DCN BETTER LIVES STRONGER ECONOMIES
DISTRICT COUNCILS' NETWORK

Effective Representation for Local Communities

Councillors and the Representative Ratio

AN INDEPENDENT REPORT FOR THE DISTRICT COUNCILS' NETWORK

1. INTRODUCTION

A functioning and effective local democracy requires a nuanced approach to the number of citizens councillors are required to represent. The councillor's representative ratio influences the quality of democracy generally and specific aspects of the various roles conducted by councillors. Given that England has the largest units of local government and the fewest councillors across Europe we are surprisingly unaware of the impact that has on the effectiveness of local democracy and the demands and expectations it generates for councillors in England.

The more citizens a councillor is expected to represent has important implications for councillor's workload, their ability to satisfy and work with residents, communities, businesses and other public and private sector organisations, the time they are required to dedicate to council work, their ability to hold officers and the council to account and to hold other public, and private sector organisations to account. The world of the councillor is a complex, dynamic and highly networked world and the fewer councillors there are, the greater the workload for the remaining councillors and the greater the impact on the quality of local democracy.

The purpose of the report is to review the representative ratio of councillors and to explore the effect of those ratios on the quality of local democracy and on good governance. The report will also assess whether there is an optimum size for councillors' representative ratio, above which there are deleterious effects on the quality of local democracy, the ability of councillors to undertake their roles and on good governance.

The next section sets out the questions to be addressed in the report. The third section briefly reviews the roles of the councillor and the expectations placed on them in their representative activities. The fourth section presents sample international data on representative ratios and compares that to councillors in England. The fifth explores examines data on councillor representative ratios across England to draw out lessons for the appropriateness of councillors to citizen figures. The report concludes by drawing out the lessons for an effective representative ratio for councillors in England.

The District Councils' Network would like to thank Professor Colin Copus for his work on this short report.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Councillors conduct a range of variegated and differentiated roles which see them operating in a number of spheres: the council, the community, their party (or no party) and with individual citizens and each of those spheres has a number of dimensions. So, if we look at the council, for example, we can see different dimensions of activity: as a leader or cabinet member; a scrutiny chair or scrutiny councillor; a policy-maker, a policy-reviewer; a case worker; a community leader; a network leader; a party representative; and, a representative of the community (see Jones, 1975, Newton, 1976, Rao, 1994, Copus, 2016). These are examined in more detail in the next section.

A series of studies have shown that there is a gradual but steady and substantial increase, over time, in the number of hours allocated to council duties (LGA, 2006 and 2008, Evans and Ashton, 2010, Kettlewell and Phillips, 2013, LGA, 2018) (also see Robinson, 1977, Maud, 1967, Widdicombe 1986, Young and Davies, 1990, Bloch and John, 1991, Young and Rao, 1994). But, the methodology used in some of these studies suggests that there is an underestimate of the hours councillors commit to council work of one type or another.

The varied nature of the roles of the councillor and the increases in time demands that councillors are experiencing mean that any reduction in councillor numbers will increase the workload and time demands on the remaining body of councillors and could have adverse affects on the quality of local democracy and effective representation. In many respects the questions, how many councillors do we need, can be answered by the simple reply: how many do you want which recognises that the number of councillors is more than anything a political or ideological choice governed by the perceived role of local government and councillors within an overall governing system. In assessing however, if there is a number of councillors – either on councils or across the country – which would optimise effective representation, and good local governance a number of questions emerge and which are addressed throughout:

1. What are the roles and responsibilities of the councillor that should be considered for representative ratios?
2. How does the changing role of the councillor generate change in representative ratios?
3. How does the number of voters councillors represent affect local democracy
4. What issues need to be considered in assessing the number of voters councillors can reasonably be expected to effectively represent?

By addressing these questions an assessment can be made of the affect of representative ratios on the quality of local democracy, good governance and councillors' effectiveness in the various roles they are expected to conduct. Before doing that it is necessary to briefly review the roles of the councillor.

3. THE ROLE OF THE COUNCILLOR

Councillors operate in a dynamic and often turbulent environment. They are faced with the need to constantly reassess what they are able to do to bring about change and to work around the constraints on the powers of their office to deal with the challenges they face.

The activities councillors carry out relate to their roles in regard to four dimensions: place, policy, people and processes (see Jones, 1975; Newton, 1976; Rao, 1994, Copus, 2016). Each of those areas of focus for the councillor can be undertaken inside and outside the council.

The dynamic nature of local government, the new and emerging problems of localities and the local manifestations of cultural, political, economic and socio-demographic issues, international trends and change inspired by other levels of government, means that councillors are continually reassessing what they do and how they do it. That reassessment however, is often masked behind the realities of the day-to-day and strategic role that they undertake within the council and the wider community; the larger that community becomes and the fewer councillors there are, greater and greater strains are placed on those left to undertake the role of the councillor both within and externally to the council. The internal and external roles of the councillor are summarised and crystallised in table one.

TABLE ONE: Councillor Roles: Location within the council and external to the council

Internal	External
Policy-maker	Community advoocate
Decision-taker	Community leader
Policy advocate or spokesperson	Community activist
Policy area specialist	Ward/divisional advocate or representative
Leader	Local decision-maker (for devolved budgets, etc)
Portfolio-holder	Case worker
Committee chair	Communicator
Scrutineer – either the ruling group or administrative machine	Network coordinator
Party representative	Negotiator
Representative of a community or group	Network and alliance builder
Majority group member	Influence/holding to account of public and private agencies
Minority group member	
Negotiator	
Network builder	
Influencer / holder to account of public and private agencies	

What is apparent from the list of external and internal roles and areas of activity of the councillor is that similar activities can take place focused on either the council or the wider place and community (see, De Groot 2009, Heinelt, 2013, Klok and Denters, 2013). A good example of this is the increasing amount of work and time that councillors must put into network activities, that is in trying to influence a myriad of public sector organisations which spend public money, develop public policy and make decisions which influence the development and well-being of communities for decades to come, but do so with little or no democratic links of accountability to the communities they affect. Councillors are spending more and more time in influencing and holding to account these organisations, which can be done formally through council mechanisms, or through direct contact made by the councillors (Copus, 2016, Copus and Wall, 2017). Moreover, such activity is conducted on a strategic long-term basis as it affects the council area as a whole, but also on a more immediate day-to-day basis within a ward or division represented. English local government exists in an increasingly fragmented public sector landscape which councillors must join together and hold to account. Yet, it is strange that so much attention and calls for reorganisation are given to distinctions between county and district councils – the easiest of all distinction to recognise and for the public to negotiate – yet little recognition is made of the deeply fragmented nature of the rest of the public sector landscape and the time and energy councillors commit to overcoming that fragmentation.

Debates and decisions about councillor numbers must be cognizant of the wide range of roles councillors have to undertake. It is also vital to appreciate councillors' role in holding to account and influencing, on behalf of the local taxpayers and citizen, a myriad of organisations existing in a fragmented and often chaotic network of competing and interacting agencies and bodies which may not share the direction or focus of the council and have different:

- Purposes
- Resources
- Policies
- Structures
- Ambitions
- Powers

Many of these bodies, with which councillors interact, operate beyond council boundaries and have little or no accountability to the public or concern for place. If councillors as community leaders are to be able to place-shape then it is councillors that must hold such bodies to account and influence, inform, shape and direct their polices and decisions.

A strong local democracy would enable all councillors, irrespective of their position, to oversee, influence and or control the activities and policies of those organisations – public and private – which operate within governance networks with no real democratic mandate to do so. Currently however, councillors must settle for influence over their unelected counter-parts but such influence can only be secured if councillors engage in networks and that task is not left to leaders and executive councillors alone. Indeed, indulging in governance networks may now be the only game in town for English local government and one which has replaced ideas of councils delivering all the important public services and making all the important public decisions. That is not to say local government does not have an important delivery role as it still provides a range of services vital to modern society, but if local government must move beyond a focus on services to governing and that can only be achieved through engagement with networks of one kind or another.

Councillors in all types of councils (including town and parish councils) experience a complex set of demands for their time and attention and in considering the issue of how many councillors we need it is necessary to understand both the nature of the job and the time demands made on our existing councillor population. Rather than a 'think of a number' approach a more nuanced and perceptive approach is required which appreciates the realities of the life of the councillor and the council and community workload.

TIME ON DUTY

The one thing that is clear is that the workload of the councillor and the demands made upon them are increasing over time as pressures mount from the council, citizens, communities and governance network members and their parties (at the time of writing around 90% of all councillors in England are from one of the three main British parties).

A unique feature of the office of councillor is their proximity to their constituencies, voters and the communities they represent and govern. It is a proximity that is very different to MPs and MEPs who spend vast amounts of their time away from the areas they represent. Councillors live, often work, shop, and have a social life in the areas where they are a councillor. What that means is that there is a very fuzzy boundary between the councillor's life at the council, in the community and in moments when not acting officially – in the latter councillors can still be approached at home or in public places by constituents.

The complexity of the life and work of the councillor and fuzzy boundaries that exist between council and private life means that is extremely difficult to get an accurate picture of the hours councillors contribute to council work. Primarily because it is difficult to identity clearly what is council work and when does it take place. Studies therefore have often tended to focus on 'council meetings' and preparing for meetings but a meetings focus often misses the richness and complexity of council life (see Robinson, 1977, Maud, 1967, Widdicombe 1986, Young and Davies, 1990, Bloch and John, 1991, Young and Rao, 1994).

The Local Government Association's national census of local authority councillors has shown an increase over time in the hours committed to council work. The 2018 surveying reported the average weekly hours given to council work was 22, with the largest amount of time being given over to meetings – some 8 hours; constituency work took up just over 6.2 hours and working with community groups around 4.1 hours; party meetings accounted, on average for around 4 hours a week (See, LGA, 2006, 2008 and 2018, Evans and Aston, 2010, Kettlewell and Phillips 2013)

Surveys of the time councillors spend on council duties are normally conducted by a memory-based questionnaire, or by diary completion by councillors over a given period of time. Either way the approach relies on a selective memory of the councillor to record time spent against given activities. Much of the work of the councillor today cannot be captured by such an approach which does not fully account for activities such as: phone calls over a day with officers, citizens or others; or, discussions held with the public; or interactions with public and private sector bodies; or time spent reading papers etc, or when social, private and council life collides. It is fair to argue that the hours councillors commit to council work, of one sort or another, is underestimated

The complexity and weight of work undertaken by councillors, whether they are leading members, back-benchers, majority or minority group members and whether they place their priority on policy or issues of people and place or politics, means that questions of the right number of councillors – if there is such a thing – must relate to the work of the councillor if good governance and a strong local democracy is to be achieved. As a result it is time to briefly explore representative ratios from overseas.

4. COUNCILLORS AND CITIZENS: EFFECTIVE LOCAL DEMOCRACY AND REPRESENTATION

The number of citizens represented by a councillor has a profound influence on the way in which they conduct their activities within and outside the council. As democratically elected, representative bodies, councils provide an opportunity for around 17,500 people across England to take part in holding elected office. Thus local government not only represents the people but also provides avenues for participation in politics allowing for a wider range of people to hold elected office than simply the 650 Members of Parliament.

When considering the number of councillors required in a local democracy, it is necessary not just to think about the tasks of the councillor, or the size of electoral areas, but also the opportunities for participation in governance and politics that being a councillor offers. Fewer councillors not only means more work for the remaining councillors, but fewer opportunities to participate in local self-government, community leadership and elected government.

A recent OECD study (2017) provides an illumination of the relationships between the number of municipalities, the total number of councillors and the average number of councillors per council. What we can see from these figures, is that countries with smaller populations than England often have far more councils and while the average size of the membership of a municipality is smaller than that in England (reflecting the geographic size of the municipality) councillors are able to work closely with compact communities of place. Table two shows the average number of municipal councillors in selected OECD countries.

TABLE TWO: Average number of municipal councillors in selected OECD countries, 2015

Country	Average number of municipal councillors per municipality	Number of municipalities	Total number of municipal councillors
Hungary	5	3 163	16 841
Chile	6	345	2 240
Portugal	7	308	2 086
Iceland	7	74	504
Slovakia	7	2 911	20 830
Spain	7	8 078	59 136
Czech Republic	10	6 234	62 137
Italy	11	7 794	87 746
Latvia	14	119	1 618
France	14	36 756	524 280
Estonia	15	198	2 951
Turkey	15	1 364	20 538
Slovenia	16	212	3 365
Poland	16	2 475	39 959
Belgium	22	589	13 072
Denmark	25	98	2 442
Norway	25	429	10 785
The Netherlands	27	340	9 175
Greece	30	325	9 691
Finland	30	320	9 674
Ireland	31	31	949
Sweden	44	291	12 763
England	51	343	17 700
Germany	60	402	23 278

Source: OECD (2017), Making Decentralisation Work in Chile: Towards Stronger Municipalities, OECD Multi-level Governance Studies, OECD Publishing, Paris

The balance struck in the table above is between meaningful communities and effective local government both in terms of representation and service responsibilities. All Slovenian municipalities, for example, irrespective of their geographical size and number of members, have the same responsibilities. We also see some fascinating differences in the number of councillors such as France's 524,000 councillors (for a population of 67 million) compared to England's 17,700 councillors (for a population of 56million). Such differences raise important questions about the community role of the councillor and opportunities for public involvement in elected politics which can get lost in debates about the appropriate number of councillors for English local government.

Building on the figures presented in table one, table three presents figures from a random sample of the average representative ratios from across Europe (based on lower tier councils only) and shows that councillors in England represent the largest number of citizens.

The figures in the above table relate to population not electorate. It does this because councillors have a responsibility, not only to voters, but to all residents, whether on the electoral register or not. Restricting figures to voters only thus underestimates the actual people councillors represent and govern. The exceptional representative ratio of councillors in England puts it into a different league to most of the rest of Europe and places an incredible strain on the existing councillor population in terms of workload and sustaining the quality of local democracy and citizen engagement. Indeed, the 1974 reorganisation reduced the number of councillors from around 40,000 (on all councils) to approximately 26,000 (Barron, et al, 1991); in the intervening period we have lost just over a further 8,000 councillors. There is little to be gained from reducing still further the number of councillors especially in view of the increasing demands made on councillor time by councils, citizens, communities and organisations in the complex network of governance that councillors currently navigate.

TABLE THREE: Average Representative Ratios

Country	Population millions	Number of lower tier principle councils	Average population per council	Total cllrs ('000s)	Persons per councillor
France	67	36,500	1,800	515	130
Spain	47	8,100	5,800	65	720
Germany	83	12,013	6,900	200	410
Italy	60	8,000	7,500	100	600
Belgium	11.5	581	19,700	13	880
Sweden	10	290	34,400	46	220
Netherlands	17	390	43,500	10	1700
Denmark	6	98	61,000	5	1200
England	56	315	177,700	17	3,300*

Source: Council of Europe Committee on Local and Regional Democracy (CLRD) (2008) and CEMR/Dexia 2010, 2012 and 2013 (figures updated and rounded for ease of presentation)

*This figure differs from the average in the next section as it relates to district / met councils only and to population not electorate.

If we recall, set out in section two above, the list of tasks of the councillor and the increasing time allocation councillors give to council duties, and that our current knowledge of that time is inadequate and then hold that against the representative ratios of councillors overseas (table two) we can conclude that further reductions in councillor numbers will have a negative effect on the quality of local democracy. It is safe to say that if it were not for our current councillor population our democracy would be far less rich, our political culture far less vibrant, our system of government far less reflective of the views of the local citizenry, our democracy far more centralised and the opportunities for involvement in local politics (and regional and national political networks) far more limited. It is time then to examine, in more detail, the representative ratios of councillors across England to draw out lessons from the existing situation.

5. COUNCILLOR REPRESENTATIVE RATIOS: THE STATE OF PLAY

As we know, councillors in England already represent, on average, more citizens, and in some cases far more citizens, than their counterparts across Europe. But, it is necessary to look, in detail, at the state of play in England when it comes to councillor representative ratios to consider some of the variations in those ratios.

When we look at the electorate, rather than population as in table two, we see that the average representative ratio for councillors in England is 2,962, but that there is some variation from that overall average when we look at the averages for types of councils. The average representative ratio for district councillors is just over 2,000, while for county councillors it is over 9,000. unitary councils, metropolitan and London boroughs also have ratios higher than district councils at 2,926, 3,366 and 3,109. Thus, of all types of councillors, it is district councillors are the closest to their voters. The smallest ratio for a county council is Warwickshire where the average for voters to councillors is just over 7,500; whereas the largest average representative ratio for district councils is found in Nuneaton and Bedworth at 2,800 –a long way from the 7,500 for the lowest county ratio.

The total electorate for English local government is 40,133,379 and some 16,304,258 voters (41% of the total electorate) are represented by district and shire counties. Comparing that to other types of councils we see that some 9,537,410 electors are represented by unitary councillors (24% of the total); 8,386,157 voters are represented in metropolitan districts, with some 5,905,554 voters represented in London boroughs.

An interesting lesson to draw here is that although devolution has focused on urban areas, it is the districts and shire counties where most voters are represented and which so far have fallen behind in the devolution stakes. When we take together the average representative ratios for all types of councils, we see that the conditions for good governance and effective representation of citizen and community interests and views, sits where the ratio is smallest – at the district level of two-tier shire areas. Moreover, with some 41% of the electorate represent by district and shire counties the two-tier system ensures that what would otherwise be the largest average representative ratio - 9,000 voters represented by county councillors – is attenuate by the district councillor's average of just over 2,000. The multi-member wards which exit at district level also attenuate the large single member divisions represented by county councillors and provides vital representation and political services within what would otherwise be very large electoral areas for local government purposes.

There are also variations between representative ratios across all types of council. The greatest variation for district councillors is that between Northampton, with the highest at 3,621 and Eden District Council with the lowest at 1,108 – a variation of some 2,513 voters. With the abolition of Northampton Borough Council and its merger into a new West Northamptonshire Council will see that variation fall by around 100 voters.

Looking at county councils the highest councillor to voter figures are found for Essex with the highest at 14,611 and Cumbria with the lowest at 4,645 – a variation of 9,966.

In unitary councils the highest ratio can be found in Bristol at 4,640 and the lowest at 1,090 in Rutland – a variation of 3,550.

In metropolitan and districts the highest ratio stands at 7,105 in Birmingham and lowest at 2,133 in South Tyneside – a variation of 4,972

Finally with London boroughs the highest ratio at 4,191 is in Tower Hamlets and lowest at 1,891 in Kensington and Chelsea (not including City of London) a variation of 2,300

As would be expected the smallest variation in representative ratios is found at district level of around 2,500; the greatest county variation is at almost 10,000 voters. Again we see that districts are able to maintain a much closer relationship with voters, even when the variation between the smallest and largest ratio is taken into account.

What we also see is that county councils are distinct in their representative ratios compared to other types of councils having by far the largest number of electors per councillor. Indeed, counties have the 24 largest ratios in

the country with the 25th Birmingham City Council (itself the largest authority in England with around a million population); all but one county council – Cumbria – have ratios of over 5,000.

It is the shire district councils which generally have the fewest voters per councillor. What this set of figures shows is that district councillors are the closest to their voters when held against councillors on all other types of council and this gives district councillors a unique proximity to those they represent. That proximity to the voters is a distinguishing factor for district councillors enabling them to engage with communities and citizens closely and to ensure the quality of local representation and democracy in a way that is difficult to replicate when representing 9,000 voters (the county average).

When we consider the nature of the service provided by district councils and county and unitary councils we see the importance of smaller representative ratios when it comes to reflecting voter opinion and for casework. District services are closer to the community and citizens and some services provided by counties – such as social services and education – which have a personal element will place greater strains on councillors taking up casework or community issues when the average ratio is around 9,000. A benefit of the tiered system is that it shares the workload between county and district councillors, particularly as voters rarely distinguish between the councillors they contact and with many district councillors reporting being approached about county services.

Discussions about the number of councillors must accommodate the many and several roles of the councillor that were set out in table one and discussed in section three and the varied roles they have within the council and external to it. Councillors may find that the functions, tasks, responsibilities and duties of their office at the end of their term may be different from those that they took on when they were elected. But that constancy of experiencing and dealing with change is matched by the constancy of the link to local citizens that councillors experience. Moreover, that linking role is enhanced as councillors now not only link citizens to the council but also link them to a range of bodies operating in governance networks. By maintaining the link between citizens and organisations and agencies which make and implement public policy and spend public money within the locality, councillors make a positive contribution to:

- The fabric and health of national and local democracy
- Participation in politics
- Access to decision-makers for citizens and communities
- Localising decision-making and ensuring it reflects local needs and priorities
- The accountability of supra-local bodies
- The well-being of communities
- Good governance generally
- Healthy local democracy

What is clear from the figures we have reviewed in this section is that it is district councillors who are best placed to ensure the strength of the link between a council and a community and to maintain the integrity of that link. Indeed district councillors are best placed to provide casework support and leadership to local communities. The larger the representative ratio the more difficult it is to maintain links to the community and citizens and the greater the difficulty to develop a strong and healthy local democracy.

CONCLUSION

All councillors, whatever type of council they are a member of, have certain core roles and responsibilities which were set out in table one. Those core roles and responsibilities relate to the council as an institution and the community and external networks for which councillors have a responsibility. We have seen that councillors in England have some of the largest representative rations across Europe and that England has the fewest councils and councillors across Europe for its electorate and population. While a unique factor of the office of councillor is the proximity it has to the community and voter. Proximity to the electorate brings with it a positive bonding between representatives and represented, but also results in a breakdown of barriers between councillor and citizen, the latter can often show little restraint in contacting councillors whenever and wherever required.

While proximity allows councillors to understand the needs, priorities and values of their local communities, it also means they are on 24-hour-a-day call for those communities and citizens. Council internal arrangements must not only recognise, but cater for the consequences of proximity for councillors. District councillors, being the closest to the community and voter will experience greater pressures and demands as a result of that proximity compared to councillors on other types of authorities.

The current devolution debate, linked as it has become, to local government unitary reorganisation will, if reorganisation occurs, inevitably result in fewer councils and fewer councillors. As a result greater workloads and demands will be placed on the

remaining body of councillors and as we have seen, the time commitment required of councillors has been increasing and will increase further as a result of any reorganisation. Increasing the time demands will deter many from standing for election in local government. Local government must remain firmly rooted in local communities and, as we have seen, it is our district councillors who are closest to communities and voters with the smallest representative ratios. Any increase in those ratios, brought about by reorganisation, will place greater distance between the councillor and the community and make local government more remote. Far from having too many councillors, the figures show that England has far too few; it is district councillors that strengthen and maintain the link between local government and the communities it serves.

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