

Southend-on-sea City Council Conservative Councillor Group

Council Size Submission

Southend-on-Sea City Council

About you

The Southend-on-Sea Council Conservative Councillor Group is the political grouping of Councillors who are a member of the Conservative and Unionist Party. The group currently has 18 Councillors from all parts of the City. The Conservative Councillor Group is currently the 2nd largest political group on Southend Council and is currently the leading group of the opposition. Before May 2024 the Southend Conservative Group were the administration group on Southend Council.

Context

The last time the Council reviews its ward boundaries and size of Council was in 2000 during this review the number of Councillors increased from 39 to 51. This is a 25% increase in Councillors. The main two reasons given for this increase was the decision for Southend to become a Unitary Authority and an expected increase in population. In reality the population since this time has only increased by 3% and so we believe that the increase in Councillors of 25% was too high and so a reduction in the number of Councils by 6 (to a total of 45 Councillors) would address this imbalance whilst also allowing for future population growth expected in developments such as the Garrison Development and Fossett's Farm developments which at present are the only 2 large developments expected in the immediate pipeline.

It is important to note that in 2022 the Council took part in an LGA peer review, in which criticism arose about our Governance structures and decision-making ability. We believe this is in part to the Council Size. It is also the reason why in June 2024 the General Purposes committee in Southend Council agreed to beginning work on a constitutional review.

To conclude, we believe that as a result in the previous decision to increase the Council size by 25% we have increased the size of the council disproportionately when compared to only a 3% population growth, we also believe this has played a part in our poor performance in the recent LGA peer review for governance.

Accountability

- 1) **Internal Scrutiny** – At present Southend City Council has three scrutiny committees (Place, People, and Policy and Resource) each of these committees are made up of 16 councillors that are distributed in accordance with proportionality rules.

It is not uncommon for these meetings to be forced to waive standing orders in order to increase the time allocated for these meetings. We have also seen recently chairs of these committees being forced to restrict the number of

questions that Councillors can ask at any one given time in order to improve the efficiency of these committees. We believe that this is due to the size of the Council resulting in the size of these committees being too large. The idea of having 3 scrutiny committees is one that we support but with the size of the Council being as it is these committees currently are unable to hold a given administration to account effectively without either waiving standing orders or restricting Councillors ability to ask questions.

It is for this reason we believe the size of the Council should reduce by 6 members (total of 45 councillors) in order to reduce the size of these committees and thus allowing more effective accountability of any administration.

- 2) **Statutory Function (Planning)** – At present the Council has 1 planning committee in the form of the Development and Control Committee which consists of 17 Councillors. Most if not all planning applications that are seen by this committee are applications that Councillors themselves have asked to be put in front of the committee.

In recent times there has been a reduction in the number of applications this committee has seen this is due for two reasons. Firstly, the proportion of applications that are being decided through delegated authority has increased. The second the increased number of permitted developments that no longer are required to come to the Planning Committee.

The role of a committee member has also changed in recent years. Previously, committee members would be required to attend a site visit of the application along with a pre-meet with officers to discuss the technical aspects of the planning applications. Now these visits and pre-meets and visits no longer are a part of the process the amount of time required for these meetings has reduced as such the number of councillors can also reduce.

For these reasons we believe that the number of Councillors should reduce by 6 (tot a total of 45 Councillors) to reduce the number of councillors and address the over subscription of this Council. We also believe that the reduction in Councillors will allow for more effective scrutiny of more strategic development applications as they come through the process.

- 3) **Statutory Function (Licensing)** – Licensing applications currently are reviewed through the Licensing committee which consists of 15 Councillors. Recently a review of our licensing policy has resulted in an expected reduction in the number of licensing application this committee will see from Taxi Drivers.

As such the workload of this committee has lessened. However, there have been an increase in more complex licensing applications. As such we believe that a reduction in Council size by 6 (to a total of 45 Councillors) would allow for this committee to better look at these more detailed applications more effectively whilst also taking into account the reduction in overall number of applications.

- 4) **Outside bodies** – There has recently been a review of the number of Outside Bodies that Councillors can sit on as a part of their duties. During this review it has been revealed that there has been a significant reduction in the number of outside bodies.

We believe that is evidence towards a reduction in the number of Councillors by 6 to a total of 45 councillors. To ensure that all Outside body roles can be filled.

In summary, looking at our scrutiny, planning and licensing roles we believe the Council would be more able to fulfil its accountability duties with a reduction of reduction of 6 to the Council size, to a total of 45 Councillors. This is further supported by the reduction in the number of Outside bodies Councillors sit on as a part of the duties.

Community Leadership

- 1) **Community Leadership** – All of our Councillors take an active role in their community the do this through a number of means including, surgeries, door knocking, attendance of resident events and social media.

In recent time we have seen a number of resident associations being created that cover larger areas. These include BERA which has membership in 3 ward, the Shoebury residents Association which has membership in 2 wards and Project Southchurch which covers 4 wards. During community meetings arranged by these groups we often see a disproportionate number of Councillors compared to residents. For this reason we believe that the number of Councillors should reduce by 6 (to a total of 45 Councillors).

In Leigh, we also have a very active town Council which takes on a number of duties that would usually be the jurisdiction of the Borough Council such as Allotments and some street scene. This town council has it's own representatives with their own duties which often overlap with the roles of City Councillors. As such we believe that the number of Councillors should reduce by 6 (to a total of 45 Councillors)

Finally, the use of social media has made community engagement easier and far more accessible. Often communications with many members of the public would have taken a long period of time in order to deliver a community message. Now with the use of social media the time this takes is far less, as such we believe this is evidence that the council size should reduce by 6 (to a total of 45 Councillors)

- 2) **Casework** – Following the announcement that the ward boundaries would be reviewed the Southend Council Conservative Group held a consultation amongst its members in relation to the amount of Casework we see come through our system.

Whilst many Councillors agreed that during the Covid period they saw an increase in their Casework, only 1 Councillor out of 18 suggested that their casework had increased. For all other Councillors they reported either a decrease in the amount of Casework but with increased level of complexity or did not notice any difference in Casework load since being elected.

During a report on the pay of Councillors it was noted in Appendix A that the average time spent by Councillors nationally is 22.8 hours a week doing the role of Councillor. The report also found following consultation with Councillors that Southend Councillors worked between 16.5 hours and 20 hours a week. Much less than the national average. It should also be noted that this is a reduction in the number of hours reported since the previous allowance review 4 years prior.

As such, we believe that due to this reduction in hours worked and relative reduction in casework that the Council size should reduce by 6 to a total of 45 Councillors.

Summary

In conclusion, we believe that the Council Size should reduce by 6 to a total of 45 Councillors. We believe this for the following reasons

- 1) That the previous increase of 25% was excessive compared to the only 3% increase in population seen since that time.
- 2) That the effectiveness of Scrutiny has been impaired by the increase number in Councillors
- 3) That the workload of Planning Committees has reduced due to increase use of permitted developments, delegated authority and the reduction in time required of the committee
- 4) That the workload of Licensing has reduced due to the changes in licensing policy

- 5) That the number of outside bodies that Councillors sit on as part of their duties has reduce
- 6) That the community bodies are now representing larger areas resulting in a disproportionate number of Councillors to residents representing areas supported by resident groups
- 7) That the city has a very active town council which has its own elected representatives whose duties often overlap that of City Councillors
- 8) That due to social media the time and effort for community engagement has reduced
- 9) That the number of hours worked by Councillors is below the national average and has reduced since the last allowance review
- 10) That the amount of Casework seen by Councillors has seemed to have reduced in volume.

We hope that this submission will help the Boundary Commission make an enlightened decision on the size of the Council.

We have also raised concerns that the Council submission was based only on the views of 3 Councillors as a part of the Consultation. It must be noted that our submission has been based on a number of conversations with the 18 Councillors or our group as well as former Councillors.