbally at the evidence gathering session held on 11th July 2013. The report is accompanied by the draft submission on Council size which has been informed by the evidence heard by the Committee, and which the Committee is asked to approve and refer to Full Council.

2. Summary

- 2.1. The report summarises the evidence of eleven organisations and individuals which was received by the Scrutiny Management Committee in relation to the electoral review of Sheffield City Council, and in particular in relation to the number of councillors which it is recommended should make up the Council (the council size).
- 2.2. The Council Size submission is the proposed submission of Sheffield City Council to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England on the appropriate number of councillors to be returned to the Council. It proposes that the Sheffield City Council should continue to be comprised of 84 councillors, representing 28 wards. The submission also contains the Council's rationale for this proposal.

3. Introduction

- 3.1. Sheffield City Council will be the subject of an electoral review between August 2013 and March 2015. This has been called by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (the Commission) because the electorate of Central ward is now 42% larger than the Sheffield ward average. The review takes place in two stages, both run by the Commission. The first stage starts in January 2014 and will consider the number of councillors to be returned to the Council, and the second stage the ward boundaries and names. A preliminary evidence gathering stage is currently underway and the Commission met with officers and elected members in July.
- 3.2. As part of the first stage of the review the Council has the opportunity to put forward a submission on the number of councillors that it thinks the Council needs in order to function effectively (the 'council size').

3.3. Although the Council is able to put forward its proposal, which will carry significant weight, the Commission will reach their own judgement based on the individual characteristics and needs of each local area, based on the following three criteria:

- the governance arrangements of the council and how it takes decisions across the broad range of its responsibilities.
- the council's scrutiny functions relating to its own decision making and the council's responsibilities to outside bodies.
- the representational role of councillors in the local community and how they engage with people, conduct casework and represent the council on local partner organisations.

3.4. The Council's submission addresses these points. Arguments are also put forward on the basis of reflecting communities and allowing for fairness of representation.

3.5. The Commission also asks the Council and local people to consider the number of councillors for the authority not simply in the context of the council's current arrangements, but also taking into consideration likely future trends or plans. In every review it carries out, the Commission aims to ensure its recommendations remain relevant for six to ten years and will aim to recommend a council size that delivers effective and convenient local government well after the completion of the electoral review.

3.6. The Commission's guidance explicitly references factors which it **will not** consider relevant:

- Financial considerations – the Commission believes that value for money can be best achieved by having the optimum number of councillors to enable the Council to function effectively (so, arguments based on reducing the Member allowances budget will not be taken into account);
- Comparisons with other local authorities – although Sheffield currently has relatively few councillors per head of population compared with the national average, other South Yorkshire authorities, and also to the seven other Core Cities (ratios tend to be broadly in line with electorate: the higher the electorate, the higher the number of electors per Councillor), this will not automatically be an indication that Sheffield should have more councillors.

3.7. The Council size submission has been developed over several months, involving councillors from all groups via interviews, questionnaires and focus groups. A detailed methodology and rationale for the proposal is included within the submission.

3.8. It is recommended by the Commission that, wherever possible, the political groups within a Council should seek to reach a shared view on the proposed size of the Council to maximise the chance of the local recommendation as to the appropriate size being implemented. In light of this, Scrutiny Management Committee is recommended to endorse the draft submission and recommend its referral to Full Council before it is submitted to the Commission.

3.9. The Commission will consult on the issue of council size during March and April 2014, reaching their final decision in May 2014. The second stage of the review, concerning the boundaries and names of wards, will take place between May 2014 and March 2015, before being implemented in 2016.

4. Evidence presented to Scrutiny Management Committee

4.1. In order to inform the work taking place within Sheffield City Council to develop the Council's submission on Council size, 65 individuals and organisations were contacted and invited to provide evidence to the Overview and Scrutiny Management Committee. This included:

- the Sheffield branches of political parties achieving 10% or more of the vote in any Sheffield ward at the last election, as well as any independent candidate achieving the same percentage of the vote
- respondents to the Community Assembly consultation
- representative bodies from the VCF sector
- community organisations known to have an interest in issues of democracy
- academics specialising in local democracy and electoral geography
- individuals who have expressed an interest in the electoral review
- Parish councils and community forums

4.2. Evidence has been provided by eleven organisations and individuals, and eight organisations and individuals attended an informal evidence gathering session of the Committee held on 11th July 2013. This report summarises the evidence submitted as far as they relate to matters which can be considered by the review, namely the role of the councillor in Sheffield and the implications of this for the number of councillors in Sheffield City Council. Comments were also received about a number of specific boundary issues, and these will be taken into account when the Council develops a proposed scheme of wards in 2014.

4.3. The evidence gathering session was attended by Councillors Chris Weldon; Penny Baker; Jillian Creasy; Roger Davison; Gill Furniss; Cat McDonald and Mick Rooney. Witnesses attending were:

- Vicky Seddon (Sheffield for Democracy)
- Sharon Squires and Daniel Spicer (Sheffield First)
- Cllr Shaffaq Mohammed (Sheffield Liberal Democrat Party)
- Russell Cutts, Chairman (Sheffield Conservative Party)
- Jonathan Harston
- Ecclesfield Parish Council (Cllr Dr John Bowden)
- Tony Slatcher (Sheffield Labour Party)

Overall summary

- 4.4. There was no desire from respondents for a reduction in the number of councillors, with respondents generally feeling that the current number was 'about right' and several respondents stating a preference for an increase in the number of councillors. Whilst some respondents recognised that the cost of democracy needs to be managed, reducing the number of councillors was not seen as the only way to do this.
- 4.5. Several respondents mentioned both that Sheffield has a relatively low number of councillors per head of population, although it was noted that the number of councillors fitted a pattern for Metropolitan councils, with the larger councils having progressively fewer councillors per head of population.
- 4.6. The role of the councillor in the community was the best understood of the councillor's roles, and something which respondents felt was particularly important, and particularly demanding. There was a general view that it was important for there to be enough councillors for communities to be able to engage effectively with their councillors, and that reducing the number of councillors would make this more difficult to do. Several witnesses referred to the change to ward based working arrangements, with a shared view that this would be likely to increase workloads for councillors.
- 4.7. Those witnesses who considered the role of the councillor beyond the community level noted the increasing complexities facing councillors, and the range of skills required to lead a large city as well as to be an effective ward councillor.
- 4.8. Several respondents indicated that retaining three member wards was important to allow for cover arrangements and to enable councillors with a variety of skills, expertise and diversity within wards, whilst two respondents suggested changing this number if it enabled communities to be more cohesive. In practice, as the council elects by thirds, the Commission is required by law to look to achieve a pattern of three member wards unless there are pressing reasons why this would not work.
- 4.9. Summaries of the evidence of individuals and organisations is provided below.

4.10. Bradway Action Group

- One main function of the councillor is to help members of the local community to find the correct avenues through which to tackle problems.
- A second role is to draw to the attention of and explain to the local community developments that are planned that will affect them, including explaining the constraints placed upon the Council and officers.
- In both of the above roles, councillors can work most effectively if they are known to the members of the local community, work with local community groups, attend public meetings in their Ward, and are easily contactable. Although we do not have a clear view of the appropriate total number of councillors for a city the size of Sheffield, we do believe that

Ward boundaries should not become so large that councillors cease to be known and recognisable to the local people.

- As a local community group we believe that councillors can perform their roles more effectively when they co-ordinate their actions with those of the voluntary groups within their Ward. This enhances legitimacy by demonstrating that there is a “bottom up” element in formulating an agenda of issues.

4.11. Ecclesfield Parish Council

- In order to avoid confusion amongst the electorate and from past experience, it is important that there should be a sensible relationship between Ward Boundaries and the Parish Council Boundary. In other words, Ward Boundaries and the Parish Council Boundary should be coterminus.
- If there are to be any changes to Parish Wards then this needs to be handled carefully to maintain a balanced number of electors and that they make sense, on the ground.
- In the Parish Council’s view, the present 3 member City Council Ward system works well and should not be altered.
- Parish Council elections should be held on the same day as City Council elections with the purpose of encouraging voter turn-out and to keep costs to a minimum.

4.12. Mr. Jonathan Harston

- Mr Harston was a Sheffield City Councillor between 1999 and 2010 and has an interest in mapping, particularly how community groupings relate to their geography.
- The number of councillors in metropolitan councils, however, is broadly proportional to the square root of the population. Sheffield is about four times as big as Barnsley and has about twice as many councillors – the square root of four. Sheffield is about twice as big as Rotherham and has about one and a half times as many councillors – the square root of two. Birmingham is about twice the size of Sheffield and has about one and a half times as many councillors – the square root of two. Consequently, the number of councillors Sheffield currently has fits well into that, and so should remain more-or-less about what it has at the moment – something in the region of 84 councillors. With three-member wards that is around about 28 or so wards.
- A reduction in the number of councillors can only be an option if there is a reduction in the functions and responsibilities of councils. The only change that would make sense is if Sheffield adopted a directly elected executive mayor, taking away the most of the executive functions from councillors.
- The larger a ward, the more residents are distanced from their elected representatives, and the harder it is for elected representative to work their wards.
- Whatever wards Sheffield has must necessarily fit around the immovable geography of the city. Everybody who put together the wards in 2004 worked well to get probably the best set of wards Sheffield has ever had with only a few splits such as Shiregreen and the northern edge of Handsworth. This review shouldn’t undo that good work, but has the opportunity to build on it.
- 27 or 29 wards would be the easiest numbers of wards to divide the city into whilst retaining natural communities.

- Three member wards allow a mix of skills and expertise which is beneficial both for councillors and constituents, but parishes should be able to recommend whether they wish for 2 or 3 member wards.
- Due to the geography, it is not possible for parishes to be used as the building blocks for wards without the addition of some unparished areas.
- The law requires the review to use the registered electorate, which is a fairly consistent proportion of the population [in Sheffield very close to 73%-74% of the population are adults]. You cannot use perceived under-registration to justify a “small” ward on electorate figures because you believe there are people not on the register.

4.13. Mr. Alan Kewley

- Representing electorate is a key part of the role, but not all councillors provide the level of information and consultation constituents would like to see
- Changing approaches to engaging communities through local level organisations (community assemblies etc) can be confusing and off-putting
- The current changes to local workings may increase workloads for councillors
- Engaging with focus groups could be helpful for councillors
- Councillors may be able to concentrate on broader issues if case work was passed on to officers
- The city leadership role should be balanced with other roles
- Councillor involvement in Scrutiny and other Council meetings and committees can affect the representative role of the councillor
- More cross-party work before decisions are made, rather than after, would improve decision-making
- Councillor workload has increased in recent years while numbers have reduced, making the ratio of electors per councillor in Sheffield one of the highest in the country. Unless managed effectively, this may result in lower standards of governance, which may save initial costs, but result in less scrutiny of flawed decisions which could cost more in the long-run.
- The role of councillor should be made more attractive to enable more young councillors to come forward and increase turnover.
- The number of councillors should be increased -- by at least 10%, creating, say, 3 or 4 new wards & a proportionate reduction in size. But this should be accompanied by a more transparent audit of councillor activity to improve effectiveness. This should be backed-up with a more robust call-in procedure, where councillors who appear to be under-performing are referred to a scrutiny panel.
- Mr Kewley suggests that a job description for councillors may assist both councillors and the people they represent.

4.14. Sheffield Conservatives

- Believe that the Council is sufficiently big enough.
- Boundaries should be assessed on communities, not drawn up to meet a pattern of three party wards. One or two member wards would be appropriate where there were small discrete communities.

4.15. Sheffield for Democracy

- Encourage the Council to work towards a consensus view if at all possible to enable the decision to be made locally rather than by the Commission.
- Changes to ward based working, and reduced support for councillors, are likely to increase the workload of councillors, and this is likely to reduce the service that the electorate receive.
- The number of councillors should be at least the same as there are currently.
- Some wards may generate more work, especially casework, than others.
- Maintaining the coherence of communities is more important than having the same number of members per ward.
- Council should include issue of non-registration in their submission and include likely numbers in the forecast (*N.B. per SCC – the legislation requires that electoral reviews are based on the electorate, and not the population or any other figure*)
- Aware that the Council works hard to ensure students are registered appropriately, and need to make sure this is part of the review.

4.16. Sheffield First

- Recent report by Communities and Local Government Select Committee, looking at the role of Councillors notes the increasing expectation that a Councillor's role is in part about community development and/or leadership, rather than simply representation and also highlights the difficulties being experienced around the country by all organisations, whether political parties or otherwise, in trying to recruit to these roles.
- It is important that elected members are fully involved because they are the community's chosen representatives. In the absence of large-scale investment in community work, it is arguable that councillors should be taking on this role.
- Councillors have sufficient access to be able to hold public sector organisations to account and to challenge them at the local level. This aspect of a councillor's role is likely to become increasingly important, as Sheffield City Council's plans for changes to locality management put them at the centre of a ward-based approach.
- People who feel close to their councillors may be more likely to vote and become engaged in civic life.
- Councillors are expected to fulfil a wide range of roles and responsibilities including ward level and local working, as well as the ability and capacity to lead strategically and to work in partnership.
- There is a link between the review and the issue of active citizenship which is being discussed at Sheffield First. The role of elected members is key to building strong communities. Austerity makes particularly important for councillors to work with citizens – the role of the councillor in times of enormous change is very challenging.

Points of clarification in response to questions from members of the Committee:

- Jillian Creasy: Have you thought about the relationship between the ward councillor and the development of scrutiny and policy?
- SS: The role of members is likely to become more complex generally. Their role should be about making sense of the issues to enable strategic policy decisions, not just within the Council but also with other partners. Sheffield First has been asking partners how they engage with ward councillors.

- Cate McDonald: Can you clarify your understanding of community leadership and community development and what you believe that the role of the councillor should be?
- SS & DS: The two are different and require different skills sets. Councillors are well-placed to be 'network nodes', knowing the community activists within the community. Community development takes significant resources and councillors can't do this alone, but could play a role in developing communities in areas where infrastructure levels are low.
- Ian Auckland: Community Development implies something much more systematic than the approach taken at the moment. The role of the councillor is usually one of leadership – unblocking systems and encouraging communities to act.
- SS: Community leadership is a big ask and very time consuming, but important for community leadership.

4.17. Sheffield District Labour Party

- People expect their councillors to be accessible, visible – both personally and through letters, emails and by phone – and available to pursue grievances and seek redress. Opinion formers and community group organisers and volunteers expect their councillors to regularly attend their meetings, keep abreast of their development and support and champion their efforts in the wider community and within the Council.
- People think that councillors are MPs. They think they perform the role full time and that they are well remunerated accordingly.
- In performing these roles, councillors make an important contribution to the process of legitimising our democratic model. Assisting with casework and lending support to local projects is important to groups and individuals in ensuring that they feel part of a representative process and that their concerns and achievements are respected and valued.
- There is no evidence that any of these expectations will diminish. If anything, changing models of local governance at ward level would tend towards an anticipation that these expectations will increase.
- Setting the strategic vision and leading one of Britain's biggest cities, with a wide range of projects and an active media is demanding of skills and time.
- Changing funding and service delivery models are not expected to reduce the amount of time that the effective performance of these functions is anticipated to take.
- The increase in responsibilities of local government, and the reduced financial circumstances, mean that the workloads of the administration are increased, whilst outsourcing does not lead to a reduction in demand on councillors.
- Sheffield's diversity, and a commitment to inclusion, increases the demands on councillors.
- Three party wards are the most suitable to ensure that there is a mix of skills.
- The District Labour Party does not believe that there is a case for reducing the number of councillors, and that consideration should be given to increasing.

4.18. Sheffield Liberal Democrat Party and Sheffield Liberal Democrat Councillors' Group

- Councillors bring a wide range of benefits, skills and experience to the council.
- They have a wide range of roles, including representing constituents, challenging status quo of the Council, making the council accessible to the public.

- Councillors should provide strategic leadership for the Council.
- Councillors have vital role in setting the budget and should ensure that the voices of all communities are heard and that limited funds are spent equitably and efficiently.
- Undermining the role of councillors will undermine the Council's commitment to be an accountable body. No one individual can behold all the skills required of councillors - The tasks that councillors undertake as a 'community campaigner' vary widely. These range from organising and liaising with community groups, speaking to residents on the doorsteps, assisting constituents with casework and identifying and highlighting pressing issues in their ward. In addition, to these community roles, councillors are expected to also contribute at a strategic level to the Council by scrutinising and developing council policy or through their quasi-judicial roles on Council committees such as licensing and planning.
- There is no 'correct' or 'right' model of being a councillor. For the Council to operate at its optimum level, councillors need a complimentary range of skills, styles and experiences, which reflect the nature of our city in the 21st century – a geographically, spiritually and physically diverse city.
- Three member wards have on the whole worked well, with councillors complimenting each other's skills, even when they represent different parties. Therefore, we recommend that – whatever the outcomes of the review – Sheffield retain three members wards.
- Reduction of the number of councillors must be considered as a way of reducing the cost of democracy, but other ways should also be considered.
- Sheffield already has the third highest ratio in the country and reductions in the number of members could severely impair the ability of councillors to serve the whole of their community.

4.19. Sheffield Wildlife Trust

- Based on the national benchmark, the council size is about right.
- The skills and characteristics of individual councillors can be more important than the number of councillors.

4.20. Sheffield 50+

- Councillors should understand and be representatives of the local area, to act as a point of reference and advocate with the Council.
- Councillors should be visible, especially when changes happen.
- Councillors should listen, understand and when necessary signpost.
- There needs to be more visible publicity about Councillors' Surgeries.
- The review of the role of Community Assemblies may clarify part of the role of Ward Councillors.
- Councillors should encourage local communities and play a leadership role at local and city wide level.
- Councillors should be a representative of the City. In collaboration with colleagues, to promote the city and actively encourage inward investment by an openly warm business welcoming attitude.
- Councillors should advocate to reduce disparities within the city.
- Councillors should see the city as a whole and have a more corporate view.
- Citizens of Sheffield have rejected elected Mayors which implied we want greater local democracy.

- There is a perception that central government is taking away roles and responsibilities and adding contentious parts.
- Education has to be managed locally as it links to enterprise.
- Sheffield should increase the number of councillors to enhance local democracy and reduce the workload on councillors.

5. Issues raised by witnesses in evidence that cannot be considered by the review but which relate to issues of local democracy

- Introducing proportional representation would be fairer and more accurately represent the votes cast in Sheffield for parties other than the two dominant parties in Sheffield.
- Moving to four-yearly elections would be more effective and less antagonistic.
- Efforts to further increase electoral turnout would be beneficial.
- Parliamentary boundary review rode roughshod over communities to ensure a good fit with the numbers.
- Introducing job descriptions for councillors would give them and the public a clearer idea of what to expect.
- Increased training for councillors would help them to meet the wide range of expectations and skills expected of them.

6. Conclusion

6.1. The evidence submitted to the Committee has been valuable to understand the views of interested groups and organisations, and has been fed into the Council's work developing a view on council size. Accompanying this report is the Council's draft submission on Council size.

7. Recommendations

7.1. Scrutiny Management Committee is asked to:

- i.) note and approve the contents of the report;
- ii.) provide views or comments on the draft submission on Council size ;
- iii.) approve the draft submission on Council size and refer it to Full Council prior to its submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England.