

Appendix A: Report of research into work and experiences of elected members

To inform the Council's submission on council size, research was carried out asking elected members about their work.

Methodology

A questionnaire was sent out to all councillors, as well as focus groups held with seven Labour and four Lib Dem councillors, and interviews with whips for both groups. In addition, three councillors provided diaries for one month.

The questionnaire focussed primarily on the time that councillors spend on the activities connected with their work as a councillor, including time spent:

- in the Town Hall and on obviously Council business (attending Council meetings, attending meetings held on Council premises including meetings with Council officers and other organisations, or attending meetings as a representative of the Council)
- engaging with individual constituents and communities in wards and local areas, including surgeries and community meetings
- carrying out administrative and preparatory work, including phone calls, emails etc
- training
- taking part in political work, including political meetings, canvassing etc – for councillors who are elected on behalf of a political party this is an unavoidable part of the role and needs to be taken into account when calculating the council size
- travelling.

The questions asked can be found at Appendix A1 and were based on councillors' perceptions of time spent (i.e. councillors were not asked to keep a diary and to record the time spent). It was possible to cross-reference questionnaire results with one diary which indicated that the total time estimated was broadly accurate, although the time spent on different activities varied between the diary period and the estimated average time spent over a month. This is to be expected as different elements of the job will dominate at different points, for example some meetings only take place quarterly, and councillors will often share surgeries and so attend a surgery only every few months.

Results

The questionnaire was sent to all 84 councillors by email, to be completed online. 35 responses were received, a return rate of 41.7%. 23 (66%) responses were from Labour councillors, 11 (31%) from Liberal Democrat councillors and 1 (3%) from a Green party councillor.

Councillor workloads

- Of the councillors who answered the questions about time spent on councillor work (29, several answered the question partially and these responses were not taken into account in calculating the total workload of councillors) the average time that councillors estimated that they spent on activities connected with their councillor role each month was 113.9 hours (**26.4 hours per week**). The monthly total was made up of:
- Approximately 18.6 hours spent in formal council meetings.
- 18 hours spent in non-official council meetings (e.g. task and finish groups, meetings with officers)
- 13.6 hours spent on community obligations
- Nearly 27 hours spent engaging with constituents and dealing with casework
- Approximately 12.75 hours spent on party business
- Approximately 8.3 hours spent on external meetings
- 13.5 hours preparing for meetings or in training
- 12.5 hours of travel

Several councillors have subsequently said that they were conservative in their estimates and thought they had probably under-estimated and several responses were discounted because they were partially completed, with the councillor indicating that they couldn't reliably estimate time spent in an area because the number was so high. It is also of note that new councillors, who have fewer positions of responsibility, are over-represented in responses to the questionnaire, whilst councillors who have served for between 6 and 20 years who tend to have greater levels of responsibility, are under-represented.

As might be expected, councillor workload is not distributed evenly, with many councillors working very many more hours than the average (and some working fewer hours). As might be expected, councillors with greater responsibilities (Cabinet members; committee chairs etc) have on average longer working hours, although this is not universal: for many councillors, their ward level and area working takes up significant proportions of time, particularly those councillors who share a ward with Cabinet members as they may take on more of the ward level work on behalf of their colleagues.

Adequacy of time

The large majority of councillors who have responded to questionnaires and focus groups felt that, although they spend longer on councillor work than they expected when they started, they were able to fulfil their role. However, in focus groups and comments in the questionnaire, issues about the timing of meetings were raised frequently, with concern that meetings during normal office hours made it more difficult for people of working age to become councillors (although for those with childcare, meetings outside of school hours are equally problematic; there is no ideal time). It is, however, notable that:

- Of those who had been serving between 6 and 16 years, almost half of questionnaire respondents felt that they did not have enough time to do the role.

- Four out of the five councillors who are self-employed and 33% of those in part or full-time employment felt they did not have enough time to perform the role, whilst all those who were retired felt that they did.
- Several councillors mentioned that they had reduced hours or stopped working to enable them to fulfil their duties, or that they only had enough time because they were retired.
- In focus groups and responses to the questionnaire, councillors from across the spectrum raised concerns that any increase in workload would result in fewer employed members and members of working age. This was a concern for many councillors who felt that it was important that there was a wide range of councillors.

Comments about the time commitments include:

“The demands of being a cabinet member are such that I struggle to put enough time in in my ward - I manage this by giving up Saturdays to run mobile surgeries but this takes its toll on family life.”

“Modern communication tools, particularly emails, make it easier for constituents to contact local councillors. There is an increased obligation that these constituents receive replies.”

“I work part-time... and before I stood as a Councillor I spoke to my line manager who was supportive. Since then my line manager has changed and so has the support (any time off is expected to be paid back which I often do by using my annual leave. On Mondays and Fridays when I do not work I do not have time to pay back time to [my employer] as I'm in the Town Hall in meetings especially since I became a Cabinet Assistant).”

“Having been a Councillor when in full time employment I can say that it makes life very difficult and does limit the number of people who can become councillors. The reduction of allowances to opposition Councillors will further limit the number of people who could fulfil this role.”

“The main business of Council is conducted in the daytime whereas community engagement is evenings. whilst I would not argue for a larger council a reasonable size allows for a wider variety of contribution from members including normal employment - a smaller council would I believe tend to narrow composition towards retired and semi -retired unless the Council conducted more business out of hours”

“I think we need to be realistic when talking to potential Councillors about the commitment of the role - I shadowed the previous Councillor who was retiring for a good 18 months before the election but it still didn't give me a realistic view to the time commitment involved and how getting a work life balance can sometimes be very difficult. There again I do think it is down to the individual I'm sure I've under estimated the hours above as my daughter is constantly saying to me I never see you!”

“I am grateful that there are 3 Councillors of the same party in my ward, even with 3 of us we still can't get to all the meetings we should be attending.”

“It's very time consuming building relationships with community organisations and social landlords plus other agencies and partners in trying to deliver an offer to the community. The pressures on diary commitments of a large group of people is also challenging.”

Approach to engaging with communities

Councillors were given the opportunity to comment on their experience of working with communities. Comments included:

“To ensure we engage effectively we go out most weekends knocking on doors and asking people if they have issues. Attendance at local events is important as is active involvement in school governors, I like many colleagues sit on 2 governing bodies. People are less and less inclined to come to formal meetings and surgeries so we try to find other ways of engaging and seeking opinions. In doing so you are effectively on call 24 hours per day.”

“The ward I represent is very demanding and with BME communities they intend on calling on BME members first and being a ward with level of deprivation are more demanding. Case work and personal visits are very high.”

“Impromptu door-knocking to meet and greet and determine any issues constituents may have. Half-a-dozen doors per street will generally raise several generic issues.”

“Navigator round and interpreter of public authority for electors as individuals and groups. Encourage involvement and provide representation. Maintaining a look out for my ward. Provide case work service.”

“In my opinion a Councillor should be immersed in their community. That is why I became a Councillor it felt like a natural progression from being active within the community serving on School Governing Bodies, Patient Focus Group on local Health Centre and being on Friends groups...). It's the best bit of the job, when you see things come together such as the Skate Park, improvements around Frecheville Park & Pond”

“I went part time at work which is why I can fit in my council work. It is as much or as little as you want it to be. I try to be disciplined about it but it is hard esp as the Blackberry makes us available 27/4. I could be out every day and most evenings. Often feel don't do the ordinary just going round to say hello stuff. Mostly trouble shooting, often at a late stage in a case. Prolonged casework over a year isn't unusual e.g. one case just resolved was begun four years ago by my predecessor! I do see my role as being a community leader, working in partnership with other agencies for the good of the people I serve.”

“I believe that in the current environment of austerity work with community groups will be of increasing importance. Community groups such as Friends of Parks groups are able to access resources that councils may not have access too but do need our support (One group I support has needed written support from the council to access in excess of £60,000 to refurbish a play area). To do this effectively elected members need time to cultivate relationships and offer practical support.”

“Trying to give assistance and guidance to electors and trying to navigate services internal/external of the council is challenging. Being in a ward which has so many of its services outsourced and a whole social housing area which went across on stock transfer, to many different social landlords. Being a facilitator to endeavour to bring various individuals and organisations to deliver the needs of the people and the community.”

**Appendix A1
Questionnaire**

1. How long have you been a Sheffield councillor in total?

0-2 yr, 2-5 yr, 5-10 yr, 10-15 yr, 15-20 yr, 20yr plus

2. Which party do you represent? (Tick one)

Labour Party

Liberal Democrats

Green Party

3. How many positions do you hold within the Council (i.e. Leader, Portfolio holder, special adviser)?

**4. Please indicate which Council committees/sub-committees are you a member of?
Tick as many as apply**

None

Cabinet

Cabinet Highways Subcommittee

Scrutiny committee

Planning and Highways Committee

Licensing Committee

Licensing Sub-committee

Audit Committee

Standards Committee

Admissions Committee

Appeals and Collective Disputes Committee

Emergency Planning Joint Committee

Senior officer employment committee

Other (including task and finish groups. Please specify number and/or names)

5. No of political positions held (e.g. group leader/deputy leader/whip)

6. How many external appointments do you hold where you are appointed as a representative of the Council?

7. How many hours per month do you spend on Councillor business? (please give approximate figures for each category)

Attendance at any official Council meetings (e.g. decision-making meetings and committees, Scrutiny etc)

Attendance at non-official council meetings (e.g. meetings with officers, task and finish groups, working groups etc)

Time spent on party business

Attendance at external meetings (where you have been appointed as a representative of the Council, rather than attending because of your ward councillor position)

Community obligations (e.g. attendance at TARAs, Community Forums)
Engaging with constituents, surgeries,
Dealing with constituent enquiries, etc.
Preparation for meetings
Attending seminars, conferences and training
Travel related to councillor business
Other (please specify nature of activity and time spent)

8. Is the time you spend on council business what you expected when you became a councillor? (Tick one)

Y

N - I spend more time on council work

N - I spend less time on council work

9. Do you feel that you have sufficient time to fulfil your council and political roles effectively? (Tick one)

Y

N

Comments

10. We will hold focus groups to discuss the community role of councillors in focus groups, but would you like to say anything about how you represent electors, and your role in the community?

11. Is there anything else about your experience of being a Sheffield councillor that might be relevant to the Council's submission on council size?

12. Which decile does your ward fall in in the Index of Multiple Deprivation? (Tick one)

13. What is your employment status (Tick one):

In full-time paid employment

In part-time paid employment

Self-employed

Unemployed

Retired

Permanently sick or disabled

Not in paid work - looking after home/family

In full-time education

Not working for other reason

14. Equality data

