

Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research

# How many elected representatives does local government need? A review of the evidence from Europe

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The question of the appropriate number of elected representatives is at the heart of debates about democratic governance, representation and citizen engagement. However, there has only been limited comparative research on the factors and processes involved in determining the number of elected representatives that are suitable for a particular governance structure. In this article we examine the principles and practices informing the size of local government in the UK and other European countries. The issue of the number of elected representatives remains a neglected area of reform and innovation.

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# **How many elected representatives does local government need?**

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### **Abstract**

The question of the appropriate number of elected representatives is at the heart of debates about democratic governance, representation and citizen engagement. However, there has only been limited comparative research on the factors and processes involved in determining the number of elected representatives that are suitable for a particular governance structure. In this article we examine the principles and practices informing the size of local government in the UK and other European countries. The issue of the number of elected representatives remains a neglected area of reform and innovation.

In the UK the numbers of local councillors varies considerably across different areas and comparable types of authority. Whilst there are formal processes of review, the number of elected representatives in each council is in large part the result of historical accident. There is limited evidence for measuring the appropriateness of different council sizes for democratic representation, such as the minimum number of elected representatives to perform the core functions of democratic governance. The procedures for determining the numbers of elected representatives need to be robust, consistent and capable of anticipating future change. Moreover, the paper considers the policy option of increasing the number of representatives in priority areas as a driver for increasing civic engagement and for tackling deprivation.

### **Introduction**

The number of representatives has important implications for the functioning and effectiveness of democracy. It might be thought that such an area of research is not controversial and that the number of representatives is simply a function of the size of the population or the number of administrative units (though the latter is normally related to the former), but there are many other aspects of governance that may be linked to the number of elected representatives. Very little research has been conducted into the most robust way of determining the appropriate numbers of elected representatives and the implications for governance in its broadest sense including: decision making, breadth of expertise, accessibility of representatives, workload and costs.

In this paper, we focus on the processes, if any, that exist for regulating the size of local government, the principles that inform decisions on size and the political debates about local democratic representation. The paper explores the impact of these factors by examining the experience in local government across a number of countries with very different institutional traditions. It may be the case that the variation in the numbers of elected representatives owes much to historical accident, but the different experiences show the extent to which different council sizes impact on democratic and governance outcomes.

## **Methodology**

This comparative research involved a range of qualitative and quantitative methods. The research reviewed local council size in four EU countries and conducted a conceptual review of past council size decisions in England and Wales. The research team interviewed a number of key experts and practitioners and hosted an expert seminar attended by more than twenty practitioners and academics. In relation to identifying the key factors in determining council size in England, the research reviewed the availability of secondary data for profiling the populations and socio-demographic circumstances of different local authorities.

## **Regulating Local Government Size - European Approaches**

The numbers of elected representatives that form local government structures vary considerably across different countries. Wilson and Game (2002: 247) have compared electorate to councillor ratios across European countries and highlighted how the UK has fewer and larger local authorities than almost any other Western country. Average council sizes vary - from relatively small local councils in France, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Sweden and Spain of between 8 and 14 elected representatives compared to 49 councillors in the UK and over a hundred in Sweden<sup>1</sup>. Though the actual size of the populations of these different council types varies considerably from - 118, 209 and 256 people per councillor in France, Austria and Sweden respectively compared to 2,336 and 2,603 people per councillor in Ireland and the UK respectively.

Treated in isolation, a crude ratio of representative to electorate is an unreliable indicator of democratic quality. Within countries there can be considerable variations and different countries operate very different systems of local government in terms of history, institutional structure, function, responsibilities and power. Moreover, there are considerable variations in terms of the role of political parties (Copus, 2004), the frequency of elections, the extent to which local politics is integrated with national politics, the nature of the electoral system and the availability of alternative direct routes for members of the public to exert influence

(Lowndes et al, 2001). For an overview of the challenges of comparing local governance across different countries see Woolman (2008) and also Lidstom (1999).

This paper is primarily interested in the actual infrastructures and spaces within which political participation can take place. A lack of accessibility of a representative can inhibit effective democratic governance (see Dahl and Tufte 1973). The next section looks in more detail at the size of different local government structures across case study EU countries.

### **Ireland and France**

Ireland and France do not have an independent system for adjudicating or advising on the size of councils and local electoral issues. The Local Government Act 2001 in Ireland had envisioned an independent body – the Local Government Commission – that would advise ministers on alterations to the number of councillors in a local authority as well as other aspects of the local electoral system. The proposals did not include a periodic review of council sizes but rather the council would propose a change to the relevant Minister who would invite the Local Government Commission to make a recommendation about the future council size. The relevant part of the Act has yet to be enacted however. During the legislative passage of the 2001 Act a proposal that ratios should be equalised across councils was explicitly rejected<sup>ii</sup>. The Government's position was that equality of ratios between electoral wards within individual counties and cities was the key issue and an equalisation across authorities would cause significant disruption.

In France the local government determines council size and boundaries. There is no independent body with formal responsibility for advising on local electoral issues; rather the Interior Ministry has responsibility for overseeing the code. In France there are four levels of constitutionally recognised local authority. Three of them hold direct elections for their governors, the 36,564 communes, 96 departments (divided into 320 administrative districts and 3,872 cantons (electoral districts)) and 22 regions (Knapp and Wright, 2006: 351). The communes, based on pre-revolutionary parishes, are generally seen as the institutions that most closely reflect community identity and past attempts by governments to encourage mergers have had limited success (Cole, 2005). The boundaries of the cantons on which

election to the departments are based have also changed little. The absence of a system for changing electoral boundaries and council size has led to some disproportionality in both France and Ireland. In France, the urbanisation of the population along with the stability of canton boundaries has led to an over-representation of rural areas in the boards of the departments (Knapp and Wright, 2006).

### **Finland and Sweden**

A different method for determining council size is in place in Finland and Sweden. In both these countries, in common with other Nordic countries, the size of a council is directly related to the population (Rose and Stahlberg, 2005). Sweden has both county and municipal bodies and for both types there are a number of population thresholds that are related to the minimum size of council. A consequence of this system is that occasionally, as a result of demographic changes, councils are required to increase the number of elected representatives. However, there is no requirement to remove representatives if the number of residents falls. In fact, the number of forced changes in council size has been quite small in comparison to Finland where a similar system operates and the numbers of elected representatives in assemblies are quite stable (Pettersson-Lidblom, 2006). On average the number of representatives is higher than the minimum required, for example, municipalities with electorates of less than 12,000 have a statutory minimum of 31 but the average size is 40.5 (Pettersson-Lidblom, 2006, Table 4). The committee system in Swedish local government also allows the participation of non-elected members. The Elections Act 2005 in Sweden established a Central Elections Authority with responsibility for the regulation of elections. With respect to municipal and county elections the County Administrative Board (part of central government's field administration) acts as the regional election authority. For county elections, constituencies are formed so that each is estimated to have at least eight permanent seats. After consultation with the municipalities the division of a county into constituencies is determined and approved by the county council assembly and the County Administrative Board in the year prior to an election. The number of permanent seats per constituency is allocated by the County Administrative Board based on a calculation of electoral ratios (Elections Act 2005: 837). For elections to the municipalities, the smaller authorities are not split into constituencies but if the electorate is more than 6,000 the municipality may be split

into constituencies. If the electorate is greater than 24,000 then division into constituencies is required. The division into constituencies is decided by the municipal assembly in the year prior to election and again must be approved by the County Administrative Board. It is then for the Administrative Board to decide the number of seats (all permanent) allocated to each constituency.

In Finland, the local councils are not split into constituencies. Finnish legislation stipulates a specific number of elected representatives for a particular population band. The population in May of an election year (every 4 years) is used to determine the number of elected representatives. There was a proposal in 1995 to abolish the population bands but it was rejected after opposition from smaller parties. The thresholds from the 1976 Act were retained. In addition to population change, overall electorate to representative ratios are influenced by moves at a national level to encourage the small authorities to merge. There has recently been a further push to restructure Finnish local government with the aim of improving the quality and efficiency of services.

It is clear there is variety in the processes of determining council size as well as the underlying principals for decision-making in the European case study countries we have examined. In Ireland, as well as England the principal of equality of ratios within council areas is applied. In the two Nordic countries discussed, equality between different councils of similar size is the underlying principal. In France, the traditional nature of canton boundaries has led to an over-representation of rural areas in the departments. Similarly, there is variation in the processes and structures for regulating electoral arrangements across the different countries reviewed. An independent body regulating local electoral relations is by no means the norm in Europe. We now go on to consider developments in the UK.

## **Developments in the UK**

### **England**

Local government in England has a complex structure of county councils, district councils (existing within county councils), unitary authorities, metropolitan councils, London boroughs and also parish councils<sup>iii</sup>.

There is no fixed size for an electoral ward or a local authority in England. However, via Period Electoral Reviews (PER) conducted by the independent Boundary Commission for England (BCE) there is an attempt to keep some uniformity. Large differences are still apparent and even within the same type of authority there are considerable differences in terms of both electorate and population size as table 1 highlights.

<Table 1 about here>

Functions and service responsibilities vary by council type though some are shared. When comparing different council sizes and the ratios it is important to bear in mind the different functions of some of these authority types and that county councils and district councils are nested within each other to form two-tier authorities.

By governance type the average number of councillors is as follows: mayor (including mayor and council manager) 52; leader and cabinet 53; alternative arrangements 36. These differences reflect largely the different council types and the existing size of councils before the Local Government Act 2000. There have been some reductions in council size on the basis of new governance arrangements following review.

There are similar types of councils with comparable population sizes and characteristics but which have different numbers of councillors as Table 2 highlights. However, the complex nature of the make up of different local authorities emphasises the challenges posed in producing a single formula for determining the number of councillors.

<Table 2 about here>



Decisions on council size in England have to conform to the Statutory Criteria as outlined in the Local Government Act 1992. Council sizes are reviewed by the BCE on a rolling basis every eight years as part of a PER. This process involves a period of public consultation with local residents and other stakeholders. The final decision is taken by the BCE. The process can take two years or more. The Statutory Criteria are focused on the need to achieve electoral equality in terms of electorate to councillor ratios. However, it is stated in the Local Government Act 1992 that due regard should also be given to: “securing effective and convenient local government and to reflecting the identities and interests of local communities”. Proposals can be quite radical, a recent example involved a proposal by a member of the public to reduce the number of councillors on Basingstoke and Deane council in Hampshire by 50 per cent. This was taken to the third phase of consultation during which 83 submissions were received by the BCE. After this it was decided that there would be no change in the number of councillors (BCE 2007).

The Statutory Criteria are a challenge to implement as they are quite abstract and not precisely defined. Our research involved conducting a conceptual analysis of patterns of reasoning and assumptions as evident in past decisions taken by the BCE and the previous Local Government Commission on council size including where council's have been reduced in size or allowed to expand. This involved analysing the content of council, party group and public responses to PER reviews and council electoral arrangements where council size is specifically mentioned, reviewing and analysing decisions across England where either substantial changes in councillor numbers had been proposed or adopted. In total twenty decisions were examined. Extended discussions were also held with Electoral Commission and BCE staff.

Despite being open to representations made which conform to the Statutory Criteria the review revealed that ultimately the decisions by the BCE seem to come down to electoral equality in terms of elector to councillor ratios. Whilst the *identities and interests of local communities* may be seen as important amongst those making representations during a consultation process, it is often interpreted in terms of one idea of community identity at the expense of another. Such as, for example, a group of neighbours not wanting to be associated with a certain part of their local area. The recognition of identifiable physical boundaries such

as road bypasses, rivers and railway lines is arguably more straightforward though they may not always easily map to the boundaries that are desired in administrative terms. Any change of boundaries and a change in the number of councillors can have implications for party support bases and the overall political balance of a council. The consultation process during a PER can be the target for political gain with political parties seeking to increase the impact of the base of their support or reduce the impact of the power base of rival parties.

It is notable that in the USA redistricting in relation to both the Congress and Senate electoral boundaries have been the subject of numerous law suits and Supreme Court rulings on ‘malapportionment’, where electoral districts had wildly unequal populations (Grofman et al. 1992; Webster 2000). ‘Gerrymandering’ through excessive manipulation of legislative districts has occurred for both political and racially partisan purposes (Siegel, 2002). Rallings *et al.* (2004) and Johnston (2002) have assessed the impact of boundary changes on electoral outcomes, particularly the way that the division of areas affects party support. In relation to the representation of minority communities, US redistricting plans may specifically allow a minority population sub-group to be delimited so as to have a reasonable opportunity to elect someone from their own population (Morrison & Clark, 1992). For further discussion of electoral boundaries and numbers of councillors in England see Norman, Purdam, Tajar and Simpson (2007).

## **Scotland**

In Scotland, following the Local Government Act 1994, the national government indicated that the move to single tier authorities would be accompanied by a decrease in the number of elected councillors (Smith 2007). Councillor numbers had not been reviewed since 1974. However, it appears that the government backed away from its policy and in essence the size of the new single-tier authorities was based on the predecessor lower tier councils. Over the period 1999-2007 the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland (LGBCS) implemented a more systematic method for deciding on the size of councils. This was essentially based on population size and density. Population bands were established but with certain exceptions for very rural areas and areas of very high population density. Five bands were established (60,000–74,000; 84,000–116,000; 136,000–173,000; 235,000–274,000;

353,000-475,000) alongside three areas with specific geographical considerations (Borders, Highland and Dumfries) and two special cases (Argyll and Bute and Clackmannanshire). Urban areas were defined as those with more than 60 percent of the population in settlements of more than 10,000 population and rural being areas with more than 60 per cent of the population *not* in settlements of more than 10,000 population. The two main groups being further subdivided into: high density, medium density and low density. The final classification, which was subject to a consultation with the new unitary authorities, used a categorisation based upon a formula developed for the Rates Support Grant purposes using information from the 1991 Census - for each mainland council area, the percentage of population in settlements of less than 10,000 people and persons per hectare (Smith 2007). The argument for special consideration of population density is related to the distance that councillors are required to travel to cover their wards and to maintain effective contact with the electorate.

It is notable that for its most recent review, the LGBCS developed measures of community identity in relation to drawing electoral boundaries. These are not based on specific cultural or socio-economic identities but in terms of service boundaries such as school catchments housing associations, Community Councils and council devolved service delivery areas. Between 1997 and 2007 there have been further changes in council size based on balancing electoral equality and to take account of population density: Highlands plus eight councillors to 80, Aberdeenshire plus 21 councillors to 68, Borders minus 23 councillors to 35 and Dumfries minus 23 councillors to 47. These changes gave the lowest mainland electorate to councillor ratio to the Highland Council area and Argyll and Bute Council area thus taking account of population density and at the same time brought parity to the other regions. The present ratios are as follows: Highland 1:2,051; Aberdeenshire 1:2,509; Borders 1:2,430; Dumfries 1:2,479.

The LGBCS claims that the methods adopted have led to stability in the overall number of councillors and that there has been a sharp decline in the number of representations they receive questioning proposed boundary changes (Smith 2007). The consultation approach is different from that in place in England as the LGBCS presents its preferred option to the public and other interested parties with components of change attributable to new housing developments and demolition expected over the statutory five-year time horizon (Smith 2007).

## Wales

The size of councils in Wales, in respect of the number of councillors, forms part of the Local Government Boundary Commission for Wales (LGBCW) periodic review of electoral arrangements. Following the Local Government Act 1974 it was established that a minimum number of 30 councillors are required for what is termed “*the proper management of the affairs of a principal council*”. It was established that in order to minimise the “*risk of principal councils becoming unwieldy and difficult to manage*”, the maximum size should not normally be more than 75 councillors. The aim was also to achieve electoral divisions with a ratio no lower than 1:1,750 (Halsall 2007a).

As part of the Local Government (Wales) Act 1994 and following reviews of each individual council area council sizes of between 33 to 75 councillors were established. The LGBCW were given the minimum and maximum figures only as guidance. Following the review and after considering the representations they received the LGBCW decided to recommend no changes. Though the LGBCW state that they have been encouraged by the government to take account of rural sparsity in larger rural areas when making decisions on council size. At present ratios range from Gwynedd 1:1,158 to Cardiff 1:3,255.

It is a requirement that the number of local government electors shall be, as nearly as may be, the same in every electoral division in the principal area. In relation to boundaries it is advised that they should remain “easily identifiable” and any “local ties” retained (Halsall 2007a). Wales is divided into Community Areas a number of which have Community Councils. Of those with Community Councils a number are divided for electoral purposes into Community Wards. The LGBCW recognise that these Community Areas have boundaries that are well recognised and are considered to have a sense of community identity. The Commission therefore decided to use the Community Wards as the building blocks for the electoral divisions<sup>iv</sup>.

Recent research by CRG (2007) on behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government states that a managerial body of 15 councillors is required to undertake the core tasks of political management, whatever the population or its geography. The CRG (2007) report states that most of the councillors who were interviewed believed that current numbers are ‘about right’. But most officers, a majority of the national stakeholders and some councillors argued that there was a need to reduce numbers. A number of councillors in rural areas also argued that town and community councillors could be more effectively utilised to deal with some very local issues and that this could enable a reduction in the numbers of councillors, although it was recognised that at present the councillor’s role is restricted by

legislation, insurance requirements and, in some areas, a lack of will and expertise. The case for reducing the number of councillors in Wales across the board was inconclusive and that such issues need to be considered authority by authority. In conclusion the CRG (2007) research found that the appropriate number of councillors depends on: population size and population sparsity (travel times around the ward and to meetings are greater in more sparsely populated areas); socio-economic demographics (i.e. deprived wards need more support and create more case work than more prosperous areas); and the nature of town and community councils (areas with active town and community councillors may need fewer county councillors).

## **Options for reform and innovation – other possible factors to be considered in determining council size**

The predominant criteria in determining the number of elected representatives is population size. However, population size does not indicate how many elected representatives are required for effective governance. But other factors, such as those promoting democratic engagement and achieving desired policy outcomes, could be taken into account in determining the number of elected representatives. The following sections consider these factors in more detail and explore what scope there is for broadening the criteria and remit of decisions on the number of elected representatives.

### ***Governance Structure and Councillor Roles.***

A certain number of elected representatives are required to carry out the essential functions of an administration (which may need to be duplicated in each party) such as filling executive roles, ensuring effective service delivery, providing scrutiny of the executive and a representation role to constituents. In addition, some consideration needs to be given to elected representatives being unable to fulfil their roles at all times perhaps due to work or illness. In the past in England there have been examples of small councils where all the councillors had to be on all the committees and if some were unavailable this impacted on the running of the council. The numbers needed to provide these essential functions suggest there is a need for a minimum number of elected representatives to sustain an administration and an opposition or oppositions, and other representative roles such as on scrutiny committees. This number is about thirty councillors based on a cabinet size of less than ten portfolio holders.

Innovations in governance such as those introduced in England and Wales under the Local Government Act 2000 also need to be taken into account in relation to decisions on the number of elected representatives. Though the initial evaluation research suggests that the more outward facing roles of councillors envisaged in the legislation have not been fully realised and that in some cases the committee system may have just been replaced by other forms of policy and planning groups (see Sandford 2006; Stoker et al., 2006 and Gardiner 2006). Moreover, the 2006 Census of Councillors (LGAR 2007) revealed that whilst the average number of committees a councillor served on had fallen since 1997, on the whole, councillors were still spending more time in council meetings than with residents.

### ***Population Density and Mobility.***

Population density is an important factor to consider as increased demands can be placed on councillors representing areas where the population is widely spread out. Whilst it is possible to consider innovations in communications and transport, councillors representing rural areas still face additional challenges. There can also be considerable differences in transport links which make some areas that are classified as rural being more accessible than some suburban or commuting areas. Some local authorities are a complex mix of urban and rural hinterland.

In addition, decisions on council size could take account of areas where the population changes rapidly and/or there are thought to be large numbers of non registered people (such as temporary labour migrants, asylum seekers and refugees) which can mean additional demands can be placed on elected representatives. Such populations can grow rapidly and can be highly concentrated thus increasing their impact locally. The evidence on size of these populations is limited however.

### ***Costs.***

In the UK the local government reforms in the late 20<sup>th</sup> Century were informed by the idea of there being optimal council sizes regarding costs for specific types of services such as education, social services, fire and police services (Wilson and Game 2002 and Stewart 2003). In terms of costs, the number of councillors under the present arrangements councillors do not constitute a large part of council spending. Councillors are only paid expenses though under the new constitutional arrangements executive councillors are paid a salary. There is no set

amount for each councillor's expenses but they are usually between £2,000 and £4,000 plus travel and subsistence expenses. It is estimated that on average the costs of councillors amount to 1.2 per cent of a council's revenue budget. Each council has its own independent remuneration panel<sup>v</sup>.

Clearly a greater number of councillors is likely to increase the administration support costs, however this may lead to savings in the longer term as a result of more effective policymaking and use of resources as councillors are more likely to be in close contact with residents and have a greater understanding of their views and concerns (Denters 2002; White *et al.* 2006). Just as councils are compensated for higher input costs in certain parts of the country (Bailey 2005; DTLR 2003; ODPM 2003 and McLean and McMillan (2003) so they could also be compensated in terms of the number of councillors in relation to increasing civic engagement or in tackling deprivation.

Comparative research on Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway and the UK has shown that the amount of trust citizens have in elected representatives is related to the size of local government. This is thought to be related to how satisfied residents are with their local government (Denters 2002). See also a much earlier study by Dahl and Tufte (1973). Research has shown that there is a negative correlation between the size of the population and voter turnout (ODPM 2002).

### ***Representatives Workloads.***

Electorate to representative ratios impact on the workload of representatives and the amount of time they can allocate to different duties and casework. Rao's (1994) research in the UK found that councillors in authorities with high representation ratios (between 6,000 and 10,000 electors per councillor) spent on an average 101 hours a month compared with 72 hours a month spent by councillors in authorities with low representation ratios (1,700 to 3,000 electors). The 2006 Councillor Census has also highlighted the workload of councillors and differences between in time spent by councillors in different types of authority<sup>vi</sup>. The average number of hours per week spent on council and political business varied from 17.8 hours in shire districts to 29.3 hours in metropolitan districts. Moreover, evidence suggests

councillors are sometimes seen as a first point of contact for issues that are not necessarily related to their core roles.

The shift in local authorities to become enablers rather than producers has not necessarily reduced the minimum efficient size of an authority. Individual councillor workloads can vary enormously and are also related to their particular commitment. For the workloads of elected representatives to be used effectively as a factor in determining council size a workload management system would need to be developed where demands and time spent on different activities were monitored in a more detailed way than is presently the case.

### ***Local Government Performance.***

It is perhaps over simplistic to directly relate local government size to performance but a small number of elected representatives across different policy areas who are difficult to access may lead to shortcomings in governance and a failure of councils to deliver policies that effectively recognise the problems residents are facing. Conversely, too many elected representatives may lead to ineffective decision-making.

Research conducted by CRG (2007) on behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government found that there is not necessarily a link between the size of councils and their performance. See also Stewart (2003) and Muzzio and Tompkins (1989). Specific evidence on resident satisfaction with individual elected representatives and the service they provide would be of value here. Local governments that are dynamic in their approach could be recognised in terms of providing additional elected representatives to support work in the area of engagement and tackling deprivation.

### ***Deprivation.***

People living in deprivation often have greater needs and therefore the demands on elected representatives in terms of both the number and complexity of cases can be higher (such as for example in relation to social housing issues). This argument is, however, in no way straightforward. People in economically prosperous areas can also have concerns which place demands on elected representatives. Not all issues are specific to someone's socio-economic status such as, for example, planning issues.



In relation to deprivation, consideration would need to be given to the specific areas in a local authority which elected representatives serve. The inclusion of a measure of deprivation into council size decisions as part of a wider strategy to tackle poverty and engage residents in governance in targeted areas could be made on a short-term basis since the level of deprivation in a ward is likely to change over time (Norman, 2007).

***Number of Elected Representatives Per Ward and Electoral System.***

In relation to the electoral system the shift to proportional representation based systems could reduce some of the party political aspects of council size decisions. Though the first past the post system, still in place in English local and General Elections, has the advantage of encouraging close contact between representatives and the electorate.

The impact of the number of elected representatives per ward could also be considered in decisions on council size. Multi-member wards are likely to provide wider access for residents to representation. Historically in England there have been examples of wards with many more councillors than currently is the case. At present for Metropolitan authorities in England, each ward has to have a minimum of three councillors. This can make decisions to increase or decrease councillor numbers quite a substantial change (i.e. by  $\pm 3$ ) and therefore inhibit the establishment of the desired electorate to councillor ratios. Single member wards could facilitate greater flexibility in decisions on council size. However, in single member wards, if the particular councillor is part of the council executive, then his or her role in representing and being in contact with residents may be limited.

***Other Democratic Structures and Multiple Office Holding.***

The presence of other democratic structures such as in two tier authorities or in relation to Parish Councils in England could also be a factor to consider when determining council size. The availability of additional elected representatives within a local authority can be viewed as an additional resource for residents. Though, for example, the existence of parish councils in England can place additional demands on councillors from other elected bodies as they may have to attend parish council meetings and individuals serving as parish councillors sometimes also serve as elected members on other councils (LGAR 2007). Evidence from the Census of Councillors suggests that many councillors serve on more than one council. 10 per

cent of councillors serve on another local authority, 11 per cent also serve on parish or town councils and 16 per cent serve on parish or community councils (LGAR 2007). County councillors are the most likely to be serving on another council with over a third serving on another local authority.

### ***Community Identity.***

Community identity, whilst specified in the Statutory Criteria for England and Wales, is an abstract concept and one that is difficult to measure. In the sense of specific populations or people of similar circumstances it is perhaps not directly related to council size. Perceptions of a community can vary in scale from street to neighbourhood to city and beyond. Different views of community identity even within a small area are often articulated during a PER in England. Arguments about community identity can become a proxy for political mobilisation. The recognition of certain communities may lead to the entrenchment of political positions and supporters thus stifling debate and party competition rather than facilitating democracy. Recognising community identity is perhaps workable in relation to boundary decisions but then only in relation to operational and service issues and hard geographic boundaries.

### ***Elected Representatives Identities***

The demographic characteristics of elected representatives have been shown to have an impact on the willingness of different residents to contact them. Identity is multifaceted and it can be, for example, that residents are unwilling to contact a councillor from a party that they don't support or if the councillor has a certain identity. Research has shown that in the past in the UK Muslim residents have chosen to contact councillors from neighbouring wards if that councillor was a Muslim. But this dynamic also operates within Muslim communities where a particular Muslim may prefer to contact a Muslim councillor from the same country/area of origin and/or biraderi. See Purdam (2001), Anwar (1993), Saggar (2000) and Solomos and Beck (1995).

The 2006 Census of Councillors (LGAR 2007) confirmed previous research that found that local councillors are predominantly older, white males. Research has found that in Wales there were a number of barriers to people putting themselves forward as local candidates (CRG 2007). It is notable that financial incentives have been considered in order to increase the

turnover of seats amongst those reaching retirement age. Paying all councillors a salary is also under consideration.

Elected representatives should be as approachable as possible to all residents within their ward. The most important aspects of an elected representative's identity relates to their skills and commitment to representation and their policy expertise. Ensuring equality of opportunity to a diverse range of elected representatives both within councils and in relation to members of local political parties should lead to an increased social diversity amongst elected representatives such that they more closely reflect their local populations. It will also be important to explore the structural issues around being an elected representative such as, for example, improving the family friendly nature of the role and reviewing the financial support.

## **Conclusions and Policy Implications**

The number of elected representatives is a key aspect of democracy and governance. It is an important factor in ensuring citizen access to representation and for the effective planning and delivery of public services in general. In order to ensure effective management and to fill the key leadership positions, there is a need for a minimum number of elected representatives. However, there is no generally accepted theory for determining the size of an elected body.

In the UK the present numbers of elected representatives are kept under review, but there is no formula or set of consistently applied principles. Rather they are the result of historical accident, where arrangements are agreed and improvised pragmatically in response to changes in the institutions and the structure of local government. In this sense, as Byrne (1994) argued, the British system of government, and of many other European countries, is still characterised by a reliance on unwritten codes of practice.

Population size is a straightforward and transparent way of determining the number of elected representatives and one that is relatively easy for political parties, government officials and the electorate to understand. However, even when the criteria include population size there is no agreement on what constitutes an effective ratio between the number of elected representatives and the size of the electorate. As this review of different governance structures

in the UK and across Europe has highlighted there are considerable variations in electorate to representative ratios.

The present parameters of electorate to representative ratios could be thoroughly reconsidered and additional factors taken into account such as: council performance, councillor time and resources, deprivation, levels of civic engagement and population mobility and non-registered and/or ineligible populations. Few UK policy-makers would argue for larger councils in terms of area of population but, they are likely to be sympathetic to the need to explore the scope for increased numbers of elected representatives in relation to meeting such objectives as delivering effective governance, policy making and increasing civic engagement. Areas could be allocated a number of elected representatives on the basis of socio-economic characteristics. Councils can work effectively with a small number of elected representatives but increases in the number of elected representatives could be part of a portfolio of measures put in place to drive forward civic renewal and for tackling deprivation - just as councils in England are compensated in economic terms for higher input costs in certain parts of the country. The role of additional elected representatives could be focused on building links between local authorities and residents to develop policies that tackle social problems in their area. In political terms these elected representatives could be either proportionate to reflect the balance of power or as independent representatives with a specific community consultation role. This approach would fit with the present debates and initiatives in the UK around developing stronger local governance (Stoker and Wilson 2004; ODPM 2005 and White *et al.* 2006) and the community champion roles for local representatives, as envisaged in the Government White Paper (DCLG 2006) and the establishment of the proposed new Unitary Authorities.

However robust evidence to support additional numbers of elected representatives beyond the existing number is at present limited. In the UK, when considering the role of non-executive councillors, it is important to note that they do not have to have a monopoly on representation. Representation involves more community-based representatives, such as those based within local neighbourhoods. There may be a case for local governments to focus on their governance function, based on a relatively small number of councillors, and to leave community based representation and governance roles to others (ODPM 2005 and White *et*

*al.* 2006;) This would be a radical interpretation of governance which would require further exploration to ensure effective scrutiny and channels for representation.

Specifically in relation to England and the PER consultation process and the Statutory Criteria, it is apparent that interested parties should include much more factual detail rather than mere opinion. Representations are often based on argument rather than evidence. The Statutory Criteria guiding the process can create confusion and a lack of trust in the process as some of the criteria are abstract and not clearly delineated. If the scope for political gain is removed from the PER then the number of elected representatives could be a much more strategic and flexible resource.

In short, the numbers of elected representatives is a key issue and one which is at the core of what local government should be about. The options for change need to be explored in much more detail both in research and practice as the issue of the number of elected representatives remains a neglected area of reform and innovation.

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**Table 1. Number of Councillors in England by Type of Authority**

Type of Authority	District Council	County Council	Unitary Authority	Metropolitan Council	London Borough	All
Number of councils	238	34	46	36	32**	386
Average population size (2005)*	98931	692582	181753	305707	234641	191627
Average number of councillors	44	67	52	68	58	51
Average elector to councillor ratio	2248	10337	3495	4495	4045	3757
Smallest authority (population)	24887	289021	37340	149393	153027	24887
Largest authority (population)	194937	1369939	398276	1001185	342697	1369939

**NOTES:**

\* 2005 ONS population estimates based on 2001 Census.

\*\* Excludes City of London

**Table 2. Number of Councillors and Local Authority Characteristics - Examples**

LA Name	LA Type	AC Group Type (ONS 2001 Census)	Governance Type	Number of councillors (2005)	Persons (2005) ONS Mid Year Population Estimates	Density type (2001) Categorisation OECD: . .	% Dispersed population (DEFRA)	Rural% (inc Market Towns)	Average Deprivation Score - Index of Multiple Deprivation (2004)	Rank of Average Index of Multiple Deprivation (2004)	% Unemployed (2001)	Parishes - Source ONS (2004). Note - not all Parish Councils are active	Councillor workloads - Average hours per month by LA Type. (Source: Evaluating Local Governance (Stoker et al. 2006)*	Councillor Workloads - Average hours per month by LA TYPE. (Source: 2006 Census of Councillors)
South Shropshire	CD	Coastal and Countryside	AA	34	42292	Rural	34.87	100.00	15.46	220	2.33	62	58.3	77.1
Christchurch	CD	Coastal and Countryside	AA	24	45074	Semi-rural	0.35	1.40	12.62	269	2.15	2	58.3	77.1
West Devon	CD	Coastal and Countryside	AA	31	50602	Rural	21.48	100.00	16.31	200	2.40	56	58.3	77.1
Bridgnorth	CD	Prospering Smaller Towns	AA	34	52170	Rural	19.67	90.11	12.32	277	2.10	51	58.3	77.1
Ribble Valley	CD	Prospering Smaller Towns	AA	40	56854	Rural	14.03	92.68	10.34	317	1.61	49	58.3	77.1
Tynedale	CD	Prospering Smaller Towns	AA	52	59809	Rural	22.61	82.40	15.45	221	2.82	52	58.3	77.1
Fareham	CD	Prospering Smaller Towns	LC	31	108484	Urban	1.13	1.61	7.79	361	1.74	0	58.3	77.1
Broxtove	CD	Prospering Smaller Towns	LC	44	109086	Urban	0.11	2.96	16.03	207	2.62	10	58.3	77.1
Cheltenham	CD	Prospering Smaller Towns	LC	40	111656	Urban	0.00	0.00	14.41	242	2.64	5	58.3	77.1
Tendring	CD	Coastal and Countryside	LC	60	141821	Semi-rural	4.55	60.91	23.13	104	2.96	27	58.3	77.1
Blackpool	UA	Coastal and Countryside	LC	42	142915	Most urban	0.00	0.00	33.91	24	4.16	0	82.1	115.0
Arun	CD	Coastal and Countryside	LC	56	144527	Semi-rural	1.48	7.24	15.56	217	2.23	31	58.3	77.1
Tower Hamlets	LB	London Centre	LC	51	213178	Most urban	0.00	0.00	45.88	4	6.59	0	75.1	100.5
Harrow	LB	London Suburbs	LC	63	213961	Most urban	0.09	0.09	13.50	252	3.06	0	75.1	100.5
Camden	LB	London Centre	LC	54	226102	Most urban	0.00	0.00	34.71	19	4.94	0	75.1	100.5
Bristol, City of	UA	Regional Centres	LC	70	398276	Most urban	0.00	0.00	27.72	67	3.08	0	82.1	115.0
<b>Manchester</b>	<b>MD</b>	<b>Centres with Industry</b>	<b>LC</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>441184</b>	<b>Most urban</b>	<b>0.02</b>	<b>0.02</b>	<b>48.91</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>5.02</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>98.5</b>	<b>127.0</b>
Birmingham	MD	Centres with Industry	LC	120	1001183	Most urban	0.03	0.03	37.57	15	5.71	1	98.5	127.0

Notes. \* Based on limited sample size



## Footnotes

<sup>i</sup> This includes deputies, elected at the same time.

<sup>ii</sup> A figure of one councillor to every 4,000 electors was proposed.

<sup>iii</sup> It is estimated that there are nearly 20,000 parish councils in the UK (ONS 2004), but not all parish councils are active. Some are large enough to form town councils. There is no national pattern of electoral arrangements for parish or town councils the only legislative requirement is that each parish or town council should have no less than five councillors.

<sup>iv</sup> An additional criteria arises from the Commission's policy of mainstreaming the Welsh Language. Consideration of issues concerning the Welsh language are required to be taken into account when considering any modification in respect of local boundaries.

<sup>v</sup> The Local Government Association has produced guidance on a Councillor's worth ([www.lga.gov.uk/Documents/Circular/48-02.pdf](http://www.lga.gov.uk/Documents/Circular/48-02.pdf)): it suggests that notionally a Councillor's time is worth at least the equivalent of the average male non-manual daily salary

<sup>vi</sup> Overall councillors stated they spent, on average, 21.9 hours per week on council/political business. Councillors holding a position of leading responsibility spent on average 25.1 hours per week, compared to 18.1 hours for those not holding a senior position (LGAR 2007). See also Rao (2005).