

# Annex B DRAFT (Version: 11)

## Council Size Options Paper - Councillor Numbers

### Introduction and General Principles

1. This paper should be read alongside the Local Government Boundary Commission's (LGBCE) Council size completed template.
2. Whilst acknowledging that each Council and Council area is different, the Guidance from the LGBCE makes clear that the determination of the appropriate number of Councillors for any given Council requires a consideration of the number of factors, specifically: the size of the Council must enable it *'to take its decisions effectively, to discharge the business and responsibilities of the council successfully, and to provide for effective community leadership and representation'*.
3. The Member Working Group of the Council's Standards & General Purposes Committee has spent some considerable time considering the data that has informed the Council size template and sets out below the Group's thinking and recommendations on the Council's requirements in the 3 areas that the LGBCE seeks to understand: strategic leadership, accountability and community leadership.
4. In setting out the Options below the Member Working Group has been mindful that the size of the Council must be sufficient to ensure that the Council can fulfil its statutory functions; but also it is of a size that ensures it is effective, and Councillors are enabled to make a meaningful and purposeful contribution to the Council's political leadership.
5. The paper sets out the Member Working Group's key considerations in their analysis of the various issues to determine the appropriate Council size, and what weight should be given to those considerations. A number of options are examined with a view to how and whether they meet these key considerations. Whilst there are number of options, there are two distinct models used. The first model starts from a proposed number and align the Council's arrangements. Option 1 references a size with from benchmarking data taken from data in 2014 and more recent existing or proposed unitary councils, and Option 2 reviews the number as proposed in the former County Council's unitary business case. The second model could be characterised as a 'workload' model, which provides an analysis of the demand on Councillors in undertaking their role which varies depending on the number of elected Councillors. 3 options of differing size are considered under this second model.

## Key Considerations

6. It is worth noting that that the total number of Council positions in the legacy Councils amounted to 236. 34 of those positions were held by dual-hatters (ie, they were elected for both the district and county councils) giving a total number of elected Councillors as 202. 8 of the original cohort of Members no longer hold positions so the current number of Buckinghamshire Councillor is 194. As from May 2021 it is anticipate that the number of 147 will come into effect.
7. The Working Group have been set the task to review the appropriate number of Councillors for Buckinghamshire Council. The case for the new Unitary Council was accepted by the Secretary of State. The decision was to create an initial Council due to be elected in 2020 now 2021 of 147 Councillors and following that decision the proposal of 98 made in the original case fell away. The Working Group consider that their role, in the absence of any other confirmed or adopted number, was to start from 147 Councillors and review fully the number of Councillors for the Buckinghamshire Council, looking at all factors that impact the decision afresh.
8. The Member Working Group consider that a sustainable workload for any unitary Councillor is important whilst retaining links with the community so that Councillors are able to work in partnership with Parish and Town Councils in particular, but also with a whole range of other bodies. These links have been key during the Covid-19 crisis and will continue to be in the recovery period, which will now include the redevelopment of Buckinghamshire's town centres.
9. The fundamental choice will be to (a) keep the Committee structure unchanged or (b) to reconsider size and frequency of meetings, particularly the size and nature of the Community Boards. It is inevitable that elements of the structure will change and new Committees or working groups will form looking at areas of the Council's functions - like the Buckinghamshire Local Plan, for example. The main Committee Structure is considered robust and will need to be as the Council fits all the parts together.

### **The Council's Changing Agenda**

10. The Member Working Group has reviewed the earlier considerations of the Council size as set out in the reports undertaken in support of the proposal to reorganise local government within Buckinghamshire. The Group notes that those reports were commissioned in 2014 and 2016 and considers that the Council's agenda has changed significantly during that time and, consequently, as has the demands on Councillors. That changing agenda has included the following:
  - (a) Covid: it has become trite to say that the pandemic has been unprecedented but the demands on the public sector generally, but also on local authority front-line services specifically, has been immense, particularly in the front-line social care functions. The Group consider that a post-Covid local authority will

require a thorough analysis of the role of local authorities and will inevitably require a reconsideration of the governance arrangements in place and an identification of service improvements and resources which will need heavy Councillor input and guidance to shape the delivery of services to their communities.

- (b) The environment: the climate change agenda has radically changed in the last 5 years with Councils, including Buckinghamshire, signing up to a radical reduction in carbon emissions and the development of a climate change strategy requiring significant changes to the way in which the Council does its business. Again, close oversight, accountability and strategic direction will be required by Councillors to succeed in this critical area of work. In addition, the Council's ambitious infrastructure projects, including the construction of highways, housing growth and the rebuilding of town centres (in part suffering from the economic effects of the pandemic) are all critical matters that the future Council will be concerned with at least for the next 10 to 15 years.
- (c) Large infrastructure projects: given Buckinghamshire's location and it being one of the regions of the UK with the highest productivity, it has been the focus of a number of planned infrastructure proposal. The biggest infrastructure project facing the Council is the HS2 project impacting on a swathe of communities throughout Buckinghamshire. As well as the formal process of Councillor consultation on the activities of HS2 there are innumerable issues and concerns raised by communities relating to construction traffic, highway diversions, noise, protestors, to name a few. As well as impacting on casework for many years to come, it is considered that Member involvement will continue and increase during the lifetime of this project. In addition to HS2 the Government's East-West Rail Project seeks to establish a significant and much-needed transport infrastructure connecting communities between Oxford through to Cambridge, impacting on large parts of Buckinghamshire. Alongside this, Highways England have advanced plans for a proposed Oxford to Cambridge Expressway. Although this is currently paused, proposals are being developed for road projects that will support the Government's ambitions for the region. These large-scale projects will facilitate very significant housing growth in the area, bringing new communities and extending other local communities which will inevitably place additional burdens on the elected Membership of the Council.

## **Allowances & Savings**

11. The determination of the appropriate allowances for Councillors is informed by the Independent Review Panel. The IRP considers a range of factors including: benchmarking data, surveys, specific demands on Councillor time, whether the allowance is sufficient compensation to those who might be foregoing paid employment.

12. At the last review in January 2020, the IRP recommended that it review Councillor allowances before 2024 and any changes before that next review should match those paid to officers.
13. It is acknowledged that a smaller number of Councillor overall will likely result in financial savings. Using the current figure given for the basic allowances for Buckinghamshire Councillors by way of an indicative example, the financial costs range is:  
  
 $147 \times \text{£}13,000 = \text{£}1,911,000$  (post May 2021)  
 $120 \times \text{£}13,000 = \text{£}1,560,000$   
 $95 \times \text{£}13,000 = \text{£}1,235,000$
14. The basic Member allowance for the 87 Councillors in Cornwall in 20/21 is :  
£14,870.50 (total: £1,293,734); for the 98 Councillors in Wiltshire for 20/21 is:  
£13,833 (total: £1,355,634).
15. The delivery of the £18m unitary savings included a saving of £635,000 from the legacy council allowances budgets. The savings achieved from the reduction of the number of Councillors arising from the formation of the unitary Council was £156,000.
16. The budget for allowances set out in the unitary business case was £1.4m, assuming a basic allowance of £14,000 for 98 members. The Council has put this saving on hold pending the electoral review.
17. Any changes in the number of Councillor will likely trigger a reconsideration by the IRP who will consider those factors that Councillor will want to emphasise. It is clear that savings would be a factor that would inform the determination of an appropriate allowance, and, as the IRP is advisory, it would be a matter from the new Council to follow or depart from any recommendation should they be concerned to achieve the savings originally envisaged.
18. However, the Member Working Group does not consider that the number of Councillors should be dictated by an undue concern about the costs of allowances and that it was more important to ensure that local communities had a Council that met their needs and could represent their interest appropriately.

### **Representation**

19. Another key consideration of the Group was to ensure that the Council had strong representation from across Buckinghamshire, but also to not create committees that lack focus, or prevent detailed discussion and debate by making them too large. Some committees may be able to reduce in size if experience dictates this is right, while others due to workload and the number of working groups, may need to increase.

20. One example is the Local Planning Committee. Each Committee requires enough members so that at times when an interest is declared a balanced number of Councillors remain. Though some may suggest increasing numbers for these Committees the Member Working Group consider that even at the current 197 Councillors it would be difficult to find the numbers who would wish to take on this specialist and 'heavy-lifting' role. Currently all wards are not represented on these committees and nor should this be envisaged in the future.
21. Enabling Members from across the Council to serve on main committees is also considered important for the unitary Council so as to maintain a balance of representation from all parts of the Council's geographical areas. This would require the development of significant detailed knowledge for each Member if they are to play a full part in the business of the Committee and any additional working groups.
22. Furthermore, given the size the majority political group on the Council the proportionality rules mean that significant reductions in the size of committees could result in some groups or parties not being represented. At present, and pending the May 2021 elections, a committee would be need to have 11 Members to have the 3 main political groups represented.

### **Casework**

23. It is difficult to judge the level of casework, local issues and queries that will correlate to size of the Council, but by reducing the number of Councillors significantly without further support the Member Working Group consider that this would increase proportionately.
24. From the calculations attached the average hours that will be spent by Councillors will increase to 32 hours a week, an increase from the current 21 hours, a change of 52%. These hours are significant with the baseline well above the 16 hours initially estimated.
25. The concern with reducing the number of Councillors significantly would be an increase in meetings, and an increase in casework. The modelling suggests that these estimated hours extends to the limits what Councillors can achieve. This reduction in engagement would cut across a key commitment to residents. As already stated, workload is a significant factor if those with other commitments are to be encouraged to make up a significant number of Buckinghamshire's Members.
26. It is acknowledged that time Councillors devote to casework is very much dictated by the particular demands of a locality. The type and nature of the issues in a rural community differ from those in more urban areas, but Members considered that the frequency and volume of matters that those in more rural wards had to address (fly tipping, planning enforcement, flooding, highway related matters, HS2) matched those of their counterparts in larger conurbations where often the focus was on social welfare issues, anti-social behaviour, support for the vulnerable etc.

## Community Boards

27. The Member Working Group acknowledge that Community Boards account for a significant commitment of Councillors' time. In the future the Council needs to review attendance at the 16 Community Boards after the boundary changes and ensure that no Councillor covers more than one Community Board. Each Community Board equals 15 meetings a year, for example Penn Wood and Old Amersham ward currently has three Community Boards in its area. This equates to 45 meetings a year and is not sustainable alongside other local commitments, including the attendance at Parish Councils.
28. Community Boards are a major platform for local engagement of the new Buckinghamshire Council and to be successful needs commitment from all the Local Councillors. The concern is that if the number of Councillors reduce the workload will increase further, requiring members to be part of most focused working groups created by the Community Board. The Group acknowledge the Community Boards are in their initial phase and have developed with their own distinct autonomy and character. They will need to develop further with the likely resumption of face to face engagement with residents. However, the vision for these Boards should not be limited to just a forum for debate and consultation but could stimulate direct action in localities.
29. Annex 1 is a document 'Introducing Community Boards' which set out the Council's approach to the Community Boards, including their purpose, membership, budget and operating principles alongside how they are supported by officers.
30. Community Boards have now been in operation for 9 months of the new Council's existence and have been well-received amongst Councillors and their communities. As well as providing direct input into community leadership, the Boards have been involved in critical projects ranging from Climate Change to community resilience and health and well-being. For much of 2020 the Boards have provided vital support to the vulnerable in their communities during Covid-19. Annex 2 is a set of slides from a recent presentation on how Boards are working in practice, the projects that they are involved in and how they are making an impact on their communities and the Council – together with how Councillors are involved with them.
31. Buckinghamshire has 169 Parish and Town Councils with many Members regularly attending a number of Parishes in their area. The Council has committed itself to a comprehensive Charter outlining its commitment to localities through this Charter (Annex 3). This Charter has been co-produced with Parish & Town Councils and has been widely circulated for consultation. Community Board alignment with Parish & Town Councils was considered a significant benefit and facilitated a forum where issues of mutual interest could be raised and, where appropriate, resources and assistance could be aligned without trespassing on Parish & Town Council responsibilities and duties. This was in addition to getting good, local responses and input into Council decisions.

32. Notwithstanding the evident time commitment, the Member Working Group were of the view that significant attendance and engagement will continue to be required by Councillors. The Community Boards have large delegated budgets, and scope for offering grants to local groups through a range of sub-committees. This involves a lot of extra work on matters that are of considerable importance to local communities.

### **Scrutiny**

33. It was an ambition of the unitary Council as articulated in the former County Council's business case, that the new Council have robust scrutiny arrangements to ensure transparency and accountability.

34. The Working Group acknowledge that the Council is a very complex organization with, for example, over 1700 property assets and trading estates which raised £10-12m p.a. in revenue. It was important to have Councillor oversight of the this work both to ensure democratic accountability but also to utilize the specific skills that Members had.

35. The current arrangements for Scrutiny provide for:

- Children & Education
- Health & Adult Social Care
- Transport, Economy, Climate Change
- Communities & Localism
- Growth, Infrastructure & Housing
- Finance & Resources (including Budget Scrutiny Inquiry)

36. These have a wide-ranging remit and are involved in detailed analysis of Cabinet proposals. They have extensive work programmes and the respective Chairman meet regularly with relevant Cabinet Members and Directors to consider how they can remain effective and add value to the Council. They currently have 15 Members reflecting a broad representation from a range of Members and political groups.

37. The Council has a large Scrutiny function forged out of a commitment to invest in a culture of challenge and improvement. The model adopted allows the Select Committees to broadly align with the political portfolios of the Cabinet and so hold Cabinet Members to account on a wide range of issues, seen as essential given the significant change agenda for Buckinghamshire. The current size of the committees is proportionate to the total number we currently have. Another option would be to reduce membership size, to say, 10 and have the option of co-opting external stakeholders onto the committees where appropriate. Reducing the number of committees is also an option but having fewer than 5 would limit the work programme. As well as the 'challenge and improvement role' the Member Working Group were also keen to involve Councillors in the role of policy formation as a way of non-Executive Members being able to influence the development of key decisions.

38. It is considered that alternative approaches – such as one committee commissioning smaller task and finish groups, or broader committees covering, say, people and place – would similarly not have the capacity to cover the significant work programme.
39. The rationale for the current approach follows the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny's guidance – The Good Scrutiny Guide. That sets out the principles of good scrutiny: (1) critical friend challenge (2) hearing the voice of the public (3) independence (4) drive improvement. It is considered that the current approach to Scrutiny fulfils those principles as well as the broader values of accountability, transparency and involvement.

### **Strategic involvement**

40. Members need to have the time to engage with the development of the strategy and the big picture for the Council as this is where the largest area of delivery, and impact is made on the community by the Council. Each Member needs to have time to input into the major areas of work for the Council and the thinking that goes behind that delivery. Through their involvement of with Committees and sub-committees, Councillors are keen to influence the development of Local Plans, affordable housing etc. A lower number of Councillors would run the risk of leaving the key areas of responsibility to the Executive and Officers with very little input from Members. The Member Working Group want a Member-led Council and the number of Councillors will be the defining element of this.
41. At paragraphs 27 – 31 is a reference to the work of the Community Boards. In addition to being a key focus of community leadership, the Boards also feed into strategic decisions making as is evident from slides attached at Annex 2 and the way in which the Boards acts as both the way in which Council delivers its priorities at a local level, but also feeding back key issues from communities which inform the strategic direction of the Council.
42. Furthermore, many Members are formally involved with the Council's key strategic partners, for example, holding key appointments on the Health & Wellbeing Board and the Fire Authority as well as regular involvement with bodies such as the Clinical Commissioning Group, Buckinghamshire Business First and the Local Enterprise Partnership. To ensure continued and meaningful participation in these strategic partners it is considered essential that there are sufficient Councillors with sufficient availability.
43. In addition, the Council and its Committees has been keen to establish working groups to consider key aspects of the Council business. The Member Working Group for the Electoral Review is a case in point, but additional Group have been formed to look at the Constitution, HS2, the Council's Highways Maintenance Contract to name a few.

44. The Group were also aware that Councillor not only have a lot of experience and knowledge of their local communities, but their involvement in the regulatory work of the Council – eg, planning, licensing – requires a degree of specialism only acquired with good training and over a period of time.
45. Immersion in the detail of that work is considered critical to be able to ensure competent and lawful decisions however it is acknowledged that that commitment impacts on Councillor time.

#### **Meeting arrangements**

46. Having a larger number of Councillors does raise the difficulty of running the Full Council meeting where all members attend. Larger numbers make this more difficult and would require the procedures for the meeting being reviewed to ensure that questions could be asked and motions debated fully. This is not impossible to fix with learning from other Councils of a similar size.

## Council size - Options

### Option 1

47. Table 1 identifies recently established unitary councils alongside the relative projected population size for their area and either their actual, or proposed Councillor number. The most obvious comparators for Buckinghamshire is: Cornwall with a projected population size of 449,000, with 89 Councillors; West Northants – 441,000 population and 93 Councillors; Wiltshire with 417, 000 population and 98 Councillors.

48. Whilst there are other Councils (eg, Durham) with a similar population size which have 120+ Councillors, the decisions of the LGBCE in the last 10 year have been significantly lower than that number. Birmingham, for example, have a projected population of over 813,000 and have reduced their size to 101 Members. Other recent decisions for Unitary Councils have not been over 100 Members.

Authority	Total electorate (at time of review)	Forecast electorate	Proposed Wards	Proposed Council size	Area (sq mi)	Average electors per councillor (at time of review)	Average electors per councillor (forecast)	Last review date
BCP	301,183 (2018)	309,792 (2023)	33	76	62.3	3,963	4,076	2018
Birmingham	728,730 (2015)	813,981 (2021)	69	101 (-19)	103.4	7,215	8,059	2016
Buckinghamshire	419,552 (2019)	427,057 (2026)	49	120 (-27)	604	2,854	3,496	2021
Cornwall	425,514 (2016)	449,182 (2023)	87	87 (-36)	1,375	4,891	5,163	2018
Dorset	295,195 (2018)	308,050 (2023)	52	82		3,600	3,757	2018
Durham	407,527 (2011)	411,788 (2016)	63	126	859	3,234	3,268	2011
North Northants	343,614 (2018) (population)		26	78	380.9	3,186	4,405	N/A
West Northants	401,996 (2018) (population)		31	93	531.8	3,186	4,322	N/A
Wiltshire	367,686 (2018)	417,228 (2024)	98	98	1,346	3,752	4,257	2019

**Table 1**

49. On the basis of the recent previous decisions of the LGBCE alone, it could be argued that the appropriate size for Buckinghamshire falls within a range of 87 to 98 Members. Taking that as a starting point inevitably requires a review of what can reasonably be expected of Councillors in terms of meeting attendance and size of committees whilst still ensuring that the Council met its statutory functions and Members played a purposeful role.
50. Recently the Secretary of State for Housing and Local Government confirmed that 3 further unitary proposals could go forward for approval: Somerset, North Yorkshire and Cumbria.
51. As a further comparator, Table 2 below identifies the proposed number of Councillors together with the associated electorate, and electors per Councillor for these new authorities. (It should be noted that these numbers are proposals and these Councils will be subject to an electoral review before the final number is determined.)

<b>Council</b>	<b>Cllr Number</b>	<b>Electorate</b>	<b>Electors per Cllr</b>
North Yorks	90	?	6850
Somerset	100	430,171	4302
Cumbria	84	392,191	4669

**Table 2**

52. These newly proposed authorities suggest that an appropriate range for a similar sized electorate might extend the Council size to 100 Members.
53. The published unitary proposal for Somerset, as an example, acknowledges that there is a risk with a smaller number of Councillors of a democratic deficit, this risk can be mitigated by appropriate representations on their Local Area Committees and significant delegations to their many (218) Town and Parish Councils. All the authorities' proposals acknowledge consolidating the number of Councillors requires a detailed consideration of appropriate officer support and assistance to enable them to fulfil their role.
54. By way of a further comparison Table 3 below sets out a comparison of the number of Committees that non-executive Member sit on, using data from Buckinghamshire's current frequency and size of Committee meetings. This gives an indication of how decision-making arrangements might need to change if the number of Councillors were reduced to below 100.

	Wiltshire		West Northants		Cornwall		Bucks	
	Frequency	Size	Frequency	Size	Frequency	Size	Frequency	Size
<b>Scrutiny</b>	6 - 8	13 - 15			6	15	5	15
<b>Area Planning</b>	10 - 15	8 - 11			12	13 - 15	12	12
<b>Audit</b>	5	12			6	8	2	12
<b>Licensing</b>	5	12			4	15	5	15
<b>Community Boards</b>	5 – 8	3 - 9			4	4	2 - 4	6 - 27

**Table 3**

55. Whilst Scrutiny, Area Planning Committees, Audit and Licensing are broadly comparable in terms of frequency of meeting and size, it is notable that there is a considerably fewer Members who attend Community Boards/Community network meetings. Cornwall have a total of 19 Community Network Panels. (It is assumed that attendance on outside bodies and Parish & Town Council meetings would also be broadly comparable across the Councils considered.)

56. The Member Working Group acknowledge that the LGBCE assessment of what is the appropriate size Council for Buckinghamshire will not be based on comparator data but will be considered on the criteria set out in paragraphs 2 and 4 above. However, the Working Group noted that the earlier proposals regarding Council size had been based on a comparison of similar Councils and gave a context to the earlier size proposals. The Working Group further noted the more recent decisions of the LGBCE. Having regard to the comparator data has led the Working Group to consider further why Buckinghamshire Council distinguishes itself from the way in which other Council's would fulfil the criteria of strategic leadership, accountability and community leadership, as outlined in the key considerations above and the recommendations below.

### Ernst & Young proposal

57. In 2014, Buckinghamshire Business First, on behalf of the business community in Buckinghamshire, commissioned Ernst & Young to develop a strategic business case for the reorganisation of local government in Buckinghamshire. Whilst undertaken some 6 years ago, the context for the Ernst & Young report was *'on-going reductions in the amount of resources Councils have to deliver services and increased demand ... [predicated to] result in a national funding gap of £16.5 billion by 2020. Our own analysis demonstrates that by 2016, without intervention, the funding gap in Buckinghamshire could reach £40m per year'*.

58. Due to the efforts of the legacy Councils the anticipated concern regarding the funding gap did not materialise although there remain some uncertainties over the future funding of local authorities with only a short-term financial settlement outlined by Government. Post Covid-19 there is the real possibility that local government is likely to face similar on-going reductions in funding.

59. The focus of the Ernst & Young report is the savings that could result from reorganising local government, including savings attached to a single unitary which was ultimately approved by Government. It was hoped at the time that with the harmonisation of Council Tax this would result in reduced Council Tax payments for residents. The report further maintained that a unitary Council would bring other tangible benefits, such as: (a) having a greater strategic impact with simpler organisational structures (eg, a unified planning authority; a single housing strategy) which would contribute to an enhanced economy; (b) having a greater locality focus by abolishing municipal boundaries in favour of natural communities alongside a simpler delivery model for services ; and (c) having a greater opportunity to develop more local democratic accountability.
60. Appendix 2 to the EY report addresses council size. Factors considered at that time were: the ratio of electors to Councillors; benchmarking data from other authorities; unique features of Buckinghamshire; and LGBCE guidance.
61. Of note is that, in EY’s view, the benefits to be derived from a unitary Council could be achieved with a relatively low number of Councillors. The report does not analyse the detail of the likely anticipated number of Committees, or Councillor’s time commitment, but it does include comparisons with other Councils on a range of measures, including electorate size; electors per Councillor and geographical area.
62. Table 4 set out a comparison by electorate size placing Buckinghamshire in the upper quartile of authorities nationally.

### Comparison of prospective size with other Unitary Councils

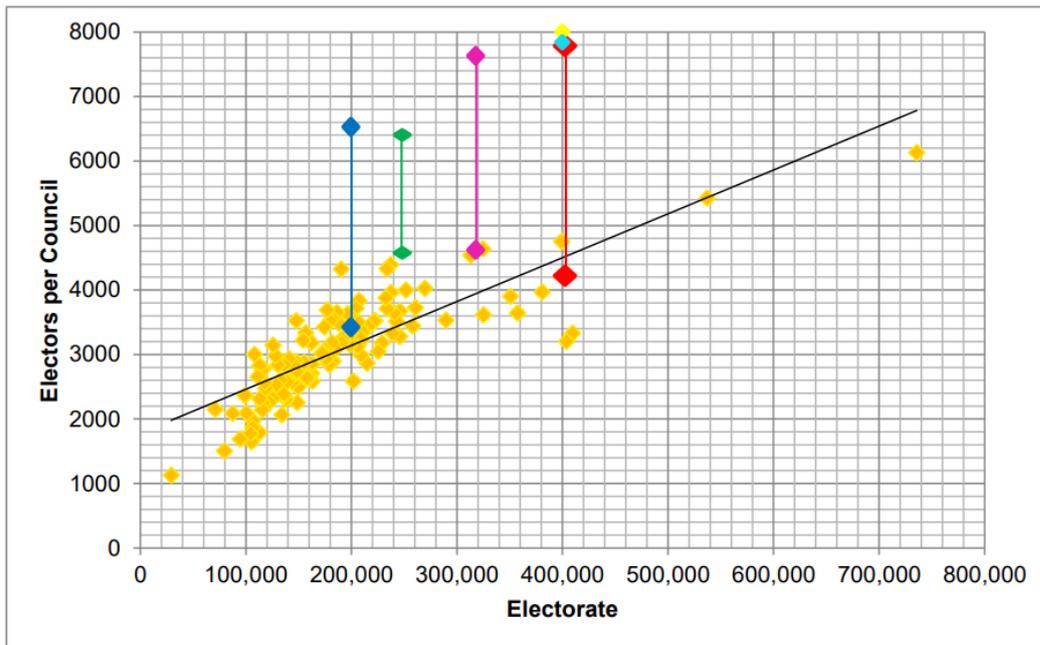
With an electorate of approaching 400,000 Buckinghamshire is toward the upper quartile in terms of size nationally, though it is by no means the biggest council as the table below sets out.

Authority Name	Total Electorate	Council Size	Electors per Councillor	Council Type
Leeds	537,163	99	5426	Unitary District
Cornwall	409,639	123	3330	Unitary County (2009)
Durham	403,742	126	3204	Unitary County (2009)
Sheffield	399,131	84	4752	Unitary District
Manchester	380,930	96	3968	Unitary District
Wiltshire	357,240	98	3645	Unitary County (2009)
Bradford	350,882	90	3899	Unitary District
Liverpool	325,125	90	3613	Unitary District
Bristol	324,584	70	4637	Unitary District
Kirklees	313,233	69	4540	Unitary District

**Table 4**

63. Table 5 below shows a comparator for democratic representation for single-tier councils outside London. The red line identifies the range of electors per Councillor based on electorates of 400,000.

In terms of democratic representation, the scatter diagram below sets out ratio for all single-tier councils in England outside London. Based on the line of best fit, each option has been included with the lower and upper figures set out below.



**Table 5**

Table 6 show the number of Councillor relative to geographical size.

Authority Name	Area in Hectares	Council Size	Hectare per Councillor	Council Type
Northumberland	501,300	67	7482	Unitary County
Cornwall	354,594	123	2883	Unitary County
Wiltshire	325,535	98	3322	Unitary County
Shropshire	319,731	74	4321	Unitary County
East Riding Of Yorkshire	240,763	67	3593	Unitary District
Durham	222,605	126	1767	Unitary County
Herefordshire	217,973	58	3758	Unitary District
Cheshire East	116,637	82	1422	Unitary District
Cheshire West & Chester	91,664	75	1222	Unitary District
North Lincolnshire	84,631	43	1968	Unitary District
Central Bedfordshire	71,567	59	1213	Unitary District

**Table 6**

64. Noting that 'an indicative 65 member council would put Buckinghamshire nearer the mean of single tier upper tier councils outside London in terms of the ratio of councillors and area'.

65. But considering the factors of electorate size, democratic representation and geographical areas, the report's conclusion is that *'the optimal size of a future unitary authority in Buckinghamshire would be between 65 and 80 elected members'*.
66. A copy of the EY report is at Annex 4.
67. **Summary:** benchmarking data from comparable size Councils from the (historic) data in the EY report, from decisions of the LGBCE on unitary Councils in the recent past and on the newly proposed unitary authorities in 2020 suggests the appropriate number of Councillors could be set at below 100, within a range from 65 – 100.
68. It is the view of the Member Working Group that taking the benchmarking data alone as the basis of determining the appropriate size does not adequately address the workload that will fall to a smaller number of Councillors and greater delegations to Parishes or officers is not considered compatible with a Member-led authority. There is also insufficient consideration given to the democratic deficit that will arise by having fewer Councillors and smaller committees.

## Option 2 – Unitary Proposal

69. *Modernising Local Government in Buckinghamshire* was published in September 2016 and set out the business case for a single unitary Council for Buckinghamshire. Reference is made to the earlier EY report throughout. The 2016 Report was the proposal formally approved by Government. The business case set out the aims for Buckinghamshire with a vision for single tier of local government that: had a single voice; was more local; had better public services and provided better value for money, as well as contributing to public sector reform more generally with other partners.
70. The detailed report set out the drivers for change and the way a unitary Council would be well-placed to meet future challenges, including a greater level of annual revenue savings, a single accountable body to the public and the delivery of a comprehensive offer to communities.
71. The business case sets out in some detail the blueprint for a new single unitary Council including the governance arrangements. As proposed, the business case envisaged that local Members would play a pivotal role between the Council and residents, with the Council providing the necessary support for their expanded community leadership role. Engagement with Community Boards, town and parish Councils would become an important part of the role of a unitary Councillor. Training and development, digital and ICT and administrative support were seen as enabling Councillors to meet the demands of their role and to make it 'as easy as possible for those with full-time day-time commitments to serve as an elected councillor' meetings would be arranged appropriately.
72. For the transition period to the new unitary it was proposed that the number of Councillors would be 98. The business case acknowledged that this was higher than the number set out in the Buckinghamshire Business First/EY report offering a more

straightforward approach in terms of a boundary review *'and would also ensure sufficient capacity to lead the council during a period of transformation'*.

73. The report acknowledges that the dividing of the County Council's 49 divisions into two would create 98 single Member wards was a simple way to achieve the reduction. It would also mean reducing the Councillor number by 138 and contributing a £1.2 million saving, which would increase to a saving of £1.6 million with a reduction in the number of overall committees and support. (This would appear to be a similar approach in the newly proposed unitary Council for Cumbria where the adoption of (in their case) 1 Unitary Member for each of the County wards was seen as the simplest and most administratively convenient arrangement with the advantage of making significant savings.)
74. Appendix 3 of the business case gives more detail on the proposed governance model. There are 8 guiding principles in determining the governance arrangements for the new unitary Council reflected in the report. These are:
- Representation of all communities
  - Transparent and open decision-making
  - Responsiveness to the needs and ambitions of local communities
  - Accountability to local residents, communities and businesses
  - Robust assurance and regulation of the use of public funding and assets
  - Scrutiny of services
  - Strong partnership
  - Civic leadership and pride in Buckinghamshire which respects values of local communities and heritage
75. In terms of decision-making, there is a strong emphasis on consultation and that local Councillors and Community Boards are properly consulted on proposals that have a local impact and that communities are able to inform area and strategic planning decisions.
76. To realise these aspirations, it was proposed that the structure and composition of the key Committees would be as follows:
- 10 Cabinet Members (for the first term; fewer for a 'steady state')
  - 5 Strategic Scrutiny Committees (supplemented by the local scrutiny by the Community Boards)
  - Strategic Sites and 5 Area Planning Committees
  - Regulatory Committees – pensions, licensing, senior appointments, audit
  - 19 Community Boards
77. A copy of the former Buckinghamshire County Council business case for the unitary Council is at Annex 5.

78. **Summary:** extensive consideration was given by the former County Council as to the appropriate decision-making arrangements that the unitary Council should adopt with an emphasis on strong relationships with local communities and robust scrutiny and accountability. Whilst no detail was provided as the size of the key Committees, each Councillor was eligible for appointment on decision-making Committees and Community Boards.
79. The Member Working Group applaud the vision in 2016 for the unitary Council, however, in the line with the comment on Option 1, the post-April 2020 reality for Councillors is a heavy workload to facilitate and bring into effect that original vision. It is considered that the desire to ensure robust scrutiny, proper accountability, and good relationships with localities requires a higher number of Councillors than that originally envisaged in the County Council model. The Working Group also were of the view that the 2016 business case had advocated a number of changes and, also, savings arising from a reduction in the number of Councillors; however, since then the landscape for public authorities had changed significantly. The pandemic has meant a rethink of the role of public authorities generally, but in addition the reality of the obligations on Councillors in undertaking the work of unitary Council (the Community Boards is one example) was significantly underestimated and the original proposal for 98 Councillors was considered unrealistic.

## The Workload Model

80. This model envisages 3 options ranging from 90 – 140 Councillors as an appropriate size for the Council. In Annex 6 to this Options Paper is a set of calculations which provide a broad outline of the workload and commitment required of Councillors currently and sets out three options with alternative numbers.
81. The key considerations that have informed Options 3 – 5 are as follows:
- Councillors should be drawn from the widest range of backgrounds, ages, knowledge and experience to better represent the communities served.
  - The amount of time required to become a Councillor should not be at a level that is prohibitive, particularly for those who are employed or in a caring role, or just wish for a balanced life. It should not be considered a full-time role.
  - Councillors should come from the community and be part of the community (local government should be local) and a Councillor needs to be accessible to their residents when issues arise, and not remote. It was considered that the establishment of the unitary Council the number of 147 Councillors was deemed an appropriate number where this connection could be maintained as a first step in the amalgamation of all the councils.
  - The Cabinet needs to be held to account by the Members through its Committees and with an appropriate level of Scrutiny. There needs to be enough Councillors to cover the current core structure and, where the need arises, to create additional Committees to cope with future challenges facing Buckinghamshire.

- The Cabinet will be made up of ten members, but some portfolios will need Deputies to assist due to the scale of the role. In the main, these would be considered as a full-time commitment.
  - There is a concern that casework increases with the reduction of the number of Councillors. If this becomes too great then the ability for a Member to significantly play a part in building the strategy of the Council reduces, and more powers are delegated to Officer discretion. For the smooth running of the Council it is acceptable to delegate powers to the Officers, but this should be done out of choice, not necessity, and where it is appropriate.
  - Allowances will be reviewed taking into account the number of Councillors and be relative to the workload reducing additional cost.
  - If the number of Councillors was set at 120, this would equate to 3,500 electors per Councillor, a number projected to increase over the next few years, and in line with a number of comparable Unitary Councils.
82. The calculations and assumptions sheet in Annex 6 give three options, which gives an indication of the time commitment on Councillors depending on the Option chosen. Option 3 notes the impact on Councillor time-commitment if the number were fixed at 90. Option 4 envisages 120 Members, and Option 5 sets out the impact at 140 Members.
83. **Summary:** the work of Councillors is demanding but must be sustainable in order for it to be carried out effectively and so as to attract candidates for elected office from a diverse background. The modelling provided suggests that with a lower number of Councillors using current commitments there is a danger that the role will become unsustainable.
84. The Member Working Group were unanimously of the view that the new Council brought with it greater challenges on individual Councillor time and commitment and that to fulfil the original vision and realise the benefits of local government reorganisation for Buckinghamshire, and afford appropriate and proportionate representation for communities, the number of Councillors required was higher than originally envisaged. Accepting that a Council size had to be practically and administratively manageable, the Member Working Group considered that 120 Councillors would be the appropriate size.

## Recommendation:

85. The Member Working Group have given close scrutiny to key considerations that ought to inform the Commissions determination of the appropriate size for the Council. Significant weight has been given to a range of issues which the Member Working Group consider will meet the Commissions requirement '*to discharge the business and responsibilities of the council successfully, and to provide for effective community leadership and representation*'. Those issues include the new Council's demanding agenda over the next few years; the Council's ambition to ensure involvement of communities through its Community Boards; the desire to have

accountability and transparency through its Select Committees and to ensure Councillors involvement in both the strategic and regulatory work of the Council.

86. Noting that the decisions of the Commission in the recent past have rarely exceeded the 100 number, having considered the feedback from Councillors and analysed the time demands in fulfilling their role in the new unitary Council, the Member Working Group consider that a higher number of Councillors is required to meet the objectives the Council has set for itself.
87. The Working Group has reviewed the information and the key considerations and have considered the hard evidence on key matters such as: the work of Cabinet Members, and the work on Committees, Community boards, Parish Councils, Casework, developing expertise, inputting into Strategy and the many other things that form part of the role of being an effective Councillor. To assist the decision-making they have evaluated metrics on how this role changes as Councillor numbers reduce. This has helped guide the Working Group towards a number and comparison of the options. The analysis demonstrate a number of tipping points in the work of a Councillor and the impact they can have, especially where the workload could act as a disincentive to younger working people and those with young families or acting as carers to take on this role. There is also the impact on the level of connection with local communities. The Working Group consider that a point would be reached where decisions are delegated not out of choice but through necessity. The analysis gives us an indication of these tipping points and although this cannot give a precise answer it does demonstrate a point differentiation. These tipping points significantly change what a Councillor can achieve for the community they serve.
88. Balancing the considerations as set out above the Member Working Group recommend that the Standards Committee should propose Option 4 (a number of 120) to the LGBCE as the appropriate Council size for Buckinghamshire Council.

END