

Vale of White Horse District Council

# Council Size Submission

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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.

'Good' submissions, i.e. those that are considered to be most robust and persuasive, combine the following *key success components* (as set out in the guidance that accompanies this template):

- Clarity on objectives
- A straightforward and evidence-led style
- An understanding of local place and communities
- An understanding of councillors' roles and responsibilities

## About You

The respondent should use this space to provide the Commission with a little detail about who is making the submission, whether it is the full Council, Officers on behalf of the Council, a political party or group, a resident group, or an individual.

This submission was agreed by full Council at its meeting on 11 October 2023. The council's Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee considered a draft document produced by officers at meetings on 11 and 25 September 2023 and agreed a submission to recommend to full Council.

## Reason for Review (Request Reviews Only)

Please explain the authority's reasons for requesting this electoral review; it is useful for the Commission to have context. *NB/ If the Commission has identified the authority for review under one of its published criteria, then you are not required to answer this question.*

Review identified by The Commission.

## The Context for your proposal

Your submission gives you the opportunity to examine how you wish to organise and run the council for the next 15 - 20 years. **The consideration of future governance arrangements and council size should be set in the wider local and national policy context.** The Commission expects you to challenge your current arrangements and determine the most appropriate arrangements going forward. In providing context for your submission below, please demonstrate that you have considered the following issues.

- When did your Council last change/reorganise its internal governance arrangements and what impact on effectiveness did that activity have?
- To what extent has transference of strategic and/or service functions impacted on the effectiveness of service delivery and the ability of the Council to focus on its remaining functions?
- Have any governance or capacity issues been raised by any Inspectorate or similar?
- What influence will local and national policy trends likely have on the Council as an institution?
- What impact on the Council's effectiveness will your council size proposal have?

[Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

### Local Authority Profile

**Please provide a short description of the authority and its setting, in particular the local geography, demographics and community characteristics.** This should set the scene for the Commission and give it a greater understanding of any current issues. The description should cover all of the following:

- Brief outline of area - are there any notable geographic constraints for example that may affect the review?
- Rural or urban - what are the characteristics of the authority?
- Demographic pressures - such as distinctive age profiles, migrant or transient populations, is there any large growth anticipated?
- Community characteristics – is there presence of “hidden” or otherwise complex deprivation?
- Are there any other constraints, challenges, issues or changes ahead?

Further to providing a description, the Commission will be looking for a submission that demonstrates an understanding of place and communities by putting forth arguments on council size based upon local evidence and insight. For example, how does local geography, demographics and community characteristics impact on councillor casework, workload and community engagement?

The Vale is a predominantly rural area located in south-west Oxfordshire. It is bounded to the north and east by the Thames and to the south by the North Wessex Downs Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) – parts of which run through the district.

The district contains the historic market towns of Abingdon-on-Thames, Faringdon and Wantage, the local service centres of Botley and Grove and numerous picturesque villages. As a result of recent growth, the Vale also contains a growing proportion of the town of Didcot. (In addition, at its north-eastern edge the district borders the university city of Oxford, while at its south-western extremity it nudges into the outer suburbs of Swindon).

According to Census 2021, the usual resident population of the district was 138,900. This was an increase of nearly 18,000 (or 14.8%) on the figure recorded in 2011 – faster than the rates seen across Oxfordshire (10.9%), the South East (7.5%) and England (6.6%). This rise in population was driven by continued development at sites across the district (Great Western Park, Kingsgrove etc). Between 2001/02 and 2021/22, an additional 15,381 dwellings have been added to the housing stock in the Vale (70.7% of these have been added in the last ten years). However, despite this growth, the Vale remains one of the least densely populated local authorities in the South East of England (11th out of 64).

Being only 60 miles from London and with good access links to the Midlands and the Southwest via the M4, A34 and M40, the Vale is home to many cutting-edge businesses (many of which are in the Science Vale area, an internationally significant location for innovation and science-based research and business).

The Vale on most measures would be classified as affluent. A significantly higher proportion of people have higher level qualifications and are employed in the professional occupations than in the wider South East region. In addition, fewer people are unemployed, economically inactive or live in poverty.

Moreover, Vale of White Horse is, according to the latest Indices of Multiple Deprivation, one of the least deprived local authorities in England (it ranked 305th out of 317). The majority of LSOAs within the district are amongst the least deprived in the country (45 out of 76 are in the 20.0% least deprived nationally). There are, nevertheless, pockets of deprivation – one LSOA in Abingdon Caldecott is amongst the 20.0% most deprived in the country, while another in Faringdon is in the 50.0% most deprived.

As a result of recent population growth and an ageing population (the median age of a resident of the Vale is slightly above that for England), demand for services has increased. This can be seen in relation to health and social care (of the nine GP surgeries in the district, five have a higher patient to full-time GP ratio than the English average) and school placements. Due to the different demographics of wards within the Vale, these problems are more prevalent in certain areas than others.

Housing affordability continues to be a problem throughout the district. The average house price in the Vale (year ending June 2022) was £365,000 – the 49th highest amongst the 298 local authorities in England and Wales (excluding London).

### 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		
<b>Governance Model</b>	<p>Key lines of explanation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>What governance model will your authority operate? e.g. Committee System, Executive or other?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>The Cabinet model, for example, usually requires 6 to 10 members. How many members will you require?</i></li> <li>➤ <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></li> <li>➤ <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></li> <li>➤ <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></li> </ul>
	<p>Analysis</p>	<p>Vale of White Horse District Council operates under the Strong Leader Cabinet model form of governance in line with the provisions of the Local Government Act 2000 and the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. Every four years Council elects a Leader who can then appoint up to nine members to form a Cabinet, one of which must be appointed as the Deputy Leader.</p> <p>There are approximately 8 formal Cabinet meetings per year which last on average 1 hour and 10 minutes and nine informal Cabinet briefings lasting on average 2 hours and 10 minutes.</p> <p>This model of governance is expected to continue and has worked effectively since its introduction in 2001 reflecting effective, efficient, and accountable decision making.</p> <p>At the annual meeting in May 2023 Council made appointments to 72 seats on committees (details under Delegated Responsibilities section). Cabinet members are not permitted to sit on any scrutiny committee, the Joint Audit and Governance Committee or the Planning Committee. For each non-Cabinet member this equates to 2.48 seats on committees and panels which is considered a balanced commitment. In addition, each member is allocated a seat on one of the area committees.</p>

		<p>Members provide the political and strategic leadership to the council. There is a confident and assured distinction between member and officer roles underpinned by close and effective working based on mutual trust and respect.</p>
<p><b>Portfolios</b></p>	<p><i>Key lines of explanation</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>How many portfolios will there be?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>What will the role of a portfolio holder be?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Will this be a full-time position?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Will decisions be delegated to portfolio holders? Or will the executive/mayor take decisions?</i></li> </ul>
	<p>Analysis</p>	<p>The current Leader has appointed a Cabinet of eight in addition to themselves with portfolios as below:</p> <p>Climate action and the environment (Leader)  Strategic partnerships and place (Deputy Leader)  Affordable housing, infrastructure, development and infrastructure  Environmental services and waste  Finance and property  Leisure centres and community buildings  Planning and development management  Corporate services, policy and programmes  Community health and wellbeing</p> <p>Whilst Cabinet meets collectively to take certain decisions, Cabinet members have individual decision-making powers within their portfolios. Approximately 40 decisions are taken by Cabinet and 50 Individual Cabinet Member Decisions taken annually. There is also a structured model of delegation to officers, which enables the council to operate effectively and provides a strong framework for decision making in a transparent manner that can be subject to Scrutiny review.</p> <p>In addition to formal meetings, Cabinet members represent the council on joint committees and outside bodies – see external partnership section.</p> <p>Cabinet members are, on occasion, requested to attend meetings of the Scrutiny and Joint Scrutiny committees to collaboratively develop policy or be held to account for their portfolio responsibilities.</p> <p>Whilst the role of a Cabinet member is not defined as a full-time requirement it does require a significant time commitment. The current size of the Cabinet not only reflects the range of responsibilities and priorities</p>

		<p>of the council but ensures that portfolios are not so large that they are unmanageable for those members who work full-time or have commitments outside the council.</p>
<p><b>Delegated Responsibilities</b></p>	<p><i>Key lines of explanation</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>What responsibilities will be delegated to officers or committees?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>How many councillors will be involved in taking major decisions?</i></li> </ul>
	<p>Analysis</p>	<p>As previously mentioned, in accordance with the Leader and Cabinet model, Cabinet is responsible for taking the major decisions with appropriate delegations to individual cabinet members and officers.</p> <p>Full Council takes decisions in relation to the functions it is required to do so by law.</p> <p><b>Delegations to Officers</b></p> <p>The Council has agreed a well proven scheme of delegation to officers detailed in the council's constitution. The majority of decisions, particularly operational matters, are made by officers under delegated powers in line with the parameters set by members. The effective operation of the delegation scheme relies upon close co-operation and liaison between officers and members, including scrutiny.</p> <p><b>Major Decisions</b></p> <p>All councillors are involved in agreeing the policy framework and all items included in it and in setting the budget at meetings of the full Council. Every four years full Council agrees a corporate plan. Members support policy development and scrutinise budget proposals at scrutiny meetings.</p> <p><b>Delegations to Committees</b></p> <p>The Council discharges its function through a number of standing committees:</p> <p><b>Appeals Committee (NNDR, Benefits and housing)</b></p> <p>This comprises three members to consider appeals against a council decision in respect of housing matters, appeals against NNDR rate relief or benefits. It has never met.</p> <p><b>Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee</b></p> <p>This committee comprises six members and is responsible for undertaking community governance</p>



reviews and polling district and polling places reviews. It makes recommendations to full Council on electoral arrangements in respect of LGBCE Reviews and responds to consultations on parliamentary and county council division reviews. It meets on average four times a year.

**General Licensing Committee**

The committee comprises 12 members and is responsible for dealing with issues relating to licensing and registration – hackney carriage and private hire vehicles, contaminated land, air quality, health and safety, street trading and street naming. Panels of three members consider individual cases. (Details of the time commitment and workload are set out in the statutory function section).

**Joint Audit and Governance Committee**

This comprises eight councillors (Four from Vale of White Horse District Council and four from South Oxfordshire District Council) and one independent member. It meets on average six times a year with an average meeting time of one hour to consider the Council’s governance & audit functions. An important part of the role is to receive external audit reports to “those discharged with responsibility for governance”. The Committee advises on the Standards Framework for Members and considers any allegations of misconduct through Code of Conduct Panels drawn from its membership.

**Joint Staff Committee**

This committee comprises 10 members (five from Vale of White Horse District Council and five from South Oxfordshire District Council). It acts as the recruitment panel for the appointment of the chief executive, deputy chief executives, monitoring officer and chief financial officer, is responsible for disciplinary action against these posts and considers appeals against such action. It also reviews the targets and performance review undertaken by the Leaders. Previously the committee acted as the appointment panel for all heads of service appointments which increased the number of meetings to an average of four a year during the previous council (2019-2023). The frequency of meetings will reduce as a result of the change to the terms of reference.

**Licensing Acts Committee**

This comprises 12 members (the same membership as for the General Licensing Committee), the

	<p>maximum number permitted under legislation, and is responsible for matters under the Licensing Act 2003 and Gambling Act 2002. Panels of three members consider individual cases. (Details of the time commitment and workload are set out in the statutory function section).</p> <p><b>Planning Committee</b> This committee comprises nine members and is responsible for the determination of planning applications that are not delegated to officers. (Details of the time commitment and workload are set out in the statutory function section).</p> <p><b>Others:</b></p> <p><b>Area Committees</b> The council has three area committees (Abingdon and North East, Faringdon, and Wantage) comprising the ward members within the relevant geographical area. Whilst the committees are a forum for issues in the geographical area their primary purpose has been to make grant awards on behalf of Cabinet. Each committee met once in the previous council between May 2019 and May 2023. This is primarily due to the pressure on grant resource.</p> <p><b>Climate Emergency Advisory Committee</b> The council established this advisory committee following the elections in May 2019 to advise Cabinet on matters relating to the climate emergency and environmental sustainability. It comprises seven members and meets about four times a year and primarily remotely.</p>
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**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	
<b>Internal Scrutiny</b>	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.

<p>Key lines of explanation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>How will decision makers be held to account?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>How many committees will be required? And what will their functions be?</i></li> <li>➤ <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></li> <li>➤ <i>How many members will be required to fulfil these positions?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Explain why you have increased, decreased, or not changed the number of scrutiny committees in the authority.</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Explain the reasoning behind the number of members per committee in terms of adding value.</i></li> </ul>
<p>Analysis</p>	<p>Vale of White Horse District Council has one Scrutiny Committee and a Joint Scrutiny Committee with South Oxfordshire District Council.</p> <p>The council’s scrutiny committee assists with policy development, undertakes pre-decision input and holds Cabinet and officers to account for decisions taken via the call-in mechanism.</p> <p>The committee comprises nine members and meets approximately five times a year and has a rolling work programme which is reviewed at each meeting. The average meeting time is 1 hour and seven minutes.</p> <p>The scrutiny function at the council has not changed significantly over number of years. However, there is currently a move to enhance the role of scrutiny including the provision of dedicated officer support to enhance its role. Following the elections in May 2023 the council brought in an external trainer from the Centre for Governance and Scrutiny to deliver training to the committee. Officers are also currently reviewing the officer support to the committee with the intention of providing more targeted support with research and reviews and report preparation which has traditionally been undertaken by the democratic services team or the relevant service within their current workload and demands.</p> <p>The Joint Scrutiny Committee comprises 10 members with five from Vale of White Horse District Council. The committee meets on average four times a year with an average meeting time of two hours. The joint committee reviews the performance of contractors delivering joint contracts for both councils, acts as the crime and disorder committee of the council in accordance with the Crime and Disorder (Overview and Scrutiny) Regulations 2009 and considers matters that affect residents of both council area. The establishment of a joint committee in 2015 reflects the joint working relationship</p>

		between Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire district councils.
<b>Statutory Function</b>		This includes planning, licencing 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?
<b>Planning</b>	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>What proportion of planning applications will be determined by members?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Has this changed in the last few years? And are further changes anticipated?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Will there be area planning committees? Or a single council-wide committee?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Will executive members serve on the planning committees?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>What will be the time commitment to the planning committee for members?</i></li> </ul>
	<i>Analysis</i>	<p>There is a single council wide planning committee comprising nine members. During the last municipal year, the committee met on 16 occasions with an average meeting time of 1 hour and 48 minutes with each meeting considering an average of three applications. Since the last electoral review the committee membership has reduced from 15 to nine members.</p> <p>The vast majority of planning applications are determined by officers. The council reviewed the scheme of delegation to officers with a view to reducing the number of planning applications going forward to committee which should otherwise be dealt with by officers.</p> <p>All members of the committee (including those who could serve as substitutes) are required to undertake planning training before being permitted to determine any applications. This training covers the role and responsibilities of the committee and planning department, legislative framework and policy framework, how planning decisions are taken and the conduct of members. There is an ongoing training programme for committee members.</p> <p>The Planning Advisory Service has recently undertaken a review of the planning department and the committee. The recommendations of the review are currently being considered for implementation and should further improve the work of the committee. We do not envisage any significant change in the committee's workload over the next few years.</p>
<b>Licensing</b>	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>How many licencing panels will the council have in the average year?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>And what will be the time commitment for members?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Will there be standing licencing panels, or will they be ad-hoc?</i></li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>Will there be core members and regular attendees, or will different members serve on them?</i></li> </ul>
	Analysis	<p>The council has a General Licensing Committee and a Licensing Committee with both comprised of the same membership of 12 members with the same Chair and Vice-Chair for both committees responsible for a wide range of licence related and regulatory matters and applications. Both committees are politically balanced. Each committee met once in 2022/23.</p> <p>Both committees establish panels (known as sub-committees) to consider individual licensing matters such as applications for premises licenses for the sale of alcohol, reviewing applications for premises licenses, applications for street trading, the refusal or revocation of taxi licenses or appeals against street naming. The panels comprise three members drawn from the committee membership. This allows for a sharing of the workload. Whilst the intention is to share the workload the time commitment for members will depend on their availability and will therefore fluctuate.</p> <p>One premises licensing panel was held in 2022/23.</p> <p>No taxi licensing panels were held in contrast to nine in the previous municipal year. This decrease reflects the decision by the head of service to make decisions using his delegation and only refer the more serious cases to a panel.</p>
<b>Other Regulatory Bodies</b>	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>What will they be, and how many members will they require?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Explain the number and membership of your Regulatory Committees with respect to greater delegation to officers.</i></li> </ul>
	Analysis	N/A
<b>External Partnerships</b>		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"> <li>➤ <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></li> <li>➤ <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></li> <li>➤ <i>What other external bodies will members be involved in? And what is the anticipated workload?</i></li> </ul>
	Analysis	<p>Members are appointed as the council's representative on a range of different external organisations, joint committees, panels, groups and partnerships.</p> <p>Following the elections in May 2023 the Leader of council made a number of appointments to outside organisations a number of which have strategic importance. These are set</p>

out in the Individual Cabinet member decision available [here](#). Some years ago (2012) the council undertook a review of appointments to outside organisations and as a result significantly reduced the number of organisations it makes appointments to from over 60 to approximately 30 this year. The review concluded that the council should only make appointments to organisations that enable the council to be represented at a strategic level, which benefit the council and support the delivery of its corporate objectives or meet a statutory requirement. The outcome of the review demonstrated a reduction in the workload and responsibility placed on members. That review supported the council's business case to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England for undertaking the previous review of the council size:

*'Historically, the council has nominated councillors to sit on a wide variety of outside bodies. Recent analysis has indicated, however, that a review is overdue with the rationale for some external appointments lost over time. The expectation is that the council will nominate many fewer councillors to sit on outside bodies at its next annual meeting in May.'*

A review is undertaken every four years, via a questionnaire to the serving member, to assess which outside body appointments should be retained.

The council also makes appointments to joint committees as below:

- Oxfordshire Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee (one member and one substitute)
- Thames Valley Police and Crime Panel (one member and one substitute)
- [Future Oxfordshire Partnership Scrutiny Panel](#) (three members)

Cabinet members serve as the council's representative on the following joint committees:

- [The Future Oxfordshire Partnership](#) Joint Committee – one member and one substitute
- The Future Oxfordshire Partnership Housing Advisory Group – one member with all other Cabinet members as substitutes
- The Future Oxfordshire Partnership Environment Advisory Group – one member with all other Cabinet members as substitutes
- The Future Oxfordshire Partnership Infrastructure Advisory Group – one member with all other Cabinet members as substitutes
- The Future Oxfordshire Partnership Planning Advisory Group – one member with all other Cabinet members as substitutes

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Five Councils' Partnership Corporate Joint Committee</a> – two members with one substitute. The Five Councils partnership jointly deliver a range of corporate, property and facilities management services for Hart District Council, Havant Borough Council, Mendip District Council, South Oxfordshire and Vale of White Horse District Councils.</li> </ul> <p>Cabinet members serve as the council's representative on several external organisations as set out below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Oxfordshire Local Enterprise Partnership – one member</li> <li>• Safer Oxfordshire Partnership Oversight Committee – one member</li> <li>• South and Vale Community Safety Partnership – one member</li> <li>• Oxfordshire Health and Wellbeing Board – one member and one substitute</li> <li>• Health Improvement Partnership Board – one member</li> <li>• Didcot Garden Town Advisory Board – two members</li> <li>• Oxfordshire Inclusive Economy Partnership – one member</li> </ul>
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### 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
<b>Community Leadership</b>	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <i>In general terms how do councillors carry out their representational role with electors?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>Does the council have area committees and what are their powers?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>How do councillors seek to engage with their constituents? Do they hold surgeries, send newsletters, hold public meetings or maintain blogs?</i></li> <li>➤ <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></li> </ul>

		<p>➤ <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></p> <p>➤ <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>
	<p>Analysis</p>	<p>The approach taken by Vale of White Horse District Council members to engagement with their local communities varies from member to member and the level of engagement is at the discretion of each member. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the majority are proactively involved within their wards with their communities as opposed to merely responding to case work. Engagement includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Holding ward surgeries – dealing with queries, providing advice and engaging with their community face to face;</li> <li>• Dealing with constituency matters via email, written or telephone;</li> <li>• Working with or offering support to community/resident groups and/or local organisations;</li> <li>• Attending parish and/or town council meetings;</li> <li>• Contact with parish and/or town councils;</li> <li>• Maintaining blogs and/or websites and social media;</li> <li>• Articles for parish/community magazines and newsletters.</li> </ul> <p>As set out in the delegated decision section, the council has three area committees although these only met once in the previous council term.</p> <p>The council operates in a three-tier local government structure, with Oxfordshire County Council as the upper tier authority. The district is fully parished. A number of members are twin or triple hatted – meaning they are elected for more than one of the three tiers of local government.</p> <p>The Leader of the council has appointed eight champions to act as a focus for the local community at elected member level and provide Cabinet with knowledge and advice in the respective areas. They report to the relevant Cabinet portfolio holder. Details of the champions is set out below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Food and Farming Champion promotes local food production and distribution, with particular reference to farming in the Vale. They take on board</li> </ul>



		<p>other important aspects of farming such as the climate impact of different foods and biodiversity and nature recovery.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Military and Veterans Champion takes a particular interest in matters to do with the Military and Veterans liaising with relevant stakeholders to strengthen the council’s relationship and improve the lives of our military residents wherever possible.</li> <li>• The Nature Recovery Champion promotes the council’s nature recovery projects and works with relevant stakeholders to promote biodiversity and natural spaces in the Vale.</li> <li>• The Small Business Champion liaises with the Economic Development Team under the Cabinet member to promote small business opportunities in the Vale meeting with relevant stakeholders.</li> <li>• The Science Vale Champion has a special interest in the science hubs that the council has had a relationship with and works to promote and strengthen connections with Milton Park, Harwell and other sites.</li> <li>• The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Champion meets with various stakeholders to improve the council’s relationships with harder to reach groups and have a special interest in enhancing inclusion.</li> <li>• The Cost of Living Champion researches different aspects of the Cost of Living Crisis and its impact on residents and their mental health, working with outside bodies including Vale Community Impact and the Citizen’s Advice Bureau.</li> <li>• The Active Travel Champion works with relevant stakeholders to investigate the ways in which the council can influence active travel within the district.</li> </ul>
<b>Casework</b>	<i>Key lines of explanation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ <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></li> <li>➤ <i>What support do members receive?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>How has technology influenced the way in which councillors work? And interact with their electorate?</i></li> <li>➤ <i>In what ways does the council promote service users’ engagement/dispute resolution with service providers and managers rather than through councillors?</i></li> </ul>
	Analysis	<p>There is no case management system in place to support members’ ward work with each member managing their ward work differently. Members take responsibility for their casework and manage their work appropriately with officer support if required. Officer support is available to assist members as and when requested to provide information,</p>

		<p>technical and professional advice and guidance. Contact is primarily made with officers via telephone or email. After the elections in May 2023, an induction programme was provided to all members and this training is ongoing to support members in their various roles. The democratic services team provides a first point of contact for all members. The council also operates a Buddy system whereby each member has access to a senior officer who can signpost queries to the relevant service/officer. The democratic services team is scheduled to investigate how it can further support members with their ward work. It is difficult to identify the average number of hours that a member spends on ward work as this is likely to vary depending on the type of ward in terms of the issues raised, the number of members representing a ward and other commitments.</p> <p>Members receive a fortnightly InFocus bulletin from the corporate communications team keeping them up-to date on current news, issues and events going on within the council. Members are expected to attend meetings of the parish/town councils within their ward to brief on district council activities affecting their area, discuss ward matters and help to identify ways in which the district council can support issues at the parish level.</p> <p>The members' allowances scheme allows for the claiming of mileage for the attendance at these meetings. The time commitment for such a role will depend on the number of parish/town councils within each ward. A parish newsletter is also sent to all parish clerks which ensures consistent information is conveyed to all parish and town councils.</p> <p>As was noted in the council's submission on council size in 2012, advances in technology continue to provide residents with an alternative means to access information rather than contact their ward member. In addition, the development of the council's website has increased the amount of information and number of transactions that customers can access directly without the need to involve their ward member.</p>
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**Other Issues**

Respondent may use this space to bring any other issues of relevance to the attention of the Commission.

[Click or tap here to enter text.](#)

**Summary**

In following this template respondents should have been able to provide the Commission with a robust and well-evidenced case for their proposed council size; one which gives a

clear explanation as to the governance arrangements and number of councillors required to represent the authority in the future.

Use this space to summarise the proposals and indicate other options considered. Explain why these alternatives were not appropriate in terms of their ability to deliver effective Strategic Leadership, Accountability (Scrutiny, Regulation and Partnerships), and Community Leadership.

The current governance model has supported Vale in delivering on the requirements placed on it for effective, transparent decision making in a three-tier area where all upper and lower tier councils operate the strong leader model with members fulfilling both their governance and community leadership roles.

The last review of electoral arrangements in Vale of White Horse District Council took place in 2012 at the request of the council following a request to reduce the size of the council. In its formal submission the council proposed a council size of 38 members – a reduction from 51 members. The arguments put forward for the reduction were that the council had streamlined its decision-making process reflecting the new executive arrangements, had increased delegated decision making so that fewer members were required to conduct the day to day business of the council, that new technology had sped up the decision making processes and made it simpler to move to more delegated decisions and had changed the way constituents make contact with the council. The officer report and submission are available [here](#). Since that time the council has further streamlined decision making with increased delegation reducing the number of decisions requiring member input resulting in fewer and shorter committee meetings. In addition, the council has established two joint committees with South Oxfordshire District Council (Joint Audit and Governance Committee and Joint Scrutiny Committee) which require a lower membership from this council. Committee sizes are generally smaller therefore reducing the number of members required to run the business of council. The size of Cabinet has increased, reflecting the increased responsibility in terms of priorities and further representation on external strategic partnerships. This increase has been accommodated by a reduction in the requirement of members to fulfil other roles on committees. Advances in technology have further impacted the role of members. A number of meetings are now held virtually, and unless involved in the formal decision-making process, ward members can address committees, particularly planning committee, without the need to travel. How residents access information and services has further reduced the need for them to rely on contacting members directly. As stated in the submission, a number of members are parish and/or county councillors which suggests there is capacity within the district councillor role.