



Report to Standards and General Purposes Committee

Date: 2 July 2020

Title: Local Government Boundary Commission for England – Electoral Review of Buckinghamshire Council

Author and/or contact officer:

Ward(s) affected: All

Recommendations:

The Committee is asked: -

- 1. To note the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's (LGBCE) indication that it is proposed to undertake an Electoral Review of Buckinghamshire**
- 2. To authorise the Monitoring Officer to agree the proposed timetable for the Review process with the LGBCE**
- 3. To establish a Member working group to oversee the work of officers in the preparation of the statistical and other information required by the LGBCE and to approve the Terms of Reference for that working group (at Appendix 1)**
- 4. To authorise officers, in consultation with the working group, to develop a communication and engagement plan for Members, Parish Councils, residents and other stakeholders to maximise participation in the Electoral Review**
- 5. To authorise the Monitoring Officer, in consultation with the working group, to prepare the necessary submissions to the LGBCE for consideration and approval by the Standards & General Purpose Committee**
- 6. To defer the consideration of the decision for the Community Governance Reviews for High Wycombe and Longwick-cum-Ilmer until the completion of the Electoral Review or until such time as the LGBCE consider it appropriate, whichever the sooner**

7. To consider any future Community Governance Review requests in accordance with the LGBCE advice that Community Governance Reviews should only be approved in very exceptional circumstances during the period of the Electoral Review

Reason for decision: To ensure the Council has the appropriate governance in place to prepare and submit the necessary statistical and other information to enable the LGBCE to conduct the Review and to facilitate the participation of Members, Parish Councils, residents and other stakeholders in the Review in accordance with the LGBCE's guidance.

Background

- 1.1. With the establishment of the new unitary Council the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) has indicated that it intends to conduct an electoral review of Buckinghamshire Council.
- 1.2. Preliminary discussions have taken place with the Chairman and Chief Executive of the LGBCE to understand the arrangements for such a review. Through these discussions, it has been established that:
 - the model of 147 members will remain in place for the 2021 elections, with the wards based on the former county council divisional boundaries;
 - The electoral review will examine Buckinghamshire Council's electoral arrangements and cover the following areas:
 - the total number of members to be elected to the Council;
 - the number and boundaries of future electoral divisions;
 - the number of councillors representing each electoral division; and
 - the name of each electoral division.
 - The outcome of the Electoral Review will take effect from the 2025 elections
- 1.3. A principal aim of the review is to deliver electoral equality across the local authority area by ensuring that all councillors represent a similar number of voters.
- 1.4. The Commission has published detailed technical guidance for those who wish to participate in the review.
- 1.5. The LGBCE is required by law to be impartial, with its decisions based on evidence and reason. The representations of all those taking part in the review are treated equally and without bias.

Timescales



1.6. The LGBCE have indicated that any changes will not come into effect until the 2025 Buckinghamshire Council elections but the precise timeframe for the stages of the Reviews is yet to be confirmed. The table in paragraph 1.8 gives an indication of the timescales the LGBCE normally works to when conducting Reviews.

1.7. The following table is an extract from the LGBCE’s Technical Guidance.

Figure 1: Stages for electoral reviews

Stage	Action	Duration*
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 the issue of council size. Meetings also held with officers, group leaders, full council and, where applicable, parish and town councils. At the end of this process, the council under review and its political groups should submit their council size proposals for the Commission to consider.	Up to 6 months in advance of formal start of review
Council size decision	Commission analyses submissions from local authority and/or political groups on council size and takes a 'minded to' decision on council size.	5 weeks
Formal start of review		
Consultation on future warding/division arrangements	The Commission publishes its initial conclusions on council size. General invitation to submit warding/division proposals based on Commission’s conclusions on council size.	12 weeks
Development of draft recommendations	Analysis of all representations received. The Commission reaches conclusions on its draft recommendations.	12 weeks

1.8. The Standards & General Purpose Committee has delegated authority under its terms of reference to deal with election arrangements, however, the LGBCE’s guidance makes clear that the Council will need to prepare extensive information for consideration by the LGBCE and facilitate the involvement of all relevant stakeholders. It is therefore suggested that the Committee establishes a Member working group who can oversee the preparation of the relevant information and a communication and engagement plan. The draft terms of reference for the Member working group is attached at Appendix 1.

1.9. The submission of the relevant information required by the LGBCE will be approved by the Standards & General Purposes Committee.

Implications for Parish Councils

1.10. The role of the LGBCE in the creation, abolition or amendments to the external boundaries of Parish Councils is limited. The LGBCE Technical Guidance indicates that Parish Councils are crucial in the work of the LGBCE in conducting a review and it is important that Parish Councils' involvement in the Electoral Review is actively encouraged.

1.11. However, the Guidance goes on to state that:

'Very exceptionally, it may be appropriate for a local authority to undertake community governance review at the same time as an electoral review of the area is being conducted. However, this can cause administrative difficulties for us and confusion for the local people affected, and any authority contemplating this approach is strongly advised to discuss this with us in advance.'

1.12. On the 7 January 2020 the Shadow Authority for Buckinghamshire considered a Community Governance Review for High Wycombe and decided to defer the decision until the establishment of the new Unitary authority, acknowledging that further consultation may well be necessary.

1.13. In discussion with the LGBCE, they have given strong advice that the Council should wait until the Electoral review has been completed before conducting any community governance reviews. The reason for this is that the LGBCE will need to ensure that the boundaries of parish wards and unitary council wards are coterminous. If the Council completed a Community Governance Review and decided parish wards in advance of the Electoral Review, it is likely that they would need to change again. Waiting for the outcome of the Electoral Review and having certainty about the boundaries of the new unitary wards would be the best way of ensuring that any CGR outcomes are sustainable in the longer term.

1.14. In the light of the LGBCE's Guidance, it is recommended that the decision on the Community Governance review for High Wycombe is postponed until after the Electoral Review or until such time as the LGBCE consider it appropriate.

1.15. Longwick-cum-Ilmer Parish Council have also requested a Community Governance Review to seek to increase the number of councillors from 7 to 9 to reflect the increase in housing and population. Again, the reasons outlined 1.13 – 1.14 as they pertain to the establishment of a new parish council apply to the increase in numbers of Councillors. It is not considered that the proposal for this Community Governance Review meets the test as advised by LGBCE and it is recommended that a decision on commencing this Community Governance Review is deferred until the outcome of the Electoral Review.

1.16. Should further requests for Community Governance Reviews be received the Committee are advised that they should be considered in the light of the LGBCE advice that such reviews would ordinarily be deferred and should only be acceded to in very exceptional circumstances.

Other options considered

2. Consideration has been given to the Standards & General Purpose Committee undertaking the work proposed to be undertaken by the Member working group, but given the volume of work it is considered a working group would be an expedient way Members could be involved in the development of those proposals designed to facilitate the Review.

Legal and financial implications

3. The proposed electoral review is a statutory process instigated by the LGBCE and driven by their timetable and requirements. The Council has no choice but to support and provide a significant amount of information for the review to ensure that the outcomes are in the best interests of the people of Buckinghamshire.
4. The governance arrangements the Council puts in place to enable it to respond to the review and discharge its responsibilities is a matter for the Council.
5. There will be some resource implications relating to officer time to prepare the necessary statistical and other information and develop and implement a communication and engagement strategy. A full project plan will be created which will identify the officer time necessary to assist in the Review

Corporate implications

6. The Electoral review will impact on all Councillors and all communities within Buckinghamshire. To maximise participation for Councillors, residents and all relevant stakeholder group it will be important to ensure a thorough consultation exercise is undertaken.

Next steps and review

7. If approved, the work of the Member working group will need to be incorporated into the Committee's work programme to ensure regular consideration of the progress of the Review in line with the timescales confirmed by the LGBCE is undertaken.

Background papers

- Technical Guidance
- High Wycombe Community Governance review Report and Appendices
- Decision of the Shadow Authority 7 January 2020

