



Report to Standards and General Purposes Committee

Date:	18 January 2024
Title:	Approach to considering requests for Community Governance Reviews
Relevant councillor(s):	All councillors
Author and/or contact officer:	Nick Graham, Service Director, Legal and Democratic. Contact officer Mat Bloxham, Electoral Services Manager and Glenn Watson, Principal Governance Officer.
Ward(s) affected:	All wards
Recommendation:	To agree the approach to reviewing proposals to change parish areas or electoral arrangements via a Community Governance Review that are received by the Council (as set out in paragraphs 2.4 to 2.6).

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 As reported to the Standards and General Purposes Committee meeting on 24 August 2023, the Council has received enquiries from parish councils and the public seeking to make changes to parish electoral arrangements. To date, five requests have been received.
- 1.2 Whilst the process for conducting a Community Governance Review is set out in legislation and statutory guidance, this report proposes an approach to how Community Governance Review requests that are received by the Council, except those with a petition, will be considered, to ensure consistency and provide greater clarity on the approach that will be followed. In summary, it is proposed that in addition to meeting the legislative requirements and statutory guidance, any proposal must demonstrate local support and where this involves changing Council size that the request is justified e.g. by taking account of the number and duration of any unfilled casual vacancies.

- 1.3 The Committee has appointed a cross-party Councillor Working Group to make recommendations to this Committee on all proposals for a Community Governance Review. The Terms of Reference are in Appendix 1. The rules for handling formal petitions are clear. However, the Committee is asked to give some clarity to the thresholds or criteria for the handling of community-based requests not made via a petition.

2. Content of the report

When the Council may undertake a CGR

- 2.1 A principal council must undertake a review when it is presented with a valid community governance petition by local government electors from the petition area. The signature thresholds for a valid petition are show in the table below:

Petition Area	Signatures required
Less than 500 electors	At least 37.5% of the electors
500 to 2,499 electors	At least 187 of the electors
More than 2,500 electors	At least 7.5% of the electors

- 2.2 Principal councils may undertake a CGR of any part of the area at any time. This may be in response to receiving a reasonable request for a review, from residents or a parish council for example, or because it decides a review is required, such as where there have been population changes e.g. arising from a new development.
- 2.3 When deciding whether to carry out a review in response to a request the council must first determine whether the request is reasonable. A request can refer to changes to population or anomalous boundaries. A request is considered unreasonable if it disrupts community cohesion or does not result in effective and convenient local government arrangements.
- 2.4 It is recommended that the Committee require that all CGR proposals, similarly to the requirements of a petition, demonstrate local support. This could include for example evidence of representations received from residents or community organisations in support of the proposal. The aim of this is to ensure that any proposed change is justified prior to a CGR being carried out and thereby ensure that council resources required for the conduct of a CGR are utilised efficiently. Unlike a petition, there is no prescribed threshold, however support should be reasonable and proportionate to the change proposed.

- 2.5 In addition to the paragraph above, it is recommended that the Council takes into account the duration and number of casual vacancies when considering a request to change Council size. Proposals to change Council size should be justified in light of the number and duration of casual vacancies in preceding years. This is to ensure that the existing Council size is fully utilised before a review is carried out. This is consistent with the statutory objectives and aims to ensure that proposals provide an improvement on the status quo.
- 2.6 It is suggested that before the Working Group gives formal consideration to a request, it is assured of the following:
- a. Proposals purporting to come from a parish council or councils should be based on a formal resolution of at least one of those councils;*
 - b. Proposals purporting to come from individuals or community groups should demonstrate wider support and that any existing parish councils affected by the proposal have already been consulted*
 - c. Where a proposal suggests an increase in councillor numbers, a commentary is supplied on how this is justified with regard to the council's success or otherwise in filling casual vacancies.*
- 2.7 If these principles are accepted, the Council's web pages on community governance reviews, and the advice given to interested parties, can be updated accordingly to manage expectations. The Working Group can apply them in framing its recommendations.

3. Timetable

- 3.1 Following approval of the approach to reviewing CGR proposals, as set out in this report, the cross-party Councillor Working Group will apply the principles to the requests currently in hand. The Standards and General Purposes Committee will then receive a report at the next meeting on 4 April 2024 detailing the Group's recommendations on any such CGR proposals received to date, along with a proposed timetable for conducting any reviews that are taken forward.