



## Standards and General Purposes Committee minutes

Minutes of the meeting of the Standards and General Purposes Committee held on Thursday 17 March 2022 in The Oculus, Buckinghamshire Council, Gatehouse Road, Aylesbury HP19 8FF, commencing at 2.00 pm and concluding at 2.43 pm.

### Members present

T Broom, M Baldwin, R Carington, B Chapple OBE, S Chhokar, P Gomm, T Green, R Matthews, H Mordue, C Oliver, L Smith BEM, M Smith and D Thompson

### Apologies

S Lambert

### Agenda Item

#### **1 Apologies**

Apologies were received from Cllr S Lambert.

#### **2 Minutes**

The Minutes of the Meeting held on 2 December 2021 were agreed as a correct record.

#### **3 Declarations of Interest**

There were no declarations of interest.

#### **4 Buckinghamshire Electoral Review**

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) had begun a consultation on the second stage of the electoral review of Buckinghamshire Council. The LGBCE was seeking views on a pattern of wards that should apply from the 2025 local election. This followed the previous consultation on 'council size' by the LGBCE, which was now minded to recommend a membership of 98 councillors. The consultation ran until 4 April (with Full Council approval scheduled for 27 April). However the Commission would like to see a draft proposal by 4 April. The Electoral Review Working Group were asked to develop a response to the consultation, making a recommendation to the Standards and General Purposes Sub-Committee as to a preferred pattern of wards, which had been arranged for 17 March 2022. Members were informed that they were also welcome to provide comments to the LGBCE individually as well as through the Electoral Review Working Group.

The Principal Governance Officer reported that the LGBCE had issued guidance on

'How to propose a pattern of wards' which was attached at Annex 1. There were three criteria which a proposal must address:-

- i) **Delivering electoral equality for local voters** – ensuring that each local councillor represents roughly the same number of electors so that the value of a vote is the same regardless of where a person lives in the local authority area.
- ii) **Reflecting the interests and identities of local communities** – establishing electoral arrangements which, as far as possible, maintain local ties and where boundaries were easily identifiable.
- iii) **Promoting effective and convenient local government** – ensuring that the new wards can be represented effectively by their elected representative(s), allowed the authority to conduct its business effectively; and adequately reflected the electoral cycle of the council.

Information was also provided on the electorate figures and mapping. The LGBCE had published electorate figures for consultees to use in framing a response. This was supplied to them by the Council. To achieve electoral equality, each councillor must represent roughly the same number of electors. The 2021 electorate for Buckinghamshire is 410,789. Based on a council size of 98, this equated to an average electorate per councillor of 4,521.

The 'electoral variance' in this context was the extent to which any proposed ward would result in a ratio of +/- 10%: i.e. above or below 4,521 electors per councillor. Annex 2 indicated what the electoral variance would be in such a scenario: 7 of the proposed wards would have a variance of either +/- 10%. In such a case, Members would ultimately need to suggest how the wards could be adjusted to achieve an acceptable electoral variance.

The Working Group of the full committee agreed to focus on Buckinghamshire as a whole, rather than become involved in detailed discussions of each individual ward – as there would be further opportunities to address details as part of the next phase of the review.

The LGBCE was invited to deliver briefings to all Buckinghamshire Councillors, and to parish and town councils, on the statutory criteria for a review. These took place on 28 February and 7 March for this Council, and 2 March and 9 March for parish and town councils.

The Electoral Review Working Group of this Committee had met twice, once online (24 February) and once in person (3 March) to work up a set of draft proposals for consideration by this Committee.

The Working Group:-

- had proposed a pattern of 50 wards based, largely, on two member representation for each ward, achieving 98 councillors overall apart from two

wards where there would be single representation. The list of proposed wards and their names was attached at Annex 1 of the report. An interactive map was available.

- had been mindful that 'one size' does not fit all. As a new unitary authority, it was important that the pattern of wards supports communities and provides the best possible reflection of community identity and effective government. This had resulted in a proposal that included a mix of one- and two member representation per ward.
- had commented that the review represented an opportunity to provide a stable basis for electoral representation following a period of considerable structural change in local governance across Buckinghamshire. In framing its proposals, the Working Group had not thought it necessary to disregard existing ward arrangements where these already reflected good community identity. Equally it did not simply follow existing structures as an easy rule. Rather, each ward had been proposed based on the best balance of the three statutory criteria.
- was aware that there were a small number of areas where further detailed work on certain boundaries was potentially necessary to achieve better community identity. The Group was recommending that the Council engaged with the LGBCE, and stakeholders, on these proposals, with a view to working them up in more detail, particularly in the next phase of the consultation.

During discussion the following comments were made by a Member:-

- In terms of next steps the Member wanted to make sure that there would be opportunity at the next stage to make changes and that by agreeing to this first stage, this would not restrict suggestions later in the process. Given that there was time before early April it would be helpful to look at wards in more detail now to provide reassurance. This should be undertaken by the Working Group and recorded.
- On Recommendation 2, the Member referred to what extent do the powers of delegation extend to the Service Director for Legal and Democratic Services, "in consultation with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Committee..."? The Member expressed concern that this recommendation enabled material changes to the draft submission without further recourse to the Electoral Review Working Group.
- On Recommendation 4, the Member asked who would determine if it was necessary for the Electoral Review Working Group to meet at further stages of the Review process? A preference would be to include this in the delegated authority to the Service Director for Legal and Democratic Services and notified to the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Committee.
- On Paragraph 1.4, the Member asked whether the Ward Pattern proposed in the draft submission attached to the report reflect the output from the two Electoral Review Working Group meetings or was the output subsequently amended without further review by that Group?

- On Paragraph 4.5, it stated that further detailed work was necessary on certain boundaries to achieve better community identity. The Member asked whether a list could be provided of those areas identified to Group Leaders or to Members more widely.

The Chairman responded on process saying that the Council knew there was going to be a second phase of consultation which should commence in July which would look at that detailed work. Phase 1 related to submitting a broad warding pattern. The second phase would be based on proposals from the Local Government Boundary Commission for England once it had reviewed submissions and made its own local investigations. This was why it was important to put something forward at this stage so that the Council had an input before the Boundary Commission arrived at its own proposal, and to give the Council the opportunity to shape it. In terms of Recommendation 4 the Working Group would continue to operate and would start to look at detailed work now before the second phase of the consultation. He referred to concerns about changes made to the proposal after the Working Group had met which was to Booker, Cressex and Castlefield. The reason for this was because of the volume of data being scrutinised; when the revised figures had been put into the spreadsheet there was a higher variance than expected so the Chairman had requested that two streets be moved into another ward based in the interest of electoral equality. These kind of issues needed to be looked at in more detail in the second stage.

The Principal Governance Officer reported that in terms of the delegation to the Service Director this was purely on presentational issues to send to the Boundary Commission and there would not be any additional changes. He also added further reasons why it would be helpful for the Working Group to meet: if the Boundary Commission came back with any questions where issues had been raised in the consultation by local bodies; and then during the next consultative phase which would run from 5 July to 12 September 2022. The proposal then may be based on the Council's submission or it could be a different proposal; in either case the Working Group would be well placed to examine the detail and make recommendations as to the Council's response.

The Member asked if any further changes could be made before April, however the Chairman reported that if anything was changed it would have to be considered by a further meeting of the Standards and General Purposes Committee and there was not enough time for amendments. The Chairman offered to provide briefings to Members, if requested during the remaining phases to ensure an open and transparent process.

Following this discussion some further points were made:-

- A Member made reference to the point that a comment had been made that the Boundary Commission were minded to agree 98 councillors which some Members were not happy with. This Committee had recommended 120 councillors which they felt was more representative of workload and would

attract more candidates to stand for election as councillors, particularly those who work. He also expressed concern that the Boundary Commission were skilled at numbers but obviously needed to rely on the consultation to listen to local communities. In response it was noted that the Boundary Commission had made a decision on 98 councillors following an extended consultation period. This was now a given criteria. Any proposal from the Council that suggested anything other than a minor difference would likely be set aside by the Boundary Commission as it was not compliant with the parameters they have set for the consultation. If a good case was put forward then the Boundary Commission may consider increasing the number e.g. to 99 councillors.

- The Member also expressed concern about the 48 two member wards, and the two single member wards, and commented that there could be more areas that were better suited to one or three member wards and hoped that there would be flexibility to address this in the second stage. In response it was noted that in the second stage if the Commission was minded to follow the Council's proposal, then further revision may be possible. This was why the proposal noted that there were some areas such as Wycombe and Aylesbury that Members may wish to flag up and work on further with the Boundary Commission.
- A Member commented that the role of the councillor was an evolving one and there were now alternative ways of working. He supported the proposal and the basic parameters that had been set out. The majority of wards would work well with the two councillor model and where not, other alternative proposals could be put forward in discussion with local communities.
- A Member emphasised that it was important to put forward a good case to the Boundary Commission based on a balance of the criteria.
- Once a final decision had been made by the Commission, there was no right of appeal.

The Chairman thanked the officer team for providing detailed support at short notice and also thanked Members for their constructive comments and support.

The following recommendations were proposed by Cllr B Chapple, seconded by Cllr S Chokkar and were agreed by the Committee, with two abstentions.

**RECOMMENDED to Full Council that:-**

**(1) the draft submission be approved, in principle, to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England on a future pattern of wards for Buckinghamshire Council based on the approach in paragraph 4 and Annex 1 of the report; and**

**(2) the finalising of the draft submission, based on this proposal, be delegated to the Service Director for Legal and Democratic Services, in consultation with the Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Committee and in liaison as necessary with the Commission; and**

**(3) the proposal be endorsed as the basis of the Council's formal submission, at this Stage of the Electoral Review process; and**

**(4) the Electoral Review Working Group of this Committee continues to meet as necessary, to consider any ongoing liaison with, or proposals from, the Commission at further stages of the Review process.**

**5 Date of next meeting**  
Thursday 14 April 2022 at 2pm