



## Report to Standards and General Purposes Committee

**Date:** 18 January 2024

**Title:** **High Wycombe Community Governance Review**

**Relevant councillor(s):**

**Author and/or contact officer:** Nick Graham, Service Director, Legal and Democratic.  
Contact officer Glenn Watson, Principal Governance Officer.

**Ward(s) affected:**

**Recommendations:**

- 1) To receive the recommendations of the Community Governance Working Group and approve:**
  - a. the draft Terms of Reference for the Review (annex 1)**
  - b. the draft timescale for the Review (annex 2)**
  - c. the draft consultation and communications plan for the Review (annex 3)**
- 2) To ask the Director of Legal and Democratic Services formally to commence the Review by publishing the approved Terms of Reference and to begin the consultation accordingly.**

### **1. Reason for decision:**

1.1 In August 2023, the Committee agreed to undertake a Community Governance Review of the unparished area of High Wycombe. In doing so, a cross-party Councillor Working Group of this Committee was established to make recommendations on the scope of the review, the timeframe for it and the engagement plan for consulting upon it. The Committee is asked to consider the recommendations on each of these points.

### **2. Background – community governance reviews**

2.1 A community governance review concerns parish governance arrangements. Typically reviews can consider:

- a) Creating, merging, altering or abolishing parishes;
- b) The naming of parishes and the style of new parishes;
- c) The electoral arrangements for parish councils (the ordinary year of election; council size; the number of councillors to be elected to the council , and parish warding);  
and
- d) The grouping parishes under a common parish council or de-grouping parishes.

2.2 In this particular review, however, the consideration is whether the existing governance arrangements in the unparished area of High Wycombe are sufficient or whether the whole of the High Wycombe area should formally be parished and a town council created.

### **3. Key criteria for a Community Governance Review**

3.1 In law, the outcome of a Community Governance Review must:

- a) reflect the identities and interests of the communities in that area; and
- b) be effective and convenient.

3.2 The Council must also consider:

- c) any other arrangements... that have already been made or that could be made for the purposes of community representation or community engagement in respect of the area under review.

3.3 These must be the guiding criteria for the Review and any valid outcome from it.

### **4. Recommendations of the Working Group**

4.1 The cross-party Working Group met on four occasions to frame its recommendations: 26 September, 19 October, 9 November and 7 December 2023.

#### **Terms of Reference**

4.2 Terms of Reference are required for every Community Governance Review. These set out what the Review will consider and the statutory and other considerations that apply. The Working Group's recommended Terms of Reference are at **Annex 1**.

4.3 The **options** put forward by the Working Group deal squarely with the binary question of whether or not the unparished area of High Wycombe should be parished. It recommends that the two options for consultation should therefore be:

- a) whether the existing governance arrangements for the area of High Wycombe are sufficient or could be improved; OR
- b) whether the currently unparished area of High Wycombe should be parished and so have a town council for the whole area

4.4 Rationale: Option a) follows the statutory guidance that says consideration should be given, within a Review, as to whether the current arrangements are sufficient or could be improved without the need for any formal change in governance structures. Current arrangements include the High Wycombe Town Committee of Buckinghamshire Council, the Charter Trustees for High Wycombe and this Council's High Wycombe Community Board plus the network of community groups and associations.

4.5 Rationale: Option b) deals with the fact that High Wycombe is the only unparished town within Buckinghamshire. It asks whether formally parishing the area would meet local identity. Creating a parish would, in law, necessarily mean establishing a town council and Option b) seeks views on whether this would be effective or desirable.

4.6 The Terms of Reference follow best practice guidance in terms of format. They provide the background to the Review, the key criteria and the timeline for it. They set out what the Review is about and how it will be conducted.

### Timeline

4.7 **Annex 2** sets out the recommended timeline for the Review. This again follows best practice, including two consultations – one beginning in February 2024 on the Terms of Reference; and a second beginning in July 2024 on the Draft Recommendations arising from a consideration of the initial consultation responses.

4.8 The Council is conducting the Review under its discretionary power. As such it is not bound to a particular timeframe. However, best practice is that a Review should be concluded over a 12-month period beginning with the publication of the Terms of Reference and ending with the publication of Final Recommendations. The recommendation is that Review should be concluded within 12 months. **Annex 2** sets out the various stages including the periods of public consultation. (Flexibility may be needed if a General Election occurs during 2024 which might affect the timing of the second consultation).

### Consultation and engagement

4.9 **Annex 3** sets out the proposed Consultation and Communications Plan for seeking local and stakeholder views on the options in the Terms of Reference. A copy of the proposed survey is included. The Council must consult local electors in the unparished area together with any stakeholders the Council considers appropriate.

4.10 The Consultation and Communications Plan builds on this and proposes a sustainable, inclusive and comprehensive consultation plan proposing a range methods based on previous engagement in this area and the nature of the communities. Other formats and languages would be available on request. The methods would include:

- A household postal survey with free return and information booklet
- Online survey

- Email or written response
- Multi-channel awareness raising including leaflets, roller banners, outdoor adverts and radio advertisements on several channels; plus social media.

## **5. Next steps**

5.1 If the Committee approves the Terms of Reference, Timeline and Consultation Plan, the next steps would be:

- a) The publication of the Terms of Reference – shortly after this meeting
- b) The commencement of the first period of consultation (on the options in the Terms of Reference) – from Monday 12 February to Sunday 7 April inclusive.

5.2 Following the consultation the cross-party Working Group would review the responses and frame some Draft Recommendations and a second Consultation Plan for this Committee. It would be for the Committee to approve any Draft Recommendations and second Consultation Plan. On the conclusion of the second consultation, the Working Group would similarly recommend Final Recommendations as appropriate for approval by the Committee.

## **6. Legal and financial implications**

6.1 Section 82 of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007 authorises a principal council to commission a community governance review. The Act requires a Council to publish Terms of Reference for a review and to consult local electors within the area of the proposals and any other stakeholders the Council deems appropriate. This recommendations in this report fulfil these requirements.

6.2 The immediate financial implications of this report would be the cost of undertaking the initial consultation. If the recommended Consultation and Communication Plan is adopted, the cost would be approximately £35,000. This would not be attributed to the special expenses for High Wycombe.

6.3 In the event that a parish/town council was ultimately created as a result of this process, there would be significant financial implications. An analysis of the likely costs, benchmarked against other recent examples locally and nationally, has been undertaken. These would be set out more fully, as appropriate, in any Draft Recommendations following the first consultation and would not directly occur as a result of the recommendations in this report.

6.4 The proposed consultation accords with the Gunning principles for good consultation practice. It has been constructed with an appreciation of the demography of the High Wycombe area. It maximises inclusivity through the proposed use of several

communication channels, not simply online, and with the offer to translate key documents into other languages.

