

Council Size Submission: Template

North Warwickshire Borough Council

Contents

How to Make a Submission	2
About You	2
The Context for your proposal	2
Local Authority Profile	4
Council Size	6
Other Issues	12

How to Make a Submission

It is recommended that submissions on future governance arrangements and council size follow the guidance provided and use the format below as a template. Submissions should be treated as an opportunity to focus on the future needs of the council and not simply describe the current arrangements. **Submissions should also demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been considered in drawing up the proposal and why you have discounted them.**

The template allows respondents to enter comments directly under each heading. It is not recommended that responses be unduly long; as a guide, it is anticipated that a 15 to 20-page document using this template should suffice. Individual section length may vary depending on the issues to be explained. Where internal documents are referred to URLs should be provided, rather than the document itself. It is also recommended that a table is included that highlights the key paragraphs for the Commission's attention.

'Good' submissions, i.e. those that are considered to be most robust and persuasive, combine the following *key success components* (as set out in the guidance that accompanies this template):

- Clarity on objectives
- A straightforward and evidence-led style
- An understanding of local place and communities
- An understanding of councillors' roles and responsibilities

About You

The respondent should use this space to provide the Commission with a little detail about who is making the submission, whether it is the full Council, Officers on behalf of the Council, a political party or group, a resident group, or an individual.

This response has been developed by officers and overseen by a group of members from each political group on the council.

The Council established an Electoral Review Advisory Group, which developed this response, before it being approved by the Council's Executive Committee and Full Council.

The Context for your proposal

Your submission gives you the opportunity to examine how you wish to organise and run the council for the next 15 - 20 years. **The consideration of future governance arrangements and council size should be set in the wider local and national policy context.** The Commission expects you to challenge your current arrangements and determine the most appropriate arrangements going forward. In providing context for your submission below, please demonstrate that you have considered the following issues.

- When did your Council last change/reorganise its internal governance arrangements and what impact on effectiveness did that activity have?

- To what extent has transference of strategic and/or service functions impacted on the effectiveness of service delivery and the ability of the Council to focus on its remaining functions?
- Have any governance or capacity issues been raised by any Inspectorate or similar?
- What influence will local and national policy trends likely have on the Council as an institution?
- What impact on the Council's effectiveness will your council size proposal have?

North Warwickshire Borough Council (NWBC) operates a "Committee System" of governance and has done for the last 15 years. This involves a small number of committees managing different aspects of the work of the council, with committees reflecting the political balance of the council.

In May 2023 following the local elections, the council moved to "no overall control", with the conservatives being the largest group, but without an overall majority on the council.

Members consider that the current system of committees allows for a more consultative approach to decision-making, something that will be further explored under the current political balance. Officers keep members informed of upcoming policy developments and areas of concern via a range of committees. Member-officer relations are good and both officers and members have different, clearly separate roles.

The committee system, by its nature, involves a greater number of councillors in decision-making, and this does therefore have an impact on the number of councillors required to operate this system, especially compared to neighbouring authorities with smaller cabinet-style executive arrangements.

As explored further below, the council proposes to increase the number of councillors in future. From a governance perspective, members in future will continue to play the same role within the committee system, however the pace of change in the borough in terms of residential development and other changes will require greater oversight from councillors – a role that only elected members can play.

In terms of the local/national policy trends, continued pressure has been brought to bear on the Council's finances, with officers and members working closely together on closing budget gaps, delivering services in new ways and finding opportunities for revenue generation, whilst improving the key services that residents depend on.

Like much of Local Government, the Council is keen to explore new ways of delivering services [via its updated Corporate Plan](#) and through shared services and working closely with other public and private sector partners to deliver services.

The Council has retained its own housing stock, manages its own Housing Revenue Account and has also (unlike many of its comparator councils) retained direct control of its own Leisure Facilities.

Our proposal to increase the number of Councillors by a total of four will mean that:

- The Council retains the correct number of councillors to manage the increase in population forecast in the next 10 years

- the Council is able to meet its ambitions in shaping of North Warwickshire as a place, and in particular, protecting the rural environment during a period of immense change in the borough
- The Council has sufficient members to carry out the statutory responsibilities associated with a borough council, particularly around environment, housing and development.

Local Authority Profile

Please provide a short description of the authority and its setting, in particular the local geography, demographics and community characteristics. This should set the scene for the Commission and give it a greater understanding of any current issues. The description should cover all of the following:

- Brief outline of area - are there any notable geographic constraints for example that may affect the review?
- Rural or urban - what are the characteristics of the authority?
- Demographic pressures - such as distinctive age profiles, migrant or transient populations, is there any large growth anticipated?
- Community characteristics – is there presence of “hidden” or otherwise complex deprivation?
- Are there any other constraints, challenges, issues or changes ahead?

Further to providing a description, the Commission will be looking for a submission that demonstrates an understanding of place and communities by putting forth arguments on council size based upon local evidence and insight. For example, how does local geography, demographics and community characteristics impact on councillor casework, workload and community engagement?

North Warwickshire Borough Council’s vision is:

“Protecting the rurality of North Warwickshire, supporting its communities and promoting the wellbeing of residents and business.”

Which highlights the fact that the county district of North Warwickshire is, at heart a rural district set in the middle of England. The borough itself stretches from the edge of Coventry in the South, to Tamworth in the North and from Leicestershire in the East and the edge of Birmingham in the West.

North Warwickshire is a recognisable community with a distinctive sense of place. It is connected to but separate from the wider West Midlands area as well as the East Midlands.

In terms of key infrastructure features, the Borough is dominated by the A5, which cuts the borough in half between East – West and the M6 toll road and M42 in the West of the Borough. The Borough is also affected by Phase One of HS2 at Coleshill and Water Orton. The West Coast Mainline also passes through the borough, between Nuneaton and Tamworth.

The area does not benefit from any significant UK, regional nor EU regeneration regimes, and therefore the council is the key driver in terms of regeneration, in past and future bids to national levelling up and other funds.

There is significant forecast residential development in the next 10 years, as set out in the Council's Borough Plan, strategic housing land supply documents and evidenced by a number of large outline and full planning applications that have been given permission.

Full details of the sites of these developments, evidence and impact at polling district level will be supplied to the Commission separately, so details of sites are not included in this document. This unprecedented residential growth is an important context to the rest of this council size proposal.

Rural Nature

North Warwickshire is a rural Borough with over 50 settlements, covering 110 square miles. The Borough has an open rural character which is unique compared to many of the surrounding urban areas. Settlements range in size from Atherstone and Mancetter, with a population of 10,000 to small hamlets.

Atherstone with Mancetter, Coleshill and Polesworth with Dordon are the three market towns, which provide the majority of services to the surrounding villages and hamlets.

Local requirements have changed as the residents of the countryside have changed in recent years. There are many people who live in the smaller settlements and the countryside, who have difficulty accessing services/facilities and affordable housing. In many communities, there is ongoing conflicting requirements for additional housing, whilst protecting the rural character of these smaller settlements. As the local planning authority and with the council retaining control of its own housing supply, the borough council has a major role in dealing with these issues.

Agriculture is a major influence on the character of the Borough. A thriving rural economy is important to the Borough. Members have a recognised role in not just representing constituents but also managing the large, rural area and acting as custodian of place as well as its people.

Community characteristics

Some communities in the borough have a former mining legacy. The Borough had a number of mines and there are still ex-mining communities in need of assistance, in particular with the standard of housing and access to skills, training and access to better health care.

The Council recognises that there are clear links between issues of poor health, obesity and open space/recreation provision, education and the skills gap, rural transport and isolation and that the borough council and councillors have a leadership role in these areas

From the residents' perspective, there are significant public concerns to ensure the impacts of residential development and new transport infrastructure are mitigated, and residents look to the council to do this. There is public concern to maintain the provision of local services that are vital to community life, whilst recognising that there are limited council resources reflecting a small and rural population.

Council Size

The Commission believes that councillors have three broad aspects to their role. These are categorised as: **Strategic Leadership, Accountability (Scrutiny, Regulatory and Partnerships), and Community Leadership**. Submissions should address each of these in turn and provide supporting evidence. Prompts in the boxes below should help shape responses.

Strategic Leadership

Respondents should provide the Commission with details as to how elected members will provide strategic leadership for the authority. Responses should also indicate how many members will be required for this role and why this is justified. **Responses should demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been explored.**

Topic		
<p>Governance Model</p>	<p><i>Key lines of explanation</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ It is anticipated that for the foreseeable future, the Council will continue to operate a Committee system. The current system allows Councillors overall responsibility, oversight and accountability for the functions of the Council ➤ It is felt by Councillors that the Committee system currently in operation involves members in decision-making and encourages a more collaborative atmosphere in meetings. Officers and chairs of the respective committees are challenged and held accountable during meetings and the controlling group, main opposition group, minority group and independent councillor are able to contribute. ➤ Where there are different views on policy, minority reports are used well to provide different options for the council to consider. ➤ The Executive Board – this is the main decision-making body of the Council (aside from full-Council), which is chaired by the Leader of the Council and has the chairs of the other main committees as members. It has the role of co-ordination of the other committees’ work, as well as taking its own decisions. This committee also has the Leader and Deputy Leader of the Opposition Group as members, as well as representation from the minority opposition group. The Executive Board has 12 members and normally meets around 6 times a year. This committee also has budget oversight for a specific set of services. ➤ Community and Environment Board – This Committee is comprised of 14 members and has a wide remit, including the budgetary oversight of the services that report to it, including Environmental Health, Leisure Facilities, Air Quality and reports from other bodies, including Climate Change

		<p>member group and the Warwickshire Health and Wellbeing Board. As the Council has retained its own leisure facilities and employs leisure staff directly, provision of these facilities is a key issue for members.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Resources Board – this Board has budget oversight for a range of services, including the Council’s Housing Revenue Account and other housing matters. This board also manages the Council’s capital programme and matters such as property disposals. This board has 12 members and meets roughly 5 times per year. ➤ Special-Sub Group – this Sub-Group meets up to 12 times per year with 6 members, and deals mainly with staffing/HR matters and staffing policy such as liaison with Trade Unions. ➤ Safer Communities Sub-Committee – this Sub-Committee deals with matters relating to community safety, the safer communities partnership and enforcement matters such as fly-tipping. This Committee has 12 members and meets 3 times per year. ➤ Standards Committee – this Committee meets as necessary to deal with issues relating to the members’ code of conduct. 6 members are appointed to sit on this committee.
	Analysis	Click or tap here to enter text.
Delegated Responsibilities	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ The Council has delegated functions to a range of committees as set out below, which report back via their minutes to full Council. This means that all members are able to oversee the work of these committees. ➤ Officers of course take day-to-day operational decisions, but by convention and practice the amount of decision making delegated to officers is less than at larger authorities. This means members are closer to the day to day running of the Council, and the level of scrutiny of spending is greater than at a council with a more comprehensive scheme of delegation ➤ As a result of the above, Councillors at NWBC are “closer” to the day to day running of services. They have knowledge of how services are delivered and have good working relationships with the officers responsible for service delivery, as well as senior officers. This is to the benefit of residents, as there is awareness amongst members of service delivery issues as well as strategic matters.
	Analysis	Click or tap here to enter text.

Accountability

Give the Commission details as to how the authority and its decision makers and partners will be held to account. The Commission is interested in both the internal and external dimensions of this role. **Responses should demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been explored.**

Statutory Function		This includes planning, licensing and any other regulatory responsibilities. Consider under each of the headings the extent to which decisions will be delegated to officers. How many members will be required to fulfil the statutory requirements of the council?
Planning	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ As an authority with a vastly expanding population, the Planning and Development Board of the Council is a vital, busy committee with a high-profile remit. ➤ The number of large, complex outline and full planning applications that need to be considered by the Board has increased significantly in the last 5-10 years, mainly driven by new residential development in the North of the Borough and around Atherstone ➤ The Borough has a single “planning committee” made up of 16 members. The board meets 12 times a year, with a varying number of planning applications and enforcement matters considered at each meeting ➤ There is a significant time commitment for members serving of this committee, not just the attendance at meetings but due to the large number of documents that need to be read and understood ahead of each meeting ➤ Due to the continued residential development growth in the borough that is anticipated in the next 10 years, the Planning and Development Board will continue to require a large number of trained and experienced members to help the Council determine planning applications.
	Analysis	Click or tap here to enter text.
Licensing	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Licensing Committee (technically 2 committees comprising of Alcohol and Gambling & Taxi Licensing) sits as and when required, including hearings under the Licensing Act or Gambling Act. This committee has 15 members, partly due to the need to provide members to sit on hearings as necessary. Whilst the majority of Council meetings are in the evening, licensing hearings are during the working day, due to the attendance of partners. ➤ The Council does not have a large number of licensing hearings, however there is a floor-level in terms of the number of members that are required to be trained in licensing matters and to be available should a hearing be required.
	Analysis	Click or tap here to enter text.

<p style="text-align: center;">Other Regulatory Bodies</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Key lines of explanation</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Local Development Framework (LDF) Sub-Committee (a sub-committee of the Executive Board) – due to the current and forecast increase in residential development, review and monitoring of the Borough Plan is a key piece of work for members. This committee is formed of 6 members and meets at least 4 times a year, with additional responsibilities and workloads during periods of consultation. • The LDF Sub-Committee in future will likely need additional members in order to continue to review planning policies in light of members’ priorities and changes in national policy. As the anticipated development that is part of the Borough plan starts to be built out, there is also the function of oversight and implementation of the Borough Plan that this sub-committee is required to do, which is a key priority for our members.
	<p style="text-align: center;">Analysis</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Click or tap here to enter text.</p>
<p>External Partnerships</p>		<p>Service delivery has changed for councils over time, and many authorities now have a range of delivery partners to work with and hold to account.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Key lines of explanation</i></p>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When compared to the Council’s last boundary review, the Local Government landscape has changed significantly. Whilst the Council has excellent relationships with partners (particularly Town/Parish Councils and Warwickshire County Council) there are now a larger number of partners involved in service delivery, which is necessary with a much-reduced officer workforce working directly for the Borough Council • The Council is a non-constituent member of the West Midlands Combined Authority, which requires member oversight and involvement, in order to unlock funding streams and networking across the region. In addition, The Council is a partner of the Coventry and Warwickshire Growth Hub (formerly part of the Local Enterprise Partnership) • The Council is also a member of a range of community-based partnerships that provide services directly to residents, such as Warwickshire Community and Voluntary Action and Warwickshire Equip – Equality and Inclusion Partnership • In addition, the number of services that the Council now shares with other councils has grown exponentially since the last boundary review, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shared Revenue and Benefits Service with Nuneaton and Bedworth Borough Council (NBBC), • Shared Private Sector Housing Team with NBBC • Shared Elections Management arrangement with NBBC

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building Control Partnership with Lichfield District Council, • Sherbourne Recycling Company (Materials Recycling Facility – the Borough Council is one of 5 councils investing in a £58 million in a state-of-the-art facility • Northern Warwickshire Financial Inclusion Partnership (shared with NBBC and a range of partners •
Analysis	Click or tap here to enter text.

Community Leadership

The Commission understands that there is no single approach to community leadership and that members represent, and provide leadership to, their communities in different ways. The Commission wants to know how members are required to provide effective community leadership and what support the council offers them in this role. For example, does the authority have a defined role and performance system for its elected members? And what support networks are available within the council to help members in their duties? The Commission also wants to see a consideration of **how the use of technology and social media by the council as a whole, and by councillors individually, will affect casework, community engagement and local democratic representation. Responses should demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been explored.**

Topic		Description
Community Leadership	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Members carry out a wide range of duties ranging from helping to develop the Council's long-term strategic vision to dealing with issues raised by their constituents. They represent their communities in debates around specific local issues and engage with those that affect particular parishes, wards or the whole borough. Resident awareness of the work of Local Authorities has increased as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. ➤ Members spend considerable time engaging with parish and town councils as the closest form of local government to residents. Members act as conduits of information to/from the Borough Council as well as then taking up issues on behalf of the Parishes in their areas. This means members gain a better understanding of local issues, which benefits decision making at borough level. ➤ Both members and officers at the Borough Council pride themselves on the level of engagement, communication and partnership working that the Council carries out with Town/Parish councils. The Council values this work and allocates significant resource in ensuring this takes place across all areas of the Council. ➤ Increasingly, members act as community leaders, and have influence by bringing people together around issues and helping to resolve them. This is symptomatic of the wider context of the borough council bringing

		<p>partners together to resolve issues. Members are often involved in community litter picking, attending residents' association meetings, parish councils and become a school governor in their relevant wards and meetings with local authority housing officers.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Since the last review, the number of officers at the Borough Council has reduced significantly – in part this will have reduced the amount of officer resource dedicated to community development. In the past there were area committees and other mechanisms run by officers. Some of these changes are due to changes in service delivery models, but some of this work now falls to members.
	Analysis	<p>Click or tap here to enter text.</p>
<p>Casework</p>	<p><i>Key lines of explanation</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ There is no dedicated support mechanism in place for monitoring or logging member casework. The majority of members take responsibility for monitoring cases and resolving any issues themselves. ➤ Councillors consistently report that the volume of contacts they receive has greatly increased in recent years, with residents being able to contact them 24/7 in ever-increasing ways via email, telephone and social media. There is evidence of increasing complexity in the cases that are brought to members, with residents caught between different public sector, private sector and charity providers of services, meaning more time is needed per piece of casework. ➤ Since the last review, the use of email and social media has obviously also increased. Social media is regularly used not just by members pro-actively, but as another means of being contactable by the electorate. ➤ In a recent survey of NWBC members, it was found that 75% of members found that: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ ➤ There had been an increase in the number of hours worked on Council business in the last 5 years ➤ The majority of members worked between 10-15 and 15-20 hours per week on council business, on average ➤ Members found that residents' expectations had increased about their role as councillors, with increased contact via email, phone or social media being the biggest driver on member workload ➤ These findings accord with the wider picture as evidenced by the recent LGA census of Councillors, that the average number of hours spent on Council duties has increased steadily since 2013 and is now 22.4 hours per week on Council business.

	Analysis	Click or tap here to enter text.
--	----------	--

Other Issues

Respondent may use this space to bring any other issues of relevance to the attention of the Commission.

Housing Revenue Account

The Social Housing (Regulation) Act 2023 introduces a number of requirements upon Registered Social Landlords, particularly around safety in the homes, landlord performance, complaint handling, treat tenants with respect, empowerment of tenants, provision of good quality homes and neighbourhoods. The accountability to the tenant will significantly increase with Members required to respond and be accountable across a range of service provision. As an authority with over 2500 council properties, there is an ongoing obligation for member oversight and management of this function, which some district councils of similar size would not have.

Alternative options

There is no case to be made for a reduction in the number of councillors at NWBC. It could be suggested that due to the level of representation at County Council, Borough Council and (for the vast majority of the Borough) Parish Council level, that residents have an abundance of elected representatives they can contact. However, in discussion with members and via our member survey, it is clear that:

- For some areas, the County Council division is too broad an area (both geographically and the span of services) to effectively deal with local issues, and there is evidence that a large number of County Council queries/issues involve borough councillors in any case and ask/expect Borough Councillors to champion their issue at County level
- Because of the visibility of NWBC in terms of refuse collection, housing and Council tax collection, residents often contact NWBC as a first port of call, even that issue should be dealt with by a local County or Parish/Town Councillor
- Whilst it is recognised that there is an absolutely vital, key local role for parish/town Councillors, in many cases the Parish Council will look to the local Borough Councillor to champion issues, and is another mechanism for residents to hold borough councillors to account

In effect, whilst part of a 3-tier system of local government, in many areas, NWBC is the most visible layer and co-ordinates between other levels and partners. In an ever-changing landscape of service delivery models and increasing demand, this co-ordination role will become more vital.

Summary

As outlined above, the Council believes that as a growing borough, there is a need to increase the number of councillors for a number of reasons:

- Strategically oversee the residential and other development of the borough, which is forecast to be considerable over the next 10 years. This will lead to an unprecedented level of population growth in the area, and NWBC, via its Borough Plan and Planning Development Board are the custodians of this
- To retain the current ratio of Councillors: Electors, given the evidence of increased demand from residents and changing increased expectations on the role of a Borough Councillor
- To ensure NWBC retains its key task of protecting North Warwickshire as a rural economy and environment whilst overseeing residential growth and accommodating local housing needs, including as a housing provider.