



Westmorland
& Furness
Council

westmorlandandfurness.gov.uk

Council Size Submission

Submission on behalf of
Westmorland & Furness Council



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Context for our proposal - A submission for Westmorland and Furness Council

Westmorland & Furness is a unitary authority, formed in 2023 through local government reorganisation. At its formation, the authority was granted a council size of 65 Councillors. This was to ensure a good level of representation for local communities as the new authority was developed and the functions of the three preceding District Councils and the County Council were integrated into a single authority. Wards were based on the existing wards/divisions of the previous councils (although configured in a different way), some of which had not been reviewed for a considerable amount of time. As a result, there is significant electoral inequality between wards across the authority area which will be resolved through this review. In addition, anticipated residential development is taking place across the area but, as is common across the country, differs in size and scope between wards and communities. Some towns and communities will see ongoing continued growth in the coming years, whilst others will remain relatively unchanged in terms of the number of local government electors. As a result, this review is looking ahead 6-7 years beyond the end of the review in an attempt to equalise representation at the end of that timeframe.

The preceding councils had a total of 123 district councillors (36 from Barrow-in-Furness; 38 from Eden; 51 in South Lakeland) and 84 in Cumbria County Council (now split between this authority and Cumberland; 38 of the former County Council divisions are now within Westmorland & Furness).



Since the authority was formed, considerable work has been done by all service areas to bring the operational and strategic functions together. Work previously done by three district and one county council is now being undertaken by a single authority working across different office locations and with a digitally enabled workforce enabled to work remotely. The work to ensure functions can be seamlessly integrated into one core service, whilst continuing to serve communities across a wide geographical area and with distinct and varying needs, has been substantial and more work is continuing. As such, significant reductions in the numbers of officers or Councillors is not currently something that can be considered. The authority inherited overheads in terms of governance and strategic planning that are still being worked through against a competing set of priorities to deliver the new corporate plans and ensure the needs of communities are met in a changing and challenging environment.

In a recent public statement, Cllr Dyan Jones (then Cabinet member for Customer and Waste Services) explained “On 1 April 2023 Westmorland and Furness Council took over the delivery of council services, replacing the former district councils in Barrow, Eden and South Lakeland and Cumbria County Council. While the county council had delivered its services across the whole of the county, prior to 2023 the district councils had, over nearly 50 years, developed ways of working that suited their individual areas, their individual communities’ needs and, as ‘sovereign’ councils, were able to set their own priorities and their own policies on how services would be delivered in their respective areas, within any rules laid out in national legislation. This meant that, on 1 April 2023, Westmorland and Furness Council inherited services from the former district councils that had many differences in the way they were managed. Some of those differences were subtle, perhaps a different type of form being used for a grant application or a different reporting procedure for certain services. But others, such as the way waste and recycling services are delivered, are more obvious, as they are services that are used and relied on by almost all of our residents, every week. The former district councils had developed collection solutions to suit the different areas and differing needs.”

The consolidation of these different approaches will continue to take some time to finalise, as the existing service delivery must continue until they are aligned.

Future government strategies will continue to impact on the delivery of services across the authority area. For example, the ‘Simpler recycling’ strategy may result in changes to waste and recycling collection and processing, making the merger of three disparate approaches more difficult as the rules and guidelines change. This means progress may be slower than hoped in aligning service delivery. The authority’s economy is focused on tourism, shipbuilding and agriculture. All of these are impacted by the national economy and global influences. The ongoing ‘cost of living’ crisis is having an impact on tourism figures and therefore the local economy. Agriculture is under ongoing pressure as evidenced by recent national protests. The shipyard in Barrow continues to produce military submarines and is undergoing an expansion due to recent new developments, although national defence and industrial prioritisation may change over time.

As the third largest unitary authority in England, Westmorland & Furness covers a vast and largely rural area, stretching for more than 100 kilometres north-to-south and covering more than 3,745 square kilometres. It encompasses some of the most isolated parts of the country. Across the authority area, there are a total of 146 parish councils. The Authority represents a large and diverse area, with communities facing and experiencing different and diverse challenges. The preceding authorities were distinct and different, and the communities in Westmorland & Furness continue to have their own identities, interests and priorities. The needs of the communities in Barrow (electorate around 42,000), Kendal (23,000) and Penrith (13,000) differ from those of the multitude of small rural parishes (117 of the 146 parishes have fewer than 1,000 electors), and individual parishes and communities have their own distinct identities, priorities and issues.

The officer corps of the authority is headed by Chief Executive Sam Plum, supported by the Leadership Team of nine senior staff covering the broad range of services delivered by the authority.

At the May 2022 elections, to elect 65 Councillors to the 33 wards (initially to the shadow authority, and ultimately representing the new authority from 2023), 36 Liberal Democrat, 15 Labour, 11 Conservative, 2 Independent and 1 Green Party councillors were elected. Cllr Jonathan Brook (Liberal Democrats) is the Leader of the Council.

The Council's Constitution was developed ahead of the formal inception of the authority, bringing the different governance approaches and backgrounds of the different councils into a single new authority. It remains under continuous review. Delegations are in place to ensure the Council remains agile.

[Link: Council's constitution](#)

[Link: Director's scheme of delegation](#)

[Link: Leaders Scheme of Delegation under Directors Scheme of Delegation](#)

The current Constitution was published in June 2024. Amendments to the Constitution are brought before Full Council as part of the continuous review process.

Regular Leadership Team meetings and Cabinet meetings take place to agree the strategic direction and long-term planning of the Council.

Whilst the Council is actively working to integrate the different approaches undertaken by the predecessor authorities, the current number of Councillors provides a strong basis for ongoing strategic leadership of addressing those challenges. All Council services have a portfolio holder with overall strategic responsibility for the function, and with adequate Committee and Scrutiny functions to ensure democratic accountability continues across Council services. An increase in the number of Councillors would give greater choice for selection onto Committees, and help reduce workload pressures on individual Councillors. However, a significant increase in Council Size would decrease effectiveness as there would be more voices to lead or scrutinise, but without specific roles or duties assigned to them. Similarly, a large reduction in the number of Councillors would lead to significant disruption to strategic oversight due to the restrictions placed on Cabinet Members not being part of certain other Committees; a lack of Members could result in a reduced ability to service the functions of the Council.

The work to integrate the disparate strands of work into a single unitary authority is considerable and, due to a changing national political, social and economic landscape, has perhaps taken longer than originally anticipated. As such, the next stage of the future strategic development of the authority will be focused on consolidation, refinement and improvement. As services become fully integrated, there will be more scope to review the underpinning Constitution and, perhaps, to then investigate any possible benefits of reducing Council Size. However, at this time such a reduction would be detrimental to the strategic planning, service delivery, and community representation roles of the Council.

It is important to recognise that, as a unitary authority, Westmorland & Furness has both the functions of the historic district councils and the broad overarching functions of the old County Council. As such, a significant proportion of the authority's resource is utilised to service authority-wide functions such as education, social care and transport. As a strategic authority, Westmorland & Furness also has a role in regional policy making and service delivery. In addition, the communities across the authority area are vastly different in terms of population, demographics, priorities and the issues faced.



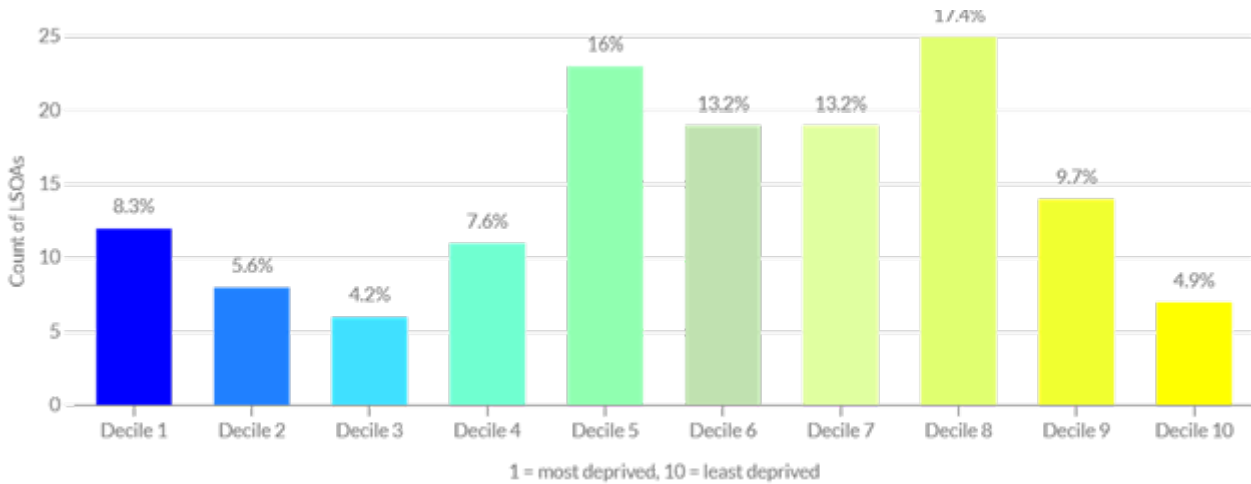
Local Authority Profile

The authority area is the third largest unitary authority in the country by area (3,745 square kilometres stretching from the upper Tyne Valley to Morecambe Bay and home to a wide range of diverse communities) and has a largely rural population base being the most sparsely populated unitary authority in England.

The area has few large towns including Barrow (42,000 electors), Kendal (23,000) and Penrith (13,000) and many much smaller communities. Of the 146 parishes in the area, 117 have electorates of fewer than 1000. This difference, between urban centres and sparsely populated rural communities, is reflected in the issues and priorities of communities; in turn the needs of communities are reflected in the representation they require from their elected officials. Walney Island is geographically separated from the rest of the authority, accessible via the Jubilee Bridge. The majority of the area is on the mainland, which includes a number of lakes and mountains which limit connectivity between communities. Whilst parishes and communities are scattered throughout the authority area, road transport is limited by geography and the need to preserve the two National Parks. For example, driving from Walney Island at one end of the authority to Alston at the other takes over 2 hours; public transport is often not a viable option with the same journey taking 5 hours using a combination of bus and rail.

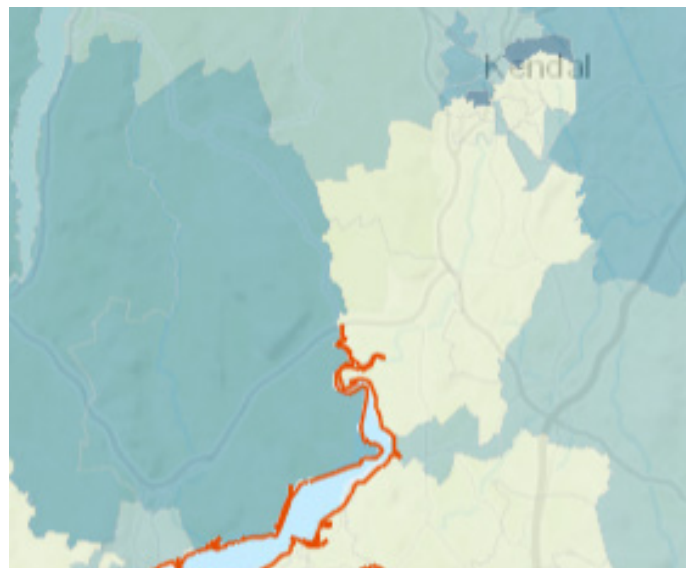
The area includes parts of both the Yorkshire Dales National Park and the Lake District National Park. Both exhibit relatively low levels of residential development and growth, and high levels of tourism. The National Parks comprise around 50% of the area.

Reports from the Cumbria Intelligence Observatory (www.cumbriaobservatory.org.uk) indicate average levels of deprivation overall, with 8.3% of the LSOAs (Lower Super Output Areas, or neighbourhoods) in the most deprived IMD (Index of Multiple Deprivation) decile, compared to 4.9% in the least deprived, but over 13% in each of deciles 5-8.



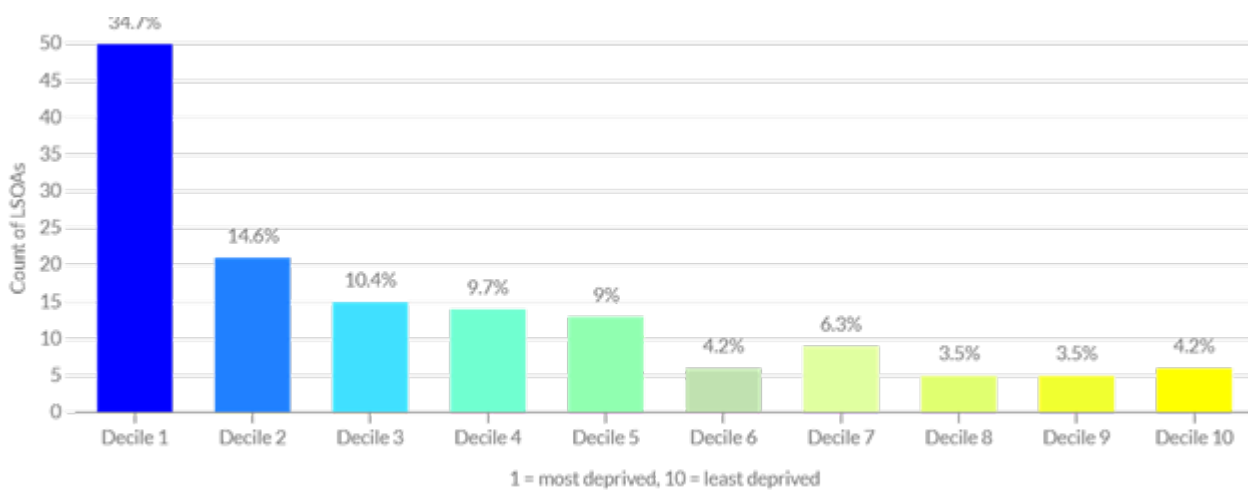
Index of Multiple Deprivation - LSOAs by decile in Westmorland & Furness (2019), from www.cumbriaobservatory.org.uk

Deprivation is not uniformly distributed throughout the area, with urban centres such as Barrow showing much higher levels (left, darker shading) compared to rural areas such as Levens and Crooklands (right, pale shading).



Index of Multiple Deprivation - LSOAs in Westmorland & Furness (2019), from www.cumbriaobservatory.org.uk

Around 35% of LSOAs in the area are considered amongst the most deprived 10% of neighbourhoods in the country in terms of living environment, which takes into account the quality of housing, measures of air quality and road traffic accidents.



IMD Living Environment Domain - LSOAs by decile in Westmorland & Furness (2019), from www.cumbriaobservatory.org.uk

The percentage of children under 16 living in families with low income is lower than the North West and England averages. The percentage of households in fuel poverty is 13%, similar to the regional and national averages. The number of households owed a duty under the Homelessness Reduction Act is lower than the regional and national average, and the number of households in temporary accommodation is very low (0.3 per 1000, compared to the North West of 1.8 per 1000, and England of 4 per 1000).

In the coming years the working age population as a percentage of all residents is expected to fall, whilst the proportion of older people is likely to increase. The current claimant count (for out of work benefits) is below the national average and has remained relatively stable over time. However, the proportion of residents on Universal Credit has been gradually increasing. In addition, the proportion of children (aged 0-15) in relative low income families in Westmorland & Furness has increased from 13.6% in the financial year ending 2015, to 15.1% in the financial year ending 2021, and to 17.9% in the financial year ending 2023 (**DWP data, link**), and in some parts of the authority area one in three children living in low income families (**Cumbria Revealed, link**). Child poverty has implications for a wide range of Council services, including education, social care, and public health.

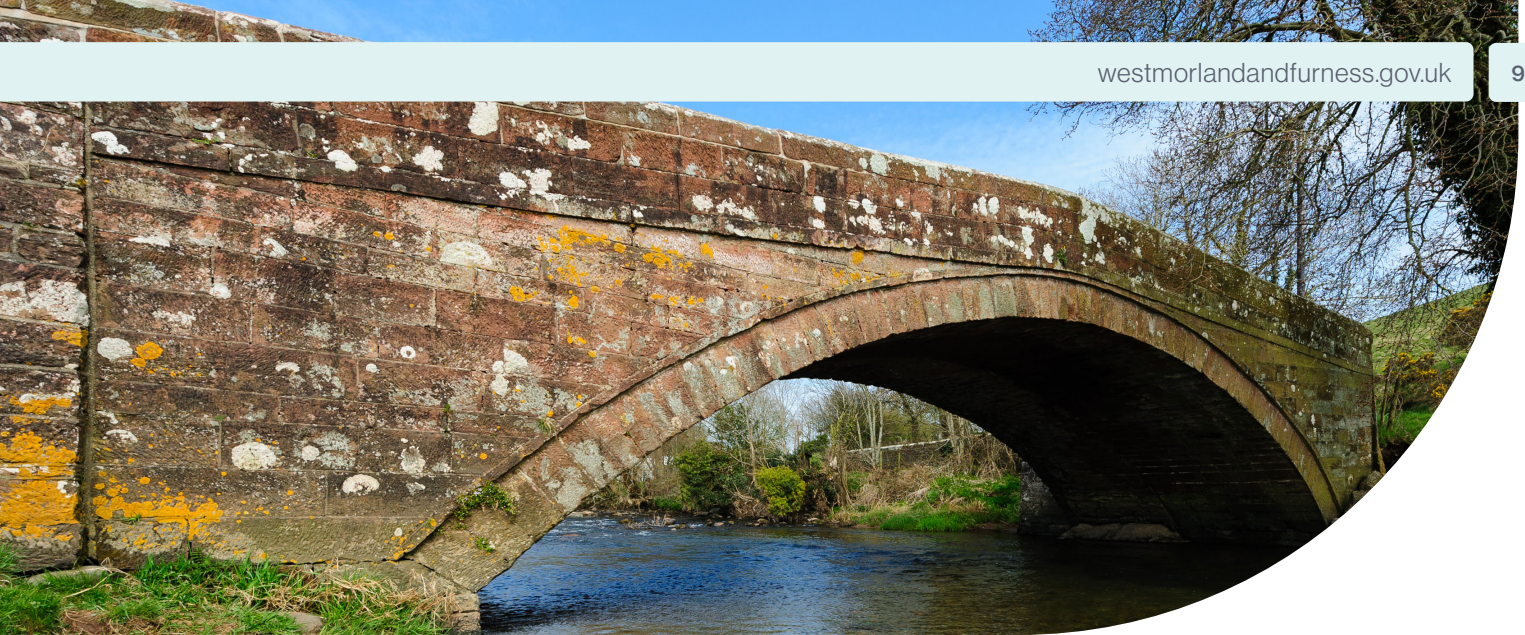
Employment within the local authority area highlights the significant roles of manufacturing (including shipbuilding in Barrow) and tourism, as well as agriculture and a higher than average number of small self-employed businesses.

The rurality of the area, and the wide spread of communities, can make representation more challenging. Councillors, in line with national guidance, recognise the value of local parish councils. Town and Parish Councils often provide a direct link to local people and help aggregate and consolidate the views of local communities. Town and Parish Council meetings are an ideal place for the views of local people to be shared and heard and for issues to be aired and discussed. As such, Councillors try to attend every parish council in their ward on a regular basis. The larger the ward area, the greater the chance of it including a larger number of Town and Parish Councils and the greater the risk of clashes of dates. Given the wide geographic spread, this can lead to many meetings of many different parishes, with significant travel between. Councillors carry out a number of important functions - attending Westmorland & Furness Council meetings, parish council meetings, and community activities, undertaking casework for their constituents and, for many Councillors, undertaking their regular paid work and be members of their own families. As a result, wards cannot become much larger as it would then become impossible to effectively represent the needs of many diverse and disparate communities. This can become more challenging due to the rural road network and geography, which limits direct links between some communities without long circuitous detours; the current and future configuration of wards is therefore important and defined in part by the geography to ensure Councillors can appropriately and effectively represent all communities within their ward.

The overall population is expected to increase, but not uniformly across the authority area. Much larger developments are planned in some centres, with little growth in rural areas. This difference will exacerbate the difference in representative needs. More tightly packed urban communities with higher levels of deprivation (such as Barrow) have very different needs compared to rural communities, whilst rural communities face their own issues in terms of access and transport and the impacts on their area by external factors.

The Council vision for Westmorland and Furness is to be 'a great place to live, work and thrive'. The Council Plan can be found at www.westmorlandandfurness.gov.uk/your-council/council-documents/council-plan. In it, the authority sets out the priorities within the themes of people, climate, communities, economy and culture, customers and the workforce.





Council Size

Strategic Leadership

The table below provides detail of the strategic leadership for Westmorland and Furness Council.

Topic	
Governance Model	<p>The Council has adopted an executive form of governance, with a Leader and Cabinet. Cabinet must have up to 9 other Councillors (i.e. 10 in total), who are responsible for certain policy decisions and high-level functions. Executive decisions may also be taken by the Leader, or a committee set up by the Cabinet, or by individual Cabinet members, or officers under the authorised scheme of delegation. Cabinet decisions are made within the budget or policy framework; other decisions are referred to Full Council.</p> <p>The Council has a number of other Committees, who make decisions on regulatory, staffing and similar functions such as planning and licensing (details are in the Constitution, link):</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Audit Committee 2. Standards & Governance Committee 3. Strategic Planning Committee 4. Local Area Planning Committees (x3) 5. Licensing & Regulatory Committees 6. Overview & Scrutiny Committees (x5) 7. Health & Wellbeing Board 8. Staffing Committee 9. Independent Persons Panel 10. Lake Administration Committee 11. Joint Arrangements 12. Joint Executive Committee Shared functions 13. Joint Overview & Scrutiny Committee 14. Cumbria Police, Fire & Crime Panel 15. Corporate Parenting Board 16. Locality Board (x3) 17. Pension Committee 18. Cumbria Local Pension Board

Topic	
	<p>All elected Councillors are members of the Locality Board that represents their area, based on the three predecessor district council boundaries. These Locality Boards give members of the public, service users and residents a greater say in Council affairs and have the ability to influence and engage with matters that affect their locality.</p> <p>Every Member of the Council is a member of their Locality Board. Each Locality Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Has a small amount of decision-making powers, including some funding for local projects and grant-making; • Has a significant influencing role, using their local voice to represent their communities to Council; • Has a key engagement role within their communities; • Develops and works with external partners within their locality; • Has a consultative role regarding Council decisions; and • Develops Locality Board plans for their area, to support targeted projects and funding against the identified priorities. <p>The Council is reviewing the role and impact of Locality Boards during 2024/25, with a view to implementing any changes in the 2025/26 municipal year. These may include both the geographic boundaries of the Locality Boards as well as the powers and funding of the Boards. There is currently no intention to remove Locality Boards, and the Council feels these remain an essential part of the Council structure at this time. This is because the local needs and issues differ between the three areas. The wide geographic area of the authority limits the ability of local people being able to engage effectively with the Council in a single location, whereas Locality Boards can operate at a more local and convenient location, and local-specific issues can be discussed more effectively at Locality Boards than at Cabinet. The direction of travel is for greater delegation to Locality Boards to ensure local needs are taken into account and addressed by the authority.</p> <p>New area-specific projects are continuing to develop, such as the investment in Barrow, and Locality Boards play a key role in supporting, engaging and influencing those projects.</p> <p>Consideration has been given to the strategic governance model in use in the authority, and the existing Leader and Cabinet, supported by Committees and Locality Boards, has been identified as the most appropriate for Westmorland & Furness. This ensures effective decision-making via the Cabinet and delegated authority; local issues can be identified and fed in to decision-making processes; and the broad range of skills, interests and experiences of Councillors can be utilised most effectively in topic-specific Committees.</p> <p>Link: Council's constitution (published June 2024) Link: Director's scheme of delegation</p>

Topic		
Portfolios	There are currently 10 Portfolios representing the service groups within the Council (as updated at Annual Council 2024 – link)	
	Portfolio	Responsibilities
	Leader & Economy	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> To provide strategic direction for the organisation and leadership for place. Represent the Council and its area at a regional and national level. Strategic Overview, External Relations, Communications, Policy and Performance, HR/OD, Transformation, Change, Regeneration, Economic Development, Nuclear.
	Deputy Leader & Finance	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> To deputise for the Leader as required and to help maintain a strategic overview of the organisation. Medium Term Financial Strategy and Planning; Budget Monitoring, Treasury Management; the Capital Programme, Core Financial Processes, Commissioning and Procurement, Insurance and Risk Management, Benefit Administration, Council Tax and NNDR, Legal and Corporate Governance, HR/OD, Health and Safety.
	Adult Care	Social Care Services for Older Adults, Physical Disabilities, Learning Disabilities, Mental Health, Active Cumbria, Health Integration, Public Health and Westmorland and Furness Care.
	Education, Inclusion & Skills Statutory Lead Member for Children's Services	S19 Children Act 2004 Lead Member for all children's services. Early years, Schools and post 16 Learning, Adult Learning, SEND, Skills and Apprenticeships, Home to school transport, partnerships.
	Children's Services	Children and Families, Early Help and Partnerships, Children's and Young People's Social Care, Child Sexual Exploitation, Young People, Youth Offending Service, Safeguarding, Fostering and Adoption, Corporate Parenting and Member Development.
	Highways, Assets & ICT	Highways, Street Lighting, Fleet, Windermere Ferry, Assets, Property, ICT and Digital.
	Sustainable Communities & Localities	Sustainable Communities, Locality Working, Rurality, Sparsity, Local Plan, Locality Working, Planning and Building Control, Libraries, Archives, Museums, Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion, Arts and Culture, Street Scene, Leisure and Parks.
	Climate, Biodiversity & Environmental Services	Climate Change, Biodiversity, Flood Prevention, Air Quality, Resilience Planning, Waste and Recycling Services.
	Housing & Customer Services	Housing, Homelessness and Domestic Abuse, Community Safety, Welfare, Housing Benefits, Poverty Alleviation, Refugees, Customer Services.
	Transport & Regulatory Services	Transport including Cycling, Active Travel, Public Rights of Way, Countryside Access, Environmental Health, Food Hygiene, Public Protection, Trading Standards, Licensing, Registrars, Coroners, Bereavement Services.

Topic	
	<p>Portfolios are reviewed and reconfigured at Annual Council to ensure they represent the diverse needs of the local community, whilst reflecting changing balances in priorities and workloads.</p> <p>Decision making can be made by Cabinet, the Leader, Officers or Portfolio Holders in line with the overall policies and budget (within the budget or policy framework) (Section 5.3 Constitution).</p> <p>Portfolio Holder roles are intensive with a broad range of responsibilities, some are also appointed to other appropriate committees. Portfolio Holders can also be appointed to other bodies and represent the council on external partnerships. Cabinet Members cannot be Members of the Scrutiny Committees and the Audit Committee, however they may attend meetings. They are supported by the Corporate Leadership Team. The role of a Portfolio Holder is effectively a full time position, and none of the Cabinet Members are able to have any other significant employment due to the amount of time and level of commitment required to undertake the duties.</p> <p>Cabinet continues to maintain a Joint Executive Committee with Cumberland (on which 4 Cabinet Members from Westmorland and Furness serve) to manage legacy issues and the remaining shared and hosted services.</p> <p>Given the range of responsibilities, including broad strategic roles (formerly from the County Council) it is not practical to reduce the size of Cabinet significantly. The current arrangements, which combine corporate joint responsibility with individual decision making within a framework, with appropriate oversight and scrutiny, works well and ensures decision-making is effective and reflects the needs of the authority and the communities it serves.</p>
Delegated Responsibilities	<p>The Council's Constitution details the responsibility for functions for Council, Cabinet and officers. This also includes the roles and responsibilities of the Cabinet members, Scrutiny, other regulatory committees and the Corporate Leadership Team.</p> <p>Day-to-day decision making is carried out by the appropriate officers in accordance with the officer scheme of delegation.</p> <p>All councillors are members of Full Council and take part in the decision making at the meetings.</p> <p>Cabinet consists of 10 members.</p> <p>The Constitution is reviewed regularly, and any changes are reported to and agreed by Council.</p>

Accountability

The table below provides detail of the accountability for Westmorland and Furness Council.

Topic	
Internal Scrutiny	<p>At its Annual Meeting Full Council appoints four Overview & Scrutiny Committees (Corporate; Children, Young People and Families; Health and Adults; Communities and Environment) each with 9 Members, in addition to the Joint Overview & Scrutiny Committee (6 Members). These cover the broad range of functions of the authority.</p> <p>Overview and Scrutiny supports the work of The Cabinet (para 6.1 Constitution) and Council as a whole, as well as reviewing and scrutinising decisions which affect residents of the area.</p> <p>The Committees hold inquiries into matters of local concern in which the public may take part, and have authority to invite external bodies to provide evidence or appear before it. This leads to reports and recommendations which advise the Cabinet, the Council as a whole, and, in some case, outside agencies, on policies, budgets, and service delivery. These Committees also monitor the decisions of the Cabinet, as well as having a consultative role on forthcoming decisions and development of policy. In addition, the Council has Joint Overview & Scrutiny Committees with neighbouring Cumberland Council.</p> <p>Given the broad range of functions of the authority, the role of the subcommittees is paramount in ensuring effective decision making, appropriate scrutiny and acceptable monitoring of decision making processes.</p> <p>Each Overview & Scrutiny Committee has 9 members. Cabinet Members may not be on these Committees. There is a general approach to try to reduce the overlap between membership as much as possible. As such, around half of all Councillors of the current membership may be part of an Overview & Scrutiny Committee.</p> <p>The structure and format of the Scrutiny function and Overview & Scrutiny Committees has been carefully reviewed and monitored. Each Committee has a wide remit of major importance. It is therefore not considered practical to reduce the number of Committees at this time of ongoing change, nor to reduce the number of Members on each. To work effectively, each Scrutiny Committee must have sufficient members to support effective discussion and debate, whilst also ensuring Members of the Council are not required to sit on too many Committees. The grouping of service areas into these Committees is considered appropriate and reflective of corporate, local and national priorities.</p> <p>Whilst there may be some overlap between members of different Committees, this is kept to minimum to ensure no single Member holds too many scrutiny roles, hence a large reduction in the number of Members would be detrimental to the function.</p>

Topic	
<p>Planning</p>	<p>The authority has a Strategic Planning Committee, responsible for strategic development management, comprising 8 Members, all being ward representatives from wards in that area.</p> <p>In addition, three Local Area Planning Committees, managed on the predecessor authority boundaries, are responsible for local planning matters. Each has 8 Members. The use of three planning committees is designed to reduce unnecessary travelling for all involved in the planning process, given the vast distances that would be required with a single planning committee.</p> <p>Members must have received adequate and appropriate training to sit on any planning committee.</p> <p>Whilst other authorities have many more Members involved in planning functions, the Council recognises the value in having appropriately trained Members making decisions effectively. There remains a need to represent the local communities, and retaining three separate local planning committees is considered the most effective way to deliver that. Planning Committees are relatively small with just 8 Members, reflecting the need for appropriately trained Members. Whilst the number of Local Planning Committees, and the division between Strategic and Local planning, has been reviewed through discussion, it is unlikely to change in the near future. That considered, it is noted that the ward boundaries for the authority may end up straddling the predecessor district boundaries and therefore the areas covered by the three Local Planning Committees may be revised in future to take any such changes into account.</p> <p>Given the broad geographic reach of the area, it is important to continue to maintain more than one local planning committees, to ensure the needs of local communities are effectively represented and to ensure local knowledge is retained on the Committee. Any reduction in the number of Councillors overall can impede the effective governance of the planning function by limiting the number of Members who are eligible to sit on the Committee.</p> <p>The committees meet approximately every four weeks, which requires time from the Members to read the agenda and reports, along with any background papers or information that can be found on the planning portal, via the website.</p>
<p>Licensing</p>	<p>The authority has a Regulatory Committee of 10-15 Members, the same Councillors of which serve on the Licensing Committee. Sub-committees are established by each Committee to review and determine individual cases as required. Members are required to be appropriately trained in order to serve on these Committees. The Constitution sets out the detailed roles of each Committee and the scheme of delegation that exists.</p> <p>Under current legislation, no substitute Members are permitted on these Committees (unlike some of the other Committees of the authority).</p> <p>Given the broad remit of Regulatory and Licensing Committees for a unitary authority, and the wide geographic area served by the authority, retaining the two functions as separate but linked Committees is prudent and simplifies proceedings for both Members and applicants.</p>

Topic	
<p>Other Regulatory Bodies</p>	<p>As noted above and in the Constitution, the Council is supported by a number of Committees. The number of these is kept to a minimum, with carefully specified Terms of Reference and scope to ensure best use of Member and Officer time and resources. Given the ongoing need to represent local people across the authority area across all functions of the authority, there remain a number of Committees that are necessary.</p> <p>In addition, the authority works closely with the two National Parks authorities, with the Cumbria Police and Fire services, and with the neighbouring authority of Cumberland. The authority also has a statutory role in providing care for children and young people and a Committee is in place to provide oversight and strategic development, and to ensure multi-agency working of that function. Committees are also in place for the other statutory duties such as adult care, and highways. These high-priority strategic functions represent a considerable proportion of the authority's resources and have a significant impact on many of the area's residents and every community.</p> <p>The Council has a detailed scheme of delegations, conferring considerable authority to Chief Officers within the budget and policy framework. Nonetheless, the role of accountable elected local representatives is vital to a healthy democracy, and significant decisions remain within the remit of Members.</p>
<p>External Partnerships</p>	<p>A considerable number of councillors are appointed to external bodies, with the 2023/24 appointments and list of all external bodies available here.</p> <p>These external bodies range from national appointments, regional bodies and local and consultative groups, through to community organisations. These appointments vary in nature and workload, dependent on the Terms of Reference of the body they are appointed to. Appointments are made at Annual Council or via Cabinet or the appropriate Locality Board.</p> <p>Some appointments are wide-reaching, and others being allocated to ward councillors where the body operates within their ward.</p> <p>The number and breadth of external appointments is large, reflecting the strategic role of the authority, the wide range of functions undertaken, and the large geographical reach of the authority's area.</p> <p>It is considered that these external appointments are of great importance to the local community and support the way the authority is able to deliver its functions. They each provide key value to the people in the area, and careful thought has been given to the number of Members on each body and the frequency of meetings. The Council does not feel that reducing the number of Bodies on which we are represented would be appropriate. A significant reduction in the number of Councillors would have a negative impact in the way we can represent the needs of local people, as representation through these external appointments would be diminished. Working strategically with external bodies through external appointments gives greater impact than the Council working alone, and represents good value for money and increased service delivery overall.</p>

Community Leadership

The table below provides detail of the community leadership for Westmorland and Furness Council.

Topic	
Community Leadership	<p>Councillors are actively involved within their Wards and most consider themselves to play a pro-active part in the communities they represent. The approach taken varies from councillor to councillor but all are involved in some or all of the following as part of their engagement with constituents:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Casework/Constituency matters • Town and Parish council meetings • Community/resident meetings <p>Out of the 65 members 31 are “twin hatted” representing Town and Parish council in the area (9 from the former Eden district area, 17 from South Lakeland, and 5 from Barrow).</p> <p>Members use a variety of methods to communicate with constituents, including face-to-face meetings, email and telephone calls. Some hold local surgeries or undertake a ward walk in their community to meet with local people. Some issue newsletters and some are active on social media to engage with their communities.</p> <p>Councillors attend town and parish council meetings within their ward, to both represent the voice of Westmorland & Furness Council to the parish, and to hear the views and concerns of local people. These interactions are vitally important, and enable the authority to remain alert to the needs of the many local communities it serves.</p> <p>Given the requirement to ensure Councillors serve approximately the same number of local government electors, there is a risk that rural Councillors would end up representing very large sparsely populated areas with more town and parish councils if the number of Councillors overall is reduced. Members recognise that having fewer Councillors overall would result in many needing to attend more town and parish councils to engage with local people, and this would be impossible to achieve. As such, some local communities may become more isolated and under-served by the authority. The aim of this review is to deliver electoral equality, which means not just having an equal number of electors for each Councillor to serve, but also enabling the voices of every elector and every community to be heard effectively and coherently. Attending town and parish council meetings is a key part of that activity.</p> <p>The sparsely populated rural communities of the area are separated by substantial geographic obstacles – rivers, lakes and mountains. These limit connectivity and transport between parish communities, and would hinder effective representation by Councillors traversing these areas. As a result, it is important that sufficient Councillors sit on Council to ensure effective representation.</p>

Topic	
	<p>In addition, many rural Councillors already represent multiple parish areas and regularly attend multiple parish council meetings. This is a key function in maintaining two-way dialogue, effective representation and convenient local government. Reducing the number of Councillors would result in rural Councillors each representing more parish areas and needing to attend more meetings. Members feel this is not viable, and would result in reduced representation and ineffective governance. It would also limit who may stand as a Councillor in future, given the significant impact this has on the time and availability of individuals.</p> <p>The report of the Independent Remuneration Panel early in 2024 (link) stated that Cabinet Members estimate they spent up to 40 hours per week on Executive Business; Chairs spent around 10 hours per week on Committee Business. The report states:</p> <p>“It was clear to us that apart from preparation and attendance at formal Cabinet and other formal meetings, Cabinet Members were required to undertake on a day to day basis extensive work associated with the responsibilities of their roles. Cabinet Members outlined a number of barriers to undertaking the role of a Cabinet Member, including the present level of Cabinet Member Special Responsibility Allowances, and travel time between meetings which could be extensive given the geographical footprint of the Council.”</p>
Casework	<p>Due to Covid, technology became an integral part of allowing members to carry out their roles and it has continued to play an important role. Each member is provided with a council email address following their election and provided with a laptop or tablet to enable them to carry out council business on. All public meetings are face to face. Some Informal officer meetings, briefings offer a hybrid option to attend but the majority of meetings are in person and this adds considerably to the demands of being a Councillor in Westmorland and Furness.</p>





Other Issues

Financial Considerations:

The current scheme of Member Allowances can be accessed from [this link](#). Councillors are not paid a salary for their work, but they do receive an annual Basic Allowance to cover the time that they put in to their role and, in some cases, also a Special Responsibility Allowance for particular roles which carry additional responsibilities, such as the Leader of the Council. The basic allowance is £13,500 per Councillor.

Any reduction in the size of Council overall could potentially release savings, although the increased workload per Councillor would be taken into account by the Independent Remuneration Panel and the resulting saving would likely be small. Similarly, any increase would increase the number of seats but may result in a recommendation of a reduction in per-Member allowance by the Independent Remuneration Panel, resulting in an overall small increase in costs associated with with IT provision an support.

Local Government Nearest Neighbour Group Comparisons:

Westmorland & Furness is a new council and, as such, is not included in the CIPFA Nearest Neighbours model. However, there is value in comparing this authority to other, broadly similar, councils.

Analysis of current unitary authorities suggests that the number of members is closely correlated with both their electorate and their population density. More sparsely populated areas have more member, all other things being equal. This is not surprising as it reflects the additional complexity, responsibility and burden on rural councillors serving disparate and distinct parish council areas and diverse rural communities.

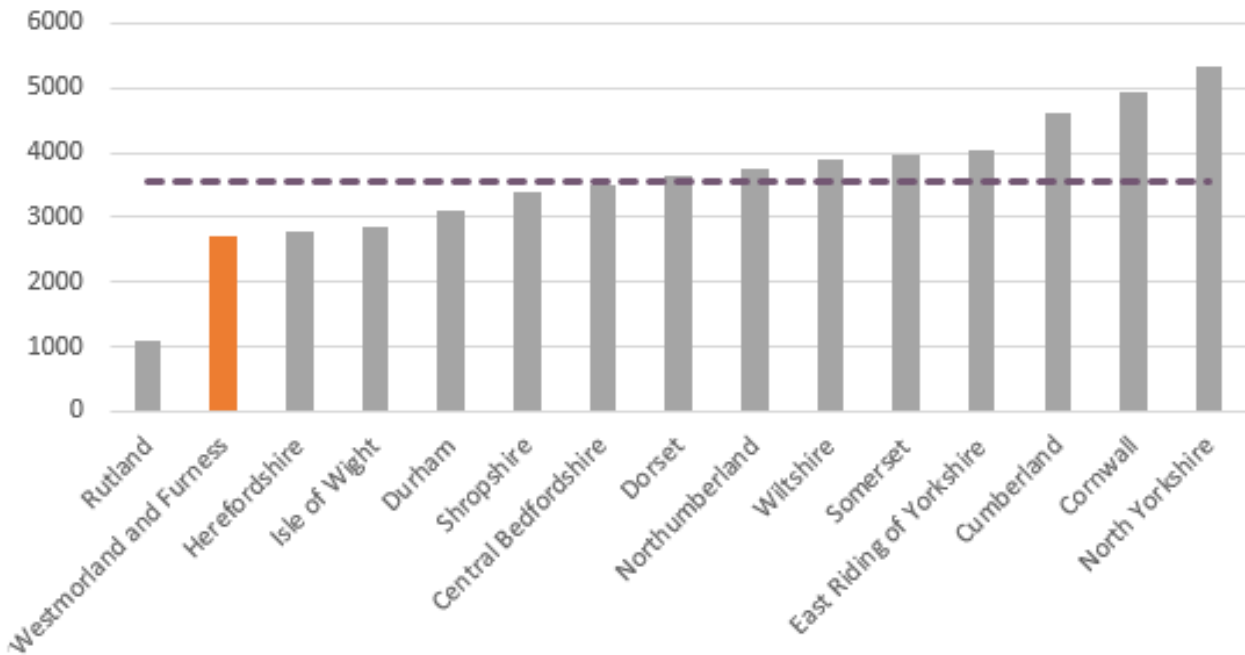
Looking solely at those unitary councils in England that have predominantly rural populations, we have developed the table below:

Local authority	Number of electors	No Cllrs	Ratio of electors to Cllrs	Population density (n/ km ²)	% of population in rural communities
Westmorland and Furness	175500	65	2700	60.4	79.6
Northumberland	251575	67	3755	63.9	70.8
North Yorkshire	478427	90	5316	76.6	73.1
Herefordshire	147429	53	2782	85.8	65.8
Cumberland	211735	46	4603	90.70	71.4
Shropshire	250146	74	3380	101.2	74.9
Rutland	29841	27	1105	107.5	100.0
East Riding of Yorkshire	270089	67	4031	142.4	60.0
Dorset	297542	82	3629	152.4	67.8
Wiltshire	382740	98	3906	156.8	67.4
Cornwall	431186	87	4956	160.9	83.0
Somerset	437457	110	3977	165.6	57.4
Durham	390322	126	3098	234.5	60.9
Isle of Wight	110695	39	2838	370.0	100.0
Central Bedfordshire	219869	63	3490	411.2	58.4
Mean			3571		

Based on this table, Westmorland & Furness currently has a lower number of electors per councillor than the group average, but notably has the lowest population density.



Electors/Councillor (Rural authorities)



Mean number of electors per Councillor shown by the dotted line.

Regression modelling of the number of councillors against the number of electors for any given unitary authority in England gives a fairly consistent result whether looking at all unitary authorities, or only rural unitary authorities.

Both Northumberland and East Riding of Yorkshire have 67 Councillors; both have higher elector to Councillor ratios (3755 and 4031 respectively, compared to 2700 for Westmorland & Furness); both are predominantly rural; and both have high numbers of parish councils (166 and 171 respectively, compared to 146 for Westmorland & Furness).

However, models and averages are based on other local authorities, each with their own circumstances, communities and governance arrangements. Changes in the number of Councillors in any one area affects the mean and the model, and therefore would impact on any proposed number suggested for this authority. It is therefore important that local circumstances, local issues, and the complexities and challenges experienced by this authority and the people and community it serves are not only taken into account, but at the forefront of the decision-making process when determining the most appropriate Council Size for Westmorland & Furness.

Summary

During the process of preparing the submission, a Member Working Group has met and considered the options for the future size of the Council. Different Council size options were reviewed.

(1) Reduce the number of Councillors.

A reduction in the number of Councillors may generate a small financial saving through reduced Member allowances. Given the requirement to ensure each Councillor serves the same number of electors, any reduction in the number of Councillors would result in urban Councillors each serving a slightly larger area (likely within the same broad urban community) but would result in an increase in the number of rural communities each Councillor serves (increasing travel costs). In addition to their role attending Council and Committee meetings, each Councillor is a representative for their local community. Part of that role involves attending town and parish council meetings and local events throughout their ward. Increasing the number of such town and parish councils for each Councillor would lead to an electoral and representative deficit and result in some communities not being adequately served. Further, given the ageing population and increased demands on adult social services, reduction would ill-serve the communities this authority serves. Reducing the number of Councillors could likely mean that the governance and committee structures would need to be reviewed and amended and not only does the Council not see any justification for that at the current time, doing so would be detrimental to service delivery given the current priority to consolidate functions and deliver priority services. In addition, the considerable geographic barriers of lakes and mountains limit connectivity between communities and lead to complex and challenging transport links. A reduction in the number of Councillors overall would inevitably lead to larger rural wards, which are unlikely to be viable and lead to increased isolation of communities; this would lead to reduced effectiveness and convenience of local governance and lead to wards that do not reflect local interests and identities.

(2) Retain the current number of 65.

Based on current forecast population for 2031 the ratio of number of electors to each councillor would be 2845, which would be an increase of 127 on current numbers. This increase in workload is likely to result in some Councillors representing more communities, as the growth in electorate is not uniform across the authority area. However, this appears to reflect the best balance in terms of value for money, statutory obligations, electoral equality, and the challenging and ambitious forward plans.

(3) Increase the number of Councillors.

Consideration was given to increasing the size of the Council, which was not felt to be necessary, despite the forecast growth in the population and therefore the electorate. A figure of 67-70 was investigated further, for which the ratio would be 2760 to 2642 electors to each councillor. An increase in numbers would see additional budget pressures to fund an increase in allowances and additional support required.

Recommendation:

Taking into account all relevant data and analysis, and considering our unique geography, Westmorland & Furness Council proposes that the number of councillors remains at 65 to effectively operate and represent the electorate in a fair, equitable and effective way.



Westmorland
& Furness
Council

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