

ELECTORAL REVIEW - COUNCIL SIZE SUBMISSION

Responsible Cabinet Member - Councillor Stephen Harker, Leader of the Council

Responsible Director – Rose Rouse, Chief Executive

SUMMARY REPORT

Purpose of the Report

1. This report seeks Council's views on a proposed submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England in relation to the future size of Darlington Borough Council.

Summary

2. The Council has been given the opportunity to make a submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) on the future size of the Council. A cross-party working group consisting of the four Group Leaders was set up to prepare a draft submission. A survey of member workloads and activity was undertaken to assist in the preparation of the submission. The submission also contains details of the governance arrangements for the Council, work on outside bodies and the work undertaken by Members in their capacity as community leaders. The submission is based on the criteria set out in the Council Size submission template provided by the LGBCE.

Recommendation

3. It is recommended:
 - (a) That a proposed Council Size of 41 Members be submitted to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (with a minority view of 42 Members also reflected within the submission).
 - (b) That the draft Council Size Submission be approved.
 - (c) That the submission be referred to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England.

- (d) That the Chief Executive in consultation with the four group leaders has delegated powers to make any necessary amendments to the Council Size Submission before final submission on 3 October 2025.

Reasons

4. The recommendations are supported by the following reasons:-
- (a) The proposed number reflects detailed analysis of the information in the submission and was the view of the cross-party working group.
- (b) To enable the submission to comply with the deadlines set by the LGBCE.

Rose Rouse
Chief Executive

Background Papers

No Background papers were used in the preparation of this report.

Paul Dalton: Extension 4805

Council Plan	The Council Size submission supports the core principle of efficient and effective use of resources by seeking to maintain convenient and effective local governance arrangements.
Addressing inequalities	There are no specific inequality issues other than those reflected in the submission in relation to the inequality in the ratio of Councillors to electors.
Tackling Climate Change	There are no specific issues in relation to tackling climate change within this report.
Efficient and effective use of resources	There is a small efficiency in the reduction of Members proposed in this report.
Health and Well Being	There are no specific implications for Health and Wellbeing.
S17 Crime and Disorder	This report has no implications for S17 Crime and Disorder.
Wards Affected	All Wards.
Groups Affected	All Groups.
Budget and Policy Framework	This does not represent a change to the Budget and Policy Framework.
Key Decision	This is not a key decision.
Urgent Decision	This is not an urgent decision.
Impact on Looked After Children and Care Leavers	This report does not impact on Looked After Children or Care Leavers.

MAIN REPORT

Information and Analysis

5. A letter was received by the Chief Executive on 8 May 2025 explaining that the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's (LGBCE) intention to conduct an Electoral Review in Darlington. The Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 sets out the duty placed on the LGBCE to undertake an Electoral Review of every principle local authority in England 'from time to time', and the LGBCE usually conduct a review after three of four electoral cycles. Darlington was selected for review due to the time that has elapsed since the last review, which was undertaken between 2012 and 2014, and which came into effect in May 2015.
6. An initial meeting involving the Chief Executive, the Leader of the Council, the Chair of the LGBCE, Professor Colin Mellors and the Chief Executive of the LGBCE, Ailsa Irvine, took place on 27 May 2025. This was followed by a meeting between the Group Leaders and Officers from the LGBCE on 29 May 2025.
7. An All-Member briefing with Officers from the LGBCE was then held on 3 June 2025, and Officers from the LGBCE subsequently met with those Officers from Darlington Borough Council who would be supporting the review on 24 June 2025.
8. The purpose of an Electoral Review is to consider the number of Councillors elected to the Council, the names, number and boundaries of the wards, and the number of Councillors to be elected to each ward. The LGBCE will attempt to ensure that each Councillor represents approximately the same number of electors as his or her colleagues on that Council. The LGBCE will aim to make recommendations which improve electoral equality, while at the same time trying to ensure that communities in the area are reflected and that convenient and effective local government is provided for.
9. The outcome of this review will be implemented at the Local Government (Borough) Elections in 2027.

Electoral Review – Process

10. The Electoral Review has two distinct parts:

Stage One – Council Size

11. The first stage of the review is to consider the Council size. The Council has been invited to provide a submission. The LGBCE will consider the Council's submission, and any other submissions received, before coming to a view on the total number of Councillors to be elected to the Council in the future.

12. In making the decision on Council size, the LGBCE believes that Councillors have three broad aspects to their role: -

- (a) **Strategic Leadership and Governance Arrangements** – the LGBCE will consider how elected member provide strategic leadership for the authority, and how the existing governance arrangements are exercised. Submissions should indicate how many members are required to fulfil these roles and why that figure is justified, with evidence that alternative Council sizes and governance arrangements have been considered.

The Commission will aim to ensure that Councils have the right number of Councillors to take decisions and manage the business of the Council in an effective manner, both now and in the future. As part of their submission, Councils are invited to provide evidence in relation to Cabinet and committee responsibilities, the number of Committees and their workloads, delegation to Officers, responsibilities on outside bodies, and future plans.

- (b) **Accountability (Scrutiny, Regulatory and Partnerships)** – the LGBCE will examine details as to how the authority and its decision makers and partners are held to account, with the Commission looking at both the internal and external dimensions of this role. The Commission will look at the Council's scrutiny functions relating to its own decision-making and the Council's responsibilities to outside bodies.

When considering Accountability, the LGBCE will seek evidence to demonstrate the number of Councillors required to effectively hold the decision-makers to account and ensure that the Council can discharge its responsibilities to other organisations (eg. other public-sector bodies, partnerships, and trusts). The LGBCE are keen to see that alternative approaches have been considered.

- (c) **Community Leadership / Representational Role** – The LGBCE recognises that there is no single approach to community leadership, and that members represent, and provide leadership to, their communities in different ways. The Commission will look at how members engage with people, conduct casework and represent the Council on local partner organisations, as well as how members provide effective community leadership. The Commission will take into consideration the level of support that the Council provides to them to undertake this role.

Stage Two - Warding Patterns

13. Once the LGBCE has made a decision on the Council size and the Council has been duly notified, the review moves onto the second stage which is to give consideration to the warding arrangements based on the newly proposed Council size.
14. Prior to the commencement of this stage, the LGBCE has requested that the Council prepare and provide electorate forecasts, mapping and details of housing developments, and this work is currently in the process of being undertaken. Electorate forecasts will be

up to and inclusive of the year 2031 and broken down to polling district level, in line with the LGBCE's statutory duty to consider forecasts five years from the end of the review.

15. As part of this stage, the LGBCE will carry out two phases of consultation. During the initial phase the Council will be invited to present proposals for new ward boundaries. The Commission will be looking for proposals that provide the best balance of their statutory criteria, which include three main elements:
 - (a) **Delivering Electoral Equality for Local Electors** - This means ensuring that each Councillor represents roughly the same number of electors so that the value of an individual's vote is broadly the same regardless of where they live in the local authority area.
 - (b) **Interests and Identities of Local Communities** - This means establishing electoral arrangements which, as far as possible, avoid splitting local ties and where boundaries are easily identifiable.
 - (c) **Effective and Convenient Local Government** - This means ensuring that the wards can be represented effectively by their elected representative(s) and that the new electoral arrangements, including both the Council size decision and warding arrangements, allow the local authority to conduct its business effectively.
16. The Commission will use the responses that it receives to this initial consultation phase to draw up draft recommendations for new ward boundaries across the Borough. The Commission will then hold a second round of consultation on those proposals during which time the Council will be able to comment on them and propose alternatives.

Council Size Submission (Stage One)

17. A cross-party working group of the four Group Leaders was established to develop the Council Size Submission, which has the benefit of input from all parties as part of that working group. The cross-party working group met on several occasions between July and September and considered the aspects outlined within the Council Size submission guidance.
18. Members of the group scrutinised the governance arrangements currently in place and gave consideration to alternative options, whilst maintaining convenient and effective governance. Members also examined the arrangements around the Council's scrutiny and regulatory functions, comparing these to the suggested requirements and to other authorities. Recognising that members represent and provide leadership to their communities in different ways, the cross-party working group developed and circulated a Members Survey to capture a sense of the time members gave to their role in Darlington. The full draft Council Size Submission is attached at **Appendix 1** for Members' consideration.
19. The working group concluded that the recommended Council size should be 41 (with a minority view of 42 Members also reflected within the submission).

20. The original timetable required that the Council should make its submission in mid-September, however following discussions with the LGBCE, an extension of time was agreed to enable members to consider the Council Size Submission at this Ordinary Meeting of the Council, with the submission date agreed as 3 October 2025. The Council will be notified of the LGBCE's decision on Council size in mid-November 2025.