

# **OXFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL**

## **ELECTORAL REVIEW: COUNCIL SIZE**

**Supplementary information – 6 January 2023**

### **1 Electorate forecast methodology**

The number of planned residential dwellings for each expected development site (from 2022 to 2029) has been provided by Planning Services at each District Council and collated by County officers. The forecasts for Oxford City use a modified methodology due to the large student population.

The desirability of Oxfordshire as a place to live and as a location for employers means that development sites are highly likely to be completed irrespective of the economic climate. It is therefore reasonable to assume that the population will grow as indicated in the Council submission.

### **2 Review process**

A cross-party working group was established to provide political input into the review process. A technical officer group has been supporting the working group with officers from the five District Councils working alongside officers from the County Council.

The members of the working group were mindful of financial pressures and recognised that any increase in the total number of councillors would lead to higher costs for allowances and officer support. However, the anticipated increase in dwellings will result in higher revenue from Council Tax.

### **3 Representing local communities**

County Councillors provide a vital role in representing their local communities and therefore it is important that the number of electors they represent does not rise excessively. With significant growth in the electorate, the only way this can be achieved is through an increase in the number of elected members on the Council.

Oxfordshire has a large city along with a number of market towns and a relatively sparsely populated rural area. Individual caseloads reflect the nature of each councillor's division: the needs of inner city Oxford are not the same as Henley-on-Thames which in turn are very different to a rural division with 20 parish councils.

### **4 Climate change action**

The Council's priority for a greener more climate friendly Oxfordshire puts county councillors in the frontline as evidenced by media coverage and public

reaction to the introduction of low traffic neighbourhoods, 20mph speed limits and proposals for traffic filters.

The role of the Council extends well beyond its own operations and now includes influencing local people in making choices around climate change. Councillors and the decision-making process have arguably never had such a high public profile.

## **5 Growing caseload for individual members**

The volume and complexity of the casework for councillors has grown over the last 10 years. The workload of individual county councillors has historically been dominated by highway-related issues, particularly the condition of roads. That is not a surprise as this affects everyone to a greater or lesser degree. Roads continue to be a big issue but the population and employment growth across Oxfordshire means that members are having to deal with much more than road condition. This includes the infrastructure to support new development: new routes, upgrading or replacing major road junctions, developing more 'climate friendly' ways of travelling and determining the location of community facilities like new schools.

The caseload of members has grown to reflect other areas of public concern which are related to pressures on local government funding. This includes Special Educational Needs (SEND) assessments with residents approaching their local county councillor for support with their applications. The volume of applicants together with limited resources means that councillors often become involved as advocates for people living in their divisions. For example, the county councillor for Henley-on-Thames has seen his casework expand significantly as a result of parents approaching him on SEND assessments for their children. This upsurge in demand is not short-term as financial constraints mean that it is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

Flooding and the fear of flooding has become a much bigger issue over the last 10 years. Councillors are often the focal point for the public and can use the knowledge gained from their local community to help public agencies and utility companies, including the Environment Agency and Thames Water, tackle incidents. The role of the councillor not only includes responding when flooding incidents happen but also working with agencies afterwards to consider lessons learnt and what steps can be taken to prevent future flooding.

## **6 Changing governance arrangements**

A motion was passed by full Council on 7 October 2022 to consider a potential change of governance from cabinet and leader to a committee system. This is being taken forward through a cross-party working group in 2023. If adopted, a committee structure will involve a wider number of members becoming involved in decision-making at the Council.

## **7 Reinenergating Overview and Scrutiny**

The Council is taking steps to raise the profile of scrutiny and provide wider member engagement through overview and scrutiny committees and task and finish groups. Task and finish groups on a range of issues including transport, education, health and social care result in more involvement from members. A recent motion passed by full Council (13 December 2022) related to the potential introduction of an Education Overview and Scrutiny Committee alongside the People Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

In recent years, the Thames Valley Police and Crime Panel has been established and more recently the Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire (BOB) Joint Health Scrutiny Committee, both with councillor representation from Oxfordshire County Council. Joint arrangements such as these with other public sector organisations are becoming more common in an effort to deliver value for money in the provision of public services.

## **8 Financial pressures**

The last 10 years has seen much greater financial pressure on Council services with councillors become more involved in 'challenge' sessions alongside senior officers to explore new ways of working and finding innovative ways of doing more with less resources. Councillors have to defend decisions to spend money on one area whilst reducing expenditure in another area. Inevitably some sectors of the local community feel like they are not being listened to and this results in them contacting their local councillor. Public protests and petitions are now commonplace whereas in the past these were the exception rather than the norm.

In addition, cuts to local government funding over the past 10-15 years have impacted on service delivery. Where members of the public do not receive the service that they feel that they should receive, and in some cases are statutorily permitted to receive, they now revert to their councillor for information, guidance and support rather than engaging with officers as they would traditionally.

## **9 Covid impact**

The Covid pandemic highlighted the role of members in identifying vulnerable members in their local communities, some of whom were not known to local authorities and health bodies such as GP surgeries. Councillors through their community links were able to help provide support and coordinate agencies in putting in place support packages.

The Covid period resulted in an upsurge in demand for a range of Council services, many unrelated to the response to the pandemic itself. Some services saw a three or four-fold increase in demand. Examples include Freedom of Information and Subject Access Requests where demand grew to

such an extent that the local authorities could not meet demand and lengthy backlogs built up. Service users became frustrated and complained about the perceived lack of response. This often results in their local councillor becoming involved. Some of these backlogs have still not been fully addressed.

The increase in demand for services has continued following Covid as the members of the public have become more aware of their rights and inclined to make a much higher number of requests.

## **10 Individual member profile**

Councillors have a much higher profile than previously as they are widely seen as the face of the Council. Senior officers more often fulfilled this role in the past and were commonly put forward as the Council spokesperson for particular issues. Controversial plans to change the way that services are delivered and the Council's growing community leadership role in areas such as climate change mean that councillors are the focus for the public including media coverage.

Councillors are more likely to be on the ground in their local communities and have become more 'hands on' in coordinating the delivery of services, sometimes brokering solutions between different agencies. With the constraints on funding councillors are increasingly forming local networks and hubs to ensure that action is taken to address particular concerns.

In 2022-23, each councillor has £15,000 through the 'Councillor Priority Fund' to provide grants to community organisations. This new initiative is bringing councillors much closer to the communities that they serve with a resulting increase in their workload.

## **11 Council size**

A range of options for Council Size were considered by the cross-party working group: from keeping the current number of members (63) to increasing the to 72 members. After a lengthy discussion, a cross-party consensus was reached by the members of the working group on a Council Size of 69. Members of the working group strongly support single-member Divisions and for an odd (rather than even) total number of councillors.

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