

Draft Council Size Submission

Thanet District Council

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How to Make a Submission

It is recommended that submissions on future governance arrangements and council size follow the guidance provided and use the format below as a template. Submissions should be treated as an opportunity to focus on the future needs of the council and not simply describe the current arrangements. **Submissions should also demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been considered in drawing up the proposal and why you have discounted them.**

The template allows respondents to enter comments directly under each heading. It is not recommended that responses be unduly long; as a guide, it is anticipated that a 15 to 20-page document using this template should suffice. Individual section length may vary depending on the issues to be explained. Where internal documents are referred to URLs should be provided, rather than the document itself. It is also recommended that a table is included that highlights the key paragraphs for the Commission's attention.

About You

This submission is in response to the periodic electoral review of Thanet District Council. The LGBCE contacted the Council in June 2023 and informed them that it was due to undertake a review due the time that had elapsed since its last review. The LGBCE then met with Senior Officers of the Council, Group Leaders to discuss the review with them and then formally launched the review at a Members Briefing for all Councillors on 25 September. The Council has an established Boundary and Electoral Arrangements Working Party and a series of meetings were created in order to oversee the work required to create the submission. The first of the working party was on 22nd August and it then met four/five further times. The Working Party indicated that they wished to see a reduction in the number of Councillors and commissioned officers to research and find evidence to support a reduction, whilst ensuring there would still be effective and efficient local governance for the benefit of the residents and communities within the district.

Evidence was presented to the panel and this enabled the panel to initially agree to reduce the number of Councillors to between 36-44 and then down with further evidence to 36. The working party came to this conclusion based on the changes that had occurred to the governance arrangements since the last review, the level of decision making being undertaken by Councillors and the amount of representation needed to external groups. However after further evidence from the Council's strategic planning team and revised population estimates meant that at its final meeting the working party then made a recommendation to the Full Council that Councillor numbers should be reduced to 42. The Full Council then considered the draft submission at its meeting on 7 December 2023, where it was agreed.

The Context for your proposal

The Council officially moved to the Leader and Cabinet model of governance in the early part of 2002. There is no indication that the Council is looking to move away from the Leader and cabinet model in the future. This model allows for efficient and effective decision making in a medium sized district council.

The Council over the past decade saw services outsourced to a variety of providers, these included; Housing, Audit, Customer Services and Revenues & Benefits and ICT. Of those services both ICT and Housing have returned to being in-house provided services in [November 2022](#) and [February 2020](#) respectively. Currently the Council is in the process of creating a LATCO to take over the running of its customer service and revenues and benefits services from a private contractor. Looking forward the Council will continue to monitor the running of all of its services in order to provide efficient and cost effective services for its residents.

The Council's External Auditors, Grant Thornton, issued a report under Section 24 of the Local Audit and Accountability Act 2014 on 12 October 2021. That report made a number of recommendations, which were considered and approved by [Council on 2 November 2021](#). One of the recommendations was that the Council should appoint an Independent Monitoring Officer (IMO), with a remit to investigate the issues raised by the External Auditor, and to look more broadly at the governance of the Council. The IMO produced his report, which was considered by [Council on 19th May 2022](#). The recommendations made by the IMO were approved by Council. Two particular areas of recommendations that are relevant to this review were to review the Council's constitution particularly in relation to decision making and to improve member/officer relations. The Council continues to work on these areas and has just completed reviewing its Policy Framework and Key decision thresholds to ensure that Councillors are involved in significant and high level decision making, but leaving the remainder to Officers. It is also in the process of re-writing its member officer protocol.

Local Government in general is facing increasing financial pressures, this has been going on for over a decade and there is no imminent solution to the issue of local government finance, however it is expected that revenue support grant will end in the near future. For context at Thanet District Council, its revenue support grant in 2013/14 was £4.1m by 2023/24 this had dropped to £358k, this represents a fall of 91% over the 10 year period. The Council has no choice but to scrutinise all areas of expenditure in order to find both savings and efficiencies. A reduction in the number of Councillors will reduce costs for the Council, as well as allowing the current support from Officers to be split across a smaller pool of Councillors, this, combined with new support for Councillors through a specific member casework officer, should allow for an improved experience for Councillors as well.

The Council is currently updating its Corporate Plan. This key document sets out the high-level priorities for the organisation over the next four years from 2024 to 2028.

The Council's current Corporate Statement was adopted in 2019 and ends in 2023, in line with the electoral cycle.

The five proposed corporate priorities are:

- To keep our district safe and clean
- To deliver the housing we need
- To protect our environment
- To create a thriving place
- To work efficiently for you

The Council currently has 56 elected members across 23 wards, these being a mixture of a single member and two and three member wards. Elections are held every four years on an all out basis. To the knowledge of the Elections team there has not been an uncontested district election since the last review by the LGBCE. The Council holds a bi-Annual Become a Councillor event that helps to attract those interested in becoming a Councillor. There have been no instances where the Council has been unable to discharge its duties due to a lack of Councillors

In recent years the Council has had a strong record of Member Development, particularly regarding the induction of new Councillors. This enables new Councillors to perform effectively straight from the start of their tenure as a Councillor. The Council also has a cross party Member development group that oversees Member training and induction and Members of that group promote training and attendance in their respective political groups.

Local Authority Profile

Thanet is located in East Kent, in close proximity to continental Europe. It has three main coastal towns of Margate, Ramsgate and Broadstairs. The built up area is densely populated and forms an almost continuous urban belt around the north east coast. This is separated by areas of countryside between the towns and providing relief in the built area. There are also attractive coastal and rural villages and outside of the urban area, much of the land is high quality and intensively farmed agricultural land.

The district has an area of about 40 square miles (10,300ha) and a resident population of about 140,000. About 30% of the district is urban with 95% of the population living in the main urban area around the coast. Thanet is the fourth most populated district in Kent, and has the second highest population density. Thanet is a popular area for retired people to live, and has the highest number of over 65 year olds in the county whilst having a lower proportion of 16-64 year olds than the county average.

The district has some significant difficulties. Average skills levels in the district are lower than the rest of Kent and England, with unemployment levels higher than the Kent average (KCC Business Intelligence publications). Wage levels are also lower than the national and regional average. However, the Council and a range of other organisations have a clear strategy to encourage both local business growth and inward investment and are working with industry partners to achieve this. The overall quality of life of Thanet's residents is varied. Some residents enjoy a very high quality of life, including living in high quality residential environments. However, Thanet also has a number of highly deprived wards with many people with support needs. These areas are also characterised by pockets of urban decline and poor housing stock. A key challenge is to ensure that everyone has the same opportunities by reducing inequalities in the area and improving quality of life for all. The Council and relevant other organisations are working to deal with these issues through different initiatives.

The District experienced a 4.8% population growth between the 2011 Census and the 2021 Census (lower than the national average), growing from 134,200 to 140,600. Population growth has been mainly driven by net in-migration, both from other parts of the United Kingdom and internationally; recent years have shown lower levels of natural change within the district. There has been a slowing of growth since 2015 and this has been as a result of slightly slowing in-migration, but a more notable increase in out-migration. However, household growth in the district is also partly driven by local household formation.

There are currently no population projections available based on the 2021 Census. It is anticipated that the earliest projections will be published in 2024. However, the 2018-based subnational population projections (SNPP) indicate that the population of the District will increase by about 6,700 people in the period from 2020 to 2040. Population growth is expected to be focussed in older age groups.

The rate of housing development since 2011/12 to end of March 2023 has seen approximately 4,044 properties built across the District with most development over that period being focussed on the main towns and Westwood. The projected level of residential property development within Thanet up to 2030/31 is approximately 9,398 properties, with a further 4,988 residential units coming forward 2031/32 to 2034/35. This is based on data gathered as part of the 2022/23 annual housing land supply survey. This figure is regarded as providing the most accurate level of intended property growth within the District.

Further to this, much more robust evidence from developers/landowners of major sites (10 or more dwellings or sites of 0.5ha minimum) on the deliverability has been collected. It is worth noting that more or less development could come forward during this time period, however, projections are based upon applicants or their agents supplying their delivery timescales at this time.

The predicted rate of electors per dwelling, vacancy rate and migration patterns all contribute to the anticipated impact on the number of electors registering to vote up to 2025.

It is recognised the rate of housing development will happen differentially across the District with varying timescales over the next 9-10 years. There are known hot spots of significant housing developments such as the strategic allocations at Birchington, Westgate, Westwood and Ramsgate which will be developing during the period of the review.

In 2019 Thanet District Council responded to central government’s call out for projects as part of the Future High Street Fund and over the following three years, Thanet was successfully awarded over £50m in regeneration funding through a series of programmes from central government including Town Deal and Levelling Up. This includes the delivery of more than 15 capital projects in Margate and Ramsgate. Many of the projects aim to provide opportunities for the creation of new jobs and enabling the growth of businesses. It is an exciting time for Thanet due to this significant investment.

Council Size

The Commission believes that councillors have three broad aspects to their role.

These are categorised as: **Strategic Leadership, Accountability (Scrutiny, Regulatory and Partnerships), and Community Leadership**. Submissions should address each of these in turn and provide supporting evidence. Prompts in the boxes below should help shape responses.

Strategic Leadership

Respondents should provide the Commission with details as to how elected members will provide strategic leadership for the authority. Responses should also indicate how many members will be required for this role and why this is justified. **Responses should demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been explored.**

Topic	
Governance Model	<p><i>Key lines of explanation</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>What governance model will your authority operate? e.g. Committee System, Executive or other?</i> ➤ <i>The Cabinet model, for example, usually requires 6 to 10 members. How many members will you require?</i> ➤ <i>If the authority runs a Committee system, we want to understand why the number and size of the committees you propose represents the most appropriate for the authority.</i> ➤ <i>By what process does the council aim to formulate strategic and operational policies? How will members in executive, executive support and/or scrutiny positions be involved? What particular demands will this make of them?</i>

		<p>➤ <i>Whichever governance model you currently operate, a simple assertion that you want to keep the current structure does not in itself, provide an explanation of why that structure best meets the needs of the council and your communities.</i></p>
	<p>Analysis</p>	<p>The Council was last reviewed by the LGBCE in 2001 and the result of that review was a Council size of 56 Councillors. The Council agreed to create a Cabinet in 2002 as a result of the Local Government Act 2000. The Council then agreed at its meeting of 24 February 2011 to move to the Strong Leader and Cabinet model of governance from 19 May 2011, the Leader is elected on a four yearly term and they appoint a Cabinet of between two and ten Cabinet members.</p> <p>Since 3 August 2000 the Cabinet has consisted of between five and seven Councillors inclusive of the Leader of the Council. The Cabinet takes all key decisions of the Council as well all other decisions except for those in the Council's policy framework, are the responsibility of Planning Committee, Licensing Board, General Purposes Committee or Standards Committee or those that are delegated to Officers. The Council has no plans to change from the Leader and Cabinet model of governance to the Committee system.</p> <p>The Council at its meeting of 7 December 2023 agreed a revised key decision definition as follows: <i>Key decisions. A "key decision" which must be included in the Forward Plan, is an executive decision:</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) <i>Which is likely to involves the incurring of expenditure, or the making of one-off savings, by the Council, which are anticipated to be £250,000 or more*. The exceptions to this rule being:</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) <i>Where approval has previously been received to incur that expenditure by the Cabinet.**</i> b) <i>For the acquisition, enhancement or disposal of land or property with a value of £1m, a new key decision would be needed even if previous generic permission has been received via another key decision.</i> 2) <i>Which is likely to have an annual expenditure of less than £250,000, but has a total contract value over the lifetime of the contract of over £750,000.</i> <p>or</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3) <i>Where the effect would be on communities living or working in the district, in an area comprising two or more wards. However, decisions that impact on communities living or working in one ward will be treated as "key" if the impact is likely to be very significant.</i> <p><i>*With regard to property leases the £250k value is defined as the letting or taking of a lease with a cumulative rental value in excess of £250k over the first 5 years of the lease</i> <i>**Having the budget approved by Council does not mean that an individual has permission to proceed with their project.</i></p>

		<p>The Council reviewed its Policy Framework at its meeting on 7 December 2023, it revised it to the following list:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Community Safety Plan; 2. Plans and strategies which together comprise the Local Plan 3. Council's Corporate Plan; 4. Housing, Homelessness and Rough Sleeping Strategy 5. Housing Assistance Policy 6. HRA Business Plan 7. Treasury Management Strategy <p>The Council has no plans to change from the Leader and Cabinet model of governance to the Committee system; it has served the Council well, allowing for effective and timely decision making and is much more appropriate for a smaller Council as it requires less committee places than the committee system. The Council has a clearly defined key decision definition and Policy Framework both of which have been very recently reviewed, this gives the Council clear boundaries of where Cabinet decision making starts and ends and allows for non-executive members to have clarity on their involvement in the major decisions in the Policy Framework.</p>
Portfolios	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>How many portfolios will there be?</i> ➤ <i>What will the role of a portfolio holder be?</i> ➤ <i>Will this be a full-time position?</i> ➤ <i>Will decisions be delegated to portfolio holders? Or will the executive/mayor take decisions?</i>
	Analysis	<p>As stated above since its inception, the Cabinet has consisted of either five or six Councillors and is chaired by the Leader, there are role descriptions for the Leader, deputy Leaders and Cabinet Members set out in the Council's constitution (Annex 1). The Cabinet takes all key decisions of the Council as well as all other decisions except for those; in the Council's policy framework, are the responsibility of Planning Committee, Licensing Board, General Purposes Committee or Standards Committee or those that are delegated to Officers.</p> <p>The Council considers five or six Councillors to be a sufficient number to form a Cabinet, this has shown to be an effective number over the past 20 years, it is large enough to allow for a divergence of viewpoints, but small enough to work efficiently without spreading resources too thinly. The current Cabinet Members have not raised any issues with the workload or the way the Cabinet works, in addition there has never been an inquorate Cabinet meeting.</p>

		<p>A Cabinet of five or six Councillors in a Council of 42 members would still leave at least 35 members to fill all of the non-executive posts. In addition there are no procedure rules in the Council's constitution that would prevent executive members from sitting on the Planning Committee or General Purposes Committee and this will aid filling the places on those committees.</p> <p>The Leader has indicated that he has no plans to alter the current number of Cabinet Members. The position of a Portfolio is not currently seen as being a full time role and is not remunerated as such.</p> <p>There is a limited amount of individual decision making, although the majority of decisions are made collectively. To demonstrate this there were 246 individual decisions made by Cabinet members in the first five years of the Leader and Cabinet model, in the last years to date there have only been 54 individual Cabinet member decisions (Annex 2).</p>
Delegated Responsibilities	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>What responsibilities will be delegated to officers or committees?</i> ➤ <i>How many councillors will be involved in taking major decisions?</i>
	Analysis	<p>The Council has a scheme of Executive delegations outlined in Part 3 of its Constitution and also has its officer delegations set out on its website.</p> <p>In February 2016 the Council revised its scheme of delegations from a retained by Cabinet members unless detailed in the Officer delegations model to unless it was retained by Cabinet members or a committee decision making power was delegated to Officers. This revised model favours officer decision making and reduces the amount of decision making needed to be undertaken by Cabinet Members. It is important to note as referred to earlier, that the Council has reviewed and amended its Policy Framework and Key decision thresholds. This means that both Cabinet members and non-executive Councillors have a clearly defined role to play in taking the major decisions of the Council leaving the remainder to Officers.</p>

Accountability

Give the Commission details as to how the authority and its decision makers and partners will be held to account. The Commission is interested in both the internal and external dimensions of this role. **Responses should demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been explored.**

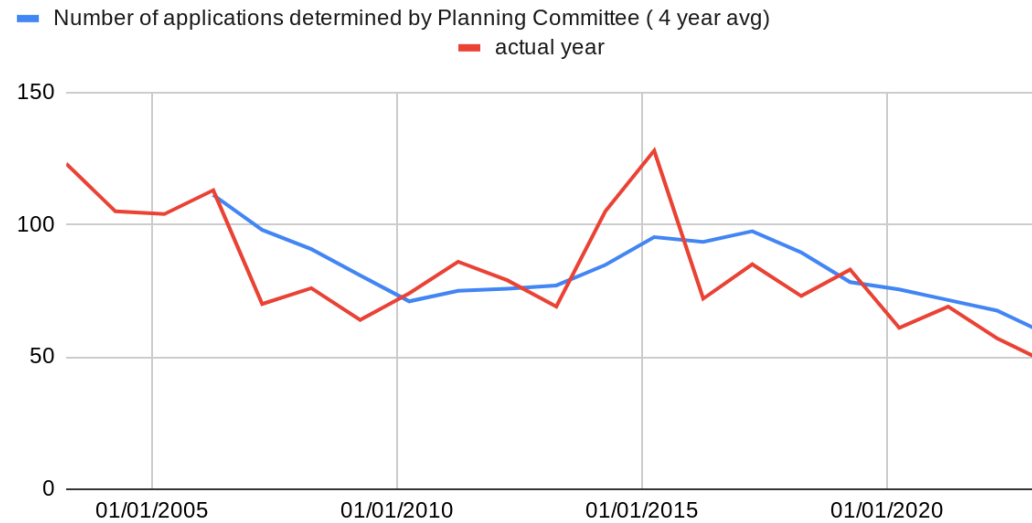
Topic	
Internal Scrutiny	The scrutiny function of authorities has changed considerably. Some use theme or task-and-finish groups, for example, and others have a committee system. Scrutiny arrangements may also be affected by the officer support available.
<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>How will decision makers be held to account?</i> ➤ <i>How many committees will be required? And what will their functions be?</i> ➤ <i>How many task and finish groups will there be? And what will their functions be? What time commitment will be involved for members? And how often will meetings take place?</i> ➤ <i>How many members will be required to fulfil these positions?</i> ➤ <i>Explain why you have increased, decreased, or not changed the number of scrutiny committees in the authority.</i> ➤ <i>Explain the reasoning behind the number of members per committee in terms of adding value.</i>
Analysis	<p>Thanet District Council has a single Overview and Scrutiny Panel consisting of 15 Councillors covering all aspects of the Council's work. The Council in 2003 had three Overview and Scrutiny Panels, each with 10 members, this was then reduced to two in 2005. It was reduced to a single panel in 2007 and apart from a limited expansion to two committees between 2018 and 2019 it has remained at one panel ever since. There have not been any occasions since moving to a single panel where a meeting has been inquorate.</p> <p>The current panel has an annual work programme that it sets itself taking into account the resources it has available to it. The Panel conducts one Scrutiny Review at a time, the topics for these reviews are received as suggestions from the Panel, the Cabinet and members of the public. They are scored against a matrix agreed by the panel in order to ensure that the Panel uses its resources in a way that adds most value to its work. The reviews are made up of both members of the scrutiny panel and other non-executive members where necessary.</p> <p>The Scrutiny Chair and Vice-Chair cannot be from the same political party and there is a written convention in the Council's constitution that the Chair should be from an opposition party. There are 11 meetings of the Panel that match with the Cabinet meetings, this is because the panel considers every key decision the Council takes via pre-decision scrutiny.</p> <p>The Council provides training for its panel members and with the introduction of scrutiny reviews after a review of the way the single panel conducted the work of the panel, its outputs have improved a great deal</p>

		with all its recommendations from its reviews being accepted by the Cabinet. This has shown that better processes and better training have meant better scrutiny outputs despite the halving of the number of Councillors involved in Scrutiny work since 2003.
Statutory Function		This includes planning, licensing and any other regulatory responsibilities. Consider under each of the headings the extent to which decisions will be delegated to officers. How many members will be required to fulfil the statutory requirements of the council?
Planning	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>What proportion of planning applications will be determined by members?</i> ➤ <i>Has this changed in the last few years? And are further changes anticipated?</i> ➤ <i>Will there be area planning committees? Or a single council-wide committee?</i> ➤ <i>Will executive members serve on the planning committees?</i> ➤ <i>What will be the time commitment to the planning committee for members?</i>
	Analysis	<p>The overwhelming majority of planning applications are determined by officers as the Council has performance standards to meet, namely to determine planning applications within 8 and 13 weeks of their receipt, depending on the type of application.</p> <p>Thanet District Council has one Planning Committee consisting of 15 members and meets on a monthly basis, it considers all planning applications referred to it by our Council's planning protocol. Executive Members are allowed to be members of the committee.</p> <p>The number of planning applications over the last five years has dropped as is shown in the table below with currently only 5% of applications being taken to the Planning Committee to determine.</p>

		Year	Number of applications determined	Number of applications determined by Planning Committee	Percentage determined by Committee
		2022/23	956	48	5%
		2021/22	1142	57	5%
		2020/21	980	69	7%
		2019/20	1017	61	6%
		2018/19	1041	83	8%

In addition this downward trend in the number of applications considered and determined by the Planning Committee has continued since 2002 and this can be seen on the graph below.

Number of applications determined by Planning Committee (4 year avg) and actual year



Given the falling number of applications the level of delegation regarding the Planning Committee, both the Committee and Officers is not expected to change. This should ensure the continuation of the Council's effective handling of applications

Licensing

Key lines of explanation

- How many licencing panels will the council have in the average year?
- And what will be the time commitment for members?
- Will there be standing licencing panels, or will they be ad-hoc?
- Will there be core members and regular attendees, or will different members serve on them?

Analysis

The Council has a single Licensing Board made up of 15 members that deals with taxi licensing and policy and an ad-hoc sub-committees for premises licence applications.

The Licensing Board meets nine times a year, but as is clear from the table below, meetings are often cancelled due to paucity of business.

Licensing Board Meetings 2019-2023					
Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Scheduled meetings	9	9	7	9	9
Cancelled meetings	3	5	3	2	4

In 2022/23 11% of driver applications were considered by the Licensing Board, so far in 2023/24 this is still currently at 11%

Licensing Sub-Committees meet on an ad-hoc basis and there have been a total of 36 sub-committee meetings called over the last five years, however again as can be seen from the table below six of these called meetings were in fact cancelled as objections had been dealt with by officers.

Licensing Sub Committee Meetings 2019-2023					
Year	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Called meetings	11	8	7	4	6
Cancelled meetings	3	1	0	1	1

In 2022/23 only 7% of premise licence applications went to Committee, so far in 2023/24 this is still currently at 7%.

All licensing applications are dealt with within the specified time limits. As shown above the number of Board and Sub-Committee meetings needed to deal with applications has fallen, year on year. The level of

		licensing activity is not expected to significantly increase in the future and so the reduction in workload supports the reduction in Councillor numbers.
Other Regulatory Bodies	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>What will they be, and how many members will they require?</i> ➤ <i>Explain the number and membership of your Regulatory Committees with respect to greater delegation to officers.</i>
	Analysis	<p>The Council has a number of other committees including the General Purposes Committee, Standards Committee and the Governance and Audit Committee all of which meet quarterly. In addition there are also two working parties that have been created under the LGA 1972 these being the Constitutional Review Working Party and the Boundary and Electoral Arrangements Working Party. It is important to note that the Council has four independent members of its Standards Committee in addition to the Councillor Membership.</p> <p>It is proposed to combine the Governance and Audit Committee and the Standards Committee together, whilst retaining a proportion of the Independent Members. Combining an Audit Committee and a Standards Committee is a common change and is not out of the ordinary. Over the last 3 years the Standards Committee was scheduled to meet 17 times and of those meetings, nine have been cancelled due to paucity of business. The main role of the Standards Committee is to provide members for Standards Assessment Sub-Committee meetings that consider complaints against Councillors. A combined Governance, Audit and Standards Committee would still be able to perform this service adequately without the need for two committees.</p> <p>The Council also has a separate Constitutional Working Party and Boundary and Electoral Arrangements Working Party. Through its work on this project, the BEAWP is of the opinion that there is no need for it to exist as a separate body to the Constitutional Review Working Party. By combining them, there will be no loss of ability of the Council and it requires less Councillors to fill Committee seats.</p> <p>A model of the Council's committee structure based on 42 Councillors is available at Annex 3, this shows that the Council could easily carry out all its necessary regulatory functions with the recommended reduced number of Councillors. The new committee structure in fact shows a reduction of an average of two seats per Councillor to 1.69 seats per Councillor, this reduction in attendance will allow for this time to be put to other parts of the Councillor role.</p>

External Partnerships	Service delivery has changed for councils over time, and many authorities now have a range of delivery partners to work with and hold to account.
<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>Will council members serve on decision-making partnerships, sub-regional, regional or national bodies? In doing so, are they able to take decisions/make commitments on behalf of the council?</i> ➤ <i>How many councillors will be involved in this activity? And what is their expected workload? What proportion of this work is undertaken by portfolio holders?</i> ➤ <i>What other external bodies will members be involved in? And what is the anticipated workload?</i>
Analysis	<p>Thanet Council has a wide range of outside bodies that its members are representatives to, however the number of representatives that are required has dropped significantly from the date of the last review.</p> <p>The earliest records that could be found after the date of the last review (May 2007) indicate that there were 89 representatives needed from the Councillor membership spread across 57 different organisations. The latest list of outside bodies that was agreed in May 2023, only 43 representatives are required spread across 36 organisations. This is a 52% reduction in the required number of representatives needed. The two lists can be seen at Annex 4. Democratic Services regularly review the representations on outside bodies and will continue to do so in future, to ensure that the list is accurate and that representational needs are met.</p>

Community Leadership

The Commission understands that there is no single approach to community leadership and that members represent, and provide leadership to, their communities in different ways. The Commission wants to know how members are required to provide effective community leadership and what support the council offers them in this role. For example, does the authority have a defined role and performance system for its elected members? And what support networks are available within the council to help members in their duties? The Commission also wants to see a consideration of **how the use of technology and social media by the council as a whole, and by councillors individually, will affect casework, community engagement and local democratic representation. Responses should demonstrate that alternative council sizes have been explored.**

Topic		Description
Community Leadership	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>In general terms how do councillors carry out their representational role with electors?</i> ➤ <i>Does the council have area committees and what are their powers?</i>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>How do councillors seek to engage with their constituents? Do they hold surgeries, send newsletters, hold public meetings or maintain blogs?</i> ➤ <i>Are there any mechanisms in place that help councillors interact with young people, those not on the electoral register, and/or other minority groups and their representative bodies?</i> ➤ <i>Are councillors expected to attend community meetings, such as parish or resident’s association meetings? If so, what is their level of involvement and what roles do they play?</i> ➤ <i>Explain your approach to the Area Governance structure. Is your Area Governance a decision-making forum or an advisory board? What is their relationship with locally elected members and Community bodies such as Town and Parish Councils? Looking forward how could they be improved to enhance decision-making?</i>
	<p>Analysis</p>	<p>Councillors play an active role in their wards and whilst there is no definitive list of activities that all Councillors undertake, Councillors do take part in some or all of the activities listed below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Holding Ward Surgeries ● Attending Charter Trustee or Town/Parish Council meetings ● Producing Ward newsletters <p>Only just under a third of Councillors (17 of 56) continue to advertise an in person surgery for members of the public. There are 36 “twin hatters” with Councillors representing Thanet District Council and either a parish/town Council, Charter Trustees or Kent County Council.</p> <p>The Council does not have any area committees in the District and there is no Ward Member delegated budget. The Council does operate a Parish Forum, this is an umbrella group that acts as a forum for Parishes to raise issues with Thanet District Council, rather than raising them with individual Councillors,</p> <p>The Council runs a youth council which meets on a monthly basis. The Youth Council is a forum that represents the views of young people at a local level. The TYC is a diverse group of local young people between the ages of 11-18 years of age. Run by local young people for young people, it gives young people a voice and enables them to make their views heard in the decision-making process. Providing our young people the chance to discuss relevant issues, engage with decision makers and contribute to improving the lives of young people within Thanet’s communities. This helps the Council to engage with and take on board the views of young people.</p>

		There is a ward Councillor role description included in the Councils constitution (Annex 1) The role description states that they need “To represent effectively and impartially the Ward to which they were elected and bring their communities’ views and concerns into the Council’s decision-making process by becoming the advocate of and for their communities.” However it does not obligate Councillors to attend community meetings or residents associations, however they may choose to do so if they wish.
Casework	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ <i>How do councillors deal with their casework? Do they pass it on to council officers? Or do they take a more in-depth approach to resolving issues?</i> ➤ <i>What support do members receive? How has technology influenced the way in which councillors work? And interact with their electorate?</i> ➤ <i>In what ways does the council promote service users’ engagement/dispute resolution with service providers and managers rather than through councillors?</i>
	Analysis	<p>The use of technology has greatly increased since the last review, Councillors now receive Council issued Chromebooks, this enables Councillors to offer a more digital and effective response to their constituents and has also significantly reduced the Council’s paper output and contributed to its net zero ambitions.</p> <p>All Councillors are issued with a Thanet District Council email address to use for district council business in order to allow members not have to use their private email addresses. All meeting agendas, minutes and communications are sent electronically and no paper agendas are now produced. It is extremely rare now for Members to be communicated with via paper means.</p> <p>Providing Councillors with a council provided chromebook has meant that the Council can facilitate online meetings in an effective and standardised way. As a result the Council now holds all of its pre-meetings for meetings online, in addition it also holds its three weekly Members Briefing online. This greatly reduces travel time for these types of meetings and reduces the workload for Councillors. In addition the Council also livestreams all of its Council meetings, this again allows members the flexibility to watch certain parts of meetings that are of interest to them without needing to attend a whole meeting in person, again freeing up more of their time for other tasks.</p> <p>The Council operates an online first approach to service delivery and contact. The current website was launched at the end of 2018. In 2022 there were approximately 1.2 million visits to the website an increase of about 50% since its launch.</p>

		<p>We also promote self service for residents via our online forms. We currently have over 140 online forms and had over 70,000 form completions in 2022. We can only expect this to increase as more service facilities are moved online.</p> <p>This data shows that residents are choosing to interact with the council digitally and thus via officers rather than using a Councillor as a first point of contact.</p> <p>The communications team produces a fortnightly e-newsletter “in the loop”, this is emailed to all Councillors keeping them up-to-date with news, issues and events going on throughout the Council and the district. In addition to this Councillors also get a regular fortnightly email from the CEX stating the most important issues affecting the Council, so members get to know important issues in advance of the general public.</p> <p>Feedback from the members induction revealed that Members felt that it was difficult to contact officers when dealing with their casework. The Council has now addressed this with improved sharing of contact information, however more importantly the Council is providing a specific casework officer from April 2024. The new Casework officer’s role will be to assist Members in signposting them to the correct officers and ensuring that those officers who have been asked to provide information to Councillors reply promptly. This will eliminate repeat contacts and chasing that Councillors sometimes have to do, therefore making dealing with casework much easier.</p>
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Other Issues

The council’s annual expenditure for member allowances is approximately £370,000.

Whilst budgetary savings are not a specified reason to be considered when deciding if Councillor numbers should be amended it is important to note that if the number of councillors were to reduce the council could decide to either keep allowances at broadly the same level and realise a budget saving, or the financial headroom could be used to increase the level of allowances that are provided to members.

If the number of members were reduced to either 42 or 44 this would generate a revenue saving of approximately £100,000. The commitment required to be a district councillor can represent a significant personal and professional sacrifice, and by using the saving to increase allowances, it could be asserted that a lifting of allowances would make standing as cllr a more attractive and realistic proposition

for a greater proportion of Thanet's residents, which in turn could assist in the election of councillors from a wider range of socio-demographic backgrounds, enhancing the democratic representation of the member body.

It should also be noted that even after the recent application of a 10% increase in allowances, as approved by Council on 12 October 2023, that TDC has the second least generous basic allowance in comparison to other local authorities in Kent.

Due to budgetary constraints there is no funding available to pay allowances for an increased number of councillors and we also do not have the financial resources to significantly increase member allowances, without reducing or reallocating funding directed to service delivery.

Summary

The last review of the Council's electoral arrangements occurred in 2001 where the number of Councillors was increased to 56 divided amongst 23 wards. In developing the Council's size submission for the current review, the Council has focused on how the Council has changed in the past 20 years since the last review, both culturally and technologically. The Council has looked at how the Council operates within its current governance structure and how it could work effectively with a reduced number of Councillors. It has also reflected on the technological changes that have occurred over the last 20 years and how the way the public interacts with the Council when requesting services.

There is no current evidence to suggest that the current workload is unmanageable, in fact to the contrary, there is substantial evidence in the areas mentioned above to support a reduction in the number of Councillors. From the movement of public queries online via the Council's website, to the reduction in the number of outside bodies to the reduction in Councillor decision making, all point towards a reduction in numbers rather than the status quo or an increase.

Through its work in collating this document, the Council in pursuit of fairness, considered an increase in the number of Councillors, however there is no evidence to support an increase. When considering the Council's current electoral ratio against its CIPFA nearest neighbours it demonstrates that the Council's current model of 56 puts it at one extreme of its peers - namely too low a ratio in comparison. A reduction to 42 Councillors (based on current elector ratios) shows that the Council moves to the middle of all its comparator Councils. This is shown in the graph at Annex 5. As the Council's electorate figures grow as per our forecasting along with its comparator Councils, being in the middle of the pack, gives the Council the best chance of remaining comparable against its peers, avoiding ending up in the position it currently finds itself. The Council is confident via the work it has undertaken (Annex 2) that a reduced number of Councillors to 42 would be sufficient to run the Council's business and would not impact on the Council's effectiveness.

There was discussion at the BEAWP that some Councillors felt they had particularly “busy” wards, due to high levels of deprivation, however the working party in its discussions, validly made the point that whilst some wards were busier than others, the level of work needed to be looked at holistically. The point was also made that wards that were currently busy may not be as busy in the future as ward boundaries would be re-drawn as part of the review process.

In summary the Council believes that a move to reduce Councillor numbers from 56 to 42 will still enable the Council to function effectively and efficiently but also still allowing Councillors time and resources to meet the needs of their constituents.