

TITLE	Electoral Review – Phase 1 Submission
FOR CONSIDERATION BY	Council on 24 March 2022
WARD	None Specific
LEAD OFFICER	Andrew Moulton, Assistant Director Governance

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

Effective democratic representation through the submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) of the Council's preferred number of councillors from May 2024 onwards.

RECOMMENDATION

That Council agrees the phase 1 submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (as set out in Appendix A to the report) on the preferred number of Councillors of 54, as recommended by the Electoral Review Working Group at its meeting of 8 March 2022.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

The LGBCE is undertaking a review of the electoral arrangements in Wokingham Borough. Changes will come into effect from May 2024. The objective of the review is to ensure that the actual and projected (to 2028) increases in the electorate are reflected in the numbers of Councillors from May 2024. This is essential to ensure that the number of electors is closely aligned across all wards in the Borough. This will enable each vote to have equal weight and is the cornerstone of the democratic system.

The review process has two phases. Phase 1, which is the subject of the report, is to identify the number of Councillors that are required for the effective functioning of the Council and the effective representation of residents. The submission to LGBCE is required by 25 March 2022.

Phase 2 will decide on the ward boundaries including their names. Phase 2 will be broken down into an initial consultation where interested parties (including the Council) can submit warding patterns to the LGBCE which will take place from July to October 2022 with a further consultation on the LGBCE's final proposals from January to March 2023.

The current population of the Borough in 2020 as per the Office of National Statistics (ONS) is 173,045. The ONS estimates the 2028 population at 182,846. An Electoral Review Working Group (ERWG) has examined four options on the future size of the Council. The options consider a range of factors including representational, strategic leadership and accountability, community leadership, Councillor workload, and costs. Having reviewed the factual evidence compiled by officers, the methodology for developing options, and the relative merits of each option, the cross-party ERWG unanimously agreed at its meeting of 8 March 2022 that Option C (54 Councillors) is recommended to Council as the Council's submission to the LGBCE.

Background

1. Introduction

- 1.1 At its meeting of 17 February 2022, Council received an update on the LGBCE review and agreed to set up a cross-party Electoral Review Working Group (ERWG) to consider and recommend to Council an agreed position on the number of councillors required from May 2024.
- 1.2 The ERWG held two meetings to consider the evidence and produce the submission. At its meeting on the 28 February the ERWG decided that all options should be divisible by three to ensure compatibility with election by thirds. At its meeting on the 8 March it unanimously approved the recommendation to Council that the appropriate Council size, based on the evidence examined, was 54 Members.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009 established the LGBCE. The LGBCE has a responsibility to undertake reviews of the electoral arrangements of local authorities: the number of councillors, the names, number and boundaries of wards, and the number of councillors to be elected to each. The LGBCE is responsible for putting any changes to electoral arrangements into effect by submitting a Statutory Instrument for consideration by Parliament.
- 2.2 The LGBCE may make recommendations on:
- The total number of councillors to be elected to the Council;
 - The number of wards within an authority;
 - The number of councillors to be elected for each ward;
 - The name of the wards.
- 2.3 In carrying out a review, the LGBCE is required to have regard to:
- The need to secure equality of representation (i.e. the ratio of electors to councillors in each ward is, as nearly as possible, the same);
 - The need to reflect the identities and interests of local communities; and
 - The need to secure effective and convenient local government.

3. The review timetable

- 3.1 The indicative timetable is shown below:-

Stage/Action	Timescale
Preliminary Period Informal dialogue with local authority. Focus on gathering preliminary information including electorate forecasts and other electoral data. Commissioner-level involvement in briefing group leaders on issue of Council size. Meetings also held with officers, group leaders, and members.	June 2021 to February 2022

Phase 1 - Council size submission Deadline for submission by Council of proposals on Council size for the Commission to consider.	25 March 2022
Phase 1 - Council size decision LGBCE analyses submissions from local authority and/or political groups on Council size and takes a “minded to” decision on Council size.	25 March to July 2022
<u>Formal start of Review</u> Consultation on future warding arrangements LGBCE publishes its initial conclusions on Council size. General invitation to submit warding proposals based on LGBCE’s conclusions on Council size.	July to October 2022
Development of draft recommendations Analysis of all representations received. LGBCE reaches conclusions on its draft recommendations.	November to December 2022
Consultation on draft recommendations Publication by LGBCE of draft recommendations and public consultation on them.	January to March 2023
Final recommendations Analysis of all representations received. LGBCE reaches conclusions on its final recommendations and publishes.	June 2023
Order made Statutory Instrument approved.	Average is likely to be 4 months from being laid i.e. November 2023
New arrangements come into place for elections on	2 May 2024

4. Phase 1 Submission - Options Appraisal

4.1. The Electoral Review Working Group met on 28 February and 8 March to consider the relevant factors that determine council size as set out by the LGBCE.

4.2. The factors are:

- Residents per Councillor and Electors per Councillor (“representational load”)
- Democratic arrangements
- Councillor workload
- Cost

- 4.3. To determine “residents per Councillor,” Officers have calculated the forecast electorate in 2028 (see section 5 below) and benchmarked population against other local authorities in Berkshire and the Council’s CIPFA statistical “Nearest Neighbours.” Analysis of this benchmarking gives a range between 47 and 57 Councillors.
- 4.4. The Electorate per Councillor figure for WBC is 2,436 against a Berkshire Average of 2,496 and 3,100 against CIPFA nearest statistical neighbours. This shows that Wokingham Borough is closely aligned with other Berkshire authorities but less than our statistical neighbours. However, it is important to note that our statistical neighbours have a broad range of populations (29,990-377,981) and number of councillors (27-98). Using the Berkshire average, indicates a Council size of 53. However, the Borough is growing rapidly with electorate growth projected to be at least an additional 2.5% by 2028. Including this projected electorate growth indicates a Council size of 54.
- 4.5. The second factor requires the Council to consider its democratic arrangements including Executive, Scrutiny, other Committee, and representation on outside bodies. Officers have calculated the number of Councillors required to operate the current democratic arrangements giving a range between 48 and 54 Councillors. Democratic Services modelling showed that, in order to maintain effective governance at a reduced number of councillors, Committees would need to be reduced in size.
- 4.6. Councillor workload is evidenced through a survey of all Councillors that took place between 24 February and 3 March. 70% of Councillors responded to the survey. The results supported a Council size of 54 Members. The survey showed that currently Councillors are significantly older than the population they represent. 73% were 55 or over. 41% of Councillors are retired. Although there is significant variation in the hours worked per month amongst Councillors, the average was 74 hours per month. Councillors are deeply embedded in their communities playing a number of roles beyond that of Borough Councillors. 41% are also Town or Parish Councillors. They are active participants in their communities being school governors, charity trustees, members of the fire authority, local hospital, members of fostering panels and attend Neighbourhood Action Groups.
- 4.7. In the survey, Councillors expressed concern about increases in workload that would arise if there was a reduction in the numbers of Councillors.
- 4.8. The costs have been modelled on Members Allowances.
- 4.9. The Council has considered four options in a detailed study of the issues on the future size of the Council.
- 4.10. The four options are outlined below:
 - Option A: Reduction by six Councillors to a Council size of 48
 - Option B: Reduction by three Councillors to a Council size of 51
 - Option C: Retain the same number of Councillors, Council size of 54
 - Option D: Increase by 3 to a Council size of 57

4.11. While acknowledging that each authority is as unique as the communities that it serves, in reviewing each of these factors, the Council has benchmarked with other local authorities.

	Option A	Option B	Option C	Option D
Council Size	48	51	54	57
Representational load	Highest in Berkshire	Highest in Berkshire	Average in 2028	Current ratio retained in 2028
CIPFA Nearest Neighbours	Average	Above average	Above average	Well above average
Effective Governance	Would require a reduction in membership of 4 Committees	Would require a reduction in membership of 3 Committees	Proven effective Committee Governance	Proven effective Committee Governance
Councillor Workload	Increased workload	Increased workload	Slight increase in workload due to electorate increase	Same workload
Costs	Negligible savings	Negligible savings	Same	Increase

4.12. The ERWG expressed reservations about reducing the number of Councillors as it would negatively impact the ability to attract people from all parts of the community to stand for election, including those in full time employment, or with caring responsibilities. A reduction in the numbers of Councillors, and subsequent increase in the workload, would limit the Council to represent the communities it serves.

4.13. The cross- party working group was also keen to ensure that Councillors continue to play an active role in their communities recognising that Councillors who are engaged in other community leadership roles can help Councillors to represent their communities more effectively. The group also thinks that Councillors should have capacity to take up roles on outside bodies to enable the Council to have a strong voice locally, regionally and nationally.

4.14. Having reviewed the options the Electoral Review Working Group unanimously recommends that Council agrees Option C as the proposal to the LGBCE.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

	How much will it Cost/ (Save)	Is there sufficient funding – if not quantify the Shortfall	Revenue or Capital?
Current Financial Year (Year 1)	£0	Yes	Revenue
Next Financial Year (Year 2)	£0	Yes	Revenue
Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£0	Yes	Revenue

Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision

There are no other financial implications associated with this report.

List of Background Papers

None

Contact Andrew Moulton	Service Governance Services
Telephone No 07747 777298	Email andrew.moulton@wokingham.gov.uk
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