

Council Size Proposal

January 2024



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Executive summary

This submission proposes a revised council size of 63 which is an increase of 6 councillors (two wards) and represents a modest increase of just over 10%.

We are extremely proud of how representative we are of our communities in Milton Keynes, and we know this helps us to make better decisions. Our councillors are younger and more diverse than most councils, but this comes at a cost, because most also have to balance their duties with full time employment and their responsibilities as parents, carers, or other voluntary vocations. Evidence tells us that councillors have struggled to achieve an effective balance in the past and have sometimes had to make difficult choices about whether to continue, with young and talented councillors eventually drifting away. Many councillors already feel that there are too few councillors (our electorate grew faster than forecast at our last review) and draw a logical conclusion that inevitably more councillors will be required as our city continues to grow at pace.

Milton Keynes is growing fast, both in terms of its population and associated workload, but also its ambition and regional influence. It is not just a question of volume though, and the realisation of economic and geographical opportunities, must be balanced with substantial new town legacy issues. Alongside significant deprivation and health inequality, the Council will need to deliver new infrastructure alongside the challenge of maintaining highways, public realm, and housing stock, much of which was delivered together and will age simultaneously.

As a council we understand that we cannot simply continue to grow our numbers in a way that keeps pace with population growth over the coming decades, and that this would eventually result in an unsustainably high Council size. We also understand the current financial environment we operate in, and that an increase in Councillors equals increased costs and more work for officers. Therefore, a significant increase in Council size is neither affordable, nor the responsible thing to do.

The next 10 years will be critical in the continued evolution of Milton Keynes and whilst there are arguments to be made for a council size of 60 and 63, the latter will best provide the required capacity to deliver for the residents of Milton Keynes until 2030 and beyond.

Based on a forecast electorate of around 220,00 local government electors by 2030, alongside a council size of 63, the ratio of councillors to electors in Milton Keynes would be around 1:3,500 electors. Based on our CIPFA nearest neighbours' benchmarking group, we believe this puts us at the higher end, but not significantly out of step with comparable authorities.

| Authority | Ratio* |
|---------------------------|---------|
| Highest (Derby) | 1:3,510 |
| Median | 1:2,848 |
| Mean (Bury) | 1:2,571 |
| Lowest (Bracknell Forest) | 1:2,275 |
| | |
| Milton Keynes 2023 | 1:3,543 |
| Milton Keynes 2030 | 1:3,492 |

* Adjusted for Council's currently in 'review'

1 Introduction and background

This document has been developed in response to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's Electoral Review of the council size (number of elected councillors) and the number of wards in Milton Keynes. The Council's last electoral review was in 2013 and resulted in an increase in size from 51 to 57. Before the 2013 review Council size had been unchanged since 1997 when the Council became a unitary authority.

The Council's size proposal has been developed by a cross party working group of elected councillors, with a range of experience and responsibility, supported by officers and subsequently agreed at full Council in January 2024. To support this work, all councillors were surveyed to understand their views about their workload and the council size and around 75% responded. We also spoke to some former councillors who had previously served in a range of positions but subsequently resigned from the Council because of demands on their time. Information from both sources is available as annexes.

The Council currently elects by thirds. There was no consensus amongst councillors to consider revised electoral arrangements (whole Council, all-out elections), which means that the Council size proposed is divisible by three, in order to support three member wards. There are advantages and disadvantages to both available electoral arrangements, but councillors and officers understand and work to mitigate the governance and resource challenges associated with elections by thirds.

Composition of the Council is currently as follows: Conservative 14, Labour 27, Liberal Democrat 16. Political Control of the Council is currently via a formal alliance of Labour and Liberal Democrat groups, although there is a reasonable prospect that the Labour group will take outright control of the Council after May 2024 elections.

The Council has a four-year [Council Plan](#) which was adopted in summer 2022 and sets out how we will deliver our [Strategy for 2050](#), which is our long-term vision for our city and the future. The plan explains our priorities and key objectives: for Milton Keynes to be a thriving, progressive and sustainable city. It also gives details of the outcomes that we want to see by 2026. An [annual delivery plan](#) breaks down what will be done to achieve these goals, with key milestones.

Unusually amongst predominantly urban authorities, Milton Keynes is fully-parished. In total there are 48 parishes in the city, with 41 parish councils (two of which are grouped) and 7 separate parish meetings. In total there are 347 parish council seats.

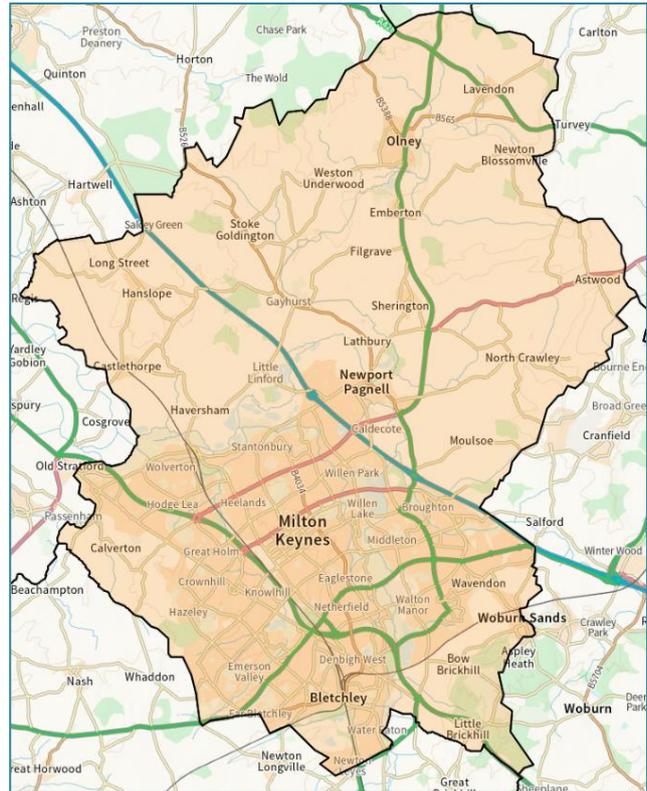
The Council operates a popular Youth Council and introduced a Youth Mayor role in 2023. Elections are held in schools every two years, supported by Democratic Services. Youth Councillors elected by their peers, alongside other co-opted young people, ensure a broad range of voices and experience are heard by decision makers. As well as regularly attending Council, Cabinet and Scrutiny Meetings, Youth Councillors are often joined at their meetings by MKCC Ward Councillors.

2 About Milton Keynes

Our city

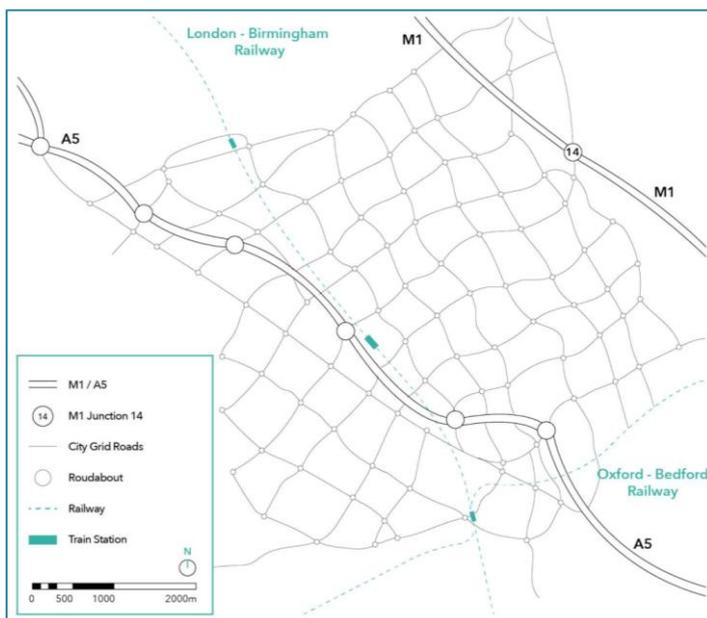
Milton Keynes was initially established as a non-metropolitan district with borough status in 1974, subsequently gaining unitary authority status in 1997. As part of the Queen's Platinum Jubilee celebrations in 2022, Milton Keynes was designated a city, and became Milton Keynes City Council shortly afterwards.

Comprising 89 km² (34 sq. miles), including a city centre, thriving market towns and historic villages, Milton Keynes sits at the very north of the Southeast region, around 50 miles north of London and is roughly equidistant from Oxford and Cambridge.



About 60% of the city is urbanised, with the remainder consisting of agricultural land or other open space, predominantly in a more rural area to the North. The designated new city area blends with Bletchley to the South, Woburn Sands to the East, Stony Stratford and Wolverton to the West and Newport Pagnell to the North.

Despite a growing population, and relatively high population density (2,970/km²) Milton Keynes compares favourably to most places for green space per citizen (15m²). A range of interconnected, multifunctional 'linear parks' (parklands, green corridors, wetlands and lakes) run throughout the city. Milton Keynes' Parks Trust (a charity independent of the Council) manages over 6,000 acres of the city's green infrastructure.



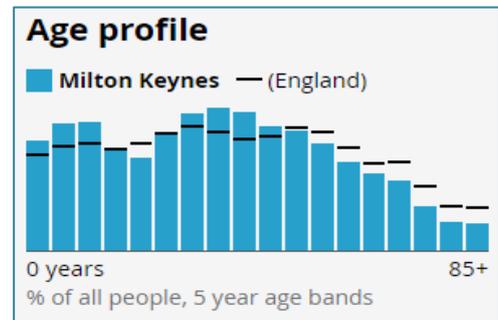
Much of Milton Keynes was purpose built and master planned, as the first of the 1960s new towns. Adopting a grid structure, comprising horizontal (H) and vertical (V) highways, which run between settlements and not through them, forming the basis and boundaries of natural communities. Alongside our grid roads are a network of 280km separated cycling and walking routes (Redways), which link the city, keeping vehicles and pedestrians separate.

People and population

The population of Milton Keynes is diverse and growing. Between censuses the population has increased by 15.3%, from around 248,800 to 287,000. This is higher than the overall increase for England (6.6%), and the Southeast (7.7%), but comparable to some of our neighbouring authorities such as Bedford (17.7%) and Central Bedfordshire (15.7%). We're now well inside the top 20% of authorities in England for population size.

Older and younger population

Whilst the average age in Milton Keynes (37) remains slightly below England (40), our age profile has seen meaningful change at either ends of the scale, bringing with it, significant service pressure and other implications.



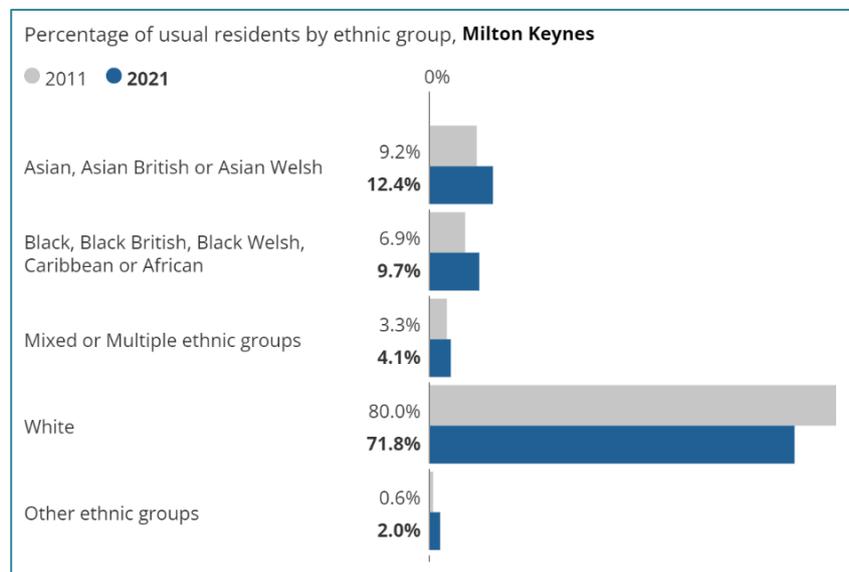
On average there are fewer people aged over 65 in Milton Keynes than elsewhere, but this number is growing fast. Those aged 65 years and over increased by 43% between census, which is a higher rise than anywhere else and compared with 20% across England.

Those aged 0-14 have also grown significantly and are now on average 1% higher than in England. As well as creating addition service demands and pressures in Childrens Services, the amount of young people who will attain voting age in the years between 2023 - 2030 will increase by 35% and as much as 66% in some areas.

Ethnicity

Milton Keynes is an increasingly diverse place and has nearly 30% ethnic demography (compared to 19% in England). Those identifying as Asian / Asian British increased 9.2% between census, whilst those identifying as Black / Black British, Caribbean or African rose 3%. The proportion of children in our schools from ethnic minority families is now over 50%.

Community cohesion in Milton Keynes is however strong, reflected in lower levels of reported hate crime than elsewhere in the Thames Valley area and strong / established groups such as Milton Keynes Islamic Arts and Culture (MKIAC) and the local Council of Faiths, regularly organising and leading interfaith community events.

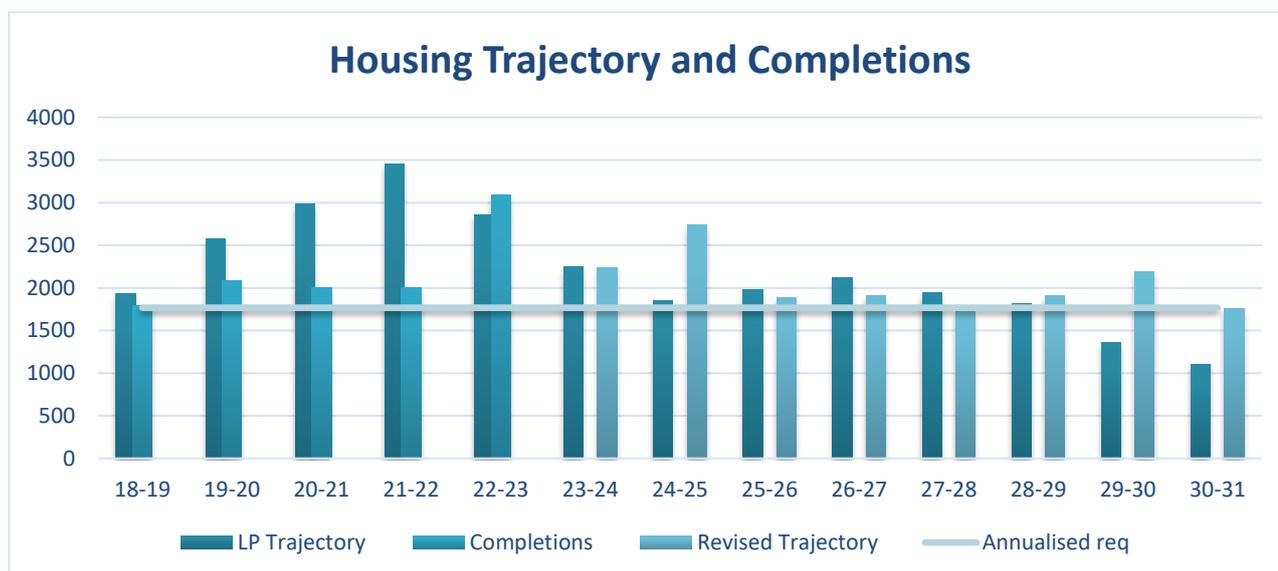


Population change

Latest ONS figures put yearly population increase in 2021 at around 2,500 per year, comprising around 45% natural increase (births and deaths) and 65% net migration. Population forecasts indicate that growth will be sustained until 2030 at between 2,700-3,000 per year with natural increase gradually slowing and net migration increasing.

Growth

Housing growth has been a feature of life in Milton Keynes for some time now and the Council has met its Housing Delivery Test (HDT) for the last 4 years, delivering over 10,000 homes over 5 years from 2018-2022. The Council's Monitoring and Implementation Team predict that a further 14,000 homes will be completed by the end of 2029 of which around 54% already have planning permission, a further 26% have outline permission and 20% are local plan allocation sites.



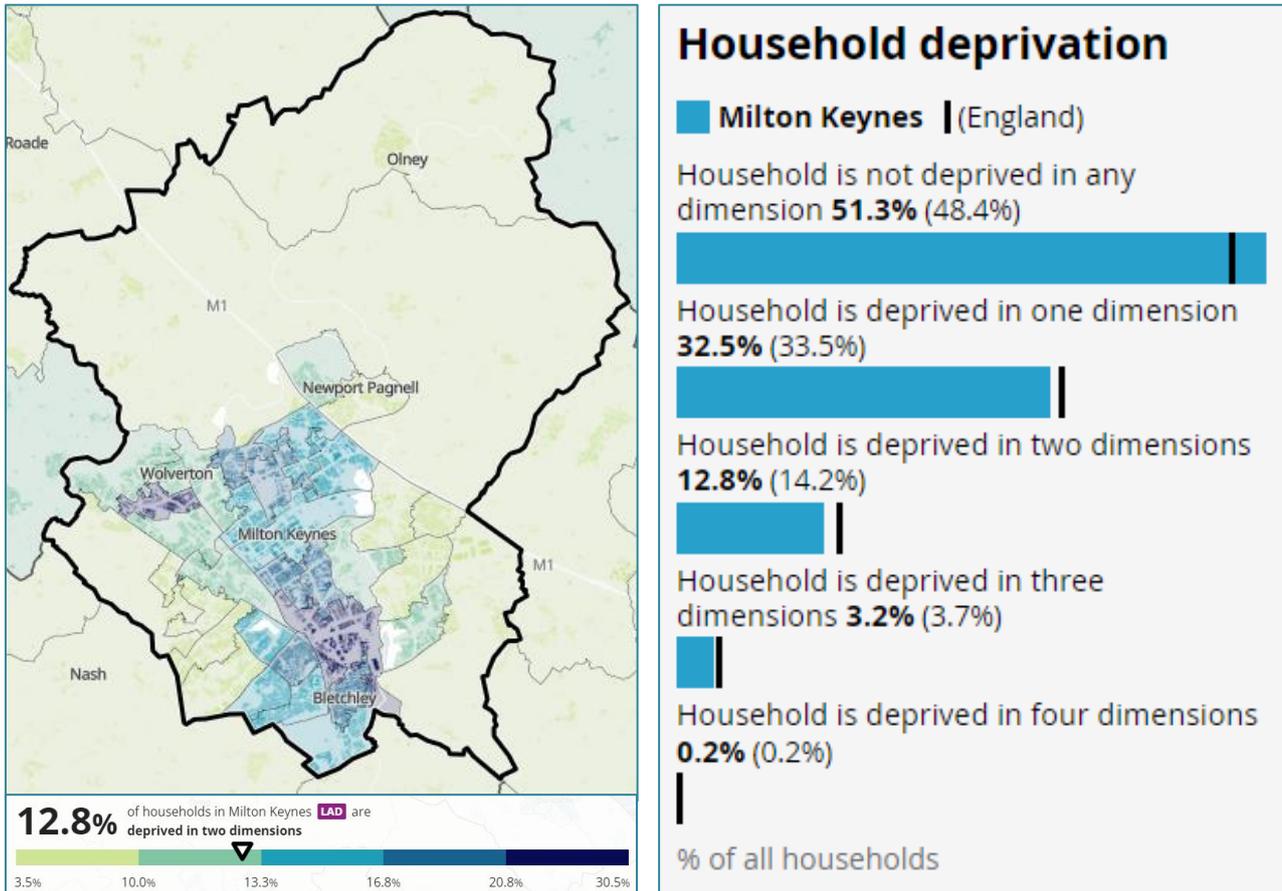
Whilst the Council's current local plan included a 20% buffer to ensure delivery of the required supply, data would suggest confidence in the Council's ability to deliver what is planned, based on current performance and dialogue with developers. Work is now well underway on the New City Plan which will run from 2030 onwards.

In addition to a range of local plan site allocations across the city ranging from less than 10 homes to over 1,000, there are also currently several strategic expansion areas across Milton Keynes including:

- [Eastern Expansion Area](#) (substantively complete - communities of Broughton / Brooklands)
- [Strategic Land Allocation](#) (underway - communities of Glebe Farm / Eagle Farm South)
- [Western Expansion Area](#) (underway - communities of Fairfields / Whitehouse)
- [Milton Keynes East Development Framework](#) (commencing in review period)
- [Southeast Milton Keynes Development Framework](#) (commencing in review period)

Our challenges

Milton Keynes ranks 107 out of 151 upper tier and unitary authorities (where 1 is the most deprived) for poverty and deprivation. However, this masks significant differences across the city and despite the good quality of life enjoyed by most people, many residents risk being left behind as the city grows. Some communities are among the most deprived in England whilst others do not have the skills needed to access good local jobs.



Health and wellbeing

Average life expectancy in Milton Keynes is very similar to that in England. However, women living in the most deprived areas live on average 5.6 fewer years than women from the least deprived areas. For men, the figure is 7.6 fewer years. These earlier deaths are commonly from cancer, coronary and cardiovascular diseases.

Nearly 30% of adults in Milton Keynes are classified as obese (25% in England), whilst 40% of children and adults in our most deprived areas undertake less than the recommended minimum amount of physical activity.

Child poverty

We know that child poverty in Milton Keynes is at a high level and rising. Nearly 20% of children are in poverty, compared to 15% in the Southeast, but once housing costs are taken into account, this number doubles. Over 7,000 children qualify for free school meals, whilst around 1,000 are in temporary accommodation.

Housing

The Council is a housing stock holding authority, with over 12,000 properties, the vast majority of which (around 70%) are general need, social rent properties. In 2022 8% of the Council's housing stock did not meet the decent homes standard, compared to 6% in England.

Many of the estates built in the 1970's are in need of substantial investment to ensure that homes meet modern standards and over half of our 'first phase' housing estates rank amongst the highest in the UK for deprivation measures. As a stock holding authority, a range of challenges, including construction inflation, Brexit and rent caps have significantly constrained headroom in the Council's Housing Revenue Account, resulting in difficult decisions about priority areas and regeneration.

Overall, there are around 124,000 homes in Milton Keynes of which around 85% are in urban areas, and 82% are houses or bungalows (77% in England). Housing tenure wise Milton Keynes is reasonably typical, with slightly higher levels of privately / affordable rented than in England. However, a much higher proportion of homeowners do not own their home outright (37% compared to 30%) leaving more of the city susceptible to cost of living and inflationary pressures.

Until recently the rate of new home building had not kept up with demand, especially for affordable housing. Our strong local economy has placed further upward pressure on demand and house prices. Private rents and our affordability ratio (house prices compared to earnings) have also increased, and more people are homeless or in temporary accommodation.

Milton Keynes is ranked 23rd of all 317 local authorities for barriers to housing and services (where 1 is the most deprived). Those who are disadvantaged experience particular challenges in relation to housing supply and standards.

Homelessness

Milton Keynes ranks as sixth for homelessness levels in England outside of London and the numbers of households living in temporary accommodation is more than double the rate for England (8 per 1,000 compared to 3.98). The most common reason for homelessness is relationship breakdowns or family / friends no longer being able to accommodate. Taken alongside a growing difference between the cost of housing and median salaries, the demand seems unlikely to slow.

Rough sleeping has also been an issue for the city having attracted national attention as 'tent city' in 2017. Significant effort and investment in the co-location of emergency beds and associated services, has however seen levels reduce by 65%, bucking the national trend of increased rough sleeping.

Our priorities

A thriving city

Milton Keynes has a global reputation as a centre of innovation and achievement. We want to continue to ensure that the city is an economic powerhouse and growing cultural centre by creating the right conditions for a successful economy in Central Milton Keynes and beyond. However, we know that around 1 in 5 of the jobs in Milton Keynes today are in business sectors that are likely to shrink due to automation. We also have a high proportion of residents without higher-level qualifications and more than 9,500 people in MK have no formal qualification at all.

Regeneration will help people in our most deprived neighbourhoods to improve their life chances through early childhood intervention, skills development and better access to jobs. And we aim to raise the aspirations and attainment of disadvantaged pupils and other groups who do less well than their peers at every stage of education. This will include helping all our secondary schools achieve high standards and supporting new approaches in which businesses are working closely with our education providers to create new opportunities for all students.

Creating a city centre undergraduate university has been a long-held ambition for Milton Keynes and we recognise the very significant benefits a large-scale university will create for our city, including strengthening our education provision, increasing our economic competitiveness, creating regeneration opportunities in Central Milton Keynes, and further developing our leisure and cultural offer. The Council has recently agreed to fully support the [Open University's Campus 2030 Project](#), which will explore relocation of the Open University from its base at Walton Hall into Central Milton Keynes, including an in-person campus-based provision on land allocated for higher education in Plan:MK.

Central Milton Keynes is an important location for employment (where a quarter of the city's jobs are) and it is an increasingly popular place to live with more than 5,000 new homes planned. CMK is also home to many of our cultural, retail and leisure facilities and is blessed with one of our most iconic green spaces in Campbell Park. Via Renaissance:CMK, a project being delivered with Milton Keynes Development Partnership, we want to create a city centre that links up people-friendly public spaces and activities that serve a wide range of visitors. There are also plans for Station Square that will improve its role as one of the major gateways for those arriving in the city and to extend and improve our open market.

Regeneration in Bletchley is also a key focus, with East West Rail providing stronger links to Cambridge, Central Milton Keynes and Oxford, giving the town the opportunity to become a significant technology hub. Alongside significant works to the station itself, there are plans for comprehensive development around the station which will help create a positive experience for those arriving by train. We are also working with town councils that serve the area, local residents and stakeholders on a [£25 million Town Deal programme](#) for Bletchley and Fenny Stratford that will take forward many of these initiatives.

A progressive city

Milton Keynes was established as an ambitious project to meet the urgent housing crisis of the time. That foundation and continuing vision is under threat from increasing unaffordability, national planning regulations and underinvestment. We need to increase the supply of genuinely affordable housing, improve the mix of housing available to rent and buy, alongside improving and investing in our existing communities and housing through renewal and regeneration.

We want all our neighbourhoods to be safe, inclusive and welcoming places for everyone, whatever their background. Cleaner and safer environments are a key part of healthier communities and are also working with local people and partners to improve the health and wellbeing of local people. The Council has adopted a [Community-Led Regeneration and Estate Renewal Strategy](#) and our priorities are Bradwell, Fullers Slade and the Lakes Estate, which all have resourced Estate Renewal Forums. Approval has recently been agreed for Phase A of the Lakes Estate, which will see the demolition of Serpentine Court and the delivery of over 350 new homes, including 120 social and affordable rented Council homes.

A sustainable city

We are committed to Milton Keynes becoming net zero by 2030 and establishing itself as a world-leading smart and sustainable city, leading innovation and change so that we mitigate the impact of climate change. We will continue to pioneer new ways of working to reduce waste, increase recycling and reuse, reduce energy demand and investment in greater use of sustainable transport methods.

In 2018 Milton Keynes Council made the commitment to become Carbon Neutral by 2030 and Carbon Negative by 2050. This work is underpinned by a [sustainability strategy](#) and associated [action plan](#), which has seen our operational emissions reduce from 24,000 tCO₂e in 2018/19 to 16,400 tCO₂e in 2021/22. Current work has focused on street lighting LED conversion programmes, Re:Fit Programmes at key locations and one of very few functioning private wires at our Waste Recovery Park, which charges our waste fleet, powers our Waste Transfer Station, and in the future will charge electric buses in the city.

Our electoral registers

Elections and Democracy in Milton Keynes is well resourced and led. However, the raft of Elections Act changes will prove a significant distraction from the ongoing work to ensure that electoral registers are complete.

We have good levels of confidence in the accuracy of our electoral register. This is because we have established routines, based around internal data sharing and comply with statutory requirements around the annual canvass. We have less confidence in the completeness of our register. We estimate our register completeness is around 90% which is below the average of our CIPFA benchmarking authority group of 92%.

Ward Population (18+) v Local Government Electorate (Top and Bottom Wards)

| Rank | Ward | Census 2021 (18+) | Register 2021 | Percentage (%) |
|----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------|---------------|----------------|
| 1 | Olney | 10,010 | 9,584 | 95.74% |
| 2 | Newport Pagnell South | 9,472 | 9,012 | 95.14% |
| 3 | Tattenhoe | 9,053 | 8,560 | 94.55% |
| 17 | Loughton & Shenley | 11,469 | 9,947 | 86.73% |
| 18 | Woughton & Fishermead | 13,535 | 11,342 | 83.80% |
| 19 | Central Milton Keynes | 12,960 | 9,956 | 76.82% |
| Total (all 19 Wards) | | 217,520 | 195,825 | 90.03% |

Our challenges are not unique, and lower registration levels are reflected in areas where there are higher levels of deprivation, private rented housing and non-UK nationals.



There has been sustained housing development in Milton Keynes. This means that in some areas there can sometimes be properties on the register that have not fully completed and there is a lag in electors moving in and registering to vote.



Whilst there is no definitive data to extrapolate how much of the population is eligible to join the electoral register, data indicates that a higher percentage of residents in Milton Keynes are not from eligible nationalities.



In the city centre, there has been particularly concentrated growth of high-density housing, often as a result of prior consent office to residential conversions or the development of modern apartment blocks. Alongside the challenge of lower registration levels for those privately renting, evidence indicates that many are corporate lettings, or serviced apartments.

Conclusions

The next 10-15 years will be crucial for Milton Keynes, as we look to deliver a foundational economy, driven by a skilled workforce, alongside significant and sustained physical growth and regeneration. But we'll need to do this in the context of a challenging financial picture, including reduced government funding, growing service pressures associated with an expanding younger and older population, and simultaneously ageing 'new town' estates and infrastructure. Growth in particular represents additional burdens for the Council, and requires effort and time from councillors who play a key role:

- in decision making / shaping of planned development and other infrastructure;
- bringing together / guiding new communities; and
- fielding additional casework arising from consultations and construction.

Councillors represent different communities with different needs. Because of planned development, some areas have grown quickly and there is significant inequality of representation. Indeed, our electoral registers in 2018 were already around 4,000 higher than forecast at our last review.

However, this only tells part of the story and in some areas, large numbers of residents are either not on the electoral register, or not eligible to register, compounding the issue. For example, in Broughton Ward the ratio of councillors to adult population is around 1:4,781, whereas in Tattenhoe (where we estimate the register is 95% complete) this drops to 1:3,018. In practice, councillors cannot simply ignore or disregard residents who are not on the electoral register as they need to lead and understand their communities. Currently, around 9% of our electoral register is made up of EU nationals and depending on reciprocal arrangements with other nations we could see growing concentrations of residents with no effective local representation.

Our survey results were very clear; councillors felt strongly that more councillors would be required in the future to deal with continued growth. Nearly half felt that the current council size was already insufficient, whilst 86% felt the council size would need to increase in the future. Nearly a quarter felt it would need to increase significantly moving forward.

3 Our governance / constitutional arrangements

The Council operates an executive form of governance, with a Cabinet consisting of the Leader and up to 9 further Cabinet members, although in recent years, cabinet size has varied between 7 and 9. There is currently no political appetite or consensus for the Council to change its governance arrangements and the executive system has provided sufficient responsiveness and transparency through many years of no overall political control, including minority administrations, run by at various stages, the 3 major political groups.

The Council has a ceremonial Mayor, who chairs full Council and is the first citizen. Political groups are able to nominate the Deputy Mayor (who then succeeds the Mayor each year) based on electoral performance. This has the effect of the office of Mayor rotating through political groups periodically. By convention, the Mayor does not sit on any committees, principally because of civic demands on their time.

Executive, Council and committee meetings, generally take place during the evening, whilst some other partnership or advisory meetings are held during working hours. There are procedural provisions which require that meetings must resolve to continue after three hours and end after 4 hours. Like many councils, we were disappointed that provisions put in place for remote meetings during Covid were not continued in some form, but despite this, average attendance rates for councillors at meetings are very good (85% in 2023). The Council's constitution provides for generous public participation, with all executive, council and committee meetings offering allocated time for public questions and speaking on agenda items. These facilities are well used and around 40% of meetings in 2022/23 had some form of public participation. For our Planning Committee / Panel meetings, this figure is closer to 100%.

The Council has an [indexed allowance scheme](#) with Special Responsibility Allowances (SRA) for Cabinet members, committee chairs and political group leaders. Additionally, the Council operates a [parental leave policy](#), which provides for councillors to take maternity leave and where they hold SRA positions, to continue to receive an SRA whilst another councillor fills the position and is also entitled to an SRA. Since the policy was adopted in January 2022, 6 councillors have taken maternity leave, including 1 Cabinet member.

There are currently 3 political groups represented on MKCC, although in the last decade there have also occasionally been a very small number of independent councillors. Each political group is currently entitled to a full time Political Assistant, who provide a range of administrative, research, communications / casework support, directed by group leadership.

The Council established Milton Keynes Development Partnership (MKDP) as a Limited Liability Partnership (LLP) in 2013. Its primary role is to use and develop its portfolio of land assets to advance the Council's objectives to develop the city in line with the Council Plan and Plan:MK. Further to a recent governance review, MKDP has moved away from a model where councillors were board members, creating a cabinet advisory group, to provide oversight.

Executive decision making

Annually, the Leader agrees Cabinet portfolios and an executive scheme of delegation (including financial delegations). The Cabinet and Cabinet members take key decisions but also non key decisions that are reserved to the Cabinet or Cabinet members by the Leader's scheme of delegation. Our key decision threshold is set at £500,000 or where the impact would be significant on two or more wards.

The Cabinet meets 6 or 7 times a year, with meeting duration ranging from 30 minutes to over 2 hours, depending on the agenda. Cabinet meetings provide an opportunity for scrutiny committees to refer or report on matters to the Cabinet and for councillors and members of the public to ask questions of the Cabinet. However, Cabinet member decisions are also taken in public meetings (delegated decisions) in most weeks, except for when there are Cabinet meetings scheduled.

There are 4 cross party Cabinet Advisory Groups (CAG)¹ that meet as required and provide advice to the Cabinet and the Cabinet member. Although these advisory groups do not meet in public, generally an agenda and minutes are published whilst the meetings are also recorded and then uploaded to the Council's YouTube channel.

On a monthly basis, Cabinet also meets collectively with the Council's Corporate Leadership Team (Cab/CLT) and also informally (without officers present) to discuss council business and agree political approaches to issues.

¹ Planning / Local Plan Advisory Group, Corporate Parenting Panel, Owner's Advisory Group and Parishes Advisory Group.

Cabinet members also undertake a range of other work, including regular briefings with officers about their portfolio, communication or other media work and attendance at scrutiny meetings as required.

The Cabinet in numbers: 2022/23

- Executive reports considered and decisions taken in public meetings - **105**
- Cabinet Advisory Group meetings - **11**
- Scrutiny meetings attended by Cabinet members - **10**
- Average hours spent by Cabinet members on executive business each week - **27**

Overview and scrutiny

The Council has 6 scrutiny committees each of which meet up to 5 times in a Council year. These are supplemented by up to 2 task and finish groups, which run concurrently throughout the year. Additionally, the Council has recently re-constituted joint health scrutiny arrangements with other Councils in the health region.

Every year, the Council receives a report from scrutiny councillors. The report for 2022/23 is available [here](#). A brief review of scrutiny committees was undertaken prior to the 2023/24 council year, which had the effect of reducing the number of scrutiny committees by one, but not the volume of scrutiny work undertaken. This report can be viewed [here](#).

Each Scrutiny Committee has a chair and vice-chairs who are nominated from each respective political group and are supported by an Overview and Scrutiny Officer. Prior to a scrutiny meeting the Chair and Vice-Chairs (planning group) meet to review their work programme and agree approaches to forthcoming meetings with Directors and report authors. On occasion planning groups or scrutiny members also undertake site visits. There were 37 planning group meetings or site visits in 2022/23.

Given the sustained period of no overall control at MKCC, overview and scrutiny is a key feature of the Council's governance. Usually there are more scrutiny topics suggested than can be accommodated in work programmes and meetings usually run for 2.5 - 3 hours, enabling detailed scrutiny of two topics. Cabinet members do not arbitrarily attend scrutiny meetings and usually only do so where they, or the planning group feel it would be important to take questions or give their view, which is around 30% of the time.

Call-in provisions for executive decisions are generous (2 ward councillors, a parish council or 20 members of the public can call-in a decision) however, call-in is used maturely in Milton Keynes, which is a reflection of the transparency in decision making and the opportunity for all councillors and the public to engage with decision makers. Call-in is usually utilised only a handful of times a year, but is resource intensive for the councillors involved, with optional mediation followed by a scrutiny sub-committee if required. A scrutiny call in can typically take up to 10 hours for a Cabinet member and scrutiny committee chair, with relatively little notice.

It is convention that scrutiny officers support up to two task and finish groups which usually run concurrently during the council year. Task and finish groups vary in their length and complexity, but it is common that over a council year, there will be up to 10 meetings involving between 4-6 councillors to undertake a variety of work. Task and finish groups work to draw their findings into recommendations, and these are subsequently considered by the Cabinet. Periodically, scrutiny committees will consider progress against any agreed recommendations.

Given the range and scope of political choice involved in setting a budget, significant additional scrutiny work is undertaken in this area. The Budget and Resource Scrutiny Committee will (in addition to its usual work programme) meet several times in the autumn and over a number of weeks in January to scrutinise budget proposals in detail, preparing a report with recommendations to be considered by the Cabinet and Council before the budget is agreed.

Most councillors (42) are appointed to scrutiny committees which represents over 91% of the Council when cabinet members and the Mayor / Deputy are excluded from the calculation. Over 50% sit on two or more scrutiny committees and anecdotally, we find that juggling scrutiny work effectively can be difficult for many councillors.

Overview and scrutiny in numbers: 2022/23

- Meetings held in public - 47
- Agenda items - 97
- Referrals to Cabinet, officers, or other stakeholders – 241
- Detailed task & finish group reports prepared - 3



Non-executive decision making

Full Council meets monthly, apart from August, December and April. Meetings comprise a mix of referrals, public and councillor questions, policy and budget framework items, motions and other non-executive items. As council meetings start at 7.30pm there is a procedural closure provision to conclude the meeting within 30 minutes, once it has been running for 3 hours. Traditionally, closure is not uncommon at Milton Keynes, although in recent years it has been required far less.

Usually, a special council meeting is required at least once a year, to consider the bestowal of a civic honour, or for other special purposes. During 2022/23 there were 3 special council meetings (to confer Alderman status, to confer freedom of the city to Leah Williamson, and to formally receive the Letters Patent, conferring city status on Milton Keynes). Special council meetings can last from 1-2 hours and are often preceded or followed by a reception for guests and councillors.

Planning Committee

The Planning Committee meets monthly (10 or 11 meetings per year) to consider major planning applications and receive other updates or reports. Usually, meetings last for 2-3 hours and consider 2-3 planning applications and at least one other report. The Chair and Vice Chairs will meet with officers for 30-60 minutes in the week of committee to understand and clarify matters, prior to the meeting. The Chair also meets regularly with planning officers to understand the pipeline of applications and offer an opinion where there is ambiguity about whether an application should be referred to committee.

The scheme of delegation is generous in that ward councillors or parishes can request that an item be considered by committee, alongside items that would be referred because they are contentious or significant. However, the scheme works effectively (97% of applications are determined by officers) and was recently reviewed by committee. Notwithstanding this, the amount of material that councillors have to read and digest in advance of meetings is significant; agenda reading times can often run to upwards of 5 hours.

A sub-committee of 5 Councillors (known locally as the Planning Panel) considers minor and other planning applications and also meets monthly (10 or 11 meetings per year). The Panel is chaired by the main committee chair and there is a pre meeting the week of the Panel. Again, agendas usually comprise 2-3 planning applications with several hours of associated reading time.

It is very rare that there is no public speaking at Planning Committee / Panel, which can often add upwards of 30 minutes to the duration of a meeting.

Licensing and Regulatory Committees

Whilst Licensing and Regulatory Committees are discrete bodies with separate Terms of Reference, their membership is identical, and they meet 4 times per year, immediately after each other, on the same evening. The scheme of delegation is mature and operates effectively. Predominantly the committees consider policy matters which are then determined by the Council or the Executive.

Each of the committees operates a sub-committee comprised of three councillors, the majority of which are convened according to statutory triggers in the Licensing Act 2005 as opposed to a delegation requirement.

The work associated with sub-committees is however unpredictable and voluminous. On average there are in excess of 10 sub committees required each year, which are convened at very short notice and require members to read and consider large amounts of information beforehand. It is not uncommon for sub-committees to be cancelled, as applicants can often make concessions which lead to statutory consultees withdrawing their objections. This often happens after much of the preparatory work has been completed.

Standards Committee

The Council continues to operate a Standards Committee, despite their no longer being a statutory requirement to do so. The Standards Committee meets 4 times per year and meetings usually last between 60-90 minutes. In addition to considering complaint trends and promoting good conduct, the Standards Committee also usually undertakes a piece of policy work in each council year. This might be reviewing the Code of Conduct, the training framework, or other guidance documents. This work is usually led by a smaller working group of members, who are supported by officers and then work is formally agreed or referred onwards at committee meetings.

The Council's arrangements for dealing with standards complaints were recently reviewed and streamlined, removing a sub-committee step at initial assessment. However, Councillors are required for sub-committee hearings which require preparation and meeting time of well over 3 hours in total. Recently very few sub-committee meetings have been required, but this area can be unpredictable and the need for sub-committees can vary significantly from year to year.

Audit Committee

The Council's Audit Committee plays a key role in assessing the Council's accounts, governance, audit arrangements and risk profile. It meets four times each council year, although in recent years special meetings have often been required. The level of detailed information provided to councillors in agendas is significant and given the importance of their role, meetings often last for upwards of 2.5 hours with similar preparatory time. Cabinet members are not able to sit on the Audit Committee.

Other meetings

There are a range of other non-executive committees or meetings which are held in public during working hours and whose membership comprises councillors:

Joint Negotiating Committee – meets four times per year to consider a range of employment issues (not including dismissal appeals). Comprises 9 councillors and includes a pre (non-public) meeting with unions and staff side representatives. Taken together the two meetings usually last over 2 hours.

Health and Care Partnership – meets four times per year in line with statutory requirements for a Health and Wellbeing Board. Membership includes the Leader (as Chair), Portfolio holder for Health / social care and representatives from opposition groups, alongside other local health leaders. Meetings usually last around 2 hours.

Safer MK – meets three times per year and is the statutory Community Safety Partnership responsible for strategies to tackle local crime and community safety issues. Membership includes the Portfolio holder for Community Safety (as Chair), representatives from each Political Group as observers and one of the Council's members of the Thames Valley Police and Crime Panel. Meetings usually last between 1.5 and 2 hours.

Non-executive decision making and meetings in numbers: 2022/23

- Meetings held in public - 69
- Average number of pages per agenda - 75
- Meetings with public participation – 60%



Conclusions

Decision making at Milton Keynes City Council is councillor led, transparent and allows other councillors and members of the public to participate. Over many years, steps have been taken to ensure that delegations are used sensibly and pragmatically, and that business is done in an efficient way that minimises the demands on councillors’ time.

Notwithstanding this, good governance is important, and shortcuts should be avoided. This means that the demands on councillors’ time remain significant, both in terms of preparation, travel and attending meetings. On average, non-executive councillors spend 13 hours a week, on meetings and decision making, but don’t always feel able to allocate the amount of time to their duties they would like and feel that the burden can be excessive, does not allow a reasonable work life balance and puts the safe and effective discharge of the Council’s statutory functions at risk.

Executive members can carry a very significant workload (closer to 30 hours on meetings and decision making), but there is a degree of acceptance of the burdens and hours associated with such senior positions. Despite the growth of Milton Keynes and the associated increase in workload, the number of Cabinet members appointed is generally less than the maximum allowed. Cabinet members cannot sit on scrutiny committees, or the Audit Committee and generally don’t sit on other non-executive decision-making bodies, so evidence would suggest that appointing more Cabinet members would restrict the pool of councillors available to the controlling group(s) to fill other committee seats.

4 Leadership in Milton Keynes

Councillors in Milton Keynes are reflective of their communities and feel this helps them to do a better job. Certainly, they feel able to understand local issues effectively, and communicate and empathise with a diverse and growing population.

| | Milton Keynes population | MKCC Councillors 2012 | MKCC Councillors 2023 | Councillors in England 2022 |
|--|--------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Average age | 37 | 52 | 36 | 60 |
| % Female | 51 | 27 | 45 | 41 |
| % Employed / self employed | 62 | 69 | 78 | 20 |
| % Black, asian or minority ethnic groups | 28 | 7 | 23 | 8 |
| Hours spent on Council business weekly | | 28 | 22 | 22 |
| Ratio of Councillors to electors | | 1:3,635 | 1:3,543 | 1:3,346 |

Despite nearly 80% of councillors being employed or self-employed and serving more residents on average than councillors in England, our councillors still dedicate nearly 22 hours per week to council business. Realistically, there is little that can be done to reduce the community leadership burden as councillors play a key role understanding community needs, aspirations and opportunities, working with local people and organisations to secure improved outcomes and where necessary, resolve conflict.

External partnerships

Councillors are appointed or nominated to over 50 [external bodies](#), including organisations with significant responsibilities, regional influence and resources, including:

- Bedfordshire, Luton and Milton Keynes Integrated Care Partnership
- Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority
- Buckinghamshire and River Ouzel Internal Drainage Board
- Central Area Growth Board
- Joint Health Overview and Scrutiny Committee
- Milton Keynes Parks Trust
- MK Dons Sports Education Trust
- Thames Valley Police & Crime Panel

Around 65% of councillors are appointed to at least one external body / partnership and often the Council nominates two or more councillors. The demands of the appointments and partnership work will obviously vary considerably but experience tells us that councillors often struggle to juggle these duties, with the heavier burdens often falling to councillors who do not hold full time employment. Some meetings are held in locations up to an hour away from Milton Keynes, meaning a two-hour meeting can require 4-6 hours for preparation, attendance and travel. There are no additional allowances paid for any appointments, save for the fire authority which has its own [arrangements for allowances](#).

It is important that Milton Keynes has more than just a seat at the table and is able to lead, shape and influence given its position regionally. This means councillors need to be able to dedicate the time to best represent residents' interests in key areas:



The Council appoints 5 members to the [Buckinghamshire and Milton Keynes Fire Authority](#) (meets 4/5 times per year), with one member currently serving as the Vice-Chair, three on the Executive Committee (meets 4/5 times per year) and two on the Audit and Scrutiny Committee (meets 3 times per year). Meetings are always held in Aylesbury, in person.



The Council appoints 2 members to the [Thames Valley Police and Crime Panel](#), with one member currently serving as the Chair. There are around 5 meetings per year which are held in person, in Aylesbury.



The effect and demands of revised regional health structures and governance, remain (to an extent) to be seen, but will require more co-operation, leadership and collaboration on a regional basis. In addition to a representative from each political group serving on the [Integrated Care Partnership Joint Committee](#), [joint regional health scrutiny](#) has also been recently re-established, (again with a representative from each political Group) with 3-4 meetings per year held at member authorities offices on a rotating basis.



Coordinated regional growth, transport, infrastructure and economic development is an area requiring increasing time and attention. East West Rail, the abolition of Local Enterprise Partnerships and exploring devolution require time to build strategic relationships and consensus across the geographical and political divide. In particular, the [Central Area Growth Board](#) has a key role in accelerating the delivery of planned growth and associated infrastructure and services across Bedford, Luton, Northampton and Milton Keynes.

Casework

Our councillor survey indicated that resident casework takes up a significant amount of councillors' time (on average around 30%) and this work is clearly an important and growing element of the modern councillors' duties.

Newly elected councillors often report feeling overwhelmed with the amount of casework they receive and struggle to settle into a sustainable approach, whilst many councillors report difficulties managing and tracking caseload. Councillors are supported with case work by the Council's customer services team, who log case work on a SharePoint system, progress chase and respond to issues raised. Overall, around 1 FTE undertakes this work although in busier periods more resources are allocated. Some more complex advocacy, or policy based casework is raised directly with senior officers, and this can be difficult to track and provide data on.

In reality, the approach to casework taken by councillors varies considerably depending on a number of factors, including whether the ward is represented by members of the same political group, how active and visible a councillor is, the characteristics of the ward and individual style.

Formally submitted casework has doubled in the last 12 months in Milton Keynes, although it is unclear what is driving this trend. Certainly, most councillors report receiving the majority of casework via email, and this may be symptomatic of more residents working from home since the Covid pandemic. However, the Council's casework framework is not well defined, and approaches about what is formally submitted and what is not, vary considerably between councillors. For example, in our survey 20-40% of case work time was accounted for by straightforward and linear activities such as signposting residents and making initial reports of public realm type defects or issues.

Other information

Training

There has been a significant turnover of councillors since 2021, with 55% of our current membership being in their first term of office. Training and acclimatising councillors is a challenge and whilst electing by thirds helps to soften the blow, it is not uncommon for committee chairs to change considerably from year to year, requiring tailored support to those in new roles. At the start of each year, focus naturally tends to be on the immediate technical skills required in quasi-judicial settings, and planning, licensing and audit training can be resource intensive. Planning Committee training for example is usually delivered over two long evening sessions and involves a mock committee exercise.

Each political group nominates a representative for a Councillor Training Group which meets 3-4 times per year. This group monitors training spend (we usually spend £10 - 15,000 per year on councillor training), and will start work soon on a member led development strategy.

Overall, it can be difficult to deliver ongoing training to councillors, in a coherent and planned way, especially when there are so many other competing priorities. In response, training is often delivered either online as bitesize sessions, incorporated into group meetings, or for external training over whole days, often at weekends.

Councillor champions

Each year councillors are appointed by full Council to specific [champion roles](#) (Armed Forces, LGBTQI+, Ethnic Minorities, Youth Democracy, and Older Persons) where they work to promote the work or objectives of particular groups, highlight issues and seek progress on a variety of matters. Each of the champion roles has a role profile and 4 roles are filled by current councillors, with one held by an Alderwomen.

Responsibilities vary but Armed Forces and Youth Democracy Champions are required to attend meetings and events on a regular basis. Some champion roles also have a modest associated discretionary budget of £1,000 to allocate towards projects or initiatives consistent with their roles.

Ward based budgets

All councillors are allocated a budget of £1,000 to spend during each council year. The scheme is to enable councillors to put forward proposals for expenditure to promote the wellbeing of local communities which they represent and is the opportunity to make a small but important contribution to projects in their ward.

Community groups will often approach councillors directly with proposals and they will then need to evaluate and decide how to allocate funds. Sometimes councillors work together to pool their funds in order to support larger scale projects, but all applications need to be in writing and sufficiently detailed to allow for authorisation and payment.

Parish Councils

We see parish councils as a key link between residents and the Council and we have a good track record of working alongside parish councils, both in terms of consultation / engagement and to devolve assets and services, where there is agreement. There is an established [protocol for working together](#), and our councillors take their relationships with parish councils seriously.

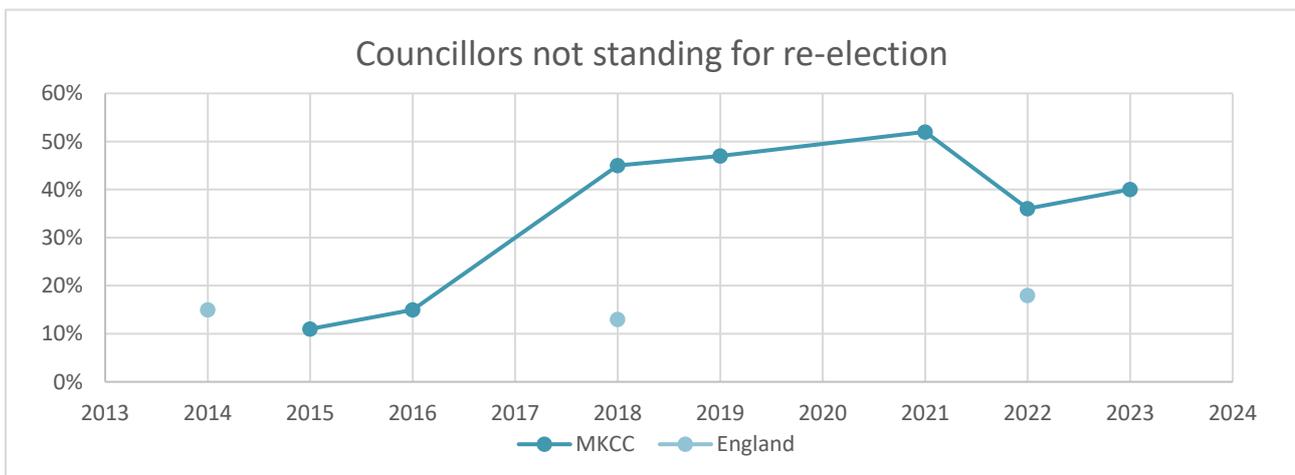
Our survey indicated that 40% of councillors also serve as parish, town or community councillors, whilst over 60% regularly attend parish council meetings. This is a significant time investment taken alongside all of a councillors' other duties and further complicated by parish boundaries that are often not co terminus with Ward Boundaries. For example, Campbell Park Parish Council is currently covered by four separate city council wards.

In addition to the Parishes Advisory Group, the Parishes Forum meeting is held quarterly, to bring clerks and councillors together to hear strategic updates. Chaired by the Cabinet member, meetings usually last for 1-2 hours and are online except for one meeting each year, which is held in the Council Chamber at our civic offices.

Retention

It is clear that recent growth and additional workloads have caused young and talented councillors to walk away. Over half (56%) of councillors are in their first term, whilst the average length of service is around 6.5 years, down from 8.4 years at our last review.

Since 2017 the number of councillors not re-standing for election has increased sharply and is more than double the rate in the years immediately after our last review. Whilst this cannot always be attributable to workload, this figure appears to be at odds with the national position based on LGA census results.



Nearly a third of current councillors surveyed have considered standing down because of workload, and councillors from across the political divide have taken the decision to walk away because of difficulties juggling work, young families and councillor positions with additional responsibility.

Our survey found that most councillors did not expect the amount of casework they had to deal with and the amount of time they spend on council business has increased over the years, whilst over half felt they did not have a good balance between their Councillor duties and other aspects of their life.

Conclusions

Councillors and council business is now more accessible than ever, something that is reflected in the growing use of social media, increased casework loads and the accessibility of public meetings. Technology has proved helpful in some respects, with the use of hybrid meetings for circumstances where there is no legal requirement for councillors to be present in person, and technology providing easier access to emails and other information.

However, regardless of the merits, the discontinuation of online attendance for councillors at committee and scrutiny meetings has removed the flexibility, accessibility and productivity benefits enjoyed during the Covid pandemic.

The Council has a good track record of working in partnership and is well regarded amongst strategic and local partners. However, these partnerships require continued work and engagement across all parties, but particularly from the Cabinet and senior councillors, as the political make up and leadership of our neighbouring authorities has changed considerably in recent years. Given the numbers of external bodies at which councillors are represented, and the levels of work arising from these, it is challenging for councillors to discharge their responsibilities effectively. Arguably, the current size of the Council is insufficient to manage council business without placing an excessive burden on members, but with an additional 20,000 or so local government electors in the next seven years it is incomprehensible that the Council does not need to grow.

5 Final Conclusions and annexes

The right number for Milton Keynes

It is clear that our council size needs to increase, and there was unanimity at full Council in this regard; maintaining our current size neither secures appropriate representation for the residents of Milton Keynes, or is sustainable from a councillor workload perspective.

We recognise that there are arguments to be made for both an increase of 3 (20 wards) and 6 (21 wards). In reality, 3 member wards mean the options are (to an extent) indiscriminate, and therefore any further increase is simply not realistic.

On one hand there is an argument to be made that an increase in electorate only affects part of a councillors' workload and the other aspects, such as scrutiny and decision making are relatively stable and might therefore be largely unaffected by growth. Since we forecast that the electorate will grow by around 10% by 2030 this would roughly equate to a 5% increase in workload and correlate to an additional 3 councillors.

However, this does not reflect the current realities. Our electorate has grown faster than forecast at our last review, and with housing growth comes additional work related to placemaking, community cohesion, the issue of highway and land adoption and delivery of required infrastructure. We have also become a much younger and more diverse council since our last review. Whilst this helps us to understand our communities and take better decisions it also means that councillors can struggle to balance their duties with other responsibilities. This is borne out by our retention rates and the testimony of talented councillors who have taken difficult decisions to step back.

Over the years, our governance arrangements have matured, and we have streamlined processes and improved delegations. Ultimately though, the complex social and political landscapes in which councillors operate, require significant knowledge, understanding, preparation and participation. We need to be able to spread this workload better and respond to growth and a variety of other challenges in a way that is both appropriately led and resourced. An increase of 3 councillors only preserves the status quo, as opposed to addressing this issue.

Meeting information

Annex A1

| Type | Meeting | # MKCC Councillors | # meetings per year | Average length |
|-----------------------|---|--------------------|---------------------|----------------|
| Executive | Cabinet | 9 | 6 | 1.5 hours |
| | Delegated decisions | 1-9 | 46 | 0.5 hours |
| Executive Advisory | Planning Advisory Group | 6 | 3-6 | 3 hours |
| | Corporate Parenting | 9 | 4 | 2.5 hours |
| | Owners Advisory Group* | 3 | 4 | 2.5 hours |
| | Parishes Advisory Group | 3 | 4 | 1.5 hours |
| Overview & Scrutiny | Corporate Oversight & Scrutiny Mgmt. | 11 | 5 | 2.5 hours |
| | Housing Planning & Placemaking | 11 | 4-5 | 2.5 hours |
| | Children & Young People | 11 | 4-5 | 2.5 hours |
| | Housing & Adult Social Care | 9 | 4-5 | 2.5 hours |
| | Public Realm & Environment | 11 | 4-5 | 2.5 hours |
| | Budget & Resources | 9 | 9 | 2.5 hours |
| | Joint Health | 3 | 2-4 | 2 hours |
| | Task & Finish Group | 4-6 | 5 | 2 hours |
| | Task & Finish Group | 4-6 | 5 | 2 hours |
| Council | Council | 57 | 9 | 2.5 hours |
| | Special Council | 57 | 1-2 | 1 hour |
| Regulatory & Advisory | Audit Committee | 11 | 4 | 2.5 hours |
| | Licensing Committee | 11 | 4 | 1.5 hours |
| | Licensing sub-Committee | 3 | 10 | 2.5 hours |
| | Planning Committee | 11 | 11 | 2 hours |
| | Planning Panel | 5 | 10 | 1.5 hours |
| | Regulatory Committee | 11 | 4 | 1 hour |
| | Regulatory sub-Committee | 3 | 2 | 1.5 hours |
| | Standards Committee | 11 | 4 | 1.5 hours |
| | Standards sub-Committee | 3 | As req | 2.5 |
| Other committees | Health & Care Partnership* | 4 | 4 | 2 hours |
| | Joint Negotiating Committee* | 9 | 4 | 1.5 hours |
| | Snr Officer Appointment / Disciplinary* | 4 | As req | 2.5 hours |
| Other meetings | Safer MK Partnership* | 5 | 4 | 2.5 hours |
| | Central Area Growth Board* | 1 (Leader) | 4 | 2 hours |
| | Parishes Forum | 1-3 | 4 | 2 hours |
| | Town's Deal Board* | 1 (Leader) | 6 | 2 hours |

* meetings held during working hours

| Partnership | Role / responsibilities | # MKCC Councillors | # meetings per year |
|---|--|--|---|
| Bedfordshire Luton & Milton Keynes Integrated Care Partnership | Partnership of four local authorities, local NHS organisations and voluntary and community organisations, working with and for residents to support and improve everyone’s health and wellbeing. | 3 | 4 |
| Buckinghamshire & Milton Keynes Fire Authority | Accountable body for Fire and Rescue Service, making decisions on policy, finance and resources. | 5/6 (dependent on proportion of LGE in MK) | 4 (full auth meetings) 5 (executive committee) 3 (overview and audit) |
| Buckingham & River Ouzel Internal Drainage Board | Provide land drainage, flood risk management and surface water management | 5 | 3 |
| Central Area Growth Board | Partnership between Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire, Luton, Milton Keynes City, North Northamptonshire and West Northamptonshire Councils to coordinate and strengthen cross-boundary working between the local authorities in the Southeast Midlands. | 1 | 4 |
| East West Rail Main Line Partnership Strategic Board | Partnership which works with the government, the East West Railway Company, Network Rail, rail operators and others, to ensure that the full potential of East West Rail is realised in support of the delivery of economic growth. | 1 | 4 |
| England's Economic Heartland (Strategic Transport Leadership Board) | Sub-national transport body for the region advising government on transport infrastructure, services and policy framework | 1 | 5 |
| Milton Keynes Parks Trust | Independent charity with responsibility for over 6,000 acres of green space in Milton Keynes including parks, ancient woodlands, lakes, river valleys and 80 miles of landscaped areas along the city’s grid roads. | 3 | 4 |
| Milton Keynes University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust Council of Governors | Governing body for MKUH, comprising public and staff constituents, and stakeholder representatives, represent residents view and hold the Trust’s Non-Executive Directors to account. | 1 | 4 |
| MK Dons Sports Education Trust | Significant local independent charity aligned to MK Dons FC, focusing on education, social inclusion, health and wellbeing, girls and women’s football, football development and community delivery. | 3 | 3/4 |
| Thames Valley Police and Crime Panel | Oversees and scrutinises the work of the Police and Crime Commissioner for Thames Valley. | 2 | 4-5 |

General

| | | |
|---|---|-------------------------|
| Councillors' other (non MKCC) responsibilities | | |
| Employed / self employed full time - 21 | Employed / self employed part time - 12 | |
| Fully retired - 2 | Caring responsibilities - 13 | Other (charitable) - 20 |
| Councillors with positions of responsibility | | |
| Yes - 27 | No - 15 | |
| Councillors appointed to outside bodies | | |
| Yes - 24 | No - 18 | |
| Councillors also serving as a Parish, Town or Community Councillor | | |
| Yes -15 | No - 25 | |
| Councillors regularly attending Parish, Town or Community Council meetings | | |
| Yes - 26 | No - 16 | |

Time commitments

| | | | |
|---|----------------|------------------|---------------------|
| Weekly hours spent on council business | | | |
| Council business (excl casework) – 15.5 | Casework – 6.5 | | |
| Time commitment compared to what expected prior to election | | | |
| More - 24 | Less - 1 | As expected - 17 | |
| Increase in time commitment over time | | | |
| Yes - 27 | No - 1 | Same - 4 | To soon to say - 10 |
| Councillors with enough time to dedicate to councillor responsibilities | | | |
| Agree - 19 | Neutral - 14 | Disagree - 9 | |
| Councillors with a good balance between councillor duties and other aspects of life? | | | |
| Agree - 14 | Neutral - 4 | Disagree - 24 | |
| Councillors who have considered standing down because of time demands? | | | |
| Agree - 12 | Neutral - 6 | Disagree - 24 | |

Council size

| | | |
|---|------------------------|--------------|
| Councillors' views on current council size | | |
| Not enough – 18 | About right - 24 | Too many - 0 |
| Councillors' views on council size 10-15 years ahead | | |
| Increase significantly - 10 | Increase slightly - 26 | |
| No increase - 6 | Reduce - 0 | |

Martin Gowans (Labour 2014 – 2021)

By way of context, I was first elected in 2014 (at 29 years old and after three years of marriage), re-elected in 2016 and stood down in 2021. I was an executive member 2016-2020. Outside of the Council, I undertook an MSC from September 2016 to August 2020, and had children in October 2015, June 2017 and one month after I stood down in June 2021. I worked in the same public sector organisation from before I was elected in 2014 until October 2020 when I moved to a private sector organisation. From October 2016 to October 2020 I worked 0.8 FTE (4 days per week).

As such my time was under a lot of pressure. I made use of the Council's childcare policy to fund a babysitter on evenings I had meetings at the children's bed time after the birth of my second child, who assisted my wife in putting the children to bed. I am appreciative of the efforts officers made in response to feedback to widen the definition of meetings to include non-public meetings as required in the routine nature of running an executive portfolio.

My public sector employer had a generous public service commitments policy. I was unable to make much use of this while a non-executive member as nearly all meetings and other activity were evening meetings with timings I could not dictate. As an executive member, I was able to schedule my regular meetings with officers during work time.

In addition to the formal council meetings is the wider community leadership role. This was often the part I felt I let down. There are also party commitments relating to campaigning which tie into this and with elections by thirds, this doesn't let up.

For me, ultimately there were not enough hours in the day and I had to prioritise my family. I do not regret this, but if course if we do not have representation from all parts of the community we will fail to represent the whole community. Whilst Milton Keynes Council is younger than average, there remains no room for complacency. Since standing down I have also progressed my career and now earn double what I used to.

Andy Reilly (Liberal Democrat 2018 - 2022)

I had already retired before I became a city councillor. I took it on expecting it to be a manageable and worthwhile part-time role that would give me an added interest in retirement. I greatly enjoyed my time on the Council and do miss it, but it was much more of a commitment than I had anticipated. I am in awe of councillors who also hold down a full-time job as it must be a considerable challenge.

In addition to full Council I was on the Planning Committee and two scrutiny committees. This was quite a workload as Planning Committee meets more frequently than other committees and has the occasional Planning Panel as well. As vice chair of one of the scrutiny committees I was also involved in committee preparation meetings.

I was also the Council's rep on the Council of Governors at Milton Keynes University Hospital. I found that to be a very important and interesting role as it coincided with the Covid pandemic. Add in the odd task-and-finish group and the commitment was significant.

Nevertheless, for a retired person it was manageable (even though it was more than I had expected). I stood down at the end of my term because my circumstances had changed, and the time commitment was no longer sustainable.

I support the idea of increasing the number of councillors as it should reduce the number of committees (and external bodies) that each councillor needs to cover.

John Bint (Conservative 2007 – 2021)

In terms of my view on how best the Council should respond to the continuing population growth of the City, I continue to believe that a large part of the work of a councillor is independent of the City's population or their ward population; it is linked to the range of services performed by the Council, and to the governance processes performed by councillors. Budget scrutiny, for example, is a process that consumes an amount of time irrespective of the population and the size of the budgets. Public transport takes an amount of councillors' time, irrespective of the number of buses, bus routes, passengers or budget. And so on.

The rest of a councillor's time is taken up with ward work that is directly related to the size of their ward electorate (as a good proxy for the size of their ward population). I took the view in 2012 (when we were discussing the changes that came into effect in 2014) that the total time spent on fulfilling the role of a Councillor was (on average) divided equally between these 2 activities. And therefore a (for example) 20% increase in ward population would generate a 10% increase in total workload, and therefore this should be addressed by a 10% increase in total number of Councillors.

You ask if the increase in workload was a factor in my personal decision to step down as a Ward Councillor in 2021, after 14 years. I had the privilege of representing some of the fastest-growing areas throughout my time as a councillor, and so for me, this constant growth in the number of streets, homes and people was part of the pleasure of this ward. In a sense, the development here is almost complete. I should add, rapid house-building not only creates more people with more issues, it creates major additional workload that is specific to new-build areas: school planning, missing signs on new streets, roads waiting ages (in some cases, years) for their final tarmac top surface, absence of litter bins, footpaths leading nowhere (until the next development is finished), public spaces not yet adopted and the developers refuse to cut the grass, and so on. So in my specific case, no, this growth in city population and councillor workload was not part of the decision to step down. But the increase in workload was very real, and I imagine it might easily have been a factor for some of my former colleagues on the Council.

Hannah O'Neill (Labour 2008-2021)

I was first elected at the age of 27 when I had no dependents and worked full time for a local charity. I was able to continue to work full time and carry out my duties as a ward councillor initially. However, even then, it was difficult to stay on top of the level of casework when representing a ward that is one of the most deprived in the country.

As my responsibilities on the Council grew, I had to start reducing my working hours, and in 2014 when I became Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Housing I had to reduce my hours further, squeezing a full time role into 28 hours.

My day job, ward work, campaigning expectations and executive role meant that I worked well into the night most nights and worked most weekends. In 2016 I had my daughter and in 2017 became a single mum. I had to rely heavily on family and supportive officers to continue to carry out my duties, without which I would have had to have stood down much sooner.

In 2019 I had my second child and my role on the Council had become almost all consuming leaving me no choice but to stand down from my day job and look for a genuine part time role. Lockdown really opened my eyes to just how much time I was spending away from the family and, especially as a blended family where my daughter would stay with her Dad every other weekend and one night a week, I realised there were days when I didn't even see her.

When the decision came to stand again in 2021, I chose to stand down. This was an incredibly tough decision, but one made for the right reasons. It was completely unsustainable for me to remain in the Executive, complete all the casework and campaigning and find a part time role whilst being a primary carer to my young family. Whilst I hope to make a return to local government one day it will not involve taking on responsibilities - this just seems impossible now.

Ben Nolan (Labour 2021 – 2023)

When I became a councillor, I had hoped that I could juggle the responsibilities alongside my young family and full-time work. I was one of the youngest councillors at MKCC and in a 57 seat council only a handful of us had children younger than school age - so I felt I was bringing an important perspective to the Council and improving the diversity of membership.

My local community is something I'm very passionate about and I had long been involved in community work via the local Labour Party, so it felt a natural extension. Whilst I was able to make all the core meetings, and officers were always very flexible about meeting me outside of work time, it was in the end too much to try and keep going, and I stepped down after just two years as a councillor.

I was representing Central Milton Keynes Ward, which meant I was covering residential and 'normal' casework, alongside significant planning, regeneration, and strategic placemaking initiatives, linked to significant development / growth. Finding the time to attend community events, meet with companies, planning staff etc. in a meaningful way, was ultimately too much for me, alongside my caring and job responsibilities. Because I felt that residents weren't getting enough of my time, I chose to step back. I would love to become a councillor in the future, but the sheer size and scale of the responsibilities at the moment in Milton Keynes would put me off until either my children have fully grown up, or I was not in full-time work. Both of these are unlikely to happen for some time, meaning that I wouldn't have the ability to stand for election again until I was significantly older. I would strongly support the idea of a slightly enlarged council to help reduce unsustainable workloads and open up becoming a councillor to people in similar life positions as me.

Ric Brackenbury (Liberal Democrat 2010-2021)

I served as a Councillor for 11 years, firstly in the Linford South Ward, then in the Campbell Park and Old Woughton Ward following the previous boundary review. When I first became a Councillor for a 2 member ward I had a full-time job and was single. Fast forward a decade, and I was married with two young children, still the full-time job, and now represented a 3-member ward with its own complexities: very different areas joined together in one ward.

The single biggest factor in realising it was time to stand down was the strain on my family. Each evening at a meeting, or distracted reading papers, meant less time with family, or less time when they were my focus. And in a marginal ward the expectations to be active and present in campaigning and community representation meant calls on my time well beyond the formal meetings. With so many split wards including my own, you end up having to cover the whole of a 3-member ward with a smaller team, as you are unlikely to work together in the same way you would with members of your own party. When you serve as a councillor, your family are part of that service, and I felt I had reached the bounds of what was reasonable, even with their support. I think I was one of 5 councillors to stand down close together with a similar age/family profile. We are fortunate in MK to have a good spread of Councillors across age/social ranges, but there does seem to be a drop-off of those with small children in particular. It's a crucial demographic for Milton Keynes and important to have at the table, especially with most councillors sitting on a decent number of committees due to the 3 sizeable political groups. So I would on balance support a modest increase in the number of councillors. Most wards are well-contested, there are a good number of people wishing to stand to contribute to the success of MK, and a small increase may make them that little more successful – and resilient – in post.

Information supporting this submission has been taken from a range of sources:

Local Government Association - [National census of local authority councillors 2022](#)

Milton Keynes City Council - [Constitution](#)

Milton Keynes City Council - [Meeting information \(modern.gov\)](#)

Milton Keynes City Council - [Strategy for 2050](#)

Milton Keynes City Council - [Council Plan](#)

Bedford and Milton Keynes - [Joint Strategic Needs Assessment](#)

Milton Keynes Community Foundation - [Vital Signs Report 2023](#)

Milton Keynes Child Poverty Commission - [Our Children Deserve Better](#)

Healthwatch Milton Keynes - [the Health of our City](#)

Office for National Statistics - [Subnational population projections for England: 2018-based](#)

Office for National Statistics - [Ward data, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

Office for National Statistics - [Facts and figures about people living in Milton Keynes](#)