



# Northumberland

## County Council

COUNCIL

DATE: 2<sup>ND</sup> NOVEMBER 2022

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Electoral Review – Part One Council Size Submission

Report Authors: Interim Senior Service Director

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### **Purpose of report**

To update Council on the Electoral Review of Northumberland County being undertaken by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) and to present for agreement the Council's Council Size Submission on part one of the Electoral Review.

### **Recommendations**

**It is recommended that Council:**

- 1. Notes the update on the Electoral Review currently being undertaken by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE).**
- 2. Consider and agrees the Council Submission on Council Size on part one of the Electoral Review.**
- 3. Delegates to the Interim Senior Service Director in consultation with Leader of Council, power to make, necessary, final amendments to the submission document prior submitting this to the LGBCE.**

### **Link to Corporate Plan**

This report links to all aims and priorities of the Corporate Plan.

### **Key issues**

1. At the end of 2021, The Local Government Commission for England (LGBCE or 'The Commission') notified the Council of its plan to undertake an Electoral Review for Northumberland County Council.
2. The Council did not request the Review but instead the review has been triggered due to Northumberland meeting the LGBCE's the Commission's criteria for electoral inequality in a number of its Divisions.
3. Throughout the Review, the Commission invites views and submissions from the Council (as a whole), political groups and communities. The Commission will use

these submissions to inform its determinations and judgements on Council size and proposed Divisional Boundaries.

4. The electoral review presents an opportunity to shape the Council for the future. It helps Members consider how they represent their communities and ensures that governance arrangements reflect long-term ambitions. When the Commission considers actual boundaries, they aim to build electoral wards that reflect communities and ensure electoral fairness for future elections.

### **Background**

5. All Members were invited to a briefing provided by the Commission on 16th March 2022. At that session, the Commission outlined: the key elements of the review; the timetable; and opportunities for engagement.
6. In short, the Electoral Review has two distinct parts:
  - **Part 1, Council size** - before re-drawing ward boundaries, the Commission will come to a view on the total number of councillors to be elected to the council in future. The Commission will form the conclusion on council size after hearing the Council's (and/or councillors') views during the preliminary phase.
  - **Part 2, Ward boundaries**: once the Commission has reached a judgement on Council-size, it will re-draw ward boundaries to meet statutory criteria. Members and other stakeholders will have an opportunity to put forward their ideas in two phases of public consultation.
7. This report deals with Part One of the Review – Council Size. The Commission do not consider Divisional boundaries until they have completed this phase. At its briefing with Members in March 2022, the Commission invited submissions on Council Size from the Council (as a whole), political groups and individual members. **Appendix 1** of this report sets out the Council's proposed submission (subject to Council agreeing to the recommendations in this report).

### **NCC's Council Size Submission**

8. The Council's Submission in **Appendix 1** answers the questions posed in the Commission's Council Size submission template. The Council's Group Leaders have been engaged by Officers in the development of this Submission. In addition, all Members were invited to complete a questionnaire which sought information on time spent across the full range of Member activities. The results of the Survey were used to inform the Council Size Submission. The Submission sets out evidence and arguments for either the current Council size (67) or, an increase to 70 Members and asks the Commission to consider both sizes in reaching a final judgement on Council size. This evidence in the submission is based on:
  - Governance arrangements;
  - Scrutiny functions; and,
  - The representational role of councillors in the local community and how they engage with people, undertake casework and represent the Council on outside bodies.

9. The Commission will make its judgment on council size by considering three broad areas:
- **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.

10. Paragraphs 11-36 (below) outline:

- What the Commission means by each of three broad areas they use to determine council size;
- The evidence the Commission are looking for to support a submission and,
- A summary of the conclusions in Northumberland's Council Size Submission on those three broad areas. The more detailed evidence is set out in the Submission itself (see Appendix 1).

## **Governance arrangements**

11. The Commission aims to ensure that councils have the right number of councillors to take decisions and manage the business of the council in an effective way now and in the future. The Commission is looking for evidence about cabinet and/or committee responsibilities, number of committees and their workload, delegation to officials, other bodies and plans for the future.

## **Council's response**

### ***Electorate and Council Size***

12. Our current Council size (67 Members) is on the upper quintile of our range (67) compared with our CIPFA comparator authorities and just above the median number for the range (63). The lower quintile in the range is 48 Members. NCC's current Council size is not outside the range of our statistical near neighbours. A modest increase to 70 Members would place NCC just above the upper quintile (67) for our CIPFA comparator authorities.
13. In developing our Council Size Submission, we have considered the arguments for an increase to 70 Members alongside the evidence for maintaining the current Council size of 67 Members. A Council size of 70 Members would produce a modest reduction in the ratio of 'Electorate to Member' when averaged across all Divisions. Alongside this, as stated above, three additional Members would take account of the forecast increase (just over 11,000) in electorate across the County, whilst ensuring Division Boundaries reflect existing community identities.
14. The unitary Northumberland County Council was created with single member divisions. Alnwick became the County's only two-member division from May 2013. Single member representation throughout the county enables accountability and effective representation by offering a uniform pattern of single member divisions for the whole of the Council. While ensuring a uniform division pattern is not a requirement under

legislation, a single member division pattern can still be achieved that delivers electoral equality and reflects the identities and interests of the local communities in the Alnwick area. Single representation in the Alnwick area as part of this review would bring this part of the county back in line with the rest of Northumberland.

### ***Strategic Leadership and Council Size***

15. The current Council size (67) has, since the creation of the Unitary County Council, proved adequate to establish Leadership and Cabinet arrangements covering the broad spectrum of the Council's functions and services. The Council has had sufficient strategic leadership capacity to participate in new governance structures such as the North of Tyne Combined Authority for example.

### ***Performance, governance, Covid and budget.***

16. Since the Unitary County Council was formally established, the performance of services and functions has generally been considered to be good. In particular, performance in critical functions such as Children's and Adults' Services as well as schools is currently positive.

17. The strong performance in key functions such as services to Children, Adults and in schools suggests 67 Members has proven adequate to provide strategic direction and oversight, and to drive improvement in the Council's strategic functions. The Council's sound and sustainable financial position is evidence we have an effective number of Members (67) to ensure strategic decision-making, oversight and stewardship of the Council's strategic financial position. However, we note current and future financial pressures alongside financial pressures on residents themselves will demand maximum participation of Members at strategic and ward / community levels.

18. Where there are areas of service improvement required, these have been identified by Members and reflected in the Administration's Corporate Plan priorities. There is no evidence to suggest the Council's service performance is adversely impacted from having too few or too many Members.

19. The 67 Member Authority has, since its creation, delivered well-performing functions, services, sound financial management and has identified and responded to strategic and local issues that require improvement. There is compelling evidence that the Members could not effectively discharge their strategic leadership and representative functions with less than 67 Members. In short, we consider 67 to be NCC's minimum requirement.

20. However, looking to the future, we have also considered in this Submission a modest increase to 70 Members. Our learning from the experience of the Covid Pandemic provides evidence for such a modest increase. In common with councillors across the country, NCC Member capacity was, during the Pandemic, stretched to respond to a flood of resident and business enquiries as well as representing their interests and helping to coordinate support. Whilst Covid restrictions are now lifted, Covid has not gone away and, unfortunately, we cannot rule out the risk of future, similar pandemics. Alongside these risks, other national and global trends such cost-of-living pressures on households point towards an even greater role for local government and the need for comprehensive Member responses.

### ***Governance Review and council size***

21. The Caller Review focused in particular on the breakdown in relationships at the most senior levels of the organisation. There is no evidence from Caller that the governance issues resulted from having the wrong Council size. However, as part of the response to Caller, the Council's improvement plan is very much focused on ensuring NCC is a Member-led authority now and for the future. This creates a strong argument for a minimum baseline of 67 Members or even a modest increase to 70 Members.

### ***Current and future national and regional policy trends and council size***

22. The creation of the North of Tyne Combined Authority (NTCA) has brought substantial benefits to Northumberland and the wider North of Tyne area. Naturally, this has increased the demands on Members at a strategic leadership level as well as at scrutiny levels. Currently, North East Authorities are developing, with Government, an expanded Combined Authority and Devolution Deal to cover a larger geography. Assuming the new, larger Combined Authority is established to replace the existing NTCA, the new Combined Authority governance should involve at least the same level of commitment from NCC Members as for the existing arrangements in the NTCA.
23. Our Member Survey of July - August 2022 indicates a high and rising caseload for Members, significantly impacted by the Covid Pandemic and likely to remain high in the medium term due to the social and economic challenges faced by households. Again, this creates a strong argument for a minimum baseline of 67 Members or even a modest increase to 70 Members.

### ***Geography, population and Council Size***

24. Getting across the large and sparsely populated rural areas presents unique challenges for Members, particularly so during extreme weather events when our most rural settlements are vulnerable.
25. Alongside our large, rural areas, we also have more urban areas concentrated mostly (but not exclusively) in the South-East of the County. These areas include some of our most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, presenting a high and complex caseload for Members.
26. Whilst our Local Plan sets out policies for housing and employment growth, the projected increase in our older population will likely increase demand for Council services as well as advocacy from Members.
27. The diversity of our towns and villages is reflected in our having 162 Town & Parish Councils across the County. Members are expected to attend Town & Parish meetings regularly to ensure their needs and views are represented at a County Level.
28. The projected increase in electorate of approximately 11,000 by 2028 and the unique geography of Northumberland, provides evidence for a Council size of no less than 67, with the potential for a modest increase to 70 Members. The increase in the electorate will be driven largely by forecast housing growth in the South and East of the County. However, we also forecast not insubstantial pockets of electorate growth in other parts of the County including in North Morpeth. Northumberland's towns, villages and smaller settlements have distinct identity and cohesion and to a large extent that is reflected in current Member representation of Divisions. As our electorate is forecast to grow and as Divisional boundaries are redrawn to ensure electoral equality, it will be important to residents and Councillors (at County and Town & Parish levels) that

community identity and cohesion is respected and maintained as far as possible. A relatively modest increase to 70 Members could, it is argued, accommodate the forecast increase in electorate in those areas with the most significant growth whilst helping to mitigate fragmentation of well-established communities as boundaries are redrawn.

### ***Deprivation and Council Size***

29. Northumberland has some of the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the country. Many of these neighbourhoods are clustered in the urban South-East of the County, although there exist significant pockets of disadvantage in other parts of the County. Higher levels of disadvantage drive higher levels of individual, complex caseload for Members as well as the need for Members to represent these issues in Full Council and in committees. Importantly, the challenges of poverty are not confined to the urban areas of the County. Our rural communities face obstacles of connectivity, employment and in-work poverty. All of these issues demand active support and representation from Members.

### ***Challenges, changes and Council Size***

30. Whilst increased use of digital interfaces could reduce travel times for Members, our recent Member survey indicated a continued preference for face-to-face meetings. And, whilst digital will make the Council's 'front-door' more accessible for residents to transact business and resolve issues, we note that Member caseload is most often driven by more complex cases which are harder to resolve in digital interfaces. Further, increased use of digital has the potential to increase demands on Members as residents demand higher levels of accessibility to local Members.

31. Beyond Council services, the broader trend to online products and services could further marginalise some communities and increase demand for Member support.

### **Scrutiny Functions**

32. Every local authority has mechanisms to scrutinise the executive functions of the council and other local bodies. They also have significant discretion over the kind (and extent) of activities involved in that process. In considering council size, the Commission will want to satisfy itself that these responsibilities can be administered in a convenient and effective way. The Commission is looking for evidence about the number of councillors our authority needs to hold decision makers to account and ensure the council can discharge its responsibilities to other organisations.

### **Council's response:**

#### ***Accountability, Regulation, Outside Bodies and Council Size***

33. The current Council size (67) has, since the creation of the Unitary Council, ensured an active and participative Scrutiny Function. NCC has actively reflected on its Scrutiny function, with the current number, size and operation of Scrutiny Committees evolving to the current structure.

34. The Council, through Members and Officers is able to discharge its regulatory functions although Members have indicated the need for additional training for committees and work on outside bodies. Some 79% of Councillors responding to a recent Survey said that the workload associated with committees and outside bodies is about right. Some 21% said the current workload is too high. The combined Council and partnership

response to the Covid Pandemic as well as recent severe weather events is evidence that Member capacity is sufficient to participate positively across the range of outside bodies in the County. Further evidence of this can be found in the number, range and scale of investment initiatives NCC has secured for the Country through the Combined Authority and Borderlands Partnership.

## **Representational Role of Councillors**

35. The Commission understands that there is no single approach to representation and members will represent and provide leadership to their communities in different ways. However, they are interested in hearing about the extent to which members routinely engage with communities and how this affects workload and responsibilities. The Commission is looking for evidence about how councillors interact with their communities, their caseloads and the kind of support they need effectively to represent local people and groups.

### **Council's response**

#### ***Caseload and Council Size***

36. Whilst the Council supports Members in their casework through a range of mechanisms, Members have indicated a high and rising caseload as a result of Covid, financial pressures on households and changing expectations. Changing engagement channels can make resident engagement more efficient and lessen the need for Member travel. However, a wider menu of engagement and more instantaneous channels of communication may actually lead to higher caseload.

### **Conclusions and recommendations**

37. Based on the evidence set out in the Council Size Submission (Appendix 1), and summarised above, the current Council size (i.e. 67 Members) has been effective in discharging its strategic leadership, decision-making and scrutiny and partnership functions, as well as the wider representational and advocacy role of County Councillors. However, given the projected increase in electorate by 2028 and, the unique geography of Northumberland, the Submission also sets out evidence and arguments for a modest increase to 70 Members. The Submission therefore asks the Commission to consider the merits of both Council sizes in reaching its final judgement on NCC's Council size.

### **Recommendations**

**It is recommended that Council:**

- 1. Notes the update on the Electoral Review currently being undertaken by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE).**
- 2. Consider and agrees the Council Submission on Council Size on part one of the Electoral Review.**

3. **Delegates to the Interim Senior Service Director in consultation with Leader of Council, power to make, necessary, final amendments to the submission document prior submitting this to the LGBCE.**

### **Next Steps in the Boundary Review**

38. Subject to Council agreement, the final Submission will be forwarded to the Commission for consideration. The Commission has also made some specific document requests including: geocoded electoral register; current and forecast electorate; forecasting methodology; housing development data; polling district maps; polling district review report; parish electoral arrangements and maps; local orders and governance changes; and, stakeholder details. These will be provided to the Commission and can also be made available on request.
39. Between now and the Commission making a final determination on Council size, the Commission may ask for clarification or changes to the information we have provided (for example, where there are differences between the Council's and the Commission's electorate forecasts). The Commission will meet on 15th November to consider our Council Size Submission and determine the council size for Northumberland. The Boundary Review will then progress to the second phase on Division patterns which will include:
  - Consultation on Division patterns - 22 November 2022 – 30 January 2023
  - Commission Meeting: Draft Recommendations - 11 April 2023
  - Consultation on Draft Recommendations - 25 April – 3 July 2023
  - Commission Meeting: Final Recommendations - 12 September 2023
  - Statutory Order laid - Autumn 2023
  - Order made - Winter 2023
  - Implementation – May 2025

### **Implications**

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|------------------------------------|--|
| <b>Policy</b>                      | This report links to all aims and priorities of the Corporate Plan.  |
| <b>Finance and value for money</b> | Whilst this report and the Council Size Submission to the LGBCE do not contain direct financial implications, any determination by the Commission to increase or reduce the Council size would have consequent financial implications for the Council. Also, changes to Division boundaries made by the Commission may have cost implications relating to changes to electoral arrangements. |
| <b>Legal</b>                       | The statutory powers of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England to undertake and implement a Boundary Review are contained in Part 3 of the Local   |



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|   | Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009.<br>In accordance with Part 3 of the Council's Constitution, matters in relation to electoral arrangements are reserved to full Council.                            |
| <b>Procurement</b>  | N/A   |
| <b>Human Resources</b>  | N/A   |
| <b>Property</b>   | N/A   |
| <b>Equalities</b><br>(Impact Assessment attached)<br>Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/><br>N/A <input type="checkbox"/> | Part one of the Boundary Review considers the role of Members to represent their constituents, including marginalised and disadvantaged groups.   |
| <b>Risk Assessment</b>  | N/A   |
| <b>Crime &amp; Disorder</b>   | N/A   |
| <b>Customer Consideration</b>   | N/A   |
| <b>Carbon reduction</b>   | The Council Size Submission (Part one of the Boundary Review) identifies the high and growing importance of climate change as a policy issue that requires Member involvement at strategic, community and partnership levels. |
| <b>Health and Wellbeing</b>   | Part one of the Boundary Review considers the role of Members to represent their constituents, including marginalised and disadvantaged groups.   |
| <b>Wards</b>  | All Wards   |

**Background papers:**

N/A

**Report sign off.**

***Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:***

|  |                      |
|--|----------------------|
|  | Full Name of Officer |
| Interim Chief Executive                      | Rick O'Farrell       |
| Monitoring Officer/Legal                     | Suki Binjal          |
| Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer | Jan Willis           |
| Relevant Executive Director                  | -                    |
| Portfolio Holder(s)                          | Cllr Glen Sanderson  |