

York Liberal Democrats

Council Size Submission

City of York Council

About You

This submission is made on behalf of the York Liberal Democrats Local Party, which covers the whole of the City of York Council area.

The Context for your proposal

York Liberal Democrats firmly believes that 47 councillors is the right number of members for the City of York Council to operate effectively and efficiently over the next 10–15 years.

This number reflects the city's expected population growth and supports its governance model. It balances democratic representation with value for money, maintaining the Council's ability to serve York's diverse rural, suburban and urban communities via suitable ward structures.

We have not sought to replicate the council's own technical analysis. Instead, we focus on the key principles required for effective local government and on new evidence showing that councillor workloads are not uniformly high and are manageable under the Council's current size.

Local Authority Profile

City of York Council serves a mixed area, with a compact urban centre, which is surrounded by extensive suburban and rural communities. These outer areas rely heavily on local councillors for visibility and direct access to the Council, particularly where parish councils are smaller or struggle to function effectively.

Recent FOI data on casework (2019–2022) provides valuable insight into how councillor workload actually varies across York. The data shows that:

- Suburban and village wards, including Westfield, Dringhouses & Woodthorpe, Haxby & Wigginton, Rawcliffe & Clifton Without, consistently generate the highest volumes of casework.
- City centre wards, including Micklegate, Guildhall and Fishergate, record fewer cases, often less than half the workload of the outer wards.
- In every year before the Member Enquiries service was abolished under the current administration, councillors representing suburban and village areas logged the highest average casework levels, while those in central wards (mainly Labour-held) recorded the lowest.

These records show that high workloads are concentrated in a number of suburban and village wards, and not across the council as a whole. Liberal Democrat Councillors hold most of these wards along with the three Conservatives and one Labour Councillor. Therefore, any suggestion that overall workloads require an increase in councillor numbers is not supported by the evidence as the Councillors with the greatest level of casework are not seeking any additional Councillors to deal with workload.

Clearly, these figures demonstrate that councillor workload is related more to ward geography and community expectation than total council size.

Council Size

Strategic Leadership

Topic		
Governance Model		<i>We accept the Council's submission on Governance Model</i>
Portfolios		<i>We accept the Council's submission on portfolios</i>
Delegated Responsibilities		<input type="radio"/> <i>We accept the Council's submission on Delegated Responsibilities</i>

Topic	
<p>Internal Scrutiny</p>	<p>The recent streamlining of the Council’s scrutiny arrangements from four committees to three has reduced the amount of reports for Councillors “to note” and made for a more focused and efficient structure, with no loss of oversight or accountability. York’s scrutiny and audit processes remain strong, with cross-party engagement and regular task and finish groups ensuring that key issues receive the necessary attention. Importantly, the reduction in the number of scrutiny committees has reduced the number of councillors required for formal scrutiny roles from 36 to 27. This change, along with the removal of a Planning Committee (reducing the number from two to one), means that the number of members regularly involved in major governance functions has already decreased. These reforms indicate that City of York Council is capable of maintaining effective democratic oversight within its existing size of 47 members.</p> <p>It will be seen from this that arguments for increasing the council size which appear to rest on assumptions about rising workloads are not borne out by the evidence. The number of councillors required for York’s scrutiny, planning, and regulatory duties has declined, not increased. Even when the ten additional members needed to participate in scrutiny and audit activity for the Combined Authority are included, the overall time commitment for councillors engaged in formal committee work is lower than in previous years. The evidence also suggests that pressures on councillors’ time arise from reduced officer support rather than the total number of elected members; this issue should be addressed through organisational improvements, not by any expansion of the Council’s size.</p> <p>York Liberal Democrats also reject any proposals to reduce the number of councillors, because this would risk undermining both representation and effective governance. With only 41 members, a majority administration would comprise something over 20 councillors, eight of whom would be needed to form the Executive, leaving just 12 councillors to fill the administration’s remaining scrutiny, Audit and Governance, and Combined Authority positions.</p>

	<p>This would leave the administration with insufficient backbench capacity to ensure proper challenge, policy development, and continuity. By contrast, retaining 47 members provides a better and more appropriate balance between efficiency, democratic accountability, and representation. The current size allows the Council to function effectively, manage workloads sustainably, and adapt to new regional arrangements without unnecessary cost or complexity.</p>
<p>Statutory Function</p>	<p>This includes planning, licencing 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?</p>
<p>Planning</p>	<p>The Council has recently reduced the number of Planning Committees from two to one, without increasing the frequency of meetings. This reform has halved the number of councillors required for planning duties from twenty-two to eleven, while maintaining timely and transparent decision-making. Far from increasing pressure on member capacity, this should make the planning function more streamlined and efficient, with greater reliance on clear policy frameworks and professional officer advice.</p> <p>An increasing proportion of planning applications will be determined under delegated powers by qualified planning officers, in line with the local plan and national best practice. This will reduce the volume of decisions requiring member involvement and is intended to allow councillors to focus on strategic applications and community engagement.</p> <p>Finally, with the adoption of the Local Plan and clearer development policies across York, the number of major or contentious applications is expected to reduce rather than increase. Given these changes, the workload associated with planning committees is decreasing rather than growing. The Council's own reforms to streamline planning thus directly contradict any argument for expanding the total number of members, while the evidence supports maintaining the existing size, ensuring good governance and effective oversight without the need for expansion.</p>

Licensing		<i>We are content with the Council's submission on Licensing</i>
Other Regulatory Bodies		<i>We are content with the Council's submission on other regulatory bodies</i>
External Partnerships	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.	
	<i>We are content with the Council's submission on External Partnerships</i>	

Community Leadership

Topic	Description
Community Leadership	We are content with the Council's submission on Community Leadership.

Many councillors take an active role dealing with casework, and addressing cleaning up street level issues. Additional pressure has been put on councillors through with the closure of the Member Enquiries service. This now requires members to spend more time logging and following up casework with officers. However, this was has arisen from a political choice and is not a true increase in overall workload.

Councillors with the greatest level of casework have consistently been those in the suburban and village wards in York. These wards have mostly been held by Liberal Democrat Councillors and Conservative Councillors. Neither of these Both Council groups have not requested an increase in Councillors to deal with casework issues.

2020

Casework

	Ward	Casework
1	Dringhouses and Woodthorpe Ward	873
2	Haxby and Wigginton Ward	778
3	Westfield Ward	618
4	Rawcliffe and Clifton Without Ward	497
5	Fulford and Heslington Ward	458
6	Holgate Ward	383
7	Rural West York Ward	206
8	Micklegate Ward	206
9	Heworth Ward	193
10	Huntington and New Earswick Ward	183
11	Fishergate Ward	175
12	Strensall Ward	167
13	Clifton Ward	155
14	Heworth Without Ward	113
15	Hull Road Ward	74
16	Guildhall Ward	46
17	Wheldrake Ward	30
18	Osbalwick and Derwent Ward	22

19	Acomb Ward	13
20	Copmanthorpe Ward	7
21	Bishopthorpe Ward	2

2021

	Ward	Casework
1	Westfield Ward	867
2	Dringhouses and Woodthorpe Ward	786
3	Rawcliffe and Clifton Without Ward	454
4	Haxby and Wigginton Ward	347
5	Micklegate Ward	286
6	Holgate Ward	252
7	Fulford and Heslington Ward	237
8	Huntington and New Earswick Ward	215
9	Fishergate Ward	196
10	Clifton Ward	153
11	Heworth Ward	153
12	Strensall Ward	152
13	Rural West York Ward	127
14	Hull Road Ward	51
15	Heworth Without Ward	45
16	Wheldrake Ward	42
17	Guildhall Ward	34
18	Acomb Ward	14
19	Osbaldwick and Derwent Ward	13
20	Copmanthorpe Ward	11

2		
1	Bishopthorpe Ward	5

2022:

Ward	Casework	Average
Dringhouses and Woodthorpe ward	1145	381.7
Rawcliffe and Clifton Without ward	875	291.7
Westfield ward	723	241.0
Haxby and Wigginton ward	560	186.7
Fulford and Heslington ward	156	156.0
Holgate ward	344	114.7
Micklegate ward	334	111.3
Fishergate ward	170	85.0
Strensall ward	161	80.5
Heworth Without ward	74	74.0
Heworth ward	215	71.7
Huntington and New Earswick ward	212	70.7
Rural West York ward	138	69.0
Clifton ward	115	57.5
Wheldrake ward	40	40.0
Hull Road ward	75	25.0
Acomb ward	45	22.5
Guildhall ward	39	13.0
Copmanthorpe ward	10	10.0
Osbalwick and Derwent ward	16	8.0
Bishopthorpe ward	4	4.0

Summary

York Liberal Democrats strongly believe that 47 councillors remains the right number of members for the City of York Council to operate efficiently, to represent residents effectively and provide good governance for the next decade. The evidence demonstrates that: recent reforms have reduced the number of councillors needed for key committees, casework demands are uneven across the city rather than universally high, and officer support, not council size, is the main factor affecting workload.

Over the past two years, the Council has made significant structural changes which have streamlined decision-making. The number of Scrutiny Committees has been reduced from four to three, lowering the number of councillors required for scrutiny from 36 to 27. Likewise, the number of Planning Committees has been reduced from two to one, halving the councillor requirement from 22 to 11. Even accounting for the ten councillors now needed to contribute to scrutiny and audit work within the York and North Yorkshire Combined Authority, the overall time councillors spend in formal scrutiny and governance meetings has fallen, not increased. These efficiencies directly contradict any argument that additional councillors are required.

The most recent casework data (2019–2022) also undermines claims that councillor workloads are unmanageable. The data show that the suburban and village wards, predominantly represented by Liberal Democrats such as Westfield, Dringhouses & Woodthorpe, Haxby & Wigginton, and Rawcliffe & Clifton Without, consistently generate the highest volumes of resident casework. By contrast, the central York wards, predominantly represented by Labour, show lower levels of casework. This demonstrates that high workload is not uniform across the city, and that the current council size already provides the flexibility to accommodate these differences. Councillor workload is shaped far more by ward geography, community expectation, and officer capacity. As the group with consistently the highest level of casework we reject the notion that more Councillors are needed to deal with it.

Where pressures on councillors do exist, these have been created by the reduction in officer support, such as the closure of the Member Enquiries service, rather than by an insufficient number of elected representatives. Addressing these challenges requires restoring officer support, improving casework systems, and making better use of technology, not appointing additional councillors. The Liberal Democrats believe that strengthening officer capacity and improving public access to council services will have a far greater impact on responsiveness and accountability than expanding the number of elected members.

Maintaining 47 councillors also protects the effectiveness of both the Executive and scrutiny functions. A smaller council, such as the 41-member model proposed by others, would risk hollowing out backbench capacity. Conversely, a larger council would add unnecessary cost and complexity without evidence of public benefit. The current structure provides the right balance: enough councillors to deliver strong representation and scrutiny, while ensuring each member has sufficient responsibility to remain active, engaged, and accountable to their communities.

Finally, York's projected population growth remains modest compared to other unitary authorities that have not required increases in council size. The city's electorate-per-councillor ratio is consistent with national norms and will remain so over the life of the Local Plan. Taken together, the reduction in committee workload, the uneven distribution of casework, and the stability of population growth, there is no evidence-based justification for expanding the Council.

In conclusion, York Liberal Democrats reaffirm that 47 councillors is the appropriate number for City of York Council.