

CGR_ C

Parishes Affected

Sonning Common

Matter to be considered

Increasing the number of parish councillors from 12 to 15.

Impact on district and county council boundaries

None

Summary of parish council responses

Sonning Common Parish Council requested an increase in the number of parish councillors from 12 to 15 for the reasons set out below:

“Some years ago this council had 15 members. It then went into a period of stasis wanting to be as inactive as possible and as a result proposed that it be reduced to 12 members which was enacted. A measure of that state was that the whole parish office administration was carried out by one very part-time Clerk.

We now have the polar opposite situation wherein we have a highly active council with four very busy committees and an office that fully employs four busy staff. We are facing ever more local initiatives and can see that members who, unlike yours, receive no remuneration for their time, are wilting under their workloads”.

Summary of other responses

These are set out in the engagement summary document.

Recommendation

To consult on a proposal to make no change to the number of parish councillors for Sonning Common.

Justification

When considering the number of councillors to be elected for a parish the council must have regard to the number of local government electors for the parish and any change to that number that is likely to occur within five years. The number of registered electors for the parish of Sonning Common is

currently 3211 as of 1 May 2022 and is expected to increase with permitted and anticipated development over the next five years.

Joint guidance issued by the Department for Communities and Local Government and the Local Government Boundary Commission for England in 2010 provides further information on community governance reviews and the factors influencing size and membership of parish councils. On size, the guidance says:

“154. In practice, there is a wide variation of council size between parish councils. That variation appears to be influenced by population. Research by the Aston Business School Parish and Town Councils in England (HMSO, 1992), found that the typical parish council representing less than 500 people had between five and eight councillors; those between 501 and 2,500 had six to 12 councillors; and those between 2,501 and 10,000 had nine to 16 councillors. Most parish councils with a population of between 10,001 and 20,000 had between 13 and 27 councillors, while almost all councils representing a population of over 20,000 had between 13 and 31 councillors.

155. The LGBCE has no reason to believe that this pattern of council size to population has altered significantly since the research was conducted. Although not an exact match, it broadly reflects the council size range set out in the National Association of Local Councils Circular 1126; the Circular suggested that the minimum number of councillors for any parish should be seven and the maximum 25.

156. In considering the issue of council size, the LGBCE is of the view that each area should be considered on its own merits, having regard to its population, geography and the pattern of communities. Nevertheless, having regard to the current powers of parish councils, it should consider the broad pattern of existing council sizes. This pattern appears to have stood the test of time and, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, to have provided for effective and convenient local government.

157. Principal councils should also bear in mind that the conduct of parish council business does not usually require a large body of councillors. In addition, historically many parish councils, particularly smaller ones, have found difficulty in attracting sufficient candidates to stand for election. This has led to uncontested elections and/or a need to co-opt members in order to fill vacancies. However, a parish council's budget and planned or actual level of service provision may also be important factors in reaching conclusions on council size.”

The National Association of Local Councils (NALC) Circular 1126 recommends:

| Electors | Councillors | Electors | Councillors |
|-----------|-------------|----------|-------------|
| Up to 900 | 7 | 10,400 | 17 |
| 1,400 | 8 | 11,900 | 18 |
| 2,000 | 9 | 13,500 | 19 |
| 2,700 | 10 | 15,200 | 20 |
| 3,500 | 11 | 17,000 | 21 |
| 4,400 | 12 | 18,900 | 22 |
| 5,400 | 13 | 20,900 | 23 |
| 6,500 | 14 | 23,000 | 24 |
| 7,700 | 15 | 45,000 | 25 |
| 9,000 | 16 | | |

The table above suggests a parish council size of no more than 11 parish councillors for a parish the size of Sonning Common – it currently has 12. The guidance suggests that a council size of 15, as requested, is appropriate for a parish council with an electorate of up to 7,700 – well above the electorate of Sonning Common which will not increase to this level within five years.

As referenced in the parish council request, the parish council previously requested a reduction in size due to problems attracting sufficient candidates for election. At the 2011 elections 14 candidates stood for election and in 2015 and 2019 the parish council elections were uncontested. The parish council states that there is interest from a number of residents wishing to become parish councillors, but this is no guarantee of future interest. A surplus of candidates at an election reflects a healthy democracy and provides the electorate with a choice at the ballot box. In respect of co-option the parish council should have a process to assess candidates if there is more interest than vacancies.

As part of the 2013/14 review, the council considered a request to increase the parish councillor numbers to 15 (CGR 23). Council agreed to make no change at that time. In 2017 this committee, at its meeting on 30 October 2017, agreed not to undertake a review of the size of the parish council following a further request from Sonning Common Parish Council.

The parish council provides evidence to show that it is active. Whilst this may be the case this council has applied the NALC guidance when considering requests to increase councillor numbers unless there are exceptional circumstances. A council size of 12, as currently provided for, reflects the pattern of council size and as such provides for effective and convenient local government.