

Electoral Review of West Berkshire District Council

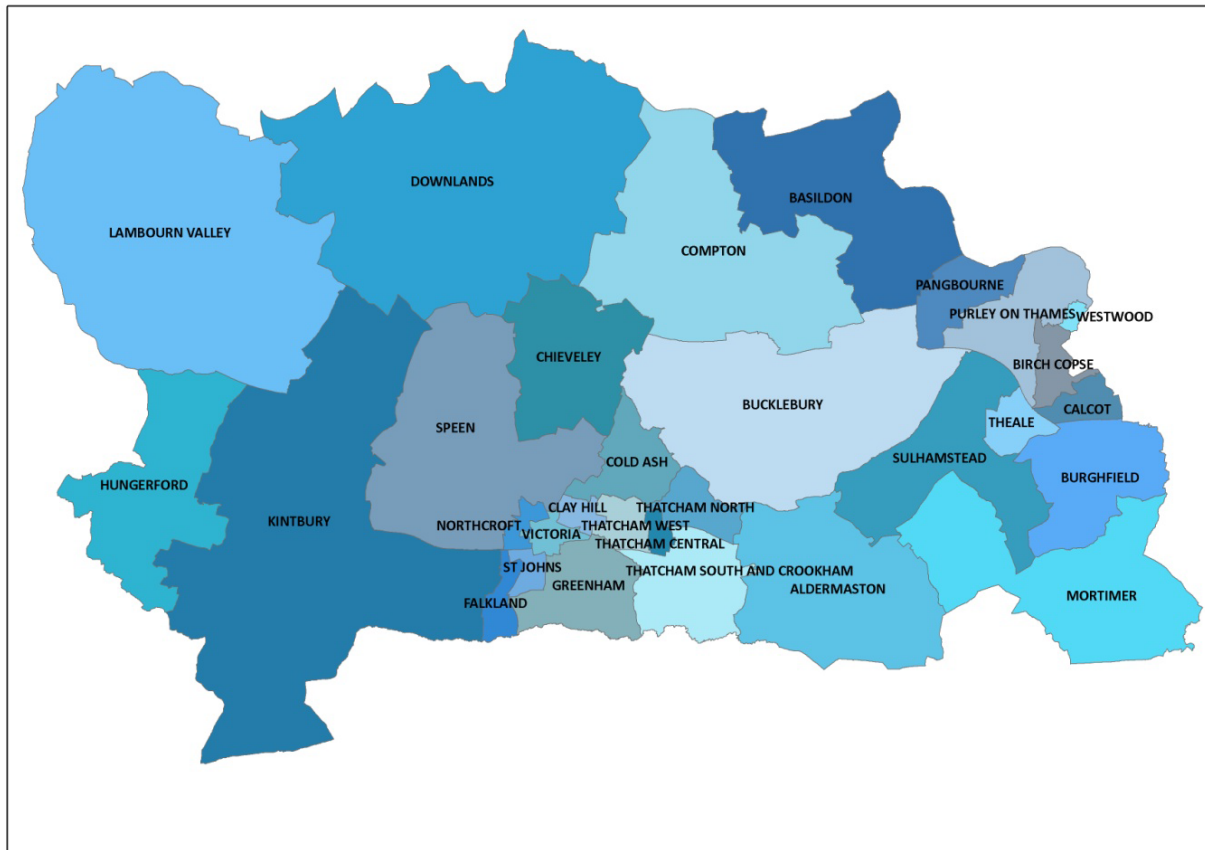
Stage 1 Size of Council

Summary

West Berkshire District Council has carried out an assessment of the roles and responsibilities of its elected councillors. The Council has determined that a Council size of 40 (+ or - 1) councillors will secure effective and convenient local government in West Berkshire going forward from the next District Council Elections in 2019/20..

1. Introduction

- 1.1 West Berkshire makes up over half of the geographical area of the county of Berkshire - covering an area of 272 square miles. It lies on the western fringe of the South East region, centrally located, at a crossroads where the South East meets the South West and where the south coast comes up to meet the southern Midlands.
- 1.2 As such, the district lies at the convergence of two key road arteries in the south – the M4 and the A34. Both provide direct road links in all directions, with all the key urban centres in southern England (London, Reading, Southampton, Portsmouth, Bristol, Oxford, Swindon) within an hours drive.
- 1.3 The district has good rail links, with London less than an hour by train and further connections, via Reading, to all the mainline routes throughout the country. The area also has very good links to international transport hubs: Heathrow and Southampton airport are 40 miles away, as are the ferry terminals in Southampton and Portsmouth, providing links with the continent.
- 1.4 The district is primarily made up of chalk Downlands, loosely centred along the lower reaches of the River Kennet, which rises in Wiltshire and flows through to join the Thames at Reading.
- 1.5 The district is administered by West Berkshire Council. The Council was created as a single tier (unitary) authority after the dissolution of Berkshire County Council in 1998. The boundary of the district corresponds with that of the former Newbury District Council.
- 1.6 The Council has 52 elected Councillors. A Leader and Cabinet (known as the Executive) model was adopted in May 2001. West Berkshire Council is a Conservative-run authority: the political composition (as of the 2015 local elections) is Conservative - 48; Liberal Democrat - 4.
- 1.7 The district of West Berkshire is made up of 30 Wards, each returning elected members to the Council. The map below shows how these are organised across the district.

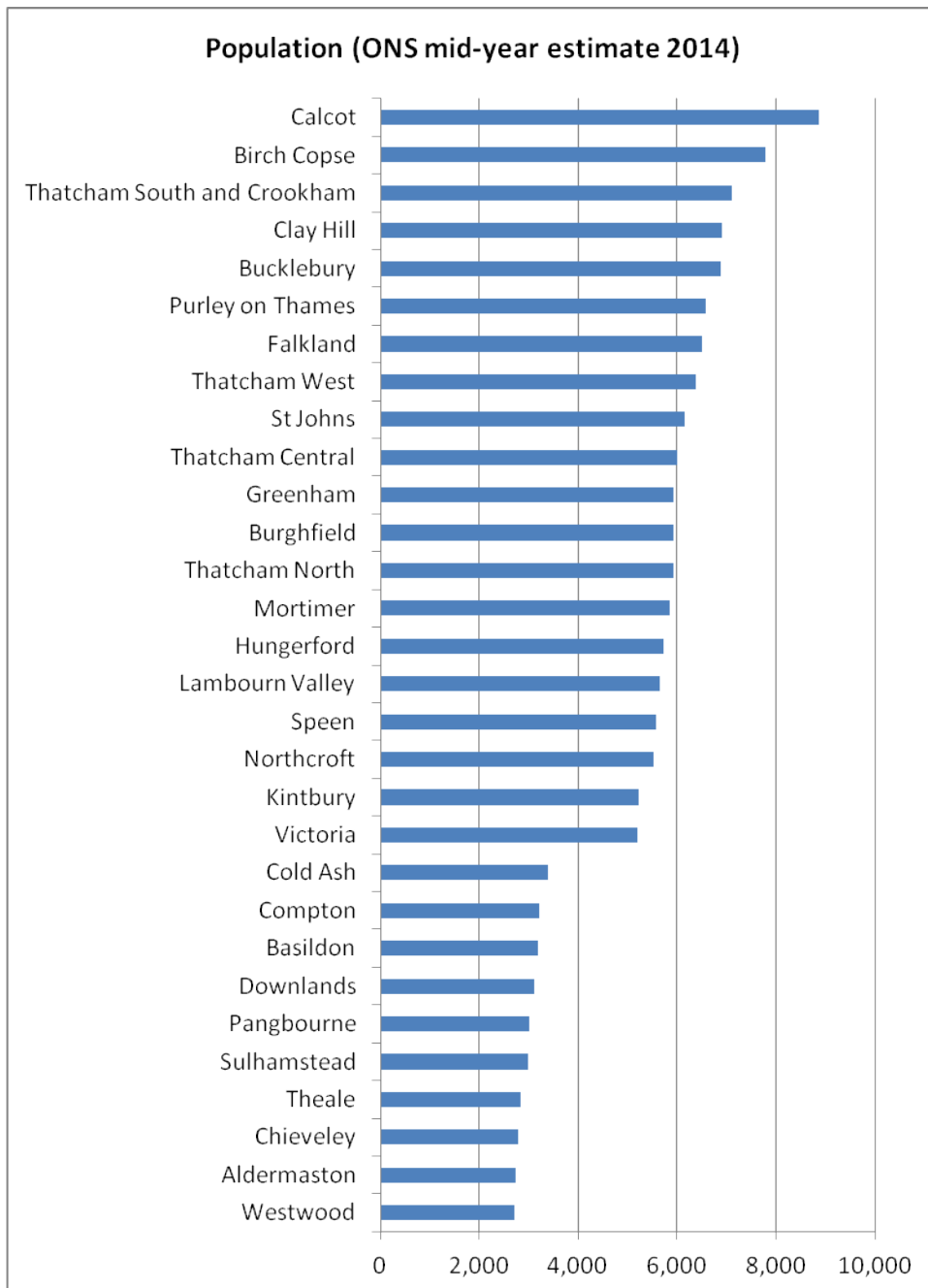


Map showing the distribution of wards across West Berkshire

1.8 The mid-year population estimate for 2014 showed the West Berkshire population as 155,732 (published June 2015). The largest urban area in the district is Newbury (incl. Greenham and Speen and Thatcham), where around 66,000 (42%) of West Berkshire residents live. 25,941 or 17% of residents live in the suburban areas to the west of Reading borough (Birch copse, Calcot, Purley and Westwood). Other significant Wards in the district are Bucklebury with just under 6,900 residents and Greenham with a population of just over 5,900.

Ward / area	Population
Newbury	40,440
Thatcham	25,430
Suburban area adjoining Reading borough	25,941
Bucklebury	6,874
Greenham	5,937
Burghfield	5,926
Hungerford	5,726
Mortimer	5,864
<i>West Berkshire</i>	<i>155,732</i>
<i>Area (Hectares)</i>	<i>70416.82</i>

- 1.9 This data comes from the Office for National Statistics. An estimate of the number of people living in the area, and their gender is produced annually. The most recent was for mid-2014, published in June 2015. West Berkshire has one of the most dispersed populations in the South East with 2.2 people per hectare (ONS Mid-year estimate 2014.)
- 1.10 The graph below shows the distribution of population across individual wards within the district. Calcot and Birch Copse, in the suburban area to the east of the district, are the largest wards in West Berkshire with just under 9,000 and 8,000 people respectively. The smallest wards represent around 2,800 people.



Source: (ONS) mid-year population estimate 202014

- 1.11 The recently released 2014 population projections by the Office for National Statistics, in predicting general population growth across the country, estimate the population of West Berkshire will be 160,404 by 2022 - an increase of some 2.3%. This compares with an average increase in population across the South East of 4.8% and for England 4.4%.
- 1.12 The largest employment sector in West Berkshire is public administration, education and health (27.3%) and then banking, finance and insurance with (17.6%) of the West Berkshire population employed in these sectors. Whilst there are some large businesses based in the area (AWE, Vodafone, Stryker, Micro Focus International plc), a significant number of businesses are small and medium size enterprises and cover a diverse range of sectors.
- 1.13 West Berkshire District Council, like many other local authorities across the country, will continue to face significant financial challenges in the years ahead. In order to ensure that the Council is fit for purpose going forward the Council agreed to approach the Local Government Boundary Commission with a view to having an Electoral Review undertaken of the Council size.
- 1.14 The Council established a Steering Group (with representation from both Political Groups on the Council) in order to oversee this review. The first phase of this review has been undertaken on the basis of looking at our existing governance structures and reviewing the role and workloads of Councillors. All Councillors are cognisant of the difficult financial challenges facing the Council and the likely available resource to manage the governance arrangements going forward.
- 1.15 In carrying out this review we have also taken into consideration the role that new technology can and does play in helping councillors manage their workloads.

2 Governance

- 2.1 There has been no formal methodology devised of how many Members the Council needs to run effectively. The Steering Group has considered the issues referred to in this submission and then exercised their judgement. Members are engaged with the Council and its political management structures as witnessed by the fact that each Member sits on at least one committee and others appointed to more than one.
- 2.2 West Berkshire Council has an extensive scheme of delegation that is reviewed on an annual basis. Since 2001 the Council has been operating Leader and Cabinet (Executive) style of governance in accordance with the Local Government Act 2000.
- 2.3 The Council's Executive has 10 Members appointed to it, each with their own portfolios. With the exception of the Executive, the allocation of seats on all other formal "Committees" is based on the proportionality rules set out in the Local Government and Housing Act 1989.

Full Council

- 2.3 All 52 councillors are expected to attend Full Council meetings which are held five times a year. The main role of the Full Council meeting is to consider and approve the annual budget and the Council policies that make up the Strategic Policy Framework of the Council. Full Council enables Councillors to present petitions organised by their residents and ask questions of Executive Members. The Annual Meeting of Full Council in May also carries out its statutory role of electing the Chairman and Vice Chairman, with the Leader appointing his Executive. The Chairmen and Vice Chairmanships of other committees are managed at the annual meeting..

The Executive

- 2.4 The Executive currently meets 10 times a year and makes all of the day to day key decisions of the Council within the Policy and Budget Framework of the Council. The Executive will also make recommendations to Council on the Annual Revenue and Capital Budget and Council Strategy. The Executive is a single party “committee” comprising up to 10 Members (including the Leader) from the majority party (Conservatives). Under the Local Government Act 2000 the maximum number of Councillors that can serve on the Executive is 9 plus the Leader of the Council. The Executive currently comprises 10 Councillors. The Portfolio’s assigned to the current Executive are as set out below:

Leader of the Council, Strategy, Performance and Economic Development
Deputy Leader, Health and Wellbeing
Finance and Transformation
Culture and Environment
Planning and Housing
Adult Social Care
Children and Young People
Community Resilience and Partnerships
Highways and Transport
Corporate Services and External Affairs

Overview and Scrutiny

- 2.5 The Council has an Overview and Scrutiny Management Commission (OSMC) and three standing Select Committees. The OSMC meets three times a year. The first meeting of the OSMC will establish a work programme for the three Select Committees.
- 2.6 The Select Committees mirror the three Council Directorates, namely, Communities, Environment and Resources. The OSMC comprises 7 Members these being the chairs and vice chairs of the Select Committee plus one Liberal Democrat Member.

Licensing and Licensing Sub Committee

- 2.8 The Licensing Committee comprises 12 Members and only meets 2 or 3 times a year. The Committee is charged with the responsibility of undertaking the

Council's statutory function of discharging the Council's licensing functions as Licensing Authority. All Members serving on the Licensing Committee are required to undertake specific training before they take up their roles. This is particularly important when Members are asked to determine Licensing appeals. Three Members are required for meetings of the Licensing Sub Committee.

District Planning Committee

- 2.9 The District Planning Committee comprises 12 Members. The District Planning Committee's role is to review decisions made by the two Area Planning Committees where those decisions conflict with adopted policies. Given the role of the District Planning Committee meetings are held infrequently.

Eastern and Western Area Planning Committees

- 2.10 The Eastern and Western Area Planning Committees meet every three weeks and comprise 12 Members each. Each Committee comprises Members from the respective parts of the District. The Council covers a wide geographical area, much of which is designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. The Council has a robust scheme of delegation in place and this helps to moderate the number of planning applications coming to committee.

Governance and Ethics Committee

- 2.11 The Governance and Ethics Committee comprises 8 Members and meets five times a year. None of the Members on the Governance and Ethics Committee can be a Member of the Executive. The former Governance and Audit Committee was recently combined with the Standards Committee to form the new Governance and Ethics Committee.
- 2.12 The main purpose of the Governance and Ethics Committee is to provide independent assurance of the adequacy of the of the governance framework, which includes the risk management framework and the associated control framework.
- 2.13 The Committee is also responsible for managing the complaints process associated with the Code of Conduct. This process is supported by the Monitoring Officer, Independent Persons and an Advisory Committee whose role it is to review the complaints received and make appropriate recommendations to the Governance and Ethics Committee on any sanctions that should be applied.

Member Development Group

- 2.14 The Council has set up a Member Development Group (MDG) comprising one Member from each political group. The MDG carries out an overarching role of monitoring and supporting the framework for Member development and training. The MDG meets 4 times a year.

3. Representational Roles and Workloads

Representational Role of Members

- 3.1 The role of Councillors in West Berkshire is varied and it is for each Councillor to decide how to organise their work. Councillors not only have responsibilities to the Council but also to their respective wards. Councillors also have to ensure that all parts of their community are represented and maintain a link between the users and providers of Council and other public services. Effective representation ensures that local people have a voice and can influence decisions that are made that affect them or their area.
- 3.2 West Berkshire Councillors also help their constituents on specific issues. Councillor contact usually involves dealing with service issues and complaints. All Councillors receive support from council officers in relation to dealing with and resolving local issues.
- 3.3 Whilst it is impossible to generalise how Councillors manage their roles the most common way appears to be to:
- (i) Hold meetings with officers and their constituents;
 - (ii) Represent and speak on behalf of their ward constituent at committees.
- 3.4 Councillors receive support from officers and colleague Councillors in carrying out their duties in relation to their casework and representational role including:
- (i) Liaison with senior management and close links with the Democratic Services Team;
 - (ii) Support from their group;
 - (iii) The Member Development Programme;
 - (iv) Links to key information documents such as the constitution and DPD and links to agendas and minutes.
- 3.5 Councillors engage with their ward constituents in a range of ways. A significant number of councilors attend parish council meetings and act as a conduit between the District Council and the parish. When a particularly controversial issue arises Members will have to manage face to face meetings, e mails, letters and telephone calls with the public within their wards. West Berkshire has 63 parishes and 56 Parish Councils. The difference in numbers is that some parishes only have the status of a parish meeting.

Member Grants

- 3.6 The Council has operated a grants scheme which allows Members to bring forward projects for capital funding. Members are able to bid for funding up to £5,000 towards a project for their ward. The Council allocates up to £80,000 in funding per year.

Outside Bodies

3.7 The Council has a list of outside bodies and Councillors are appointed to these for a four year term. At the current time the Council appoints to 61 outside bodies. Councillors are not required to report back on their outside body activity.

4.0 The Financial Challenges - A Proposed Governance Structure for the Future

4.1 Over the next three years this Council will need to find up to £22m in savings from its Revenue Budget. This follows £16m which it had to find in 2016/17. Looking ahead the Government is planning, in 2019/2020, to stop the Revenue Support Grant it pays to local authorities. This means that any governance structure needs to be proportionate to the resources available.

4.2 It is clear therefore that in order to realise the quantum of savings referred to above the Council's Establishment will reduce and it is likely that the current staffing levels available to support meetings will be impacted. At the present time over 320 meetings are serviced each year.

4.3 In looking at the Council's current governance structures (Section 2) Councillors can be categorised as:

- (i) Executive Members (10)
- (ii) Scrutiny Members (18)
- (iii) Regulatory Members (36)

4.4 At the present time some Councillors wear multiple hats and sit on a Planning Committee whilst also being an Executive Member. The Council's constitution does allow ward members to speak at Planning Committees so there should never be an opportunity when a Councillor cannot represent his/her electorate on any application if they are not appointed to a Planning Committee.

4.5 The current governance structures are not considered to be sustainable going forward. As such the Council will need to consider the possibility of moving to a single Regulatory Committee (amalgamating the two Area Planning Committees and the Licensing Committee). It will also need to review the workload associated with scrutiny to ensure that this is proportionate to the available resource.

4.6 Given the financial landscape it is suggested that a future governance structure could be based on each Councillor undertaking one of the following substantive roles. Councillors could then be members of other committees or task groups as required.

- (i) Executive Members (10)
- (ii) Scrutiny Members (15)
- (iii) Regulatory Members (15)

5. Responses from the Survey

- 5.1 As part of the Council's consideration of its submission on Council size, a survey of Members has been undertaken regarding time spent by Members in their role as Councillors on formal Council business, partnerships and outside bodies, and time spent by Members in their representational role in, and on behalf, of their communities.
- 5.2 The survey contained 11 questions. 32 (62%) of Members responded. Members were asked specific questions in relation to the average number of hours Members spent per week on:
- (a) Preparing for and sitting on formal Council committees, partner organisations and outside bodies to which Members have been appointed by the Council.
 - (b) Positions which carry a special responsibility allowance ie; Executive Member, Chairman, Vice Chairman, Opposition Spokesperson's allowance.
 - (c) Constituency matters which cover a range of issues.
 - (d) Engagement with Town and Parish Councils.
 - (e) Engagement with Community Organisations.
- 5.2 34% of those responding spent between 1 and 10 hours a week attending Committees etc. 31% of those spent between 1-5 hours preparing for those meetings whilst 25% spent between 6-10 hours a week. 45% of those responding were also a Parish and Town Councillor with 50% of those spending around 6-10 hours a week on Parish and Town Council activity.
- 5.4 The detailed answers to all 11 questions are set out as an Appendix to this report and will be submitted to the Local Government Boundary Commission as part of the Council's overall Stage 1 case.

6. Current Electorate and Electorate Forecasts to 2021

- 6.1 The Council's electoral arrangements were last reviewed in 2002 following the introduction of Executive Arrangements ("the 2001-2002 Review"), when the then Boundary Committee for England determined that the Council size should be 52 Members, a reduction of 2 Members. Based on February 2001 figures, the total electorate for the district was 111,234. The electoral forecast to 2006 demonstrated an expected increase in electors by 5% to 117,370. This equated to an average electorate per Member of 2,257 per Member.
- 6.2 The current registered electorate based on September 2016 figures is 118,823 for those entitled to vote in local government elections. This equates to an average number of registered electorate per Member of 2,285. The forecast of the number of people eligible to vote by 2022 shows a cumulative projected increase of 3.2% on the 2016 figures to 125,877. This equates to a possible projected increase in the average number of registered electors per Member to

2421, an increase on the 2016 figures of 136 per Member based on the current 52 Councillors.

- 6.3 The Council is aware that based on comparable data produced by the Local Government Boundary Commission it is currently placed 11th lowest out of 52 Local Authorities in terms of number of electorate per councillor.

7. Conclusions

- 7.1 Whilst there has been no significant change in the structure of the Council's governance arrangements since the 2002 Review, the scope of Member commitments, for example in areas such as Health and Wellbeing (an Executive function) and safeguarding has changed. The complexity of the Council's business as an extended organisation with its partners including Thames Valley Police, Newbury and Reading West Clinical Commissioning Groups has added a degree of complexity to some Members' roles. The business of outside bodies, to which the Council makes appointments, is evidenced within the detail of this submission. However, as has already been articulated Members do not report back formally on their outside body commitments. The Members' survey also adds further evidence to the Council's overall submission. A review of outside bodies will also be undertaken prior to the District Council Elections in 2019/20.
- 7.2 Executive Members have specific responsibilities under Executive Arrangements. However, non Executive Members also have key roles to play on the Regulatory Committees (Planning and Licensing Committees), Overview and Scrutiny Commission and Select Committees, Governance and Ethics Committee and a range of Task Groups. Members also have their representational roles to perform and details of their case work have been included as part of this submission. In some instances Executive Members are also allocated regulatory roles, which can, in some instances, mean that "backbenchers" are unable to undertake regulatory roles.
- 7.3 The Council is aware of the changing nature of its role given the financial challenges it has faced over the last few years and will continue to face going forward. The Council is also mindful of the positive impact that technology can play in helping Members perform their representational roles. In fact, the Council has moved to a nearly "paperless" model of governance with the majority of agendas and reports being dispatched through Modern.gov and picked up by the Surface Pro tablets which Members have been provided with. The District will also benefit from having access to superfast broadband which will enable Members to interact with their electorates much easier particularly where Members choose to use social media.
- 7.4 Going forward and having regard to the financial landscape, the Council consider that its future governance structures should reflect Members undertaking three substantive roles namely, Executive, Regulatory or Scrutiny roles. To this end, the Council's view is that the Council size in 2019/2020 should reduce from 52 Members to 40 (+ or – 1) Members.