

RESPONSE FROM PARISH COUNCILLOR & DISTRICT COUNCILLOR

Subject: Feedback on 2025 NHDC Community Governance Review for Knebworth Parish

Dear Community Governance Review team,

These are my own personal opinions as a Knebworth district and parish councillor and not necessarily the view of the Parish Council itself or other parish councillors. This has been discussed at the Parish Council and I believe the clerk has provided feedback to you.

For context I've been a parish councillor for a decade now and in this time have seen uncontested and contested elections, plus the co-option process operate. My feedback relates to the two proposed changes for Knebworth. In summary I support the electoral cycle change but I do not support a reduction in the number of parish councillors.

One - Aligning elections is a good cost saving idea

I agree that the changes to the electoral cycle make sense, as holding parish council elections alongside district ones saves the council overall thousands of pounds.

The district council, who pay for running the elections, is in a financial position where it needs to find millions of pounds of savings over the next five years to balance the books. This is well documented in the Council and Finance, Audit and Risk meetings and I'm acutely aware of in my role as Shadow Finance portfolio holder. Anything we can do to help save money will avoid less palatable cuts to services or council departments.

Holding parish and district council elections together also will help voter turn out levels for the parish council elections when they are contested, which is good for democracy.

Two - Reducing the number of Parish Councillors will, on balance, reduce local democracy effectiveness and risks making the Parish Council ineffective in a growing village

Having read through the Council and Cabinet reports on the draft proposals, I understand the intent behind reducing the number of Parish Councillors. However, I am concerned that it will lead to less diversity of people representing our community as well as ultimately nobody wanting to be a parish councillor any more due to an increasing unpaid workload spread across fewer people.

This may well lead to no voice and poorer outcomes for our community, especially if unitary authority changes for Hertfordshire mean that more power is concentrated centrally alongside this.

a. Fewer councillors may not mean better councillors or outcomes

I'm deeply concerned that reducing the number of parish councillors will result in a poorer service to the people of Knebworth, as people won't want to be on the parish council any more due to the workload and there will also be less diversity of people and opinions on it.

The intent behind the change is both to try and standardise it by size of parish, but also to ensure there are more competitive elections held. In the past quite often the parish council has been populated by people who stood and were elected by default, but only because less than 12 people put themselves forwards in the first place to be elected.

I can see that having 25% fewer councillors may lead to more contested elections, which is clearly good for democracy in principle. However it will all boil down to the number and calibre of people who are prepared to stand in the first place. If people don't want to stand as councillors, just changing the maximum number won't help.

b. The parish councillors share around a lot of unpaid work

People may think that fewer councillors is a good thing for their council tax bills, but at a parish level the councillors are of course all unpaid and essentially volunteer a lot of their time to help the community.

Knebworth is very big already for a village and parish. It is getting to the size of a small town. The workload of the parish council and councillors tends to reflect this. It also owns, and has to maintain several important buildings, land and other assets which all need overseeing. This includes the village hall, several recreation grounds and the pavilion, allotments, public conveniences, some footpaths, Norton Green common and The Station public house.

The council does have a paid clerk, part-time deputy clerk and groundsman, but the councillors get actively involved in several committees to run and oversee all these services, as well as speaking to the public regularly on specific issues as they arise daily on all the above assets.

In addition there is a large amount of effort on planning matters needed by councillors, which is particularly important given the proposed expansion of the village now and in the future with the strategic sites proposals from the Local Plan. The councillors also, with other volunteers, develop and enhance our Knebworth Neighbourhood Plan – which I have been previously instrumental in driving and know how much work it was.

c. Nobody may want to do this unpaid work in future

My fear is that the workload of the parish councillors as a whole will not reduce, in fact it will be going up as the village expands. By reducing the number of parish councillors it would mean the tasks are spread across fewer councillors. Considering what I said above, I can see a worst-case situation where few, if any, people want to stand to be councillors because of the work needed.

In that situation I'm not quite sure what happens, but ultimately if the parish council cannot function and gets disbanded then I think that would be bad for the community, with no local people able to represent our community's views and all the decisions for Knebworth made at a district or county level only.

This happens in other “unparished” areas or towns without a town council, and there are clearly moves to introduce more town councils via this review.

d. Diversity of councillors should be encouraged not reduced

Fewer councillors means a reduced range of people with different backgrounds, skills and experiences on a key decision-making body for the local community. I hope to see an increase in age, gender, racial, socio-economic and other forms of diversity on the council.

I believe that even with 12 councillors the parish council struggles with getting a fully representative diverse set of skills needed to run an effective organisation with a skeleton paid staff e.g. people with professional experience on legal, financial, planning, community engagement etc

In summary I cannot support the proposed reduction below 12 parish councillors for Knebworth.

Yours faithfully,

[NAME REDACTED]