The
Local Government
Boundary Commission
for England

[Insert name of submission organisation/group/individual here]

Council Size Submission: Template

[Insert Local Authority Name Here]

Contents

How to Make a Submission

It is recommended that submissions on future governance arrangements and council size follow the guidance provided and use the format below as a template. Submissions should be treated as an opportunity to focus on the future needs of the council and not simply describe the current arrangements. **Submissions should also demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been considered in drawing up the proposal and why you have discounted them.**

The template allows respondents to enter comments directly under each heading. It is not recommended that responses be unduly long; as a guide, it is anticipated that a 15 to 20-page document using this template should suffice. Individual section length may vary depending on the issues to be explained. Where internal documents are referred to URLs should be provided, rather than the document itself. It is also recommended that a table is included that highlights the key paragraphs for the Commission's attention.

'Good' submissions, i.e. those that are considered to be most robust and persuasive, combine the following *key success components (*as set out in the guidance that accompanies this template):

- Clarity on objectives

- A straightforward and evidence-led style

- An understanding of local place and communities

- An understanding of councillors' roles and responsibilities

About You

The respondent should use this space to provide the Commission with a little detail about who is making the submission, whether it is the full Council, Officers on behalf of the Council, a political party or group, a resident group, or an individual.

This submission is made on behalf of West Oxfordshire District Council, following its approval by full Council on 27 November 2024.

Electoral and boundary matters are a non-executive function which fall within the responsibilities of full Council. On 13 March 2024 full Council approved a change to the terms of reference of the Constitution Working Group to include responsibility for oversight of electoral matters including the District Boundary Review.

The Constitution Working Group held a series of meetings from July to October 2024 to consider advice from officers based on data and the local application of guidance on boundary reviews and to oversee and shape the development of this Council Size Proposal.

The Council is proposing an unchanged Council size of 49 Councillors. Based on the electoral register in December 2023, this provides an elector ratio of 1,876 in 2031, an increase of 65 electors (3.6%) per Councillor from 1,811 in 2024. However, since December 2023, c. 3,000 electors have been added to the electoral register as a consequence of the parliamentary general election held in July 2024. As such the electorate ratio in 2024 is closer to 1,878, rising to c. 1,919 in 2031 under this proposal.

While it is to be noted that the electorate ratio in 2024 is higher than the latest published electoral register suggests, the Council recognises that the elector ratio in the district remains relatively low compared to other district councils. The Council considers that this is appropriate in a largely rural and sparsely populated district (the second most sparsely populated district in the South East England region).

The Council wishes to retain a mix of 1, 2 and 3-Member wards to ensure effective representation across the district area, which includes large sparsely populated rural areas as well as market towns and rural service centres of varying sizes. As such the Council has decided to change its electoral cycle from elections by thirds three years out of every four to all out elections every fourth year starting in 2027. The Council considers that a uniform pattern of 3-Member wards would not provide for optimum representation as it would necessitate some extremely large rural wards, potentially covering over 20 parish areas, which would be excessively challenging for elected Members to represent effectively.

Reason for Review (Request Reviews Only)

Please explain the authority's reasons for requesting this electoral review; it is useful for the Commission to have context. *NB/ If the Commission has identified the authority for review under one if its published criteria, then you are not required to answer this question.*

West Oxfordshire District Council meets the Commission's criteria for electoral inequality with 12 of 27 wards outside a variance of 10%, with Witney West ward at +31%. The Commission has a duty set out in law to review every local authority "from time to time." The Commission has interpreted this to be around 12-14 years. West Oxfordshire was last reviewed in 2001, 23 years ago.

The review will seek to deliver electoral equality for electors in local elections.

The Context for your proposal

Your submission gives you the opportunity to examine how you wish to organise and run the council for the next 15 - 20 years. **The consideration of future governance arrangements and council size should be set in the wider local and national policy context.** The Commission expects you to challenge your current arrangements and determine the most appropriate arrangements going forward. In providing context for your submission below, please demonstrate that you have considered the following issues.

- When did your Council last change/reorganise its internal governance arrangements and what impact on effectiveness did that activity have?
- To what extent has transference of strategic and/or service functions impacted on the effectiveness of service delivery and the ability of the Council to focus on its remaining functions?
- Have any governance or capacity issues been raised by any Inspectorate or similar?
- What influence will local and national policy trends likely have on the Council as an institution?
- What impact on the Council's effectiveness will your council size proposal have?

When did your Council last change/reorganise its internal governance arrangements and what impact on effectiveness did that activity have?

The Council has operated the Leader and Cabinet model of governance since executive arrangements were first introduced following the Local Government Act 2000. The Executive takes most of the Council's strategic decisions and in doing so must act within the parameters of the budget and policy framework set by full Council. This model provides for openness and transparency, clear public accountability and effective democratic checks and balances on behalf of the local community, for example through the role and powers of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

The Council's Constitution sets out the Council's arrangements for taking executive and non-executive decisions. The Constitution is kept under regular review by the Constitution Working Group, which is appointed by full Council and has an annual work programme. Any changes to the Constitution that are considered by the Working Group to be necessary to reflect the law, good practice or the governance needs of the Council, are recommended to full Council for approval.

The Council undertook a review of its overview and scrutiny function in 2023 and decided to replace its three themed overview and scrutiny committees (Finance and Management, Economic and Social, and Climate and Environment) with a single new Overview and Scrutiny Committee. The rationale for this change, which was implemented in November 2023, was to:

a) Properly embed pre-decision scrutiny as part of the work of overview and scrutiny and the executive decision-making process;
b) Ensure effective scheduling of meetings;
c) Facilitate effective work planning and improve efficiency e.g. removing the need for reports to be presented to multiple committees, or for joint meetings of two committees to be held.

The new Overview and Scrutiny Committee meets in the week prior to each meeting of the Executive to consider items on the scrutiny work plan, which is set annually and may be adjusted by the Committee as priorities change during the year. This system enables non-members to subject selected Executive reports to pre-decision scrutiny and to make recommendations to the Executive in public, which the Executive is obliged to respond to in writing. The Committee is also empowered to commission reports directly from officers on matters of interest and to commission task and finish reviews whereby high priority issues affecting the district are subject to consideration over a series of focused meetings.

The impact of the change on the effectiveness of the overview and scrutiny function will be reviewed by the Constitution Working Group 12 months after the change was implemented. The early indications are that the change has delivered on its rationale and improved the effectiveness and standing of the function, resulting in more effective meetings and a significant increase in number of recommendations made to the Executive. Further improvements to the Overview and Scrutiny function will be identified through the review process.

The Council has also recently implemented changes to its Audit and Governance Committee. This followed a self-assessment exercise based on the CIPFA Toolkit aimed at identifying knowledge gaps and training needs. Consideration was also given to the size

and structure of the Committee. As a result of the self-assessment exercise the Council agreed to reduce the size of the Committee from 17 Members to 11 Members and to recruit two Independent Members (non-Councillors) to supplement and enhance the Committee's skills and knowledge. It was further agreed that Executive Members would no longer be able to sit on the Committee and that a programme of training would be delivered to Members. The impact of these changes will be reviewed after 12 months.

To what extent has transference of strategic and/or service functions impacted on the effectiveness of service delivery and the ability of the Council to focus on its remaining functions?

Local councils have had to increase efficiency and become increasingly financially self-sufficient as the Revenue Support Grant from government has reduced. The Council's Productivity Plan 2024 articulates how the Council has transformed services, taken advantage of technology and data, and improved efficiency.

Funding is regularly made available to district councils by central government but the bid process and administration of fundings can be extremely resource intensive and timelines are frequently tight. The provision of UKSPF and REPF funding is welcomed but it is extremely resource intensive to devise schemes, call for interest, evaluate and award, put grant agreements in place and then monitor and report progress. This also requires agile and responsive executive decision making, which the Leader and Cabinet model can provide.

There have been some changes to the demands on local authorities against this financial backdrop. The Council played an active role in supporting communities in new and different ways during the Covid-19 pandemic. This included the redeployment of a large number of staff into community facing roles, with significant resources allocated to ensure vulnerable people had access to food and medicines. Once this network of support was established and being sustained through an active network of Voluntary agencies and Charities, the focus switched to business support. Members played an active role in identifying local resources and needs throughout this period.

Members of the public increasingly expect councils to utilise modern forms of technology and to be more responsive than ever before, for example on social media. The Council has been introducing new digital channels and improving those that already existed. This activity coincided with the Covid pandemic, where people accepted the use of alternative service access channels as a result of national restrictions. This resulted in a significant percentage of service requests coming through digital channels, which presented an opportunity for the Council to trial a reduction in the hours of opening for its customer contact centre. Making this change permanent can be expected to save the Council £125,000 per annum.

The new Biodiversity Net Gain requirements placed on authorities are having a notable impact on limited ecology resources and on the demands for large numbers of S.106 agreements which need to be administered through the legal team.

Have any governance or capacity issues been raised by any Inspectorate or similar?

The Council jointly owns the shared services Teckal company Publica Group. One of the Council's partners, Cotswold District Council, was subject to a peer challenge exercise in 2022. Their Corporate Peer Challenge Feedback Report discussed the Council's "capacity for improvement", noting that the vast majority of Council staff were employed by the Teckal company Publica and that it was clear from their discussions with staff at various levels of the organisations that capacity pressures were increasingly being felt and were impacting on both the delivery of council priorities and the wellbeing of staff. West Oxfordshire District Council, together with its partners, subsequently started the process of insourcing the majority of services from Publica back to the councils.

This repatriation of services is taking place in a phased approach with phase 1 being implemented on 1 November 2024, affecting the employment of 270 staff across the partnership; most of whom work exclusively for a single council. A second phase of the transition comprising services and staffing posts that are currently shared is due to be implemented in Spring 2025. This represents a major change programme for the Council which will require significant Member-oversight and the involvement of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and the Executive.

In terms of councillor capacity, the survey results showed that the majority of Members (16 out of 26 survey respondents) believed that the workload of a councillor had increased since they were first elected (whenever that was). The primary drivers for this increase in workload were identified as being "ward member work including casework" (selected by 11 of the 16 Members), "Reading reports" (selected by 9 of the 15 Members) and "work associated with special responsibilities" (selected by 9 of the 15 Members). Only one member out of 24 felt that the workload had decreased (due to changes in their responsibilities and political campaigning).

The survey also asked Members to rank how comfortable they are with their workload from 1 (very uncomfortable) to 10 (very comfortable). The chart below presents Members' respondes to this question and a follow up question about how comfortable they would be if the workload was to increase by 10%.

Q11 & Q13 How comfortable are you with your workload as a Councillor? (1 = very uncomfortable, 10= very comfortable)
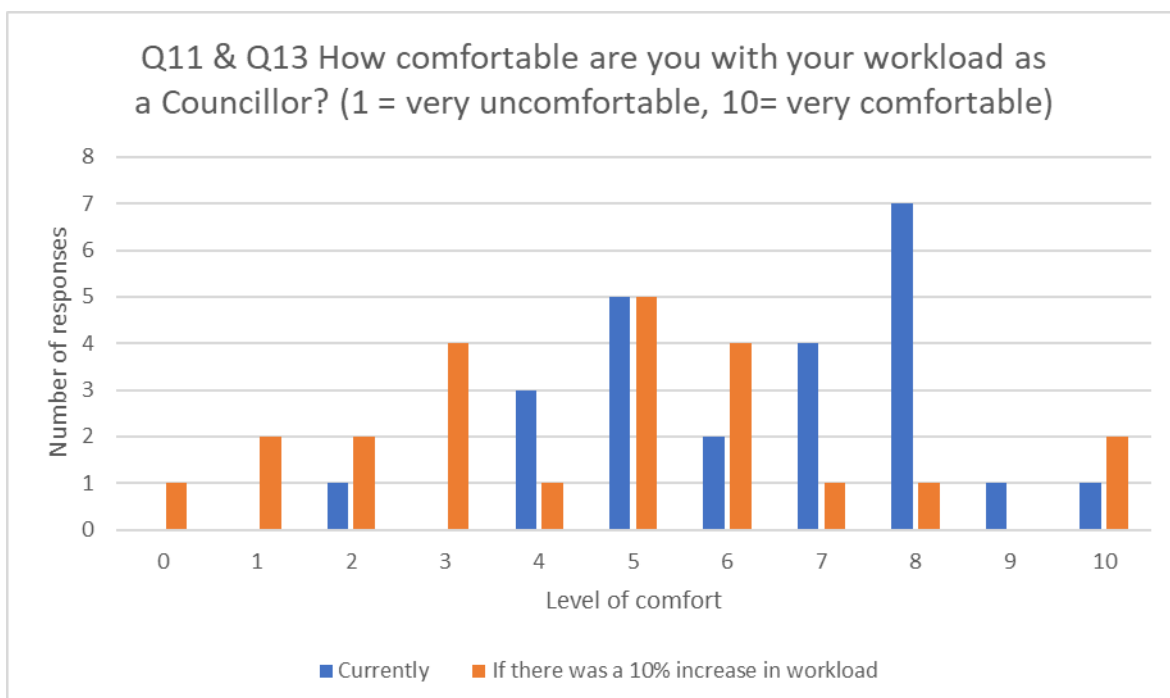
The chart shows that while most members are quite comfortable with their workload on average, this would change if the workload was to increase by 10% (which would equate to a small reduction in the size of the Council allowing for growth in the electorate). In this scenario, members provide a range of responses, but a small number would become very uncomfortable with their workload. In commenting on their workload Members have stated the following:

"Difficult to do while balancing family commitments and a full-time job."

"It is a huge workload, but there is a lot to do."

"It's a challenge having a full time job as well as being a Councillor so its sometimes difficult to attend all meetings especially during the day."

If the number of councillors was to reduce the workload of individual councillors would continue to increase significantly on average and there is a risk that certain councillor roles could not be performed effectively in future, which would be detrimental to the work of the Council and the communities it serves (including town and parish councils and the outside bodies the Council appoints to). This would place particular pressure on councillors who work full time or have caring responsibilities in addition to their duties as a councillor.

Members who represent large rural wards covering numerous of parish council areas will continue to face particular demands, including spending significant amounts of time travelling to and attending parish council meetings. These demands are likely to increase given that population growth has been centred around existing settlement meaning rural wards would likely need to increase in size on average even with 49 councillors. A decrease in the number of councillors would exacerbate these demands.

What influence will local and national policy trends likely have on the Council as an institution?

Whilst the current Labour government has only been in power for a small number of months, it is evident that the rapidly changing national policy landscape will have significant implications for the Council as an institution. The Council has long been committed to partnership working with the other Oxfordshire Authorities and a recent joint Expression of Interest to the Deputy Prime Minister's national devolution offer restates this commitment. The Council looks forward to working with government and its neighbours to establish the most impactful geographies and agree clear and accountable governance arrangements so that it can play it's part in driving forward the government's ambition for sustained economic growth. Work is under way to review the Future Oxfordshire Partnership, a joint committee of the six councils of Oxfordshire together with key strategic partners to ensure that it is ready for coming changes, and as an institution the Council is mindful to ensure that its internal make up enables it to fulfil its role within this to maximum effect.

Alongside the Council's role within the Future Oxfordshire Partnership, it must be in a position to make an equally impactful contribution to a range of other partnerships which will deliver on national policy. These will include, but are not limited to, the Oxford-Cambridge Pan Regional Partnership and the Cotswolds National Landscape. Central to the Council's

success in this will be the ability to engage with other organisations around the Council and this will require a strong cohort of Councillors to represent the local electorate.

The Council is also mindful of the specific impact of the recent proposed changes to the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) on its function as the Local Planning Authority for West Oxfordshire, specifically the implications of the newly proposed standard method for estimating the minimum number of new homes required. This sees a 62% increase in the number of new homes required, rising from 549 to 889 per annum. The requirement for a review of the Oxford green belt within the Council's geography and buffer of 5% to the 5-year housing land supply is anticipated to generate an increase in speculative applications and planning by appeal. It is likely that the NPPF changes will also, therefore, have an impact on the timetable for the West Oxfordshire Local Plan 2041. The acceleration of housing delivery will impact on the population size of West Oxfordshire and present a range of challenges and opportunities for the Council as an institution to contribute to the national policy ambition of sustained economic growth, amongst others, as well as delivering on its own vision for the District:

"Shaping West Oxfordshire as a District which offers a fulfilling and meaningful quality of life for our residents with opportunities for all to flourish. A thriving and prosperous place for entrepreneurs and businesses, where local people and visitors can enjoy the beauty and heritage of our landscape, built, farmed and natural environment."

What impact on the Council's effectiveness will your council size proposal have?

The proposal to maintain the size of the Council at 49 councillors representing a mix of 1, 2 and 3-Member wards will have a positive impact on the effectiveness of the Council:

- There will be an opportunity to alter ward boundaries where this is considered appropriate to deal with electoral variances or provide for more effective representation.
- There will be an opportunity to provide for effective governance in areas where there will be significant housing developments in and around the main settlements.
- Members will be likely to continue to have sufficient capacity to deal with increasingly complex casework on behalf or local residents and businesses, including the most vulnerable members of the community.
- Members will be likely to continue to have sufficient capacity to attend meetings of outside bodies (where applicable), in addition to their duties as members of Full Council, the Executive, committees, sub-committees and working groups.
- Non-executive members will be likely to continue to have sufficient capacity to participate in an active scrutiny function (including task and finish groups).
- Councillor workloads are unlikely to be off-putting to prospective councillors, particularly those in employment or with caring responsibilities (19 of 26 survey respondents described their employment status as being employed, either full time or part time; 10 of 26 had caring responsibilities).
- Members representing rural wards will be likely to serve a manageable number of communities within a reasonable travelling distance.
- Members will be likely to continue to have sufficient capacity to attend meetings of town and parish councils within their wards.
- All communities within the district will be likely to be effectively represented by their local ward member.

- All members will continue to have reasonable and manageable volumes of planning applications within their ward to engage with.

Local Authority Profile

Please provide a short description of the authority and its setting, in particular the local geography, demographics and community characteristics. This should set the scene for the Commission and give it a greater understanding of any current issues. The description should cover all of the following:

- Brief outline of area - are there any notable geographic constraints for example that may affect the review?
- Rural or urban - what are the characteristics of the authority?
- Demographic pressures - such as distinctive age profiles, migrant or transient populations, is there any large growth anticipated?
- Community characteristics – is there presence of "hidden" or otherwise complex deprivation?
- Are there any other constraints, challenges, issues or changes ahead?

Further to providing a description, the Commission will be looking for a submission that demonstrates an understanding of place and communities by putting forth arguments on council size based upon local evidence and insight. For example, how does local geography, demographics and community characteristics impact on councillor casework, workload and community engagement?

West Oxfordshire is the second most sparsely populated District in the South East of England. A predominantly rural area with a population density of 1.6 people per hectare, its 116,300 (2023) residents live in one of three towns, Witney (28,977), Carterton (16,600) and Chipping Norton (6,918), six rural service centres or one of the approximately 120 separate villages or hamlets scattered across the district. Communities are represented by 48 parish councils, 6 town councils and 27 parish meetings and 60% of the parishes contain fewer than 500 residents.

There are 48,000 households in total (an increase of 4,800 since the 2011 Census), the spatial distribution of these see the population predominantly concentrated along the A40 corridor and within parishes that have relative proximity to Oxford, leaving the rest of the district relatively sparsely occupied. An exception to this is Chipping Norton, the third main town, which whilst some 20 miles from Oxford is connected to the city by a direct bus service along the A44.

West Oxfordshire's population is lower than other Oxfordshire authorities reflecting the more rural character of the district. The rurality of the district presents unique challenges. Whilst deprivation is lower than average, the dispersed nature of the district means that despite a general level of affluence, some areas are classed as being within the most deprived in the country in terms of access to housing and services. This is of particular relevance for those living in relative poverty and in the district the majority claiming pension credit live in rural areas.

Notable demographic changes between the 2011-21 Census's include:
- Population growth was higher in West Oxfordshire than the South East at 9% and 7.5% respectively. Nationally the population increased by 6.6%;
- The average median age has increased from 42 to 44;

- The number of people aged 50-64 rose by 3,700 (an increase of 18.3%) while those between 35-49 fell by just over 2000 (a decrease of 8.7%). The over 65 age group increased most at 28.2% in contrast to an increase in the under 15's of 5.6%
- In 2021, 95.2% of people identified their ethnic group within the 'white' category; (down from 96.8 in 2011), 1.9% identified within the 'Mixed or Multiple' category (up from 1.2% in 2011) and 0.6% identified within the 'other' category ('Arab' or 'Any other ethnic group'), an increase from 0.2% in 2011.

Housing affordability is a particular challenge for the district with house prices well above the national average, a reflection of its location in a relatively prosperous County. The 2023 housing affordability ratio at 10.6 times average earnings indicates that local house prices in relation to income are considerably higher than the England average of 8.3, although lower than neighbouring Oxford at 12.1. This means that even the cheapest properties in West Oxfordshire are over 10 times the lowest incomes, and that there is pressure on the West Oxfordshire housing market from people working in Oxford.

In contrast to national and regional trends, the period 2011-21 saw an increase in the percentage of households in the social and private rented sector, possibly a consequence of high house prices. As of June 2024 there are 2110 households on the Council's waiting list for affordable housing.

There is therefore an ongoing and urgent need for the district to enable delivery of more homes. This is a challenge in a rural District of landscape sensitivity (notably, approximately one third of the district sits within the Cotswold National Landscape) where there are relatively limited available opportunities for brownfield redevelopment, and where access to services and facilities are impeded by that rurality. Whilst the Council continues to secure funding through development for new infrastructure, there remains a significant funding gap to deliver necessary infrastructure improvements in the district. This was raised as a particular concern by Town and Parish Councils and Parish Meetings, and the wider resident population, in a recent Local Plan consultation where responses emphasised that failure to deliver adequate supporting infrastructure for recent and future housing is likely to have a detrimental impact on quality of life of those living in the District. Transport accessibility is a particular concern. Whilst the Cotswold Line runs across the district it is not accessed from the three main towns, stopping instead at two rural service centres (Long Hanborough and Charlbury) and the village of Kingham in the north of the district.

Council Size
The Commission believes that councillors have three broad aspects to their role. These are categorised as: **Strategic Leadership, Accountability (Scrutiny, Regulatory and Partnerships), and Community Leadership**. Submissions should address each of these in turn and provide supporting evidence. Prompts in the boxes below should help shape responses.

Strategic Leadership
Respondents should provide the Commission with details as to how elected members will provide strategic leadership for the authority. Responses should also indicate how many members will be required for this role and why this is justified. **Responses should demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been explored.**

Topic	

	Key lines of explanation	➢ *What governance model will your authority operate? e.g. Committee System, Executive or other?* ➢ *The Cabinet model, for example, usually requires 6 to 10 members. How many members will you require?* ➢ *If the authority runs a Committee system, we want to understand why the number and size of the committees you propose represents the most appropriate for the authority.* ➢ *By what process does the council aim to formulate strategic and operational policies? How will members in executive, executive support and/or scrutiny positions be involved? What particular demands will this make of them?* ➢ *Whichever governance model you currently operate, a simple assertion that you want to keep the current structure does not in itself, provide an explanation of why that structure best meets the needs of the council and your communities.*
Governance Model	Analysis	Leader and Cabinet model The Council operates the Leader and Cabinet model. The Leader of the Council is elected for a 4-year term following all out elections (most recently in May 2022). The Leader appoints Executive Members and allocates portfolio responsibilities to them. Since May 2022 when the current 3-party Alliance Administration took control of the Council, the Leader has appointed an Executive of 9 Members, including the Leader and Deputy Leader. Prior to May 2022 when the Council was controlled by a single party the Executive comprised 7 Members. The size of the Executive is a matter for the Leader, who may appoint 3-10 Members to the Executive as they deem appropriate. The Executive takes strategic decisions collectively and provides political leadership and oversight of the Council as a whole, including at weekly informal Cabinet meetings. Individual Executive Members also have certain decision-making responsibilities and provide political leadership and public accountability for the specific services and activities within the remit of their portfolio. Executive Members, both individually and collectively, play a key role in overseeing the development of strategic policies and strategy documents. Executive Members also act as the Accountable Member for reports within their portfolio

		responsibilities, which includes presenting reports at meetings of the Executive, Council and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Executive Members hold senior officers to account for the implementation of decisions and the delivery of the Council's agreed policies and strategies.
		In 2023/24 the Executive held 10 meetings lasting a total duration of 11.4 hours. The meeting packs totalled 2314 pages. A number of Executive meetings were held "on tour" in different locations across the district, providing an opportunity for residents to engage with Executive Members.
		Committee structure The Council's committee structure is defined in the Constitution. In total in 2024/25 there are 75 seats on Committees, 35 seats on Sub-Committees and 19 seats on working groups. The Council also appoints Members to a couple of external committees; the Future Oxfordshire Partnership Scrutiny Panel (3 seats) and the Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (1 seat). That makes a total of 133 seats which are appointed annually by full Council, an average of 2.7 seats on non-Executive bodies per Member. This is in addition to being a member of full Council and holding any Executive responsibilities.
		While this remains a large number of seats it represents a reduction on previous years when the Council appointed to three 15-Member overview and scrutiny committees (since replaced by a single 24-seat committee), as well as a larger Audit and Governance Committee (now 11 seats but previously 17 seats).
		Overview and Scrutiny Committee The Council has a 24-Member Overview and Scrutiny Committee which meets 10-12 times per year. The Committee has a key role in scrutinising executive decisions and holding the Executive to account. It is also empowered to examine any issues that affect the district or its people and to make recommendations to Cabinet or Council. The role of the Committee and recent improvements to the function are discussed elsewhere in this proposal.
		Regulatory and administrative committees

| | | The Council operates the following regulatory and administrative committees and sub-committees which are detailed elsewhere in this proposal and have delegated responsibility for certain non-executive functions:

Development Control Committee: 25 Members
- Lowlands Area Planning Sub-Committee: 15 Members
- Uplands Area Planning Sub-Committee: 10 Members

Licensing Committee: 11 Members
- Licensing Sub-Committee (Licensing Act 2003 Matters): 3 Members
- Licensing Sub-Committee (Taxis, Private Hire and Street Trading Consent Matters): 5 Members

Audit and Governance Committee: 11 Members
- Standards Sub-Committee: 5 Members

Performance and Appointments Committee: 7 Members

Working Groups
The Council has appointed two working groups which have significant workloads.

The Constitution Working Group has 9 Members and makes recommendations to full Council about changes to the Council's Constitution. It also has responsibility for overseeing electoral matters such as the electoral review of the district and the review of polling districts and polling places. The Working Group met 5 times in 2023/24 and 4 times in the first half of 2024/25.

The Local Plan Working Group comprises 10 Members and meets to discuss the emerging Local Plan as it takes shape. This includes the consideration of technical supporting evidence as it is produced and the development of plan content and policies. This working group also met 5 times in 2023/24 and 4 times in the first half of 2024/25.

Conclusion
Following a change of administration in 2022 and the appointment of the current Director of Governance in 2023 the Council has been reviewing and making improvements to its governance arrangements, in particular its non-executive functions such as the Audit |

		and Governance Committee and the Overview and Scrutiny Committee.
		It is expected that the Council will continue to operate the Leader and Executive governance model while further strengthening and improving the effectiveness of its non-executive functions. This may include, for example, reducing the size of its Overview and Scrutiny Committee, which is very large at 24 Members. However, the Council also wishes to enhance the role of Scrutiny "Task and Finish Groups", in addition to Member working groups, and will wish to retain sufficient non-executive Member-capacity to enable this.
		At present the size of the Executive is 9 Members, as it has been for the last two years, and it is not expected that this will increase or decrease in size in the short term. An Executive of 9 Members is considered appropriate for a Council with 49 Members. However, the size of the Executive is entirely a matter for the Leader of the Council and could range from 3-10 Members.
		Decreasing the number of councillors would add to the average workload of Members which is undesirable and may constrain the ability of the Council to operate effectively and further strengthen its non-executive functions. Increasing the number of councillors would dilute the influence of individual Members and is not recommended.
		Retaining the existing Council size of 49 councillors is considered appropriate for ensuring that Member roles can be distributed effectively and help to optimise the functioning of the Council's governance arrangements by maintaining strong executive and non-executive functions.
Portfolios	*Key lines of explanation*	➢ *How many portfolios will there be?* ➢ *What will the role of a portfolio holder be?* ➢ *Will this be a full-time position?* ➢ *Will decisions be delegated to portfolio holders? Or will the executive/mayor take decisions?*
	Analysis	There are currently nine Executive portfolios which are allocated by the Leader and cover the Council Plan priorities agreed by Council, strategic responsibilities and statutory services. The Executive portfolios have remained broadly stable since the change of administration in May 2022.

| | | The current portfolios are:

• Leader of the Council (includes strategic partnerships and Council Plan)
• Deputy Leader and Economic Development
• Finance (includes asset management)
• Planning
• Stronger, Healthy Communities
• Housing and Social Care
• Environment
• Climate Action and Nature Recovery
• Leisure and Major Projects

The services that fall within each portfolio are listed on the Council's website and will change from time to time, with changes normally announced at an Annual Council meeting.

Executive Members agree the strategic direction and provide political oversight of the services and Council activities within their portfolio remits. They act as the Accountable Member for reports that come forward for decision within their areas of responsibility and provide public accountability for performance and decisions. Some Executive Members take delegated decisions as required under the Constitution.

Executive Members report that they typically spend "More than 10 hours per week" on their special responsibility. The survey results also suggest that the workload associated with the role of Executive Member may have increased in recent years, with 9 out of 16 members who believe that Member workloads have increased citing work associated with special responsibilities as driving an overall increase in workloads. In commenting on their workload as a councillor a Member has said:

"It was reasonable as a Ward Councillor, but I am still coming to terms with the workload on the Executive"

Conclusion
The role of an Executive Member is not considered to be a full-time position, but it does demand considerable time given that the role is carried out in addition to the normal duties of a councillor, such as case work, representing communities on the Council and representing the Council in communities. Some Executive Members have outside body appointments linked to their portfolio responsibilities. For example, the Executive Member for Stronger, Healthy |

		Communities will serve on the Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Board and the Oxfordshire Health Improvement Board. Some Executive Members also serve on the Future Oxfordshire Partnership (in the case of the Leader) and its Advisory Sub-Groups for Infrastructure, Planning, Housing and Environment. The number of Executive portfolios has remained unchanged under the current leadership. The Leader may make adjustments to the portfolios as they see fit but no significant changes are expected that would affect the size of the Executive or the size of the Council in the short term to medium term.
Delegated Responsibilities	*Key lines of explanation*	➢ *What responsibilities will be delegated to officers or committees?* ➢ *How many councillors will be involved in taking major decisions?*
	Analysis	The Council's Constitution (Parts 3 and 4) contains schemes of delegation for executive and non-executive functions, setting out which decisions are matters for full Council or the Executive, and which functions are delegated to committees, individual Executive Members and officers. Responsibility for setting the Council's "budget and policy framework" rests with full Council. The budget and policy framework sets the parameters within which the Council's decision makers (whether decision making bodies or individuals) must operate, providing strategic direction without being overly restrictive. The budget and policy framework comprises the following: • Council Plan • Community Safety Plan • Development Plan (including the Local Plan) • Pay Policy • Licensing Policy Statements • Budget (including the medium term financial strategy, capital programme, Council Tax and capital, treasury management and investment strategies). If the Executive wished to take a decision that was contrary to the policy framework or the budget set by full Council, that decision could only be taken by full Council. The only exception is where the decision was a matter of urgency and it was impracticable to convene a meeting of full Council, in which case the decision would be reported to full Council

| | | retrospectively with an explanation of the decision and the urgency.

Full Council sets the budget and policy framework and takes decisions in relation to certain non-executive functions that are not delegated to committees, such as electoral matters, the Members' Allowances Scheme, the Members' Code of Conduct, and the Council's Constitution.

Executive functions are the responsibility of the Leader who has in summary delegated as follows:

The Executive is collectively responsible for:

- Proposing plans and strategies, including the budget and policy framework to full Council.
- Representing the Council locally, nationally and internationally.
- Taking certain executive decisions including all key decisions (unless the Executive chooses to delegate these).
- Agreeing land and property acquisitions and disposals up to set financial thresholds or recommending them to full Council above the set financial thresholds.

Individual Executive Members are responsible for certain decisions set out in Part 3D of the Constitution. For example, the Executive Member for Finance will decide on granting certain rate reliefs and debt write-offs and the Executive Member for Stronger, Healthy Communities will decide on certain grant awards.

Senior officers are responsible for the operational management, control and supervision of executive functions, as well as any decisions delegated to them by the Executive.

Non-executive decisions, such as the determination of planning and licensing applications, are delegated to committees, sub-committees and officers. Generally, the larger and/or more contentious decisions (e.g. where there are objections or proposals are contrary to adopted policies) are taken by Members at committee and sub-committee meetings and smaller, routine decisions are taken by officers.

Conclusion |

| | | The Council's decision-making arrangements are well established and functioning effectively. The Council's Constitution sets out how the Council operates, how decisions are taken and the procedures which are followed to ensure that decision-making is efficient, transparent and accountable to local people. The Council has a cross-party Constitution Working Group, which has an annual work plan, meets regularly and makes recommendations to Council regarding amendments to the Constitution, keeping it up to date with changes to legislation, governance practice and the needs of the Council. The Council's delegated arrangements are kept under regular review but no changes to delegation thresholds are expected that would impact the size of the Council. |

Accountability

Give the Commission details as to how the authority and its decision makers and partners will be held to account. The Commission is interested in both the internal and external dimensions of this role. **Responses should demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been explored.**

Topic	
Internal Scrutiny	The scrutiny function of authorities has changed considerably. Some use theme or task-and-finish groups, for example, and others have a committee system. Scrutiny arrangements may also be affected by the officer support available.
Key lines of explanation	➤ *How will decision makers be held to account?* ➤ *How many committees will be required? And what will their functions be?* ➤ *How many task and finish groups will there be? And what will their functions be? What time commitment will be involved for members? And how often will meetings take place?* ➤ *How many members will be required to fulfil these positions?* ➤ *Explain why you have increased, decreased, or not changed the number of scrutiny committees in the authority.* ➤ *Explain the reasoning behind the number of members per committee in terms of adding value.*
Analysis	The Council has a 24-Member Overview and Scrutiny Committee which meets 10-12 times per year and is chaired by an opposition Member. The Overview and Scrutiny function has been on an improvement journey over the last year or so which will continue. Three committees were replaced by a single committee in November 2023 and the work of Overview and Scrutiny has been refocused on holding the Executive to

account and contributing to policy development on behalf of local communities.

Meetings of the new Overview and Scrutiny Committee are scheduled to take place in the week prior to each meeting of the Executive. This enables effective pre-decision scrutiny of selected executive decisions and provides the Committee with the opportunity to hold Executive Members and senior officers to account in public and make any recommendations to the Executive in a timely and transparent fashion. This system helps to ensure that non-executive members can influence decisions on behalf of the local community and that any Member concerns can be raised and issues explained, clarified or reconsidered in advance of decisions being taken. There is also the opportunity for other elected Members or public speakers to make representations in public to the Overview and Scrutiny Committee and to raise issues related to forthcoming Executive decisions.

In addition to focusing on Executive reports, the Committee is empowered to examine any issues that affect the district or its people. Recent examples include focuses on mobile network coverage within the district, waste services, and the Council's development management and planning enforcement functions.

The Overview and Scrutiny Committee may establish task and finish groups to focus in on key areas of policy development. An example is the Leisure and Wellbeing Strategy Task and Finish Group which has held regular meetings in 2024 and undertaken sight visits to the Council's main leisure facilities.

Members of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee are expected to read papers in advance and to attend meetings and to contribute to discussions or ask questions.

In 2023/24 Overview and Scrutiny held 13 meetings, including 7 meetings of the new single Overview and Scrutiny Committee from November 2023. Since that date the 10 meetings of the new Committee (including the first quarter of 2024/25) lasted a total duration of 20.2 hours (just over 2 hours per meeting on average) and the agenda packs totalled 1162 pages (just over 110 pages per meeting on average).

Since the start of 2023/24 up to end September 2024, Overview and Scrutiny made 13 recommendations to the Executive, 11 of which were agreed and 2 were not agreed by the Executive.

A review of the effectiveness of the Council's Overview and Scrutiny function is due to take place in autumn 2024, one

	year on from the implementation of the new committee structure. From the feedback received from Committee Members and others prior to the review commencing it is expected that the Council will wish to retain a single Overview and Scrutiny Committee as the preferred model going forwards but will wish to revisit the size of the Committee, which is very large at 24 Members (nearly half of all Members and more than half of all non-executive Members). While the large Committee enables many non-executive Members to oversee the work of the Executive and make contributions, it is considered that a smaller Committee size would have benefits in terms of the efficiency and focus of meetings. There is also a willingness to refer more issues for consideration by smaller task and finish groups as opposed to being dealt with collectively by the Committee. The changes, if implemented, would further improve the function and ensure better quality outcomes.
	Conclusion
	The Council currently operates a single, very large Overview and Scrutiny Committee which is considered to have broadly fulfilled its purpose and to be operating more effectively than the three committees it replaced.
	A review of the effectiveness of the Overview and Scrutiny Committee may result in a smaller committee size going forwards but this will likely be accompanied by an increased role for task and finish groups. In any event, the recently enhanced role of the Overview and Scrutiny function in the governance and decision-making arrangements of the Council will require significant non-Executive Member capacity going forwards.
	Task and finish groups can be expected to play a more prominent role in contributing to policy development going forwards and the Council has invested in its Democratic Services team to support this. The frequency and length of task and finish group meetings will depend on the nature of the matter but a review will typically take place over 3-6 meetings.
	An increased Council size is not considered necessary for supporting an improved Overview and Scrutiny function but a reduced Council size may be detrimental to this aim.
Statutory Function	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?

	Key lines of explanation	➢ *What proportion of planning applications will be determined by members?* ➢ *Has this changed in the last few years? And are further changes anticipated?* ➢ *Will there be area planning committees? Or a single council-wide committee?* ➢ *Will executive members serve on the planning committees?* ➢ *What will be the time commitment to the planning committee for members?*
Planning	Analysis	The Council typically receives a total of 3000-4000 planning applications per year and approximately 93% of applications that are determined are done so by officers under delegated authority, with the remaining 7% being determined by Members. The wards with the highest and lowest numbers of planning applications in 2023/24 are listed below. The wards with the highest numbers of planning applications tend to be among the larger rural wards whereas the wards with the fewest planning applications tend to be located in the main settlements. This pattern is consistent with previous years. Highest Kingham, Rollright and Enstone (2 Member ward) - 299 Stonesfield and Tackley (2 Members) - 210 Standlake, Aston and Stanton Harcourt (2 Members) - 207 Charlbury and Finstock (2 Members) - 180 Eynsham and Cassington (3 Members) - 187 Lowest Carterton North East (2 Members) - 29 Carterton South (2 Members) - 38 Carterton North West (2 Members) - 59 Witney East (3 Members) - 67 Milton Under Wychwood (1 Member) - 69 The Council has a single 24-Member Development Control Committee which has two area sub-committees; the Lowlands Area Planning Sub-Committee and the Uplands Area Planning Sub-Committee. All Members of the Development Control Committee are appointed to a sub-committee based on the ward area they represent, and the Chair of the Development Control Committee sits on both sub-committees. The Development Control Committee in responsible for matters including the consideration of planning applications that are of strategic significance to the district. The Committee meets after the Annual Council meeting to appoint sub-committees and thereafter meets infrequently when there is business to consider. The Committee held one such meeting

in 2023/24, which lasted 2.25 hours, having held two such meetings in 2022/23 (which lasted 2.5 and 3 hours).

The two area sub-committees meet monthly to determine planning applications that are neither of strategic significance to the district, nor delegated to officers. The sub-committees also have oversight of decisions taken by officers under delegated authority, the outcome of appeal decisions and regular updates on planning enforcement activities.

Members are expected to read papers in advance, attend site visits and attend meetings to hear presentations and representations, ask questions and determine applications.

In 2023/24 the Uplands Sub-Committee held 11 meetings lasting on average 1.6 hours and agenda packs totalled 1223 pages (111 pages on average).

The Lowlands Sub-Committe held 13 meetings lasting on average 1.75 hours and agenda packs totalled 1245 pages (96 pages on average).

All Members of the Development Control Committee (and by extension, the area planning sub-committees) are required to undertake planning training prior to determining planning applications. Members are also offered training and briefings to enhance their wider knowledge of planning functions. Recent examples include training on planning enforcement, sports lighting and modern design. In September 2024 the Council adopted a Members' Planning Code of Good Practice as part of its Constitution.

In commenting on their workload as a councillor, one Member stated that:

"Weeks vary in time spent on Council work: e.g. before planning meetings involves a lot of reading and site visits."

All Members of Council will engage in the planning system in some form, including by:

- Attending meetings of the Development Control Committee as a substitute Member.
- Attending meetings as a Ward Member.
- Reviewing applications within their Ward and requesting that applications be referred to the Committee/Sub-Committee with planning reasons within 28 days of the date of registration (recently increased from 21 days).

Conclusion

		Planning can be a significant challenge in an area with many parts of the district subject to constraints (much of the Uplands area is located within the Cotswolds National Landscape).
		The district has to provide for part of Oxford City's unmet housing need as well as catering for its own housing needs and there are significant recent and planned major developments along the A40 corridor including Salt Cross Garden Village, as well as urban extensions to Witney.
		The Council has suitable arrangements in place for discharging its planning responsibilities. There is a large pool of Members who have received training and can determine planning applications.
		Changes to the timescale within which Members may request that applications be referred to the Committee/Sub-Committee for determination could result in an increase in the number of applications referred to the Committee but that remains to be seen.
		The Labour government elected on 4 July 2024 has announced plans to accelerate house building to provide more homes and support economic growth, which could have an impact on the number of major applications that come forward for determination in the coming years, which would directly impact the workload of the Committee and its sub-committees.
		While the Council itself has no immediate plans that would warrant a review of the size or responsibilities of Development Control Committee and its sub-committees, the government has announced plans to legislate for the introduction of a national scheme of delegation. The Council will keep the workload of the Committee and sub-committees under review over the coming period.
		In this context, a reduction in the size of the Council would not be recommended and instead the Council would prefer to maintain the current number of 49 councillors.
Licensing	*Key lines of explanation*	➢ *How many licencing panels will the council have in the average year?* ➢ *And what will be the time commitment for members?* ➢ *Will there be standing licencing panels, or will they be ad-hoc?* ➢ *Will there be core members and regular attendees, or will different members serve on them?*
	Analysis	The Council has an 11-Member Licensing Committee which is principally responsible for dealing with licensing policies. Licensing applications are determined by the relevant sub-

		committee depending on which legislation the application is governed by:
		- Miscellaneous Licensing Sub-Committee (5 Members appointed annually) - for all functions relating to licensing and registration including taxi, gaming and food licensing except functions under the Licensing Act 2003 - Licensing Panel (3 Members drawn from the Licensing Committee on a rota basis) - for all the functions of the Council under the Licensing Act 2003 and the Gambling Act 2005 in relation to the holding of hearings and the determination of applications which are not delegated to the Chief Executive Members are required to undertake licensing training prior to sitting on a sub-committee to determine a licensing application. The Licensing Committee held two short meetings in 2023/24. One meeting was held immediately after Annual Council to elect a chair and appoint sub-committees and a further meeting was held to consider an extension to the pavement licencing regime. There was no business for the Miscellaneous Licensing Sub-Committee in 2023/24. The Licensing Panel held two meetings to determine licensing applications, with both meetings lasting between one and two hours and the packs averaged 74 pages. <u>Conclusion</u> The Council has suitable arrangements in place for discharging licensing functions. The demands of the licensing sub-committee functions on Member workloads and capacity are relatively minor compared to the Executive, Overview and Scrutiny Committee and Development Control. The split of responsibilities between the main committee and the sub-committees works well and there is an adequate pool of Members who can be called on to determine licensing applications. There are no plans to make changes to the the licensing functions that would impact on Member workloads or the size of the Council.
Other Regulatory Bodies	*Key lines of explanation*	*What will they be, and how many members will they require?* *Explain the number and membership of your Regulatory Committees with respect to greater delegation to officers.*
	Analysis	Council appoints the following other regulatory or administrative committees and sub-committees.

Performance and Appointments Committee
This Committee has 5 Members including at least one Executive Member and meets ad hoc as required to consider the appointment and terms and conditions of the Council's Statutory Officers and any grievance or disciplinary matter in relation to those officers. The Committee is also responsible for conducting the appraisal of the Chief Executive and has delegated responsibilities relating to the Council's suite of employment policies.

The Committee held 4 meetings during 2023/24. Two of these related to the recruitment and selection of a new Director of Finance, one was for the Chief Executive's annual appraisal and the fourth meeting was to consider proposed changes to the Council's employment policies. The meetings totalled just over 4 hours in duration.

Audit and Governance Committee
This Committee has 11 Members plus 2 Independent Members and meets 5 times per year to monitor the adequacy and effectiveness of the Council's governance, risk and control arrangements, consider reports from the Council's internal and external auditors and to promote and maintain high ethical standards by Members.

As mentioned above, the Committee recently undertook a self-assessment exercise based on the CIPFA Toolkit. As a consequence of this exercise the following changes were implemented:
- Size reduced from 17 to 11 Members.
- Addition of two non-voting co-opted Independent Members.
- No Executive Members on the Committee.
- A programme of Member training.

Members of the Committee are expected to read papers in advance and to attend Committee meetings and undertake any associated training.

In 2023/24 the 5 meetings totalled 6 hours in duration and agenda packs ran to 999 pages (200 pages per meeting on average).

Standards Sub-Committee
The Audit and Governance Committee appoints a 5-Member Standards Sub-Committee. The Sub-Committee meets on an ad hoc basis to determine allegations that a Member of the district council or a town or parish council within the district area, has breached their Council's Code of Conduct. Meetings are also attended by one of the Council's Independent

| | | Persons whose views must be considered as part of the hearing.

The Standards Sub-Committee averages one meeting per year. In 2023/24 there was one meeting which lasted 7 hours and the agenda pack contained 182 pages.

Following that hearing, which was well-conducted, the Council has considered making changes to its complaint handling arrangements and its Standards Sub-Committee procedure rules, informed in part by external legal advice about the role of witnesses and the treatment of hearsay evidence at a hearing.

Conclusion
The Council's regulatory committees are functioning effectively, and recent improvements have been positive. No further changes are currently proposed to the size of the Audit and Governance Committee, the Standards Sub-Committee or the Performance and Appointments Committee.

The new government elected on 4 July 2024 may decide to make changes to the standards regime at a national level (for example the introduction of more meaningful sanctions). This would raise the profile of the complaints process and could be expected to result in more complaints being submitted and/or reaching the hearing stage. However, the Council has robust arrangements in place and sufficient Member-capacity to mitigate any such pressure and maintaining the current number of 49 Councillors is considered to be appropriate. |
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| **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. |
| | *Key lines of explanation* | ➤ *Will council members serve on decision-making partnerships, sub-regional, regional or national bodies? In doing so, are they able to take decisions/make commitments on behalf of the council?*
➤ *How many councillors will be involved in this activity? And what is their expected workload? What proportion of this work is undertaken by portfolio holders?*
➤ *What other external bodies will members be involved in? And what is the anticipated workload?* |
| | Analysis | The Council appoints Members to external Oxfordshire-wide committees and to a range of outside bodies.

External Committees
The Council appoints Members to the following non-Executive committees:
- Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (1 seat) |

Topic	Description
	• Future Oxfordshire Partnership (FOP) Scrutiny Panel (3 seats) The FOP Scrutiny Panel meets 6 times per year. It is fairly unique to Oxfordshire and is responsible for scrutinising the business of the FOP; a joint committee of the six councils of Oxfordshire together with key strategic partners. Outside bodies The Executive appoints members to a range of outside bodies. In July 2024, 41 appointments were made to a total of 33 outside bodies (some bodies have more than one Council appointee). Some of these appointments are linked to Executive portfolios and some appointments are based on ward or other reasons. 22 Members (45%) have been appointed to one or more outside bodies. These Members have been provided with guidance to ensure that they understand their roles and responsibilities. Most Members who responded to the survey reported that they spend less than one hour per week attending meetings of outside bodies but for a significant minority the time commitment is higher, up to 7-9 hours per week in some cases. Conclusion The Council appoints Members to a total of 44 seats on external committees and outside bodies, nearly one seat per Member although they are not necessarily distributed evenly. This high number reflects the nature of the district and the unique partnership working arrangements that exist in Oxfordshire. Any reduction in the size of the Council would be detrimental to ensuring that the Council can be adequately represented on external partnerships. This supports maintaining the current number of 49 councillors.

Community Leadership

The Commission understands that there is no single approach to community leadership and that members represent, and provide leadership to, their communities in different ways. The Commission wants to know how members are required to provide effective community leadership and what support the council offers them in this role. For example, does the authority have a defined role and performance system for its elected members? And what support networks are available within the council to help members in their duties? The Commission also wants to see a consideration of **how the use of technology and social media by the council as a whole, and by councillors individually, will affect casework, community engagement and local democratic representation. Responses should demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been explored.**

Topic	Description

	Key lines of explanation	➢ *In general terms how do councillors carry out their representational role with electors?* ➢ *Does the council have area committees and what are their powers?* ➢ *How do councillors seek to engage with their constituents? Do they hold surgeries, send newsletters, hold public meetings or maintain blogs?* ➢ *Are there any mechanisms in place that help councillors interact with young people, those not on the electoral register, and/or other minority groups and their representative bodies?* ➢ *Are councillors expected to attend community meetings, such as parish or resident's association meetings? If so, what is their level of involvement and what roles do they play?* ➢ *Explain your approach to the Area Governance structure. Is your Area Governance a decision-making forum or an advisory board? What is their relationship with locally elected members and Community bodies such as Town and Parish Councils? Looking forward how could they be improved to enhance decision-making?*
Community Leadership	Analysis	West Oxfordshire district councillors perform a variety of roles both within the Council and in playing an active role in the communities they represent, providing a two-way link between the Council and communities. Some councillors have multiple representative roles as they may also serve as county councillors and/or town or parish councillors. Currently 8 District Councillors serve as county councillors (including the Leader of the District Council and the Leader of the County Council) and 19 District Councillors serve as town or parish councillors in the district area. There are a number of ways in which councillors will engage with communities, including: • Being the voice of the community at District Council meetings. • Attending town or parish council meetings. • Engaging with, supporting and serving on community organisations, residents' associations, charities or business groups. • Holding surgeries. • Dealing with casework by email, telephone or letter. • Engaging in social media platforms. In response to the survey members reported regularly engaging with up to 5 town or parish meetings, although some wards cover as many as 11 parish areas. Members also point out that the work associated with town councils tends to be more involved than for parish councils or parish meetings.

| | | The Council does not have any area committees in the district (other than the area planning sub-committees) and there is no budget allocated to Ward Members.

Conclusion
The growth in the population and the size of the electorate will place additional demands on the representative roles of elected members. A reduction in the size of the Council would not support effective representation and would place particular pressure on Members representing rural areas as the rural wards, which already cover large geographies, would increase in size. An increase in the size of the Council is not considered necessary to cope with future demands and would serve to dilute the influence of individual Members.

The Council is of the view the maintaining a size of 49 Councillors would provide for optimum representation into the future. The survey showed that nearly three quarters of Members favoured retaining a Council size of 49 councillors whereas only 2 favoured a decrease and 1 favoured an increase. |
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| **Casework** | *Key lines of explanation* | ➢ *How do councillors deal with their casework? Do they pass it on to council officers? Or do they take a more in-depth approach to resolving issues?*
➢ *What support do members receive?*
➢ *How has technology influenced the way in which councillors work? And interact with their electorate?*
➢ *In what ways does the council promote service users' engagement/dispute resolution with service providers and managers rather than through councillors?* |
| | Analysis | Councillors are responsible for dealing with their own casework correspondence. The Council does not have a casework management system. All Councillors are provided with a welcome pack and corporate induction programme upon their election. Councillors are also provided with points of contact for each Council service. These contact points are listed on the Councillor Portal (intranet), which also includes a link to the planning portal and e-forms for councillors to report issues such as missed bin collections and fly tipping. The Democratic Services Team will act as the first point of contact for newly elected members and will signpost members to other officers where Members are unsure who to contact for particular issues.

The nature of casework has changed in recent years. More Members are active on social media and will be contacted by residents using social media channels. Councillors are also contacted regularly by email, telephone or, increasingly |

rarely, letter. Councillors' preferred methods of contact are reflected on their pages on the Council's website. All councillors are provided with a Council email account for managing their Council correspondence, which they access using their own device.

Some queries which would have previously been directed to councillors are now solved through direct contact with the Council, which is done by phone, email or social media. Contact with councillors now often involves more complex matters such as planning or other complex casework which may involve multiple agencies, for example where there are mental health issues. This is particularly the case for members representing the main settlements within the district area. Such complex casework can involve research and co-ordination with multiple partner organisations, rather than simply referring the resident to the relevant officer or department. For members representing rural areas, the planning casework and issues can be particularly complex.

The majority of Members who responded to the survey spend 1-3 hours per week dealing with case work however the range is quite wide, with a small number of Members spending less than one hour per week on casework and others spending more than 10 hours per week on it. Members stated:

"Responding to every constituent is unpredictable, time consuming on a case by case basis."

"I spend a lot of time on email and social media into resident issues."

"The needs of residents is varied. Understand the policies both national and local means that time spent reading and being informed is crucial."

11 of 26 Members who responded to the survey believed that ward member work including casework had driven an increase in the workload of councillors since they were first elected.

6 Members reported that their workload was broadly unchanged compared to when they were first elected and one Member believed it had decreased (with the driver for the decrease being the time spent on special responsibilities, outside bodies and political campaigning).

| | | The survey also showed that all 26 Members who responded deal with casework over email, with the next popular methods of communication being telephone (23) and face to face (22). Some Members also use social media/blogs (9), public meetings (8), instant messaging (6), surgeries (6) and letter (4). Eight members also selected "Other" methods of engagement.

The survey showed that with a 10% increase in workload the average level of Members' comfort with their workload (with 10 being very comfortable) would fall from 6.4 to 4.25, with some Members scoring as low as 0 or 1 out of 10 in this scenario.

Conclusion
The growth in the population and the size of the electorate will place additional demands on the time Members spend dealing with casework. A reduction in the size of the Council would exacerbate these demands and result in Members being less comfortable with their workload. This would potentially deter people from standing for election. |
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Other Issues
Respondent may use this space to bring any other issues of relevance to the attention of the Commission.

Working Group to advise of any other issues to be raised.

Summary
In following this template respondents should have been able to provide the Commission with a robust and well-evidenced case for their proposed council size; one which gives a clear explanation as to the governance arrangements and number of councillors required to represent the authority in the future.
Use this space to summarise the proposals and indicate other options considered. Explain why these alternatives were not appropriate in terms of their ability to deliver effective Strategic Leadership, Accountability (Scrutiny, Regulation and Partnerships), and Community Leadership.

The Council has considered its size and concluded that a size of 49 Councillors remains appropriate for the district into the future. Due to population growth this will increase the electorate ratio and may be expected to moderately increase the workload of individual councillors. The Council recognises that the electorate ratio is currently relatively low in the district compared to other local authorities but believes that a relatively low electorate ratio is necessary in order to provide for effective representation of all communities in a district with a mix of towns, villages and large sparsely populated rural areas.

A larger council size than 49 councillors could arguably provide for enhanced representation but would dilute the responsibilities of individual councillors and add cost to the Council

without providing significant additional benefits to the governance of the Council. As such this option is not considered to be necessary.

A council size smaller than 49 councillors is also not recommended. With population growth being centred around existing settlements, the rural wards would need to increase in size and cover more parish areas on average. This would exacerbate the existing pressures faced by Members representing rural communities and would not support effective representation. It would also further increase the workloads of individual Members on average which may have negative impacts in terms of both representation and the governance of the Council.

The Council has a strong preference for retaining a mix of 1, 2 and 3-Member wards across the district and as such has decided to change its electoral cycle from elections by thirds to all out elections every 4 years from 2027 onwards.