

TITLE Council Submission to Local Government Boundary Commission for England Consultation

FOR CONSIDERATION BY Council on 20 October 2022

WARD (All Wards);

LEAD OFFICER Chief Executive - Susan Parsonage

OUTCOME / BENEFITS TO THE COMMUNITY

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) is the independent body that is responsible for deciding the boundaries between the wards of Wokingham borough. It is reviewing Wokingham borough to make sure councillors represent about the same number of electors, and that ward arrangements help the council work effectively. It wants to be sure that its proposals reflect community ties and identities.

RECOMMENDATION

That Council approves its submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission (LGBCE) as recommended by the Electoral Review Working Group and set out in Appendix 1 and the accompanying maps.

SUMMARY OF REPORT

A new pattern of wards is being developed for Wokingham Borough Council.

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) is an independent body accountable to Parliament. It recommends fair electoral and boundary arrangements for local authorities in England. In doing so, it aims to

- Make sure that, within an authority, each councillor represents a similar number of electors
- Reflect the electoral cycle so that each ward is represented by three councillors
- Create boundaries that are appropriate, and reflect community ties and identities
- Deliver reviews informed by local needs, views and circumstances

The LGBCE has decided that the number of councillors in Wokingham should be 54, the same as now. It wants to hear what residents and organisations such as the Borough Council think about their local area. A 10 week consultation inviting proposals is running until 7 November 2022.

A cross-party working group of councillors has considered future warding arrangements taking into account the LGBCE criteria and has put forward the submission set out at Appendix 1.

The LGBCE will consider the Council's proposal alongside those received from other bodies and individuals before formulating its draft recommendations which will be published on 7 February 2023. A further period of consultation will take place from 7 February to 17 April 2023 before the LGBCE's final recommendations are published on

27 June 2023. Changes will come into effect from May 2024 when all 54 seats will be elected.

Background

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).

On the 24th March, the Council agreed the Phase 1 submission on the number of Councillors as 54 Members. On the 30th August, the LGBCE supported this proposal and launched their consultation on warding arrangements on this basis. The consultation is open to anyone to submit a proposal prior to the deadline on the 7th November 2022.

The ERWG met on the 25th July, 17th August, 12th September and 27th September to discuss the proposal and work through the options.

LGBCE Timeline

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
Formal start of Review 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.	August to November 2022
Development of draft recommendations Analysis of all representations received. LGBCE reaches conclusions on its draft recommendations.	December to January 2023
Consultation on draft recommendations	7 February to 17 April 2023

Publication by LGBCE of draft recommendations and public consultation on them.	
Final recommendations Analysis of all representations received. LGBCE reaches conclusions on its final recommendations and publishes.	27 June 2023
Order made Statutory Instrument approved.	Average likely to be 4 months from being laid i.e. November 2023
New arrangements come into place for elections on	2 May 2024

Analysis of Issues

The Electoral Review Working Group has agreed this submission. The submission outlines a pattern of warding arrangements and maps that reflect the LGBCE criteria of:

- Delivering electoral equality for local voters – this means ensuring that each local councillor represents roughly the same number of people so that the value of your vote is the same regardless of where you live in the local authority area.
- Reflecting the interests and identities of local communities – this means establishing electoral arrangements which, as far as possible, maintain local ties and where boundaries are easily identifiable.
- Promoting effective and convenient local government – this means ensuring that the new wards or electoral divisions can be represented effectively by their elected representative(s) and that the new electoral arrangements as a whole allow the local authority to conduct its business effectively. In addition, we must also ensure that the pattern of wards reflects the electoral cycle of the council as shown below.

There are several areas where the ERWG was able to achieve unanimity, and these have been reflected in the submission. Where members of the group had alternative views, we have included these options.

The LGBCE guidance states, “The law states that where a council hold elections in three years out of every four where a third of councillors are elected at each election (‘by thirds’), we should seek to deliver a pattern of three-member wards across a district. This means that every voter will have an equal opportunity to influence the makeup of the council at each election.”

“We will only move away from such a pattern where a three-member ward would significantly undermine our other obligations under the law, namely: to deliver electoral equality, reflect community interests and identities and promote effective and convenient local government.”

The ERWG noted that there were a small number of exceptional examples in other Councils where the LGBCE has accepted proposals that include one and two member wards. There was a view amongst some members of the ERWG that the Hurst and Swallowfield areas met these exceptions. Some members of the ERWG felt that both areas were unique communities that shared little affinity with the surrounding areas. However, the majority of members of the ERWG felt that, although the communities were distinct, they had sufficient affinity with the neighbouring town and villages that a three-member ward would meet the criteria and ensure electoral equity. We have provided both options to the LGBCE.

The ERWG has concluded that the submission and the options within it, meet the requirements set by the LGBCE for an effective warding arrangement for the Borough. All the options meet electoral equality requirements with each proposed ward within the +/- 10% threshold. The ERWG believes that the warding arrangements proposed reflect the local communities. As far as possible, the proposals respect existing town and parish boundaries and reflect the development of new communities in the Strategic Development Locations (Shinfield and Arborfield Garrison) in the south of the borough. The warding arrangements will present some challenges for electoral administration where new warding patterns are not co-terminus with parish boundaries and the proposed Parliamentary boundaries (currently under consideration). This will require new polling districts. Officers have confirmed that these can be accommodated (largely through the expansion of existing polling districts).

Ward Naming

The guidance provided by the LGBCE sets out its approach to the naming of wards. It recommends that where wards remain largely unchanged the existing name should be retained unless a good reason is provided to justify the change.

In designing the pattern of wards consideration has been given to ward names that reflect continuity of community identification in respect of the proposed wards as well as other factors such as parish/village names, local community landmarks and smaller area names. The Council has also given consideration to whether existing ward names are still relevant where community identities may have changed over time. The rationale for each name chosen has been set out in Appendix 1.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE RECOMMENDATION

The Council faces severe funding pressures, particularly in the face of the COVID-19 crisis. It is therefore imperative that Council resources are focused on the vulnerable and on its highest priorities.

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

Following Financial Year (Year 3)	£Nil	Yes	Revenue
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Other financial information relevant to the Recommendation/Decision
None.

Cross-Council Implications (how does this decision impact on other Council services, including properties and priorities?)
The Electoral Review will result in all-out local borough elections in May 2024 which will be a significant event requiring careful planning and delivery with support from services across the Council.

Public Sector Equality Duty
The outcome of the Review will determine the number of councillors for the Borough as well as both the number of wards and ward boundaries, allowing for the most effective representation of the Borough's diverse communities.

Climate Emergency – This Council has declared a climate emergency and is committed to playing as full a role as possible – leading by example as well as by exhortation – in achieving a carbon neutral Wokingham Borough by 2030
There are no specific impacts of this decision on the Council's carbon neutral objective.

Reasons for considering the report in Part 2
Not Applicable

List of Background Papers
Council Submission on Warding Arrangements Detailed Ward Maps Council Submission on Council Size

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