

Babergh and Mid Suffolk Councils – Further Electoral Review

Council Size Submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England

1. Introduction

Babergh District Council ('BDC') and Mid Suffolk District Council ('MSDC') are two sovereign district councils with a joint Chief Executive, fully integrated management team and single staff body serving the two councils under a Memorandum of Understanding and section 113 Agreement. The councils are responsible for a significant geographical area (59,378 and 87,107 hectares respectively) in the heart of Suffolk, covering a mix of urban and rural locations. Both council areas are fully parished (76 and 124 parishes respectively).

MSDC received notification of a proposed intervention electoral review from the Local Government Boundary Commission for England ('LGBCE') due to a significant disparity in electoral equality across a number of wards¹. MSDC subsequently agreed the proposed electoral review timetable at its meeting on 28 July 2016.

Due to the nature and history of MSDC and BDC working together BDC therefore requested that the LGBCE also undertake a further electoral review of their district to coincide with the review of Mid Suffolk. This was agreed at BDC's Council meeting on 26 July 2016.

Due to the joint working relationship of the two councils, this submission has regard to both councils' size. Details of this joint relationship and areas where there are differences are set out below. This document forms both councils' formal response to the LGBCE's request that the councils put forward a submission regarding 'Council Size'.

This submission has been prepared in full accordance with the LGBCE's "Electoral reviews – Technical guidance (April 2014)". Councillors have been engaged throughout this process and specifically through a cross party 'Strengthening Governance' Task & Finish Group, and a series of information sessions and workshops.

2. Summary

In 2011 Babergh and Mid Suffolk District Councils ('BMSDC') proposed to formally dissolve the two councils and merge to form a new single district council for their areas. Under the legislation and guidance in place at that time it was a necessary pre-cursor to any such merger that the councils conduct a non-binding local advisory referendum of their electorate. BMSDC decided to make this referendum binding upon them, and that therefore more than 50% of each electorate would need to vote in favour of the merger for the councils to proceed. The referendum took place in May 2011. Of those who voted, 60% of Mid Suffolk electors voted in favour of the councils' proposed merger but only 40% of Babergh's electors supported the proposal.

¹ Stowmarket North ward has an imbalance of +31%, and a further 9 wards (30%) have an imbalance of +/- 10%

Although the two councils did not therefore proceed with such a merger at that stage a transformational integration programme of joint working, known as 'Working Together', was put in place. This integration began with the appointment of a joint Chief Executive in 2011, subsequent changes to join the management structures, and a fully integrated workforce being in place by 2013.

Although the Councils remain as politically sovereign bodies, the elected members do also work very closely together and a single Vision and Joint Strategic Plan (2016-2020) has been adopted. BMSDC also has a track record of a number of joint Councillor arrangements. These include joint committees; namely Scrutiny Committee and Audit & Standards Committee; and a variety of other formal and informal arrangements such as the Joint Member Integration Board, Joint Portfolio Holder Briefings, a Joint Housing Board, various Joint Task & Finish Groups; and Joint Member briefings and training.

The strength of this partnership working and relationship is demonstrated by the fact that it has survived for six years, and despite a change of administration, both Leaders, and of Chief Executive. BMSDC's continuing desire, through 'Working Together', to operate wherever possible as a single organisation and to potentially work towards becoming a single council, has been further extended by a variety of recent decisions. These include the creation of a single BMSDC owned company for £50m of investments and the decision to move into a single, joint headquarters building in Summer 2017; which will host all councillors, and the majority of staff and public meetings. Similarly, this integration work will further evolve during 2017 with a launch of a single joint website, new joint customer access points in both districts, refreshed joint branding, and adoption of shared staff values.

BDC currently has 43 councillors representing an electorate of 71,686 across 27 wards and MSDC currently has 40 councillors representing 79,885 electors across 30 wards. All-out elections are held every four years. Both councils have had essentially the same number of Councillors since the councils were first established in 1974. The only change has been at BDC, which has increased by one councillor from the 42 Councillors that it first had in 1974. Both councils now have wards where there is notable electoral inequality².

In December 2016 both councils resolved to move from a committee style of governance to a Leader-Cabinet model. This will be implemented from May 2017 and will be fully embedded by the elections in 2019, at which time the outcomes from this electoral review will be enacted. As such, this council size submission seeks to address two issues:

- a. The current, and potential for further electoral inequality within the warding structure of the councils, particularly having regard to future development and the estimated increase to the electorate; and
- b. The anticipated change in the councillor workload and number of committee placements as a result of the change to the Leader-Cabinet model in May 2017, and the further evolution of joint working and governance leading up to and beyond 2019.

It is therefore proposed that the number of councillors be reduced from 43 to 31 for Babergh District Council and from 40 to 34 for Mid Suffolk District Council.

² In Babergh there are 22% of wards with an imbalance of +/- 10% of the average electorate per councillor

The factors that have been considered when reaching this proposal are as follows:

- The move to a Leader-Cabinet model of governance and the expected structure of committees and decision making within that framework, which will lead to fewer councillors being directly involved in day to day decision making;
- The reduction in the number of committee placements needed to operate effectively within the Leader-Cabinet structure by 2019, in particular with regard to scrutiny, audit and regulatory functions;
- The number of councillors needed to represent and engage with the community, including working with parish councils and undertaking case work on behalf of constituents;
- The current and expected time commitment required of a councillor in order to fulfil all of their responsibilities in respect of council business, representation on external bodies and as community leaders;
- An officer assessment of member workload has concluded that, taking no account of representational needs, each council could operate with a minimum of 20 to 25 Councillors.
- The broadly agreed Councillor opinion, that emerged through the recent workshops, that each council could operate most effectively in the Leader-Cabinet model from May 2017, fulfilling all of its respective governance and representational roles, with approximately 36 Councillors;
- The current and historic working relationship between the two councils, and the realistic anticipated increased use of joint committees, joint representation and joint decision making from the new joint headquarters building;
- The councils' long term Joint Strategic Plan and delivery programme;
- The councils' desire to achieve electoral equality both within and across both districts.

Further explanation of the considerations around these factors is given below in sections 3 to 10.

It is acknowledged that at the time of this submission, the new Leader-Cabinet governance arrangements have not yet been implemented. These will take effect from May 2017 and so will be fully embedded by 2019 but there is therefore less relevance to BMSDC's historic evidence on which to base assertions about future councillor involvement and the time commitment needed. However, the assumptions made in this proposal are based on how this model of governance operates in other local authorities and in particular our neighbouring Suffolk authorities, both of which will be familiar to the LGBCE.

3. Full Council

BMSDC's Constitutions are currently being redrafted to reflect their decisions to move to the Leader-Cabinet governance model. This work will be completed and approved by each council at their meetings in April 2017. The work carried out through the Councillor workshops and Strengthening Governance Task & Finish Group has confirmed that there will be relatively few changes to the role and functions of Full Council, and no additional matters will be reserved to Full Council. The relevant extract from the current Constitutions has therefore been appended to this document.

In accordance with the Leader-Cabinet style of governance the majority of day to day decisions will, from May 2017, be taken at Cabinet meetings (see below). Although the terms of reference for each Full Council will not be changing significantly, it is anticipated that this change in governance will result in a reduction in regular business being conducted at Full Council meetings. Council meetings will remain however the place for motions, significant debates and councillor questions.

Full Council will continue to require the attendance of all Councillors. The Council (for each district) currently meets at least six times per year. In the past however there has frequently been the need to schedule additional meetings. In light of the change to the Leader-Cabinet model it is no longer anticipated that additional Council meeting will be required other than in exceptional circumstances.

BMSDC will be relocating to new offices (shared with Suffolk County Council) during Summer 2017. This is an existing building which will become the administrative headquarters of BMSDC and Suffolk County Council. The building has a dedicated, fully digitally equipped, council chamber. As the current council chamber for the County Council the room is just large enough to accommodate all of the current BMSDC Councillors, and certainly would be large enough to accommodate the combined proposed council sizes of 65 Councillors. It is anticipated therefore, in light of the continuous journey of integration between BMSDC, that up to half of BMSDC's Council meetings may be held as simultaneous meetings from 2019, if not before.

4. Cabinet

The adoption of the Leader-Cabinet governance model has had a dramatic impact on the role and workload of Councillors at every council that has adopted it since 2000. From May 2017 only a relatively small number of Councillors will be directly involved in making decisions, except for those limited matters that must still be determined at a Council meeting.

The Leader of each council will be elected by Councillors, for the remainder of the four year term, at the annual meetings in May 2017. The Leaders will then each appoint a Deputy Leader, and five further Cabinet Members / Portfolio Holders. Each of the Cabinet Members will be aligned to BMSDC's priorities, as defined in the Joint Strategic Plan. Although BMSDC may wish to retain a couple of extra Councillors, outside of their respective Cabinets, with lead responsibility for particular places or themes (to provide additional informal policy support), it is anticipated that the Cabinets will mirror each other, and only contain seven Councillors rather than the maximum of ten. Similarly none of the Cabinet Members will have a deputy and will not have delegated authority from the Leaders to make decisions with regard to functions within their portfolio.

Again the terms of reference for the Cabinets are not available yet as this work is being completed as part of the revisions to the Constitutions to be approved by each council at their meetings in April 2017. The role of the 'executive' under the Cabinet-Leader model is, however, largely determined by legislation; and so BMSDC's Cabinets will fulfil these same functions.

BMSDC currently operate cross party Strategy and Executive Committees respectively, which meet eleven times per year and will be replaced by a similar schedule of Cabinet meetings. As described above, both BMSDC are already delivering to the same shared Vision and outcomes set out in the Joint Strategic Plan through a single officer team and mirrored Portfolios, that meet jointly. It is therefore anticipated that once the Leader-Cabinet model has become embedded, and BMSDC move to their joint headquarters, then simultaneous Cabinet meetings of BMSDC are likely to become the preferred mechanism for decision making.

As this approach continues to evolve beyond 2019 then it could even result in a reduction in Cabinet sizes, with individual Portfolio Holders taking responsibility for each priority across the whole of Babergh and Mid Suffolk rather than simply within their own council area. This approach of collective representation has already been adopted by BMSDC in relation to various outside bodies, such as the Health & Wellbeing Board, where one Councillor represents both councils. Again it is anticipated that this approach is only likely to increase between now and 2019.

It has been proposed that all Councillors, and specifically the Leaders of the other political groups, and the Chairmen of the Scrutiny and Audit Committees will be invited to attend Cabinet Meetings. Any Councillor present will then be able to question Cabinet Members directly on items presented for decision and performance reports, but of course they cannot play any role in making such decisions.

It is anticipated that regular informal Cabinet Briefings will provide the opportunity for the Cabinet Members and Senior Officers to consider key issues and debate policy matters. The majority of executive decisions, that are not already delegated to officers, will then be made at the formal Cabinet Meetings. Again it is anticipated that as BMSDC become more comfortable with and embed the Leader-Cabinet model of governance then the level of delegated authority to officers is likely to increase.

5. Governance Committees

It is anticipated that as BMSDC makes a reduction in May 2017 in the number of Councillors involved in decision making, then it is likely that there may be a gradual reduction over time in the number of Councillors involved in the governance functions. Any such change is unlikely however to happen initially as both councils are determined to reinforce and further strengthen the arrangements for holding the respective Cabinets to account, especially through their scrutiny arrangements. As part of the change to the Leader-Cabinet model BMSDC have therefore decided to adopt a strengthened but streamlined framework for its governance committees. This will see each council having one Scrutiny Committee and one Audit & Standards Committee as described below.

Scrutiny

BMSDC currently has separate Scrutiny Committees made up of 8 Councillors respectively, but also meets every two months as a Joint Scrutiny Committee of 16 councillors (8 from each council). The committees have a forward programme of work which includes performance monitoring, policy development, proactive and responsive scrutiny, and pre-scrutiny in support of the Joint Strategic Plan. The committees are also responsible for dealing with any 'call-ins', although with the current governance system that is operating these have been extremely rare.

BMSDC has recognised however that it will be essential to further strength their approach to Scrutiny in order to ensure that, alongside the Audit Committee and Full Council, the Cabinet is properly being held to account for its decision making. With this in mind, BMSDC have proposed not to have a Joint Scrutiny Committee during an initial period whilst the Leader-Cabinet model is adopted and embedded at each council. By 2019 however it is anticipated that the separate Committees will have been abandoned in favour of having only a Joint Scrutiny Committee.

Both councils will need to re-learn over the next 9 to 12 months how to have an effective scrutiny function under their revised governance system. BMSDC are both keen however to retain the strong culture of collaborative, cross party and council, working that has developed under their Committee system and joint arrangements. It is anticipated therefore that there will be an even greater level of pre-scrutiny than was necessary before under the Committee system. This should also ensure that any 'call-ins' will remain extremely rare.

Overall however BMSDC's Councillors are clear, as discussed and established through the recent Member workshops, that the priority for all scrutiny functions will be to ensure that there is 'added value' for the organisation, decision making and our communities; aligned to the Joint Strategic Plan. There will therefore be a clear focus at both councils on 'quality' rather than 'quantity' of scrutiny. This approach will be supported by:

- A-Political Scrutiny;
- Electing an effective Chairperson;
- Providing bespoke training & skills (including listening, critical thinking and constructive questioning);
- Putting in place dedicated scrutiny officer resource and senior officer support;
- Clear use of the Cabinet Forward Plan;
- Calling upon external bodies as witnesses;
- Greater research and adoption of best practice;
- Ensuring all Councillors have the confidence to challenge each other effectively;
- Developing good relationships between Scrutiny and Cabinet.

Audit & Standards

BMSDC currently operate the Audit and Standards Committee arrangements in the same way as Scrutiny (as described above). Each council has an Audit & Standards Committee made up of 8 Councillors respectively, but also meets every two months as a Joint Audit & Standards Committee of 16 councillors (8 from each council). It is the role of the Audit and Standards Committees to deal with audit, corporate and financial governance, and risk in accordance with the relevant CIPFA (Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountants) Guidance.

Responsibility for reviewing the Constitution currently rests with the joint Strengthening Governance Task & Finish Group; but in the longer term this is likely to rest with the Audit & Standards Committees as a continuous role.

Following the reforms to the Code of Conduct regime, introduced through the Localism Act during 2012, the Audit Committees took on the ethical governance responsibilities within its terms of reference, and any previous Standards Committees were dissolved. In addition, BMSDC and Suffolk County Council operate a Suffolk Joint Standards Board. The new arrangements adopted by the councils for dealing with Code of Conduct complaints involves less Councillors than the previous regime. In the vast majority of cases only the relevant Group Leader is involved at all. Similarly complaints about parish / town councillors (which previously made up the majority of all complaints) only involve District Councillors if, exceptionally, they result in an investigation and a finding by the Investigating Officer that there has been a breach of the Suffolk Code of Conduct.

Again BMSDC have proposed not to have a Joint Audit & Standards Committee during the initial period whilst the Leader-Cabinet model is adopted and embedded at each council. By 2019 however it is anticipated that the separate Committees, including the Suffolk Joint Standards Board, may have been abandoned in favour of having only a Joint Audit & Standards Committee.

6. Regulatory Functions

Development Control

The councils currently operate different committee arrangements for each area but all such committees are politically balanced. BDC has a single Planning Committee of 14 Councillors that meets on a fortnightly basis. MSDC has shared the planning workload between two Development Control Committees (A and B). Each of these Committees is made up of 10 Councillors which meet monthly. MSDC also operates a Planning Referrals Committee (made up of all the members of committee A and B) to which applications can be referred on an ad hoc basis.

A special responsibility allowance is paid (see Members Allowance Schemes) to all members of the BDC Planning Committee in recognition of the extra responsibility and time demands placed on BDC members because of the frequency of meetings and the requirement to make site visits on a regular basis. All BMSDC Committee Members are also required to attend regular workshops on related planning issues and to keep informed about current regulatory practice.

The Councils are currently working towards adopting a Joint Local Plan before 2019, which will entirely replace the existing separate Local Plans. Although some change to the committee structure described above is possible, it is anticipated that, given the nature of planning matters there will remain at least two planning Committees, one for each of the councils, and that these will continue to have their meetings directly in the districts.

Regulatory and Licensing

BMSDC each have Regulatory and Licensing Committees, made up of 10 and 12 Councillors respectively. These Committees are responsible for each council's functions in the control of services, persons, vehicles and premises that are required to be licensed or registered.

A number of licensing matters are also dealt with through delegated decisions by officers. In recent years the workload of the Committees has remained relatively consistent and this is not anticipated to change. The Committee has only six scheduled meetings per year but also meets as a sub-committee to determine applications for licences and to consider breaches of licensing conditions. Such sub-committees are comprised of three Councillors.

Again both councils have slightly different arrangements regarding special responsibility allowances for Regulatory and Licensing Committees. However none of the ordinary members of these Committees at either council (non Chairman or Vice Chairman) receive a special responsibility allowance. It is anticipated however, given the nature of such licensing and regulatory matters, that by 2019 such decisions are likely to be determined through a single Joint Committee.

7. Other Committees, Task & Finish Groups and Partnership working

Committees and Task & Finish Groups

All other Committee arrangements in place for BMSDC are joint. These are the Joint Appointments Committee (ad hoc), Joint Health & Safety Committee (6 monthly), Joint Staff Consultation Committee (6 monthly) and Joint Housing Board (monthly).

It will be necessary for the councils to maintain a joint committee to deal with any statutory officer appointments and dismissals. These are, by their nature, extremely infrequent. Following the appointment of the new Chief Executive (from January 2017) and adoption of the Leader-Cabinet model it is proposed that the Joint Health & Safety Committee and Joint Staff Consultation Committee will now be dissolved from May 2017 as these are the responsibilities of the Head of Paid Service, who shall be held accountable for such matters by each Cabinet.

The current Joint Housing Board arrangements are currently being reviewed in light of the emerging financial differences between each council's Housing Revenue Account. Tenant involvement and engagement may therefore be conducted separately from May 2017 in conjunction with the relevant Housing Portfolio Holders.

As mentioned in the Summary section above BMSDC put in place a Joint Member Integration Board ('JMIB') when the two councils first discussed and began integrating in 2010. JMIB was created to steer and scrutinise the governance of the integration and transformation programme between BDC and MSDC. JMIB was established as cross party group of five Councillors from each authority. JMIB meets monthly to provide pre-scrutiny to all proposals to undertake joint transformation and to provide an ongoing governance role with regard to programme management, assumptions and risk. Following a period of six years however, this phase of integration and transformation will be fully complete following the move to new single headquarters and implementation of the Public Access Strategy (both of which are subject to separate project governance arrangements). Again therefore with the introduction of the Leader-Cabinet model from May 2017 the JMIB will now be dissolved.

Each Council and Cabinet (from May 2017) may periodically appoint non decision making working / task & finish groups to consider and make recommendations on particular areas of policy. This is a mechanism that has been used relatively infrequently in the recent past and neither council has any permanent working groups. Task & Finish Groups have been used where appropriate, recently these have included:

- Strengthening Governance
- Capital Investment Strategy
- Environment
- Implementation of modern.gov
- Leisure
- Local Plan

It is intended that this approach will continue from May 2017 with the revised Scrutiny Committees taking on a much wider pre-scrutiny function themselves. Where appropriate however the Cabinets or Scrutiny Committees may decide to form separate or joint Task & Finish Groups to explore specific issues.

Partnership working

Previous Local Strategic Partnership arrangements have been dissolved in both districts. Both councils are however engaged with the wider public, voluntary and private sectors through a number of Suffolk wide mechanisms, including the Health & Wellbeing Board, Local Enterprise Partnership and Public Sector Leaders Board. The nature of these broad arrangements is such that each usually involves only one Councillor from each authority, or on behalf of both councils. At the more local level the councils also have direct relationships with their 200 town and parish councils through 6 monthly parish liaison meetings, ward councillors and area-based community development shared arrangements with Suffolk County Council.

BMSDC also has several external contractual partnerships for the delivery of various council services. These include:

- Serco who provide waste and recycling collections for both councils;
- Shared Revenues Partnership with Ipswich Borough Council;
- Emerging service level agreements with neighbouring districts for the provision of car parking services;
- SLM and South Suffolk Leisure Trust for the delivery of councils' four sport & leisure centres; and
- Gateway to Homechoice for the delivery of choice based lettings.

Working with all partners remains a strong foundation for the delivery of BMSDC's Joint Strategic Plan. This is particularly so in relation to the delivery of the councils' shared priorities for Housing delivery, Business growth and increased productivity, and Community capacity building and engagement.

8. Councillor Involvement in Council Business and External Bodies

For the purposes of assessing Councillor involvement in council business consideration has been made of all of the committees that will be in place from May 2017. Additional involvement in various joint committees, or other committees that may be discontinued, have been ignored. The full spreadsheets of current Councillor involvement have however been attached as an appendix.

There are currently 5 Councillors of the 83 BMSDC Councillors who are not a member of any council committee. A further 47 Councillors are only members of one committee. 25 Councillors sit on two committees and just 6 Councillors are members of three committees.

External Involvement

In addition to the councils' internal and joint governance arrangements described above, BMSDC also appoint a number of their Councillors on to various outside bodies. The list of outside bodies is reviewed annually and has reduced overtime, but has not changed significantly in recent years. Most of these outside bodies meet between one and four times per annum.

BDC currently appoints to 34 places on 28 different outside bodies. MSDC currently appoints to 25 places on 23 different outside bodies. Of these outside bodies however 17 of them are appointed to by both BDC and MSDC. Overall 33 different BMSDC Councillors currently fill all of the available outside body roles.

As highlighted above a growing number of Suffolk wide outside body appointments are being shared between BMSDC. 3 of shared 17 outside bodies described above are already a joint appointment whereby the Councillor appointed represents both BDC and MSDC on the outside body. It is anticipated that this approach is only likely to increase between now and 2019.

9. Councillors' Time Commitment

The number of council committees and task & finish groups, and how often they operate is set out in each of the sections above. Council meetings and task & finish groups are broadly well attended and where Councillors are unable to attend good use is regularly made of the substitute arrangements.

The councils have never had any difficulties in servicing their committees, working groups or managing the business of the councils. However not many Councillors routinely attend other meetings of the council if they are not members of that particular committee or task & finish group and not required to substitute.

The most recent evidence that the councils have as to how much time Councillors spend on council business comes from a survey undertaken for the purposes of this report in 2017. The survey was open to all Councillors and completed by 42 of 83 Councillors (split evenly between each district and broadly in line with the rural / urban proportions across the districts). 30 of the 42 Councillors who responded hold significant additional roles within the councils, for example as Leader, Deputy Leader, Chairman, Portfolio Holder or Member with Special Responsibility. This therefore needs to be taken into account when trying to extrapolate the results of this survey for all 83 Councillors.

Of those who responded the majority are appointed to one formal committee (38%) although a significant amount are appointed to two committees (29%). By contrast the majority of those responding are not appointed to any outside bodies (43%) or task & finish groups (33%). The majority of outside body and task & finish work is instead concentrated with a smaller number of Councillors.

The survey also sought to analyse how the Councillors currently spend their time. Again there is no consistency to the amount of time spent by different Councillors on different council activities. For example roughly the same number of Councillors spend between 4 and 6 hours, as spend over 10 hours, per month attending formal council and committee meetings. The time spent attending such meetings does broadly correlate however, as might be expected, with the proportions of time spent preparing for such meetings.

The level of difference between Councillors becomes even more distinct when considering the amount of time spent by Councillors in internal council meetings and with officers. 43% of Councillors spend up to 4 hours per month on such activity, but this contrasts with 33% spending over 10 hours per month.

By contrast the amount of time spent by Councillors at parish council meetings is more consistent – with over 50% spending between 2 and 6 hours per month. Similarly, in accordance with the figures above, the vast majority of those responding (47%) spend less than 2 hours per month on outside body matters. As would be expected there is also more consistency in terms of the time spent by Councillors attending training, workshops and conferences. 50% spend up to 4 hours per month on such activities.

In line with the different nature of the various parts of the districts, and the issues that may be occurring at any point in time, there is no consistency in the amount of time spent by Councillors in engaging with their constituents. This varies from less than 2 hours per month through to over 10 hours per month, but the majority of those responding spend between 2 and 4 hours (29%).

Finally, given the geography of the districts and the different nature of the roles of those responding, the greatest contrast of responses is in terms of the amount of time spent by Councillors travelling on council business. The largest responses were over 10 hours (32%) and less than 2 hours (26%) respectively.

Overall therefore the survey demonstrates huge variation in the number of hours spent by each Councillor. There certainly is no real average. In light of the future changes, as described elsewhere in this document, 81% of respondents do however expect their workload to increase during their remaining term of office.

The councils do not currently have formal role descriptions for Councillors but each Constitution does contain a summary of the key roles, functions, rights and duties of all Councillors. The councils may develop one in future as a result of any Independent Remuneration Panel's recommendations, but have no current plans to do so.

It is not a council policy requirement that each Councillor should serve on either one committee or task & finish group, in addition to Full Council. As set out above currently 5 Councillors of the 83 BMSDC Councillors are not members of any council committee. The vast majority of Councillors (57%) only serve on one such other formal committee. This is clearly inefficient in terms of best managing the business of the councils but may also indicate that a disproportionate number of Special Responsibility Allowance ('SRA') payments are currently being awarded. Currently MSDC Councillors are allowed to claim more than one SRA. There are 32 councillor roles within MSDC which qualify for a SRA. By contrast at BDC Councillors can only claim one SRA (whichever the larger if they are entitled to more than one). 25 of the 43 BDC Councillors therefore currently receive a SRA payment.

Similarly it is clear from the data above that the work of managing the business of the Council is not evenly spread across all of the Councillors. A disproportionate amount of such work is currently falling on 37% of the Councillors. This situation is also not even reflected in the current award of SRAs – with 13 of those 31 Councillors receiving either no SRA or only the lowest level of Councillor SRA, and two of these Councillors only receive a SRA by virtue of being Group Leaders.

A simple officer assessment of member workload has concluded that (taking no account of representational needs) if each Councillor sat on at least two committees (each comprised of 7 or 8 Councillors), then each Council could operate the future governance arrangements set out above in an evenly balanced way, with a minimum of between 20 and 25 Councillors.

10. Community Leadership and Representational Role

Babergh and Mid Suffolk are represented in Parliament by three MPs. They represent the constituencies known as Bury St Edmunds, Central Suffolk & North Ipswich, and South Suffolk. All three of these MPs represent constituencies that extend beyond the BMSDC boundaries.

In addition the district is represented by 20 county councillors, three of whom are district councillors for BDC and seven are also district councillors for MSDC. Many district councillors are also parish councillors serving on one of the 200 town and parish councils in Babergh and Mid Suffolk.

The councils cover a large and mixed area. The current combined electorate as at December 2016 is 151,571. This is predicted to increase to 157,586 electors by 2022. The electorate is spread unevenly however across the parishes, towns and the 57 wards that make up the two districts. This includes several more sparsely populated rural parishes and wards.

In Mid Suffolk 25 of the 30 wards can be considered as rural and currently provide 75% of all MSDC Councillors. The 5 urban wards (17%) provide 25% of the Councillors (10). Three of these urban wards (7 of the 10 current Councillors) represent just one town - Stowmarket. The most significant electoral inequality (which triggered the need for an electoral review) is in one of these urban wards where the 3 ward councillors each represent 30% more electors than the average across the district.

The other areas of significant inequality (of more than 10% from the average) are spread across nine other wards (currently represented by 10 councillors). Eight of those nine wards are in rural areas. These are split evenly however in terms of those that are above and below the average for the district.

By contrast in Babergh 19 of the 27 wards can be considered as rural and currently provide 63% of all BDC Councillors. The 8 urban wards (30%) provide 37% of the Councillors (16). The areas of significant inequality (of more than 10% from the average) are spread across six wards (currently represented by 8 councillors). Five of those six wards are in rural areas. Again they are split evenly in terms of those that are above and below the average for the district.

As can be seen from the councils' projected electorate growth forecasts (previously submitted to the LGBCE) it is anticipated that there will continue to be further significant growth for Mid Suffolk in the Stowmarket (North) ward of 20.4%. In addition significant electorate growth is also projected to be concentrated in two other wards (Bramford and Blakenham 19.3% and Haughley and Wetherden 14.5%). Other notable areas of electoral growth of between approximately 4% and 6% are projected in Eye, Needham Market, Onehouse, Stowmarket Central, Stowmarket South, Stradbroke and Laxfield, and Thurston and Hessett.

In Babergh significant electorate growth is also forecast in the wards of Berners (16.1%), Brook (13.7%) and Great Cornard South (10.9%). Again in addition other notable areas of electoral growth of between approximately 4% and 7% are projected in the wards of Alton, Dodnash, Great Cornard North, Hadleigh North, Holbrook, Long Melford, Sudbury East and Sudbury South.

The combination of the reduction in the size of the Council and anticipated electorate growth in wards such as Bramford and Blakenham, Haughley and Wetherden, Stowmarket North, Berners, Brook and Great Cornard South are likely to place additional pressures on the workload of Councillors, especially in the more sparsely populated wards, as their ward areas and number of associated parishes may be enlarged in order to achieve greater electoral equality.

Regardless of the different sizes of electorate, parishes act as the main focal point for community engagement within Babergh and Mid Suffolk. BMSDC is anxious to maintain good links with its parishes. This does not mean however that BMSDC believes that the number of district Councillors should be set at a level which would enable such district Councillors to attend all of the parish council meetings in their ward.

In light of the mixed nature of the districts, as described above, BMSDC believes it is for each ward Councillor, either individually or together with their fellow ward Councillors in multi-seat wards, to determine how best to engage with their communities and respective fellow county councillors, parish and town councils and their councillors in their respective ward areas. BMSDC does not consider that it would be appropriate or possible, either under the current warding patterns or following the electoral review, to determine a set manner in which Councillors should engage with their communities. This view is further strengthened by the fact that many of the district Councillors are also town or parish councillors, and the ongoing exponential growth in the availability and use of digital technology and communications by all Councillors (which already includes smart phones, laptops, tablets and Skype).

The nature of 'Community Leadership', particularly in response to the councils' priority to build community capacity and engagement, is likely to be different across the various parts of the districts. Lack of direct support from local authorities, SALC or NALC could often require ward Councillors to be significantly involved in facilitating community capacity and engagement. Often this is more acutely recognised in the more sparse communities, which tend to be reliant upon a smaller pool of the same people to volunteer across a range of community organisations. Councillor support for such communities may therefore have to be both more intense and provided over a longer time period if all communities are to thrive, grow, be healthy, active and self sufficient. This may be particularly so for Councillors operating in single seat wards.

BMSDC believes that it is the role of Councillors to nurture and lead their communities and not to become directly involved in the delivery of services at a local level. In recognition of the increased burden that the localism approach has brought for Councillors, the councils have restructured their Community Development team, with dedicated area based internal Community Development Officers supporting ward Councillors alongside Suffolk County Council's locality resources.

BMSDC are also anticipating that reducing levels of resources within the public sector, significant Planning and Housing reforms, and increasing demand on Councillors representing a larger electorate, may also cause Councillors to be more often drawn directly into community issues. This in turn may prevent Councillors from being able to deal with the lower level concerns raised with them, and could create an additional strain upon the councils' customer services role. It is anticipated however that any such increased demand will be mitigated and managed as a result of BMSDC's ongoing Public Access transformation.

The councils hope that the Further Electoral Review ('FER') will respect the integrity of parishes as units of representation for local people. The councils will continue to monitor the parish pattern within Babergh and Mid Suffolk and will undertake community governance reviews where considered necessary to maintain parishes that reflect the identities and interests of the communities they represent.

The mixed urban / rural nature of the districts is likely to mean that following the FER there will still be (regardless of any reduction in the size of the councils) a number of single seat ward Councillors representing areas that contain a number of parishes. In such circumstances the councils may also review and adapt accordingly the current community development arrangements, as set out above, in order to further support the representational role of Councillors.

11. Conclusions

It is proposed that the number of Councillors be reduced from 43 to 31 for Babergh District Council and from 40 to 34 for Mid Suffolk District Council.

Although, as demonstrated above, it is possible to manage the business and responsibilities of each council with a minimum number of 20 to 25 Councillors, BMSDC believe that the size of their respective councils should be increased above 25 in order to properly reflect the representational role, described above, and to provide some additional flexibility and resilience in terms of managing the business of each council.

There is no scientific manner to reflect the representational role and so calculate the overall 'correct' size of each council. BMSDC have therefore taken into account a number of factors in considering the representational role as set out above. These have included changes in the size of the electorate size since 1974, the time spent by Councillors in their representational role, current Councillor to electorate ratios in each district, and the forecast electorate figures as at 2022.

From this it is clear that currently, in local government alone, there are 1,418 councillor seats representing the electorate of Babergh and Mid Suffolk at the parish and town (1,315), district (83) and county level (20). Any changes to the number of district councillors will not therefore dramatically impact upon the overall level of local government representation.

For the BDC the current average ratio of Councillor to electorate is 1 councillor for every 1667 electors. For MSDC the current average ratio of Councillor to electorate is 1 councillor for every 1997 electors.

The FER for MSDC has been triggered however because the significant variances from that average ratio in the district. The greatest variance is currently in the ward of Stowmarket (North) where the Councillor: Elector ratio is 2497 compared to the district average of 1997. This is a multi seat ward with a current electorate of 7490 represented by three ward councillors. Whilst MSDC agrees that such ratio imbalance should be corrected across the district through the FER, it is also comfortable that such higher ratios have not detrimentally impacted upon the ability of those particular ward Councillors to fulfil roles both in managing the business of the council and representing their wards. The councils therefore believe that average ratios below 1 Councillor to every 2500 electors are realistic.

If the councils were to take no account of the representational role and set the size of each council purely based upon delivery of the business of the council (upto 25 Councillors) then this would result in a current Councillor to electorate ratio of approximately 2800 and 3200 electors respectively.

BMSDC is concerned that having only 25 Councillors would create unrealistic pressure upon the workload of those Councillors. There are a number of factors that might create such demands. As expressed above, there is a need to incorporate some resilience within the size in order to continue to ensure delivery of the business and responsibilities of the councils. In addition the dynamics and demographics of the districts are continuously evolving over time. It would be overly simplistic and incorrect to describe this as a simple urban / rural divide. Councillors have to manage complex workloads arising from the variety of different communities that exist within and between wards. These challenges include for example economic growth, urban and rural deprivation, inward and outward migration of older people and younger people respectively, rural sparsity, and the sustainability of services and communities. As evidenced above the extent of such workloads varies from Councillor to Councillor and at different times. In considering the size of the councils it is therefore important to recognise the diversity of wards, electorate and challenges across the districts; and incorporate sufficient flexibility to enable each Councillor to manage their workload in the most appropriate way for their ward at any point in time.

The changing national framework for local government and the wider public sector has also had implications for the complexity of the role of Councillors. Fundamental changes have and will continue to be made, in particular with regard to planning, council tax, business rates and benefits. Councillors must have a firm understanding of these reforms as they may be more regularly required to support those members of their electorate that are affected. Whilst localism may result in fewer services being directly delivered by councils, Councillors may be called upon to support their more proactive communities that wish to take up the opportunity to exercise their 'community rights'. Finally BMSDC also understands the importance, both in terms of running the business of the authorities and to its electorate, of wherever possible, maintaining a diversity of Councillors. The Council therefore wishes to avoid reducing the size of the councils to such an extent that the workload could only be performed by non-working people.

Having considered all of these factors both councils considered that the most appropriate size for operating each council from May 2017, under the new Leader-Cabinet model, would be 36 Councillors. In reaching this conclusion however the Councillors did not factor in any of the further governance changes that are either likely to, or may, be adopted by 2019 (as outlined above).

BMSDC have also made it a collective priority to seek to achieve the same ratio of electoral equality for both districts. This is because BMSDC are jointly running services across both districts and believe that there are not sufficient differences between the districts to justify any difference in ratios. In addition adopting the same ratio at this stage will future-proof these arrangements, and avoid unnecessary duplication of work for the LGBCE, in the event that BMSDC decide to re-explore whether to merge at any stage post 2019.

In all the circumstances therefore the council have concluded that the size of BDC should be reduced to 31 Councillors and the size of MSDC should be reduced to 34 Councillors. Both councils are confident that such council sizes will ensure that the business of the councils is delivered in the most efficient manner possible whilst also providing the flexibility to address future challenges, and the sustainability to represent the diverse electorate of Babergh and Mid Suffolk both now and through until at least 2022.

Supporting Documentation

1. Joint Strategic Plan (2016-2020)
2. Joint Member Integration Board Terms of Reference
3. Current Joint Task & Finish Groups
4. Councillor survey of involvement and time commitment
5. Schedule of committee memberships
6. Schedule of appointments to outside bodies
7. Relevant extract from current Constitutions regarding Full Council's role
8. Relevant extract from current Constitutions - summary of the key roles, functions, rights and duties of all Councillors
9. Notes of 'Strengthening Governance' Councillor workshops
10. Members Allowance Schemes
11. Changes in the size of the electorate size since 1974
12. Current Councillor to electorate ratios in each district
13. Forecast electorate figures as at 2022