June 2020

St Helens Borough Council

Council Size Submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England
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Introduction

1. The Council has been informed by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (the Commission) that an Electoral Review of St Helens Borough Council is to be undertaken between May 2020 and March 2021. This review has been triggered as many metropolitan districts have not been reviewed since LGBCE’s predecessor body undertook a review of all local authorities in England between 1996 and 2004. The commission intends to review all local authorities that have not been reviewed since that time.

2. The last electoral review of St Helens was published in March 2003.

3. During the first stage of the electoral review, the Commission will reach a decision on the size of the Council (the number of councillors to be returned to the Council). This document is the Council's council size submission to the Commission, and provides the Commission with the Council's view as to the appropriate council size and the evidence supporting this.

4. The Local Government Boundary Commission states in its publication *Electoral reviews: Technical guidance* that the key factors which they will take into consideration in an electoral review are as follows:
   - the governance arrangements of the council, how it takes decisions across the broad range of its responsibilities, and whether there are any planned changes to those arrangements;
   - the council’s scrutiny functions relating to its own decision-making and the council’s responsibilities to outside bodies, and whether any changes to them are being considered; and
   - the representational role of councillors in the local community and how they engage with people, conduct casework and represent the council on local partner organisations.

5. The Council’s view, having regard to the above factors and having taken all the available evidence into account, is that it should continue to have 48 councillors. Underlying this view is the belief within the Council and among Councillors that the current Council size is sufficient to enable effective decision making, proper governance and scrutiny and for members to effectively represent their electorate and manage their workload whilst providing value for money to residents. This view is supported by the following points:
   - The Leader and Cabinet model of decision making continues to be an efficient and accountable form of executive that does not require additional councillors to take part (delegation to officers is also going to be increased, reducing the number of decisions that need to be made by Cabinet);
   - The Council’s Scrutiny Function is being rationalised to provide better alignment with the Council’s organisational structure and will see a reduction in the number of seats on committees.
   - The Council’s small geographic size and concentrated urban populations means that Councillors are able to represent a relatively large number of electors.
   - 85% of Councillors believe that their current workload is manageable or that they are capable of doing more and new technology and ways of working are expected to enable Councillors to be more efficient.
   - The changing ways that residents receive and find information about local issues and services (i.e. direct from the Council via internet and social media) means the reliance on councillors for support in many areas will be reduced.
The Council has recently provided all Councillors, and officers, with new laptops, tablets and phones with up to date applications and software that enables users to benefit from agile working, improving efficiency and flexibility to carry out their responsibilities.

6. The Council’s submission on council size has been informed by:
   - Desk-based research into current ways of working;
   - A survey of elected members asking for estimates of workload and views of their experiences;
   - Meetings of a cross party Electoral Review Group;
   - Diaries of councillors’ workload;
   - Consideration of St Helens’ approach to governance and democracy.

St Helens Metropolitan Borough

7. The Borough is located in the North West of England in the county of Merseyside. It is one of the 6 Boroughs that make up the Liverpool City Region. The Borough consists of both urban and rural communities, with 65% of the geographical area being made up of Green-Belt land.

8. The Borough has a population as recorded in 2018 of 180,049 with an electorate of 140,380; it has an area of 136 sq.km and a population density of 1,320 per sq.km. The population has increased by nearly 5,000 people over the past 10 years. The age structure of the Borough reflects the national trend of an ageing population. St Helens is ethnically less diverse than many areas, with 96.6% of the population (Census 2011) identifying themselves as white British, compared to 79.8% nationally. The electorate is forecast to grow by 3.3% from 2020 to 2025.

9. St. Helens ranked as the 26th most deprived local authority in England according to the Indices of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) 2019, having fallen by 10 places from 36th place since IMD 2015, with over 23% of the borough being in the 10% most deprived Lower Super Output Areas. There are substantial variations in deprivation between different wards within the Borough with a 9-year difference between life expectancies for men and a 7-year difference for woman in the Town Centre Ward and Rainford Ward.

10. The economic inactivity rate for the area is 27.6% with approximately 40% of those inactive due to long term sickness. The main industries of employment in St Helens are the wholesale and retail trade, manufacturing, transportation storage (logistics), administrative and support services, education and human health and social work activities. As with life expectancy, there are significant divergences between the highest and lowest levels of unemployment in wards in the Borough (5.7% of Town Centre population claim out of work benefits compared to 1% in Rainford).

11. To address the challenges the Borough has, the Council has developed six priorities that have been set out in the 2020/21 draft Council plan (attached at Appendix A). The six priorities are:
   - Ensure children and young people have a positive start in life;
   - Promote good health, independence and care across our communities;
   - Create safe and strong communities for our residents;
   - Support a strong, diverse and well-connected local economy;
Within the Council Plan these priorities are underpinned by a number of objectives and a more detailed action plan that illustrates how the Council intends to achieve its goals.

In March 2020 the Council announced an exciting partnership with the English Cities Fund to secure funding and support for the regeneration of St Helens and Earlestown town centres. This initiative is anticipated to provide good economic and social benefit to the Borough and significant officer and member time will be dedicated to helping to make the programme of works a success. However, it is expected that Councillors will be able to perform their role in relation to this within the current capacity.

St Helens Borough Council Governance

St Helens Borough Council is currently composed of 48 councillors, representing 16 three member wards where Councillors are elected by thirds each year, with a ‘fallow year’ every four years when no elections are held. The Council currently contains Councillors from four national political parties (Labour, Liberal Democrats, Conservatives, Green Party) and a group of Independents. The Council currently has a mixture of new Councillors (i.e. 19 elected for the first time in either 2016, 2018 or 2019) and 29 Councillors who have been re-elected over several terms.

The last electoral review of the Council took place in 2001/02, with Final Recommendations submitted in March 2003 and implemented by all out elections in May 2004. This review decided that the council size would reduce from 54 to 48 based on reducing the number of three member wards from 18 to 16. The primary reasons within the report for changes appear to be to provide greater electoral equality across wards.

Historically, Labour have had the most seats on the Council of any political party since the Borough was created in 1974 and had a majority each year apart from a short period of no overall control between 2004 and 2010. The Council currently has a large Labour majority (Labour 35, Liberal Democrat 4, Independents 4, Conservatives 3, Green 2) with the 2020 Local Elections postponed until 2021 due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Full Council

The Council sits in full eight times per year (including the AGM and Mayor Making), and is well attended by Councillors (81.25% attendance rate). As well as taking decisions which are reserved to Full Council, including decisions on the Budget, Councillors regularly submit and debate notices of motion.

Executive Arrangements

The Council will continue to operate a Leader and Cabinet model (as it has since the Local Government Act 2000) with 10 Cabinet Members (including the Leader) with the following portfolios:

- Leader
- Adult Social Care & Health
- Community Safety
The strong leader model enables swift decisions to be made and provides clear accountability. Whilst it also has the potential to provide fewer opportunities for a significant number of members to be involved in the detail of decision-making; there are opportunities for back bench members to submit recommendations in relation to policy and operational decisions via Scrutiny task and finish groups. In addition, the majority group hold regular group meetings to agree policy direction and strategy.

The Council has an extensive system of delegation in place for Executive decisions. The system comprises Delegated Executive Decisions (DED's) and Administrative Decisions (AD's). Over recent years an average of 1128 AD's and 224 DED's have been made by the Council. In both cases the decisions are taken by Officers after undertaking consultation. The Portfolio Holder is consulted when a DED is proposed. The terms of reference for each type of decision are set out in the attached extract from the constitution (Appendix B), however a significant distinction relates to the financial value attached to the proposed decision. Currently, AD's can be made for any decision up to £100k, and a DED can be taken for any decision up to £250k. It is intended that as part of updating the constitution of the Council that these figures will increase such that the AD's ceiling will become £200k and a DED's will increase to £500k. The impact of this change will be generally to reduce the involvement of Councillors, and allow them to focus on the more important decisions which are taken by the Council.

Cabinet member demands

The role of the Leader of the Council is considered to be a full time position. Some Cabinet members carry out their role on a full time basis, whilst others also have other employment. The demands on the time of Cabinet members are significant. During 2019/20 there were 11 public meetings of the Cabinet where decisions were taken. Cabinet meetings are attended by Cabinet members with support from senior officers. The length of Cabinet meetings is dependent on the length of the agenda and the number and nature of decisions to be taken. Attendance by Cabinet Members for the 11 public meetings averaged at 84.55%.

As well as public Cabinet meetings, Cabinet Members and senior officers attend informal Policy Cabinet meetings on a fortnightly basis where draft policies and decisions are debated and developed prior to being presented to formal public Cabinet meetings. Individual Cabinet members meet regularly with their relevant officers to discuss policy development and performance of services. Cabinet members also attend Scrutiny Committee meetings when requested and attend quarterly meetings with Scrutiny Committee Chairs relevant to their portfolios (one portfolio is currently covered by two separate scrutiny committees). Cabinet Members will also attend and often speak at relevant events in the community related to provision of services in their portfolio.
St Helens Borough Council does not currently operate Individual Cabinet Member decision meetings with a commitment from Councillors that decisions are taken collectively by all Cabinet members. That being said, the Leader did make a number of individual 'Leader decisions' at the start of the pandemic in early March 2020 until measures were put in place by the Council which enabled remote meetings of Cabinet to take place. In addition to Cabinet meetings, Cabinet members sit on a wide range of internal, regional and sub-regional committees and bodies (e.g. Liverpool City Region, People’s Board).

Parishes

There are seven Parish Councils in St Helens Borough (five of which are warded), not all areas within the Borough are parished. The Parish Councils in St Helens are:
- Billinge Chapel End Parish Council
- Bold Parish Council (warded)
- Eccleston Parish Council (warded)
- Rainford Parish Council (warded)
- Rainhill Parish Council (warded)
- Seneley Green Parish Council
- Windle Parish Council (warded)

26.7% of the Borough’s electorate live in a parished area. 12 Members of St Helens Borough Council are also Parish Councillors.

Scrutiny Process

The Council is about to adopt a new Scrutiny Structure following a decision by Council to reduce the number of Committees in the Budget for 2020/21. The new structure is yet to be ratified by Council however it will consist of four Committees, potentially in the following format:
- Overview and Scrutiny Commission (overarching with remit for Corporate Services) - 14 members
- Health and Adult Social Care Committee - 12 members
- Children Services Committee - 12 members
- Environment and Safer Communities Committee - 12 members

The Council’s current (previous) structure consists of six Committees as follows:
- Overview and Scrutiny Commission (15 members)
- Health and Adult Social Care Panel (10 members)
- Children and Young People Services Panel (8 members)
- Environment, Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure Panel (8 members)
- Safer Communities Panel (8 members)
- Audit and Financial Monitoring Panel (8 members)

If a structure similar to that suggested in paragraph 25 then, the changes will reduce the overall number of seats on Scrutiny Committees from 57 to 50, reducing the workload of
some members. Having more members on the new committees will provide a broader range of knowledge and experience as well as more flexibility; if some members are unable to attend some meetings there will still be a sufficient number of members in attendance. A higher number of members per committee also provides more opportunity for minority political parties to be represented, making the scrutiny process more inclusive.

29 During 2019/20 there were a total of 27 public scrutiny committee meetings scheduled (some of these did not take place because of the snap General Election in December 2019 and the lockdown brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic). Of the meetings that took place during 2019/20 the average attendance for a committee was 74.06%. Due to the reduction of Committees and the increase in the remits of the remaining Committees the number of meetings per committee could potentially increase to retain similar overall capacity to conduct scrutiny of the Council and Partners. Each Committee would hold six meetings per year and the Commission would hold seven (Total 25). The table below demonstrates that in previous years, the scrutiny function has held more meetings per panel, per year; requiring a bigger commitment from councillors. As such, the increase in the number of meetings per year would not be expected to place an unmanageable workload on non-cabinet councillors.

30 During 2019/20 Panel meetings lasted between 60 and 180 minutes depending on the agendas. Start times for meetings varied by Panel with three starting at 10am and others 4pm or 5:30pm; two Panels changed to a later start time for the benefit of those Councillors who had trouble with morning meetings due to work commitments. Cabinet Members and Senior Officers/Directors and partner representatives attend scrutiny committee meetings regularly. Committee members are expected to prepare for meetings by reading agenda papers and considering questions they will ask at meetings. Committee members are also expected to contribute to the development of the committee work programmes by sharing information about the issues affecting their residents or concerns raised by them. There is always potential for additional committee meetings being scheduled to deal with a Call-In however there hasn’t been a Call-In at St Helens Borough Council for at least 12 years (most recent appears to have been 8th October 2008).

Table 1

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<th>Total Non-Public Meetings/Engagements</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020/21</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
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</table>

31 As well as holding public committee meetings Panels/Committees also run task and finish groups. The number of task group meetings vary per panel per year dependent on the work programme however each Panel/Committee should have the capacity to run two task groups per year with the support of the Scrutiny Team. The number of members per task group can
vary between three and six and the number of meetings per group also varies from a single meeting to 6-10 meetings, sometimes including site visits, with meetings taking a morning or afternoon. Although all non-cabinet members are able to take part in task group meetings, during 2019/20 task groups were conducted by a core of approximately 12 members, some of whom were able to take part in as many as three groups. With larger committees under the new structure it is expected that the work load in relation to task and finish groups could be spread further across the non-cabinet member cohort. Taking part in task and finish groups is completely voluntary on the part of non-cabinet members and as such, there will never be more task groups or meetings than Councillors are able to cope with. As well as attending meetings, Councillors on task and finish groups are required to read agendas and reports prior to meetings, read and comment on notes following meetings and work together to develop the final report.

32 In addition to task group meetings, Scrutiny Committee Chairs and Portfolio Holders attended quarterly meetings with officers to discuss policy development and the scrutiny work programmes. These meetings coincided with the public meeting cycle so they may be increased if the number of meetings per committee increases. Chairs also meet regularly with the Scrutiny Team, hold pre-meeting briefings with the Scrutiny Team and sit on the Scrutiny Commission. Chairs and other members also attend additional meetings and events such as community groups and special interest groups to engage with the public. They are also expected to attend training and briefing sessions to maintain their skills and knowledge.

33 As well as the Council’s Scrutiny Committees, the Council is required to appoint three members to the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority Scrutiny Committee which meets five times per year. There is also potential each year that Joint Health Scrutiny Committees with other local authorities will need to be formed to scrutinise substantial developments or variations in service by NHS bodies. The scope and level of work involved in taking part in a Joint Health Scrutiny Review is entirely dependent on the topic and number of local authorities involved.

Regulatory Process and Other Committees

34 Aside from Cabinet and Scrutiny, the Council’s committee system comprises the following committees:

- Planning Committee
- Licensing and Environmental Protection Committee
- Licensing Sub-Committee
- Audit and Governance Committee
- People’s Board
- Appointments Committee
- Personnel Appeals Committee
- Standards Committee
- Sarah Cowley Committee

Planning

35 The Council has a single Planning Committee consisting of 15 members. The Planning Committee carries out the Council’s regulatory functions under the relevant planning legislation. During 2019/20 municipal year the Planning Committee held eight meetings with an attendance rate of 77.5%.
On average, 1.7% of applications have been determined by the Planning Committee over the last 3 years with the rest decided by officers. The average length of a committee meeting over the past 12 months has been in the region of 1 hour, between 8 or 9 meetings per year. Site visits occur on average 3 times per year and again last, on average, 2 hours. In addition, the Chair attends a briefing meeting in the lead up to each committee that lasts on average 30 minutes. This is not expected to change.

Members of the Planning Committee undertake training before participating in meetings. This is usually a 1 hour session at the beginning of the municipal year, with follow up sessions and one to one’s where members are unable to attend or there is a change to the membership. Training on updates and particular topics also takes place around 3 or 4 times per year. The sessions usually last around 1 hour.

The Council is progressing a new local plan. It is expected that the plan will be adopted at the end of 2020 or the beginning of 2021. The plan allocates a number of sites for housing and employment uses. Adoption of the plan will most likely result in a number of planning applications on the sites identified. In addition, the Council has recently resolved to enter into a long term partnership with the English Cities Fund to facilitate development across the Borough. The initial focus will be on the town centres. It is too early to say for certain what the impact on of these changes will be on Planning Committee meetings or the workload of members more generally. However, evidence from the local plan process and previous operation of the committee means that it is not envisaged that it will be significant.

Members are contacted regularly by the public to ask officers about planning matters, including applications and breaches in planning control. This usually takes the form of emails or telephone calls to which an officer will respond.

The expectation is that the council will continue to operate a single borough-wide planning committee that will deal with the most complex and controversial applications. It will also ensure that to a strategic overview of development in St Helens is maintained.

### Licensing

The Licensing Act 2003 paragraph 6(1) specifies a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 15 members for the Licensing Committee, with no legally defined quorum. St Helens Borough Council’s Licensing and Environmental Protection Committee consists of 15 members appointed annually and meets on a monthly basis, either as a formal meeting or to undertake training. Functions delegated to the Committee include Taxi, Entertainment, Gaming, Food and Miscellaneous Licensing, Environmental Protection and Health and Safety, however the Committee mainly hears matters relating to hackney carriage/private hire licensing and to consider matters of policy. Meetings last on average two hours but can last longer depending on the number of matters to consider in any given month and can involve significant reading in advance. The Licensing and Environmental Protection Committee makes decisions on licensing policy and reviews all policies on a three-year programme. During 2019/20 municipal year, the Licensing and Environmental Protection Committee held eight meetings with an attendance rate of 69.17%. The Licensing Sub Committee also met three times with an attendance rate of 100%.

In St Helens, decisions on applications are delegated to officers, and in particular the Licensing Manager, with the Licensing and Environmental Protection Committee or Licensing Sub-Committee hearing those matters which are contested or otherwise outside
the scope of the officer delegations. The Licensing Sub-Committee meets as and when required and hearings last on average five hours, in order to listen to all the evidence and take a decision, and usually involves substantial reading in advance. Three members are required per meeting and the Licensing Sub-Committee is reconstituted each time it meets, with the Membership being drawn from the Licensing and Environmental Protection Committee. The Licensing Sub-Committee considers all licensing cases concerning the following licence types where there is an objection, or where it is proposed that a license is revoked or refused, and takes decisions on licenses as covered by the legislation listed below:

- Matters under the Licensing Act 2003 as set out below:
- Application for personal licence if a police objection
- Application for personal licence with unspent convictions
- Application for premises licence/club premises certificate if a relevant representation made
- Application for provisional statement if a relevant representation made
- Application to vary premises licence/club premises certificate if a relevant representation made
- Application to vary designated premises supervisor if a police objection
- Application for transfer of premises licence if a police objection
- Applications for interim authorities if a police objection
- Application to review premises licence/club premises certificate
- Decision to object when local authority is a consultee and not the relevant authority considering the application
- Determination of a police objection to a temporary event notice
- Review of a personal licence where the licence holder has been convicted of a relevant offence or required to pay an immigration penalty
- Application to determine classification of films

43 St Helens Borough Council has not experienced a reduction in workload for the Licensing Committees in recent years which has remained relatively static. However as highlighted above, it is anticipated that the workload of the Licensing Committees will increase with the redevelopment of the Town Centre, particularly due to the required review of the Hackney Carriage ranks and limit on Hackney Carriage numbers, plus the Cumulative Impact Assessment in place in the Town Centre which relates to licensed premises under the Licensing Act 2003.

44 As stated above, the majority of matters considered at the monthly Licensing Committee in St Helens concern taxi licenses and the Department for Transport’s proposed Statutory Guidance for Licensing Authorities ‘Taxi and Private Hire Vehicle Licensing: Protecting Users’ has not recommended any changes which are likely to give rise to a reduction in hearings.

45 Given the current and anticipated future increased workload of the Licensing Committees, it is not considered that any reduction in the size of the Licensing and Environmental Protection Committee would be appropriate or manageable.

Other

46 The Audit and Governance Committee comprises 10 Members and meets at least four times each municipal year. The Committee’s role is to ensure there are effective relationships between internal and external audit inspection agencies and other relevant bodies, and that the value of the audit process is actively promoted. The Committee reviews the financial statements, external auditor’s opinion, reports to members and monitors management action in response to issues raised by the external audit.
Since 2016, St Helens Borough Council has not held separate Health and Wellbeing Board and Community Safety Partnership Meetings. In 2016, the Council merged these two bodies to form the “People’s Board”. The People’s Board is a multi-agency committee which includes six Councillors (all Cabinet Members covering portfolios in Health, Social Care, Children Services, Community Safety and the Leader), the statutory Officers required to be appointed to the Health and Wellbeing Board along with several other senior Officers from the Council as well as key figures from partner agencies such as: Merseyside Police, Merseyside Fire and Rescue, St Helens Clinical Commission Group, and NHS Providers. Included within the Board’s role is assessing the needs of the St Helens Borough population and leading the development of the Joint Strategic Needs Assessment. The Board is also responsible for the development of the Community Safety Strategy. It responds and contributes to developments in wider partnership arrangements in St Helens with a focus on the Borough’s strategic priorities of raising and achieving aspiration, being connected and growing the economy. The People’s Board holds formal public meetings around six times per year but will also hold other informal meetings and sub groups as and when required. By merging the Health and Wellbeing Board and the Community Safety Partnership the Council has both reduced the number of meetings required but also created greater links between partners and enabled strategies for dealing with health and community safety issues to be developed in a joined up way.

The Standards Committee has 10 Members which is scheduled to meet twice a year however will also hold additional meetings if and when required. The main responsibility of the Standards Committee is to promote standards within the Council and to monitor the operation of the Code of Conduct. Where required, it may meet to hear and determine complaints of alleged breaches of the Code of Conduct by borough or parish councillors referred to it by the Monitoring Officer. Meetings of this Committee will be called when an allegation of a breach of the Code of Conduct has been alleged. Since May 2018 there were 43 complaints against borough councillors and 0 complaints against parish councillors. The Standards Committee is also responsible for receiving reports from the Monitoring Officer on the operation of the Council’s Executive arrangements and reviewing data on Ombudsman decisions. Also advising, training or arranging to train Councillors and co-opted members, and church and parent governor representatives on matters relating to the Members’ Code of Conduct.

The Appointments Committee has 10 Members and meets when required to authorise the filling of any appointment to all posts at Director level and above. This Committee has held several meetings over the last year due to the Council’s organisation restructure and the need to fill senior directors posts due to several retirements and the resignation of the former Chief Executive. The Personnel Appeals Committee has three Members and meets when required to hear and adjudicate on appeals arising from the operation of the Council’s employment procedures. It also determines non-collective grievance cases. The Council will also soon be looking to establish a Committee/Sub-Committee of a small number of Members (three/five has been suggested) to deal with disciplinary matters concerning the Chief Executive and other designated Statutory Officers (i.e. s151 Officer and the Monitoring Officer), as such a body was highlighted as being lacking in a recent external review of the Council’s Constitution. It is anticipated that this Committee would only meet on a very infrequent basis.
Sarah Cowley Committee has 10 Members and meets once a year to determine applications from students for payments from the Sarah Cowley Trust Fund, in accordance with the terms of the Sarah Cowley Trust Deed. The payments enable the students to attend further/higher education courses, or to assist in the entry to a profession, trade or calling.

**Other Council and External Appointments**

52 Councillors serve (in varying numbers) on a range of regional/sub-regional bodies including:
- North West Regional Leaders’ Board – Leader of St Helens Borough Council
- Liverpool City Region (LCR) Combined Authority (2 members + 1 sub)
- LCR Combined Authority Scrutiny Committee (3 members)
- LCR Combined Authority Transport Committee (3 members)
- Merseyside Police and Crime Panel (2 members)
- Merseyside Fire and Rescue Authority (2 members)
- Merseyside Recycling and Waste Authority (1 member)

53 In 2019/20, there are a total of 50 Outside Bodies that Elected Members can be nominated to sit on as a Council representative. Of these 50 Outside Bodies, 17 require specific Cabinet Member representation, which is allocated according to portfolio responsibility. The remaining 33 Outside Bodies are represented through a mix of memberships, some specific to role (e.g. North West Scrutiny Network where the position is to be taken by the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Commission), whereas the others are allocated by political party.

The scope of Outside Bodies themselves varies from fulfilling or supporting Local Authority functions such as Members Training Steering Group, the Learning Disability and Autism Board and Governor Appointment Panels to supporting local community groups, businesses and charities such as the St Helens Citizens Advice Bureau, Torus and Homestart St Helens. Others present an opportunity for regional representation, for example with the Local Government Association, Mersey Forest Steering Group or in the case of the Local Enterprise Partnership, working to help determine and steer local economic priorities, lead economic growth and job creation within the local area through voluntary partnerships.

**The Councillors’ Representative Role**

**Attendance at Council/Committee Meetings**

55 The Table below shows the attendance levels at the meetings of each of the Council’s Committees from the AGM in May 2019 to March 2020. It should be noted that due to the COVID-19 pandemic meetings from the middle of March to May 2020 were cancelled or postponed to aid social isolation so these figures do not fully reflect the number of meetings which would normally take place during a Municipal year.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Members</th>
<th>Number of Meetings</th>
<th>Total for 100% attendance</th>
<th>Actual Attendance</th>
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<td>Environment, Regeneration, Housing, Culture and Leisure Scrutiny</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and Adult Social Care Scrutiny</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licensing and Environmental Protection Committee</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Licensing Sub Committee</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overview and Scrutiny Commission</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People's Board</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personnel Appeals Committee</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning Committee</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safer Communities Scrutiny</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah Cowley Committee</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Standards Committee</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

56 Generally, Council and Committee meetings have been relatively well attended with the majority showing at least 70% attendance. It should be noted that the Council’s Constitution does not currently allow for substitutes to be nominated by committee members who are unable to attend a particular meeting. The Council is however making arrangements to amend the Constitution in the near future to begin allowing substitutes at meetings which should see attendance figures increase as Councillors (presumably from the same political parties) support each other to cover roles and positions within the Council.

57 Under the current committee structure, prior to the changes to the number of Scrutiny Committees, there are a total of 120 seats on Committees (excluding Cabinet which does not have to be politically proportionate). This equates to 2.5 seats per councillor which is seen as a manageable commitment for councillors.

**Community Leadership**

58 As part of the Electoral Review the Council conducted a survey of members; this section provides a summary of the results (full results are available at Appendix C). 41 out of the 48
(85%) Members responded to the survey. Of the 41, seven were Cabinet Members, seven were Council Committee Chairs and six represented the Council on external bodies (e.g. Police and Crime Panel).

The Council does not hold Area/Ward Committees. 33 (80%) of the respondents hold a Surgery for local residents. The frequency, timing and length of these surgeries varied significant however on average Councillors spend about four hours per month at surgeries. Of those that indicated they do not hold a ‘physical’ surgery, most mentioned that they offered residents one to ones on an ad hoc basis either face to face or by telephone.

24 (58.5%) of respondents stated that they used social media (such as Twitter and Facebook) to liaise and share information/news with residents/followers. Again, the frequency and length of time Councillors spend using social media varied considerable ranging from five hours to 40 hours per month. Of those that do not use social media a few indicated that while they did not use these platforms their ward colleagues did, suggesting that there are various ways some Councillors (typically of the same political party) choose to share responsibilities within their three member wards.

12 Councillors (29.3%) indicated that they are also members of their local Parish Council. 29 of the 41 (70%) Members who responded to the survey indicated that they are School Governors – on average these Councillors suggested that they currently spend 4 hours per month preparing for and attending Governing Body Meetings.

Councillors were asked to indicate how much time they spent per month preparing for and attending different types of meetings. The table below illustrates the average hours per month those members who responded to the survey spent on different types of meetings. It should be noted that the actual figures for individual members vary significantly depended on whether they are a member of a particular body or not. For example, it is expected that Cabinet Members will spend considerably more time preparing for and attending Cabinet meetings. Also, not many of the 48 Council members are currently involved in bodies related to the Liverpool City Region or other partnership bodies (such as Merseyside Recycling and Waste Authority). As such, the standard deviation figure for responses has also been included to try to provide a better idea of the time spent by Councillors on their committee duties.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Committee/Body</th>
<th>Average Hours/Month</th>
<th>Standard Deviation Hours/Month</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cabinet</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>16.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scrutiny</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outside Body Meetings</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>16.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liverpool City Region Meetings</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Council Committees</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16.48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Councillors were given the opportunity within the survey to add further comments regarding their activities as councillors. The vast majority referred to work they do as leaders in their
communities, beyond their roles as councillors, such as roles within community groups, and organising of local events and volunteering schemes. Councillors also have a role to play before and during civic events (e.g. Remembrance Sunday) and many also referred to the time and effort they put into their political groups including campaigning for themselves and council colleagues/candidates as well as MPs, PCC, and Regional Mayor during elections.

**Casework**

64 Results of the Member survey suggested that Councillors currently spend an average of 32 hours per month on casework. Again, there is variation within the responses with roughly half (46.34%) of respondents suggesting they deal with over 15 constituent queries per month and the same number having between 5 and 15 queries. Only 7% said they dealt with fewer than 5 queries a month.

65 Councillors deal with their own casework, each with their own processes and methodology for its management. Technology has further enabled Councillors ability to undertake and progress their casework with residents now being able to contact them through a variety of methods from telephone, letter and email through to social media. Members were asked to consider how long an average query would take them to deal with. Several respondents commented that it was difficult to quantify the time spent on residents’ queries as the time varied significantly depending on the query and the need for follow up. The answers provided suggested that around 60% of Councillors spend 15 minutes to an hour on the average query with 35% saying they spent over an hour on the average query.

66 In relation to their overall workload, the vast majority of Councillors (80.95%) found that their workload was manageable (about right for what should be expected of them). This is a subjective question and each Councillor will have their own ideas about what they believe they should be able to do in their role and what residents and the Council can reasonable expect them to do. As such, Councillors who do significantly more work compared to what others may expect find that it is perfectly reasonable to do so much and do so believing that it is what they became a councillor to do. Other Councillors, perhaps those with other commitments such as family and work, may feel that a lower amount of work is about right. Just under 5% (4.76%) believed they had the capacity to do more than their current workload as a councillor and less than 15% (14.29%) felt that their current workload was too high. Again, whether or not the workload is too high is subjective and the work loads of those who think it is too much or about right may be carrying out the same level of work.

67 In addition to the results of the survey that Council can report that 29 of its Councillors (60.4%) currently have other employment (either full time or part time) and 19 (39.6%) are either retired or do not have other employment besides that as a Councillor.

**Support for Councillors**

68 Members are supported by Democratic Services with the management of their schedules (i.e. providing information and updates on when and where Council meetings or training sessions are taking place) and enquires from the public (i.e. forwarding messages received from public to the relevant members). Democratic Services also provide support with accessing agenda papers for meetings (either via agenda Apps or print/post).
The Councillors are supported with Scrutiny work by a Scrutiny Team who manage task and finish groups, support the development of the work programmes, provide advice and guidance and useful information relevant to scrutiny topics.

Councillors on Regulatory Committees are supported by Officers from the relevant services with information, during site visits and at meetings. The Council’s Internal Training and Development section coordinates Member Training including the development of the Induction and Annual Training Programme for new and existing Members.

Other Issues

Following the introduction of Leader and Cabinet arrangements for local authority decision making in 2000, many Councils saw their number of Councillors reduced in subsequent Commission reviews due to the reduced work load of the Cabinet system compared to the old Committee System. St Helens was one of these authorities that had its numbers reduced from 54 to 48 in 2002/03. Although the Leadership and Governance structure is largely unchanged (i.e. still Leader and Cabinet model) since 2003, there have been further developments, particularly in technology, that have further reduced the work load of and dependence on Councillors. The Internet generally, and social media more specifically, have enabled communication between Councillors and the residents they represent to be more efficient and more responsive. The Council provides residents with lots of information and updates on service provision directly via its website and social media channels reducing the need for residents to consult their elected representatives for minor queries and issues. The Council's website, social media channels and contact centres are most residents' first port of call for information or requests to access services with many payments and applications for services (e.g. bulky rubbish collection, reporting fly tipping, or benefit applications) being done online. For most residents this means that they would only contact their elected representatives to escalate issues which they have been unable to resolve by other means.

Besides the internet, other technological changes have impacted on the work load and demands on Councillors time and effort. The COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst for the rapid development and deployment of agile working and mobile technology which, among other things, has enabled local authorities to introduce remote meetings (both public and non-public). Although the regulations allowing remote meetings to replace traditional physical public meetings is time limited to cease in May 2021 many industry figures/bodies anticipate that remote meetings (or at least allowing some committee members to attend traditional meetings remotely) will be allowed to continue beyond May 2021 by some form of regulation. Enabling members to attend meetings remotely will reduce demands on their time as they will not be required to travel to venues and between meetings and it will be easier for those who work to balance their jobs with their councillor responsibilities. St Helens Borough Council is embracing agile working and enabling officers, as well as councillors to benefit from greater flexibility to work outside of normal times and venues. As such, there are opportunities for Councillors not only to access committee/council meetings remotely but also scrutiny task and finish groups, political group meetings, ward surgeries, training sessions and briefings, planning site visits, licensing briefings and school governing body meetings (where the schools adopt this approach). Essentially Councillors are/will be able to do more in the time they have than they would have been able to in the past.

One of the reasons the Council and Councillors are keen for the size of the Council to remain at 48 is the negative cost implications of increasing the number of councillors. Austerity has forced the Council to make very difficult decisions regarding savings, budget
cuts and rates increases to ensure it is able to continue meeting its statutory obligations and providing services to keep our most vulnerable residents safe. An increase in Councillors would result in an increase in costs of member allowances and expenses. Councillors basic allowance in 2020/2021 is £8,094 (frozen from 2019/2020 as agreed by Councillors). The table below shows the initial cost implications of increasing the number of Councillors (prior to the inclusion of additional expenses costs, training, IT and other on costs).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Council Size</th>
<th>Increase in Allowance Costs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>49 (+1)</td>
<td>£8,094</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 (+2)</td>
<td>£16,188</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51 (+3)</td>
<td>£24,282</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52 (+4)</td>
<td>£32,376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53 (+5)</td>
<td>£40,470</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54 (+6)</td>
<td>£48,564</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During times of austerity this increase in cost may not be viewed by residents as value for money when it is felt the current number of members is sufficient for the work load. Although the Council has not consulted the public directly as part of this exercise it is aware that many vocal residents (via local news media and social media groups) regularly express negative views in relation to the current number of members being too high or too costly for the role they perform. Understandably, some residents have reacted negatively to the decisions that Council has had to make in cutting services they valued and choosing to have more Councillors forcing savings elsewhere in the budget may not be supported by the public. Without conducting formal consultation on the issue it is unclear whether these vocal elements represent a majority of the population however the instinct within the Council is that an increase in the number of Councillors at this time would not be seen by most as being value for money or in the best interests of the Borough.

Compared to other parts of the country, and in particular some of St Helens’ comparator authorities, the Borough is not a very diverse place. According to the 2011 Census 96.6% of the population identified themselves as white British compared to 79.8% nationally and 87.1% in the North West. As such there are no concerns about the current number of members being able to provide sufficient opportunities to ensure all groups within our community are represented on the Council. Although there are distinct communities within the Borough (e.g. Newton, Rainford and Rainhill) with many residents feeling strong connections to their local communities, there is a strong collective feeling among most residents to St Helens as a whole and many parts of the Borough share very similar traits. St Helens is a relatively small metropolitan borough, both in terms of geography and with 65% of the borough being green belt the population is concentrated in relatively dense urban areas. As such it is felt that the current number of wards (and by extension councillors) is sufficient to ensure distinct communities within the Borough are represented and that the Councillors are able to easily cover their geographical areas.

Conclusion/Summary

Giving consideration to the information provided above, it is the view of St Helens Borough Council that the current council size of 48 remains the correct number based on the needs of the Borough and the ability of members to manage the workload.
The Council has operated with 48 Councillors since 2004 and in that time the role of the councillor has been changed in many ways by developments in technology and the internet and how that enables the public to interact with the Council in different ways. The Council believes that with the ability to contact the Council directly via its website and social media channels and the automation and/or digitisation of many tasks residents’ reliance on Councillors for support and information has been reduced, leaving Councillors with fewer (albeit the more complicated cases) to deal with. In the survey conducted for this review, the vast majority (80%) of Members indicated that their current workload was manageable (“about right”) or that they could do more. As there are unlikely to be any changes to the nature of the role of a Councillors that would increase their workload significantly it is suggested that 48 remains a suitable number.

The Council’s governance arrangements have been largely unchanged since the previous review in 2004. The Council will continue to operate a Leader Cabinet executive model and the Scrutiny Function is being rationalised which will reduce the workload of some Councillors. The Planning and Licensing Committee arrangements will be unchanged (i.e. same number of councillors) and are manageable and all other committee arrangements will also be within the capacity of the current council size to undertake.

Although the number of electors per councillor in St Helens Borough may be higher than some other areas, it is the belief of the Council that the characteristics of the Borough enable effective representation despite higher numbers of electors. The small geographical area and population density of St Helens means that Councillors do not have to cover a large area to serve their population and the relatively low levels of diversity and the shared culture and community identity of large parts of the Borough mean that even with fewer Councillors the Council has good representation of the electorate.

The Council has given consideration to the potential for an increase in the Council size however it is the view of the Council that this would be unnecessary as the current workload of councillors is manageable and the additional costs associated with having more members would not represent value for money and would not be viewed favourably by the public who wish to see the limited financial resources available to the Council going towards service delivery.

Appendices :-

A - Draft Council Plan 2020/21

B - Extract from Constitution re Executive Decisions delegation and

C – Member survey results.