

Response to Central Bedfordshire Council's Community Governance Review recommendations

Maulden Parish Council do not support CBC's recommendation to cut the number of councillors for 12 to 9.

The reasons to keep 12 councillors are:

- The parish is growing in size so cutting the number of councillors is contradictory.
- Having 12 councillors allows the workload to be shared, and gives a broader range of skills, commitment levels, ages and length of service.
- Fewer councillors will mean a higher precept to cover extra hours for the clerk and to pay contractors to take on the councillors' work, as well as the cost of contested elections.
- Fewer councillors will make it easier for a smaller group to pursue their own agenda.
- Cutting the number of councillors reduces the opportunity for residents to take part in local government.
- Neither MPC nor residents want or requested fewer councillors.
- MPC is not running with consistent vacancies, when a cllr steps down, the vacancy is quickly filled.
- MPC have had 12 councillors since at least 1979 when the population was significantly smaller.

CBC's reason given for the recommendation is "due to the number of councillors being disproportionate to the electorate" showing that the current number of electors is 2,689 with the forecast being 2,781.

This makes absolutely no sense when CBC's recommendation in Steppingley is that there should be no change when there are seven councillors but just 152 electors.

Maulden has had 12 councillors since at least 1979 when the number of electors was significantly lower due to there being a much lower population.

In 1971 the census shows the population was 1,959, which rose to 2,530 in 1981, and by 2011 was 3,132.

The 2021 census shows Maulden's population fell slightly to 3,058 but, due to significant housing developments since, the tax base has already increased from 1,429 to 1,521 – and more developments are already in the pipeline.

As the current 12 councillors all work very hard to represent all residents, CBC's comment about "ensuring ratios of electors to councillors were reasonable, dependent on the size of the parish and nature of work expected of councillors" shows that 12 are still needed given the ever-increasing size of the village and the increased workload expected of councillors.

In addition to attending the 10 full parish council meetings each year, the 12 Cllrs carry out numerous tasks as per the attached Working Groups list, including:

- Regular checks on the 88 parish street lamps, the four defibrillators, the recreation ground and play equipment, allotments, and the numerous trees on parish land.
- Community safety liaison with appropriate bodies including assisting StreetWatch and SpeedWatch volunteers.
- Organise village events such as Easter Egg Hunt, Christmas Lights, Senior Citizens' Christmas Afternoon Tea, Remembrance Sunday, and Summer Play Sessions.
- Overview of MPC finances, including contracts, budget and recruitment processes.
- Highways, pavements, traffic calming, parking and pedestrian safety issues.
- Planning application reviews and comments as statutory consultee.
- Liaising with Maulden Charities and Village Hall Management Committee.
- Neighbourhood Plan update.
- Recreation ground and pavilion updating and refurbishment project.

MPC have consistently objected to reducing the number of parish councillors whenever it has been mentioned by the democratic and governance services team, and do not want to do so. Having 12 means there is a broad range of abilities, ages, skills, length of service, knowledge, and commitment levels – getting 12 people to commit to a couple of hours a week on council duty is one thing, expecting just 9 to give even more time each to cover MPC's responsibilities as detailed above is quite another.

Given the nature of the parish, with the village being very long and drawn out, having 12 seats ensures all areas are covered with at least one councillor living there.

CBC have acknowledged that the feedback “indicated a preference to retain the current level of representation and to make no other changes”, therefore cutting the number of councillors goes directly against the wishes of the community.

There were only five responses to CBC’s initial consultation of which one actually suggested having more councillors, while one contented that there were too many but claimed fewer would save money which is completely untrue as parish councillors cost residents absolutely nothing, there is no allowance paid and expenses are only covered for anything bought for the parish. This response also demanded that the remaining councillors should do more – interestingly not offering to stand themselves – when councillors already give their time and skills voluntarily, with no monetary gain, to help the community, albeit that they are in an elected role.

This proposal will actually end up costing Maulden residents more because more work will fall onto the Clerk necessitating more paid hours, and other staff members or contractors will have to be employed to cover the workload so the precept will need to rise significantly to cover those extra costs.

CBC mention avoiding uncontested elections, MPC and the Clerk spend a considerable amount of time and effort advertising the elections every four years and encouraging residents to stand for office. It’s only been in recent times that elections have been uncontested. There were 8 candidates at the 2023 election, a 9th didn’t get their papers completed and submitted in time but stood for co-option immediately afterwards, and the full complement of 12 was filled by co-option within a short period. When those co-opted were asked why they hadn’t put themselves forward for the election they cited the onerous nature of completing the paperwork against the relative simplicity of co-option.

When a vacancy does occur candidates for co-option are always found – the two most recent vacancies occurred in September and October due to ill health and difficulties attending council meetings. One was filled by co-option at the November 10 meeting and the other by co-option at the December 15 meeting, bringing the council back to full strength within three months, with at least a third of that time period due to the co-option process required.

There is an election every four years to ensure fairness plus, when a vacancy occurs mid-term, residents always have the option of calling for an election – although there is also the matter of cost as parish councils have to pay significant sums to cover contested elections which many would argue would be better utilised on projects and responsibilities within the parish.

By cutting the number of councillors, CBC are actually causing a decrease in the number of opportunities for residents to take part in local government – CBC should be working to encourage more people to engage rather than actively working to make it more difficult.

Regarding the five comments, from a 3,000-plus population, received during the first consultation, in response to “we never see a councillor and the PC never responds to correspondence”, every single item of residents’ correspondence is always answered, if only with an explanation that their question or issue is not something the PC can deal with, and the part-time clerk always tries to point them in the right direction. Councillors are visible at least at the regular five-weekly PC meetings which are fully advertised and some are members of the regular StreetWatch patrols.

On the “Maulden PC is uncommunicative” claim, a report from every five-weekly meeting is published in the parish magazine and on MPC’s Facebook page, the minutes are on the website, information is regularly posted on Facebook, councillors are members of the StreetWatch patrols talking to residents, councillors regularly speak to people when carrying out play area checks, public consultations are held such as those for The Rec improvement project and the Neighbourhood Plan as well as a public meeting to address flooding issues, and regular events run including the Easter Egg Hunt, Summer Play Sessions, Remembrance Sunday, Christmas Lights, and Senior Citizens’ Christmas Afternoon Tea.

The Clerk's phone number and email address are on the website and in the parish magazine, the email address is regularly posted on Facebook as well as being in the profile and, as an example, within half an hour of the issue of broken glass in the play area being raised recently, the Clerk and a councillor were in attendance to sweep it up, and speak to the residents who'd reported it.

Finally, re the comment about the age profile of councillors, it's a fact of life that younger people tend to be busier with work and family commitments so older residents are more often able and willing to give the time required to serve as a parish councillor. However, MPC co-opted a new councillor in her 30s at the November meeting and one in her 40s at the December 15 meeting, giving a broad age range from 30s to 80s, and are also actively working to interest young people in becoming involved.

In conclusion, both Maulden Parish Council and parish residents are very happy to continue with a council made up of 12 members and trust that CBC will acknowledge this and work with the community by leaving the status quo.