

DURHAM UNITARY AUTHORITY ELECTORAL REVIEW

STAGE 1 - COUNCIL SIZE

SUBMISSION BY DURHAM COUNTY COUNCIL

Background to the Review

1. In December 2007 the Government accepted the County Council's Proposal for a future unitary local government structure for County Durham. The County Durham (Structural Change) Order 2008 implements that proposal with effect from 1 April, 2009 by providing that, as from that date, the County Council will be the sole principal authority for County Durham.
2. In the Proposal, the Council's initial suggestion was that *an authority of between 90 and 110 councillors representing electoral divisions in the region of 4,000 electors would be in order.*
3. The Council acknowledged that the Electoral Commission would need to determine an appropriate level of future representation in the County. However, in the expectation that the Commission might not be in a position to undertake such a review before the new unitary authority was established, it was suggested that the new council could operate on the basis of two councillors per existing County electoral division. This would provide a phased transition based on a geography which electors had generally become familiar with since the last major reorganisation in 1974.
4. On 17 January 2008 the Electoral Commission formally directed the Boundary Committee for England to undertake an electoral review of the proposed new unitary authority for County Durham. The Boundary Committee for England formally announced the start of the Durham Unitary Authority Electoral Review on 15 July 2008.
5. Stage 1 of the Review invites submissions of views on what might be the most appropriate number of councillors for the Unitary Authority.

The Council's Approach to Stage 1

6. The Boundary Committee's guidance emphasises the following key factors in relation to future Council size:
 - effective and efficient governance arrangements;
 - electoral equality; and
 - effective community representation, engagement and empowerment.

7. Against this background, the Council has carefully assessed all the various councillor roles and resultant workloads expected within the new Unitary Authority and has used the resulting information to inform its consideration of optimum council size.
8. As part of these deliberations, in addition to the Boundary Committee's own key factors listed in Paragraph 6 above, the Council has also taken account of the following matters:
 - the significant additional demands that will be placed on councillors with the transfer of the current District Council functions;
 - the need to reflect the unique nature of County Durham's settlement pattern, demography and socio-economic profile;
 - the need to secure stability in the early years of the new Authority;
 - the need to be in a position to embrace all of the additional expectations being placed on local authorities and their councillors by Government;
 - the significant overall reduction in elected representation that will be experienced in the County when the District Councils cease to exist;
 - the need to effectively represent the Unitary Authority and through it the County on a wide range of local, regional and national organisations; and
 - the ability to work effectively with partner organisations such as Parish and Town Councils, Fire and Police, Health Authorities and the Business, Community and Voluntary Sectors.
9. The Council will be one of a small number of flagship unitary authorities created in this round of local government reorganisation. The expectations are high, both from central government, stakeholders and communities. It is critical to ensure that there is adequate Councillor capacity to meet these expectations.

County Durham's Settlement Geography and Socio Economic Conditions

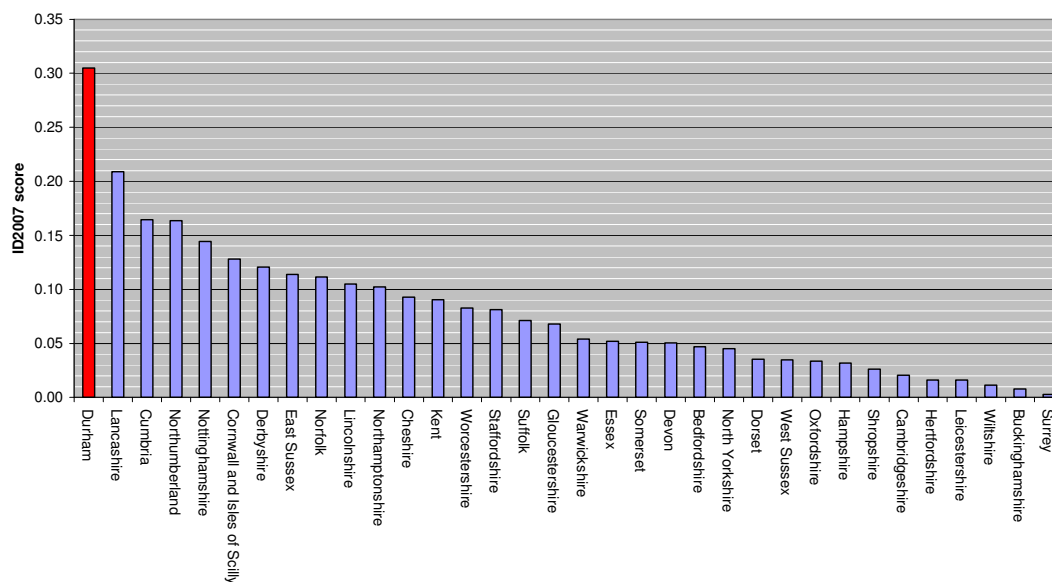
10. The transition to unitary local government will result in the creation of a very large authority, both in terms of electorate/population and area. This needs to be reflected in the size of the new council.
11. County Durham has a unique settlement pattern, unlike any other shire. In total, there are 264 identifiable settlements within the County.
12. In terms of both settlement pattern and socio-economic conditions, the County's most similar comparators tend to be the South Wales Valleys, for example, Rhondda, Merthyr Tydfil and Blaenau Gwent.

13. Within these considerations, it is instructive to examine the elector/member ratios that are currently operational within these Welsh unitaries.

Authority	Pop.	Electors	No. of Members	Electors per Member
Rhondda, Cynon, Taff	69,300	53,299	42	1,269
Merthyr Tydfil	55,500	42,764	33	1,296
Blaenau Gwent	233,900	172,826	75	2,304

14. In contrast, County Durham's population and electorate (500,096 and 394,490 respectively in 2008) suggests that a council size well in excess of 100 Members will be necessary to deliver effective representation in an area affected by the combined issues of sparsity and deprivation.
15. The Maps attached at Appendices 1 and 2 illustrate the rural/urban classifications within the County and the measure of deprivation.
16. Some 44% of adult residents of the County live in areas which could be classified as being rural. Whilst equality of representation in terms of elector to Member ratio is important, so too is the electorate's equality of access to political representation. Accordingly, the County's rurality should have a significant bearing in the determination of council size.
17. Appendix 2 demonstrates that many parts of the County have high levels of deprivation. Approximately 45% of the population live in areas which are judged amongst the 30 per cent most deprived nationally. The following chart illustrates that County Durham is by some measure the most deprived shire county.

ID2007 overall scores for the shire counties



18. Whilst the County Council and its partners have made great strides in recent years to improve its socio economic conditions, it is inevitable that there will be more demands for services placed upon the new unitary council and its elected representatives than in many other parts of the country where such levels of deprivation do not exist.

Governance Structure

19. The new Unitary Authority's governance structure is under development. Relevant factors likely to impact on the new structure are as follows:

Full Council

Full Council will remain at the centre of corporate governance, responsible for overall strategic direction, setting the policy framework, approving priorities and budgets. The Council meeting also provides the forum where **all** councillors come together to debate and determine these key issues.

Full Council meetings provide an opportunity for the public and organisations to engage directly in the democratic process and for the Council to be visible and accountable for its actions. There is a reasonable expectation that the new Council will increase the present frequency of meetings with a consequential impact on councillor workload.

Cabinet

The Council's Interim Governance Structure provides for a Cabinet of 10 councillors (including the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Council) together with up to 10 additional councillors providing essential support to portfolio holders.

Current District Council functions such as Housing Strategy, Environmental Health and Leisure will inevitably impact further on Cabinet workloads.

Regulatory Committees

The most significant change for the Regulatory Committees will be to assume current District Council responsibilities for local planning and licensing.

Between the seven District Councils in the County, there were in 2007/08 a total of 128 Planning and 60 Licensing Committee meetings dealing with in total some 3,100 applications and other items of business. Whilst inevitably there will be some degree of rationalisation within the unitary authority, the implications of absorbing this additional Member workload are considerable.

Overview and Scrutiny

Overview and Scrutiny presents a developing picture to reflect its changing and enhanced role, set within a partnership framework.

The Council believes that one size does not fill all in this context and Overview and Scrutiny will establish arrangements that not only deal with strategic, county-wide issues but also respond to the diversity of our area, reflecting communities in coastal, urban and rural areas with a variety of socio-economic problems linked to poor health, crime and so on. The Council is very keen to make sure that the excellent local scrutiny projects already in place will continue in the future.

The recent White Paper "Communities in Control: Real People, Real Power" confirms that Overview and Scrutiny will have an enhanced role as a vehicle for involving local people in addressing issues that affect their lives. An example of this will be responding to Councillor Calls for Action. Overview and Scrutiny is well placed to consider appeals when petitioners are not satisfied with the local authority response.

There are currently about 280 Members undertaking the Overview and Scrutiny role across the eight local authorities in County Durham. The new Unitary Authority needs to maintain this level of commitment from what will be a much smaller Member cohort.

Standards Committee

In addition to its new responsibilities for local assessment of Member conduct complaints, this Council Body will assume the role of Standards Committee for all of the County's Parish and Town Councils (currently 108). In 2007/08, Parish Members nationally accounted for 50% of the allegations referred by the Standards Board for England for investigation.

Whilst at present not all of the County is parished, (see paragraph 34) the Council has a long standing policy of encouraging and supporting the parishing of unparished areas and as this policy is brought to fruition through future community governance reviews, the resulting workload increase for the Council's Standards Committee will be considerable. The size and composition of the Committee will need to be reviewed to make sure it has the capacity to effectively handle these functions.

Local Area Arrangements

In the Unitary Structure Proposal, we envisaged introducing structures aligned to the principal natural communities of the County to provide a positive opportunity to directly involve local communities in shaping the way that the new council works from the outset through the creation of Area Action Partnerships (AAPs).

Local people are presently being consulted on how many AAP's are needed, which areas they might serve and their detailed role and functions.

Whatever, the final outcome, Unitary Council Members will be expected to play an active and high profile role in these new arrangements.

The Unitary Council might also wish to develop in due course some form of Area Regulatory Committee Structure.

Member Roles and Workloads in General

20. The Council's governance represents only one aspect of Member roles and workloads. Attached at Appendix 3 are the current Member Role Descriptions embodied in the Council's Interim Constitution. Whilst these will need to be reviewed for the Unitary Authority they do provide an important reference point in assessing Member workloads.
21. There will inevitably be a significant growth in enquiries, requests for assistance etc. from the public to individual Members in relation to functions/services currently provided by the District Councils.
22. A snapshot amongst the current eight authorities reveals that on average Members spend 18 hours per week on this *constituency caseload*. This will increase for Unitary Members from 1 April 2009.
23. The notion of community champion heralded in the Local Government White Paper "Strong and Prosperous Communities" will place yet further expectations on Members.
24. The recent White Paper announces further policy developments which will inevitably impact on the role and workload of Members: a duty to promote democracy, a duty to involve, petitions, councillor calls for action, and more.
25. There will be an increasing need for all councillors to be aware of and play into the role of partnerships as it is through this form of governance that a great deal of the new place-shaping agenda will be expected to be delivered.
26. As well as a significant role for Unitary Council Members in the final configuration and remit of our Area Action Partnerships, we also anticipate Members devoting considerable time to leading/facilitating community involvement at neighbourhood level.
27. The Council appoints Member representatives to a wide range of local, regional and national organisations. In many respects, the same is true for the present District Councils.

28. Between the 8 authorities, we currently make almost 900 Member appointments to over 500 organisations.
29. Whilst there will be some degree of rationalisation of this position within the new council, we must not underestimate the scale of this issue in terms of the demands it makes on Members' time/capacity or its importance for the Council's community leadership role.
30. Often overlooked in these types of exercise are the less formal networking/liaison arrangements that take place between locally elected representatives and a wide range of local organisations such as parish and town councils, community groups and residents associations.
31. Elected Members remain a key source of both recruitment and support for school governing bodies.
32. Much has been made in recent years, evidenced again in the report from the Councillors' Commission, of the importance of attracting and retaining councillors from all backgrounds and age groups and providing them with a reasonable *work-life* balance. These objectives will not be achieved if there are insufficient Members to effectively carry the workload involved.

Democratic Deficit

33. At present in the County there are 312 District Councillors and 126 County Councillors.
34. The reduction from the present 438 principal authority councillors to whatever figure is finally determined for the Unitary Council will be significant.
35. Whilst almost 94% of the County is parished, this covers only 77% of the population at present. For the remainder, at least for now, the Unitary Authority councillor will be their only locally elected representative. This factor is also relevant in terms of Member workloads.

Electorates, Population and Member/Elector Ratios

36. Appendix 4 details previous (to 2001), current and predicted (to 2013) electorate and population figures for the County. Our own population projections are a little more cautious than those produced by the Office of National Statistics (ONS). This might in part at least be a reflection of the different methodologies used. However, we are confident in the robustness of our own statistics which are based on many years of local analysis.
37. These figures illustrate a stable/modestly increasing position for both the electorate and the population overall.

38. For illustrative purposes only at this stage, the Council's current size, i.e. 126 Members, produces a member/elector ratio of 1:3,131 based on the 2008 electorate and on the 2013 electorate projection this would increase to 1:3,196.
39. These ratios are in stark contrast to those referenced in Paragraph 13. In addition, the Boundary Committee's draft recommendations in Shropshire propose a Unitary Council with a ratio of 1:3,121.

Single/Multi-Member Divisions

40. The County Council's Unitary proposal initially suggested single Member divisions as the basis of a new electoral scheme.
41. Having considered this issue in greater depth, there are now varying views within the Council between single and multi-Member divisions. Against this background, the Council will determine its final position on this particular issue when making its submission at Stage 3 of the Review (Electoral Arrangements).

Consultation

42. The County Council has undertaken a major consultation exercise to seek peoples' views on its future local area arrangements. Included in that consultation was a specific question about what people might consider to be the most appropriate number of councillors for the Durham Unitary Authority.
43. The majority of respondents were keen to at least maintain the current number of councillors, with a large proportion of people saying that this should be increased. Some of the comments included:
 - *Fewer councillors would struggle to adequately represent the communities they serve. (Real concerns over the workloads councillors are having to take on).*
 - *More councillors are needed to adequately represent communities in the large rural areas of County Durham.*
 - *Should maintain the current number of councillors but in single wards.*
 - *More collective working between Councillors is necessary.*
 - *Councillors need to be accessible to people so there should be no reduction in numbers.*
 - *Numbers should be decided on by need not by cost.*
 - *One size does not fit all and mix and match approach is needed as some areas may be alright with single member representation but others may need more than one councillor.*
 - *Distances between communities in large rural areas need to be considered.*
 - *The fewer councillors there are the greater the workload. This would better suit retired people and could be a barrier to encouraging younger people to become councillors.*

- *Do not need less as the numbers of councillors will substantially reduce come 1 April 2009. People are concerned about adequate representation and the loss of experience from existing councillors. (What happens if a councillor is ill or on holiday?).*
44. In contrast, minority views were expressed which included the desire for less councillors, in part to save money, the need to look at proportional representation and a preference for single member divisions.
 45. Consultation has also taken place on the issue of council size with the Borough/District Councils in the County, the Parish and Town Councils via the County Association and the Fire and Police Authorities.

Conclusion

46. Notwithstanding the lack of clarity at this moment in time around the Council's new governance structure (including any new area arrangements) this submission demonstrates the very considerable demands that will be placed upon Members from April, 2009. As such, the Council is of the view that its present size, i.e. 126 Members, is the minimum requirement for a 'fit for purpose' unitary authority for County Durham.
47. The Council will reserve its judgement on a final figure until it assesses the best fit with the new electoral divisions when these are developed in the next stage of the Review.