

**Further Electoral Review of Uttlesford District – Council Size Submission by reference to the Key Lines of Enquiry**

<b>Managing the business of the Council: To what extent is council size influenced by the council’s decision-making process or, conversely, the decision making structure fitted around the council size</b>	
<p>(a) What is the overall structure of decision making? Do councillors match the work to fit the time available to them, or stretch/shrink the time they spend according to how much work they want to/need to do?</p>	<p>The Council operates a leader and cabinet model having changed in May 2011 from a streamlined committee system. The participation by non-executive members of the Council in decision making takes place at Full Council meetings and the overview and scrutiny function, plus the two regulatory committees. This may be compared with the committee system operated prior to 2011 when all but 4 members were involved in at least one of the three policy committees.</p>
<p>(b) Has the Council studied how much time their members spend on Council business?</p>	<p>A survey three years ago by the Independent Remuneration Panel indicated about 13 hours per member per week for members who did not receive a special allowance. Whilst the workload of some members is more challenging than others, this is usually due to the individual enthusiasm of those members to drive forward initiatives in their wards rather than demand of Council commitments.</p>
<p>(c) What assessments have been made of how many members it needs to function Teffectively, particularly since the introduction of executive arrangements? In a hypothetical scenario where the council size was increased or reduced by 10%, how would you do things differently?</p>	<p>The report to Council on 17<sup>th</sup> April demonstrated that, purely on functional considerations, an officer assessment is that a total council membership of between 34 and 36 members is required. This was based on an executive of 6 (now 7) a pool of 14 members for overview and scrutiny and another pool of between 14 and 16 for regulatory purposes. The Council has a tradition of topic-based member working groups, panels and Boards to examine and make recommendations on specific issues, e.g. Stansted Airport, 2012 Olympics, Constitutional and electoral issues etc. These do not create a requirement for additional Members. The council’s constitution sets the number of members of scrutiny and overview committees to 10 each, but that could be changed to a lower number. If the council size were reduced by 10% (this equates to 4 Members) it would have little if any effect as there are at present 5 Members with no portfolio or committee responsibilities. If it were increased by 10% then additional work would need to be found. These assessments do not take account of the representational needs of the Council, including the statutory criterion of community identity.</p>

<p>(d) To what extent is the current council size a factor in determining the political management, scrutiny and governance arrangements or is it the other way round?</p>	<p>The number of members on Working Groups has increased since Cabinet working was introduced, as has the frequency of meetings. In fact there are more meetings than when the Council operated a Committee system, although this is largely caused by the confluence of significant events such as the Local Plan and the Olympic Games. The Governance arrangements still leave 5 members without portfolio or committee duties, and with this in mind it may be argued that the council size is not a factor in answer to the question.</p>
<p>(e) If you had a free hand, are there any changes you would make to the political management, scrutiny and governance arrangements? If so, how might that impact on the number of councillors required.</p>	<p>The Council's constitution is only a year old, and reflects the significant changes already made in these areas when the Council transferred from Committee to Cabinet governance in May 2011, so to a large extent the question is already addressed.</p>
<p>(f) How are decisions 'cascaded' down the structure? Is the balance between member decisions and officer delegated decisions effective? Is there any duplication of work?</p>	<p>There are no delegated decisions by members other than the Leader. Decisions are cascaded via decision lists immediately after Council, Cabinet and Committee meetings, minutes and the weekly list of planning decisions. Duplication is rare between the delegated arrangements. Some housing decisions can be circuitous, involving consideration at the tenants' forum, the Housing Board, Scrutiny and Cabinet meetings.</p>
<p><b>Scrutiny of the Council, outside bodies and Others</b></p>	
<p>(a) What's the structure? An overview and scrutiny committee, or several scrutiny committees? How do subjects get tackled – in Committee or Task &amp; Finish Groups? How many subjects at any one time? What's the time-span for a particular study?</p>	<p>There is one overview committee (known as the Performance and Audit Committee) and one scrutiny committee. Each has a work programme. Scrutiny committee agrees a scoping report which is followed in an agreed time by a full report. All scrutiny is undertaken through the committee. Most meetings look at one subject in depth with four to five updates. The Council makes extensive use of pre-scrutiny for key decisions such as the Local Plan. The time-span varies depending on complexity (two to six months). The Performance and Audit committee will summon portfolio holders in the event of sustained underperformance in key areas.</p>

(b) Is Scrutiny just the Councillors doing meetings or do they take external evidence?	External witnesses are called but the work in between meetings is invariably carried out by officers.
(c) If the former, what do the members do between meetings?	As presently constituted, the scrutiny role does not require members to undertake information or evidence gathering between meetings. Working to a pre-determined programme, officers perform the bulk of this work but with considerable input from the Chairman and Vice-Chairman.
(d) How is the Council handling health scrutiny – who is involved? How much work do they do?	Most engagement with health is via the Council's Local Strategic Partnership (Uttlesford Futures), which is adapting to meet national and countywide changes in the provision and commissioning of services. Scrutiny has not yet engaged materially with this agenda.
(e) How many twin-hatted members sit on outside bodies and how are conflicts of interest resolved?	<p>There are two twin hatted members of UDC and Essex County Council and a number of Members who are also members of parish councils. Conflicts of interest are few and are handled by declarations of interest at relevant meetings. All Council members are required to sign the Council Code of Conduct and to maintain an up to date register of their interests with the Council Solicitor and Monitoring Officer, who provides members with ongoing advice and guidance on conflict of interest issues as they arise. Members are required to declare any interests at the outset of Committee meetings and, if a prejudicial interest in an item is declared, that member must leave the room while the item is discussed and must also abstain from the vote. The code of conduct is applicable for planning committee members.</p> <p>The Council presently has member representation on 38 outside Bodies. If a complaint was received alleging a breach of the Code of Conduct, this would be referred for consideration by the Standards Committee. There is provision for the Standards Committee to consider applications for a dispensation in certain circumstances. Nominations in response to requests for representation on outside bodies are proposed by the Group Leaders and can only be approved by Cabinet or Council. The register of Outside Bodies is regularly reviewed and representation limited to those organisations that are of strategic significance to the Council.</p>

<b>Representational Role: Representing Electors to the Council</b>	
(a) What sort of engagement is there between front-line councillors with electors? One-to-one when there's a customer complaint, or gathering views about policy from the whole community? If the latter, how?	Frontline Councillors engage with constituents in a variety of ways – by listening to their constituents, by getting out and about in the community, through membership of clubs and societies, by questionnaires at election times, through championing local community development initiatives and events in their wards, by responding to individual queries and complaints, and through the Council's Area Forums. Councillors also assign great value to the views of parish councils, and will communicate via articles in the local parish magazines, as well as by attending parish meetings.
(b) What is the structure of local area committees. What are their responsibilities? Is membership limited to councillors? – is it open to district councillors or co-option from the wider community?	The Council has no area committees: rather it operates two Community Area Forums which are consultative and meet three times a year apiece. All members are automatically members of one forum. The forums are also regularly attended by Essex police, and representatives from other bodies (e.g. Essex CC highways, PCT) will attend on a needs basis. Feedback from the forums is communicated to portfolio holders where relevant, all of whom are in any event present at the forums. The forums are the principal means of information dissemination to parish councils.
(c) Do Councillors fix day-to-day problems by taking them to officers or by representing elector issues as policy views in meetings of the Council?	Members use a range of options to resolve day-to-day problems. Many members bring day-to-day problems to officers, but others will also try and resolve problems themselves. Others will use the local press or other media to publicise issues.
(d) How does the Councillor engage? Surgery, newsletter, blog, public meetings, or not at all?	See answer to (a) above. As with other questions, the extent of engagement will depend on the degree of enthusiasm and commitment of the individual Member.
(e) What do officers do to facilitate councillor engagement?	Officers organise the community forums, Local Strategic Partnership and direct engagement by councillors with their parishes. Officers run the Council's website, engage with the citizens' panel, organise and minute committee and cabinet meetings, maintain a Council Twitter and Facebook account, produce a newssheet to all households twice annually (Uttlesford Life) and issue press releases to convey information.

<b>Representing the Council in the community</b>	
(a) Does the councillor go to meetings of community bodies, parish councils? If so, how many? what for? Do councillors feel obliged to go to meetings of each individual parish council in their respective divisions or is it to meetings of “clusters” of parishes? Where the former, is this an effective use of an elected members time?	There are no “clusters” of parishes. Councillors work with local communities where appropriate – for example via service on outside bodies. Most members developed an interest in local politics through their engagement in community affairs. A developing area of work will be neighbourhood planning. Engagement with parish councils varies, primarily because some wards serve many more parish councils than others. For example, the nine Members for Saffron Walden only have one town council to engage with, whereas the sole member for the Rodings has five. Members manage their meeting commitments as they see fit: some deem it a mark of honour to attend every meeting of every parish in their ward and will regard their attendance in itself as time well spent.
(b) Does the Council attract candidates and retain members?	Uncontested seats are very rare, and there have been none in the last three elections. All parties, however, struggle to find a full slate of candidates at election times and it is often the case that “paper” candidates will stand, sometimes being the partners and close relatives of sitting members. Retention levels have generally been high with a number of very long-standing councillors, but 12 out of 44 sitting members stood down voluntarily at the last election.
(c) Are Councillors “go-betweens” between clients/customers/electors and paid service staff to fix service delivery complaints?	Sometimes this is the case. Very few complaints escalate to such an extent that a Member sees fit to have to referee a dispute, and most service delivery complaints and enquiries are resolved by officers at the first point of contact. Some members will accompany constituents at meetings with officers. Almost without exception there is an excellent working relationship between Members and Officers at all levels and this has a beneficial bearing on the roles of the respective parties and the need for members to pursue complaints.
What happens when a Councillor is absent? Formal taking on of responsibility by other elected members, informal contact point for electors, or nothing? (Maybe different in multi-member wards). Do front line councillors take the strain of, for example Executive members whose time maybe limited?	Absences are managed by informal arrangements between members. No substitutes are allowed at committee or cabinet meetings although any member can attend and ask questions at the discretion of the chairman. Substitutes are sometimes arranged at working group meetings. Portfolio Holders have deputies but these have no executive functions and cannot act in the absence of the portfolio holder.

<p>(d) Do Councillors learn and develop on the job or in formal training?</p>	<p>Both. We have an extensive system of topical member workshops and will be surveying Members to establish training requirements. The political groups also provide some training for their members.</p>
<p>(e) Has the Council experienced any statutory or other failures because there weren't enough councillors? Are Councillors bored or "inventing" work to do?</p>	<p>No problems have ever arisen owing to a shortage of councillors. It cannot be claimed that councillors are "inventing" work but it is felt nevertheless that a reduction in membership as proposed will allow a more even spread of both workload and responsibility across the whole membership of the Council.</p>