

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL

REPORT BY RETURNING OFFICER AND ELECTORAL REGISTRATION OFFICER

TO:	POLICY COMMITTEE		
DATE:	14 DECEMBER 2020		
TITLE:	LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY COMMISSION REVIEW OF WARD BOUNDARIES 2019-20		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	CLLRS JASON BROCK/TONY PAGE	PORTFOLIO:	LEADERSHIP/ CORPORATE & CONSUMER SERVICES
SERVICE:	ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATION	WARDS:	BOROUGH-WIDE
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1. PURPOSE AND SUMMARY OF REPORT

- 1.1 Further to Minutes 20 and 38 of the Policy Committee on 15 July and 26 September 2019, and Minute 27 of full Council on 4 November 2019, to inform Members about the final recommendations of the LGBCE published on 29th September 2020 and the anticipated timetable for the making of an Order bringing the results of the Review into effect.
- 1.2 The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) has been undertaking an electoral review of the Council in its 2019-20 programme. This is because the 2017 canvass showed over 30% of the authority's current wards (5 out of 16) had a variance greater than 10% from the authority's average ratio of electors, which was 2,443 per Councillor or 7,329 per 3-member ward.
- 1.3 The LGBCE operates under the provisions of Part 3 of the Local Democracy, Economic Development & Construction Act 2009 (the 2009 Act). This established the LGBCE in place of the former Boundary Committee of the Electoral Commission. The last review of ward boundaries in Reading was undertaken by the former Boundary Committee of the Electoral Commission between February 2001 and June 2002, and was implemented from June 2004.
- 1.4 The 2001/02 review established a Council of 46 Councillors, representing 16 wards, of which 15 were 3-member wards which held elections by thirds. The remaining ward was Mapledurham, with one Councillor being elected every four years. The first stage of the review process, concerning Council size, was completed, with the LGBCE accepting the authority's submission, agreed by Policy Committee on 15 July 2019, that the authority continue to have elections by thirds, and that the number of Councillors be increased from 46 to 48, representing 16 three-member wards across the Borough, in recognition of the significant projected growth in the Borough's electorate, from 113,590 in 2019 to a projected 121,002 in 2025 (an increase of 7,412 electors, or 6.5%).

- 1.5 The LGBCE's timetable for the review is set out in Table 1 in Section 4. The LGBCE commenced the second stage of the review process - public consultation on warding patterns - on 27 August 2019, to run to 4 November 2019. In line with the LGBCE's good practice advice, the Policy Committee on 26 September 2019 set up an advisory cross-party Ward Boundary Review Working Party's to assist the development of the Council's response to the consultation. This Working Party met twice, on 2 and 22 October 2019, to develop a submission for the authority to make to the LGBCE.
- 1.6 The Council meeting of 4 November 2019 agreed the authority's submission on warding patterns to the LGBCE, as part of the LGBCE's first period of consultation, which ended on 4 November 2019.
- 1.7 Council on 4 November 2019 resolved the following:
- That the detailed deliberations of the cross-party Working Party be noted and endorsed, and the map showing the Working Party's proposals be agreed and submitted to the LBCE along with the supporting explanation (to follow and be circulated to all Councillors) as set out in the Minutes of the two Working Party meetings and this report. That the suggested names of the 16 wards be as shown in Table 2 in Section 5.
- 1.8 The Council's Ward Boundary Review Submission was lodged with the LGBC on 4 November 2020.
- 1.9 The LGBCE commenced its consultation on its Draft Recommendations on 4 February 2020. The consultation period was due to end on 13 April 2020, but owing to COVID-19 the LGBCE re-opened consultation on the draft recommendations on 8 June 2020, with an end date of 20 July 2020. It received comments from one Borough MP, one Councillor, three local political parties, five local community organisations, and 20 local residents, which can be reviewed on the LGBCE's website: www.lgbce.org.uk/all-reviews/south-east/berkshire/reading
- 1.10 The LGBC issued its Final Recommendations on 29 September 2020 which are annexed to this report. They provide for a Council of 48 Members, representing 16 three-member seats, all elected by thirds. The new warding arrangements will come into effect from May 2022, when all-out elections for all 16 wards will be held.

2. RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- 2.1 That the Final Recommendations of the LGBCE dated September 2020 on the new electoral arrangements for the Council, be noted;
- 2.2 That the Returning Officer be authorised to take all necessary action to implement the new electoral arrangements in May 2022, including reviewing polling district boundaries and polling places.

3. POLICY CONTEXT AND LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

3.1. Under S56(1) of the 2009 Act, the Commission must, from time to time, conduct a review of the area of each principal council, and recommend whether a change should be made to the electoral arrangements. In this regard, electoral arrangements means (S56(4)):

- The total number of Councillors
- The number and boundaries of electoral areas for the election of Councillors
- The number of Councillors to be returned by any electoral area
- The name of the electoral area

3.2 Under S56(2), the Commission may conduct a review of all or any part of a principal council's electoral arrangements, including the number and boundaries of wards. In this regard, the Commission will be likely to conduct such a review in two circumstances:

- If it considers, having had regard to the council's annual canvass returns, that the ratio of local government electors to Councillors in a ward or wards is out of balance
- If a council requests the LGBCE to do a review, and the LGBCE agree that there are grounds to do so.

3.3. More details are given in Schedule 2 to the 2009 Act. Para. 2 relates to District Councils (which appears to include Unitary Authorities). This requires the LGBCE, in making its recommendations, to have regard to:

- a) The need to secure that the ratio of the number of local government electors to the number of Councillors is, as nearly as possible, the same in every electoral area - over the 5 year period following implementation
- b) The need to reflect the identities and interests of local communities and, in particular the desirability of fixing boundaries:
 - which are and will remain easily identifiable
 - so as not to break any local ties
- c) The need to secure effective and convenient local government
- d) Where an authority has a scheme of election by thirds, as in Reading, the desirability of securing that each electoral area returns an appropriate number of Councillors.

3.4. The 2009 Act does not specify a timetable for these reviews, although the reference to the 5 year period following implementation carries an inference. However, the LGBCE review each council's annual canvass returns each year, and if they consider that a council is no longer securing the ratios specified in (a) above, the LGBCE will write to the council's chief executive to give notice that they will be conducting a boundary review.

3.5 In terms of the requirement to achieve equality of representation (see 3.3(a) above), the old Boundary Committee operated to statutory criteria which required ward electorates to be within 10% of the Borough average, and not to vary by more than 30% against each other. These statutory criteria have disappeared through the 2009 Act, but the LGBCE are still working to them.

- 3.6 In order to develop the Council’s response to the LGBCE’s ward review consultation, the Policy Committee on 26 September 2019 set up an advisory working group with a cross-party membership (6:3:1:1), with the following terms of reference:

To consider the Local Government Boundary Commission Review of Reading’s Ward Boundaries 2019-20 and make observations and recommendations to the Council or Policy Committee on warding patterns for approval and submission to the Commission during the public consultation periods.

4. REVIEW TIMETABLE

- 4.1 The LGBCE started the review in November 2018, and planned to conclude it by 30 June 2020. The original anticipated time-table for the review was in Table 1 as follows:

Table 1 - LGBCE Timetable

February / March 2019	Preliminary meetings held with officers, group leaders and councillors
20 August 2019	Commission agree total number of councillors for authority
27 August 2019 - to 4 November 2019	First public consultation period inviting proposals for warding patterns
21 January 2020	Commission agree draft recommendations
4 February 2020 - to 13 April 2020	Second consultation on draft recommendations
16 June 2020	Commission agree final recommendations
30 June /2020	Final recommendations published
Autumn 2020	Order laid in Parliament
May 2022	Implementation

- 4.2 The General Election of December 2019 meant the LGBCE Final recommendations meeting was delayed until 18 August 2020 which led to the final recommendations being published by the LGBCE on 29th September 2020.
- 4.3 The review was progressing in line with the revised timetable until April 2020. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic caused the LGBCE to reopen the Second consultation on the draft recommendations on 8 June 2020 which ran until 20 July 2020. The LGBCE published its Final recommendations on 29 September 2020 as opposed to the intended publication of 30 June 2020.
- 4.4 The Order is to be laid before parliament in January 2021
- 4.5 The new electoral arrangements will be implemented at an ‘all-out’ election in 2022. The mechanism for deciding how long a councillor serves from the whole Council elections in 2022 will be based on the number of votes polled with the lowest of the three elected councillors serving initially for one year, the middle serving for two years, and the top councillor serving for a full four years. Thereafter each councillor would serve a full four years.

5 FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1 The Final Recommendations are for 16 three-councillor wards. The LGBCE considers that its final recommendations provide for good electoral equality while reflecting community identities and interests where it received such evidence during consultation.
- 5.2 The Final Recommendations are based on the draft recommendations with modification to the proposed Caversham and Thames wards based on the submissions received. The LGBCE also made a minor modification to the boundaries between Church and Redlands wards and has changed the name of the Heights ward to Caversham Heights ward.
- 5.3 Caversham and Thames Wards. The LGBCE received eight submissions which disagreed with the proposals for the new Thames ward, which straddles the River Thames. The consideration of these submissions is contained in paragraphs 48, 49, and 50 of the final recommendation report. The LGBCE considered the evidence and decided to amend the boundary by moving the centre of Caversham into Caversham ward, which it considered helped alleviate some of the governance concerns raised in relation to the proposed Thames ward. The LGBC confirmed the draft recommendations in this area with the above amendment between the boundaries of the ward.
- 5.4 Church Ward. The LGBCE received four submissions in relation to the draft recommendations for church ward which contended that the whole of Northcourt Avenue should remain in Church ward. The LGBC agreed that there was considerable evidence to suggest that Northcourt Avenue has strong community ties and should therefore remain wholly in the same ward. The LGBCE also proposed to run the boundary partially along Northcourt Avenue to ensure the university premises along the road are kept within Redlands ward, as recommended by the Council, to place University Halls of Residence in the same ward. The LGBCE took the view that Marlborough House should be kept within Church ward as it constitutes part of Northcourt Avenue; and considered that its above recommendations will ensure effective and convenient local government.
- 5.5 Save for the above amendments the LGBCE confirmed its draft recommendations as final.
- 5.6 Table 2 below sets out the 16 new wards and the changes made from the current wards.

Table 2 - New Warding Arrangements

New Ward	Changes from current wards
Abbey	Central core of Abbey ward, with north and eastern areas transferred to new Thames ward, and small transfers to Coley and Redlands ward; and the small part of Battle ward east of railway transferred to Abbey ward.
Battle	Core of current ward, with small transfers to Abbey, Coley, and from and Norcot Kentwood wards.
Caversham	Northern part of Caversham ward and southern part of Thames wards

Caversham Heights	Mapledurham ward and northern part of Thames ward, plus small transfer from Peppard ward
Church	Core of current ward, plus north-eastern parts of Whitley ward; and transfers to Redlands around university (excluding Northcourt Avenue); and to Whitley south of Hartland Road
Coley	Core of Minster ward, with small transfers to Katesgrove and Southcote, and from Battle wards.
Emmer Green	Core of Peppard ward with small transfers from Thames and Caversham wards
Katesgrove	Core of current ward, with small transfers from Minster ward to align western boundary to Rose Kiln Lane (not River Kennet)
Kentwood	Core of current ward, less small transfer to Battle ward
Norcot	Core of current ward, with minor boundary adjustments with Battle, Southcote and Tilehurst wards
Park	NO CHANGE
Redlands	Current ward, plus transfers from Abbey and Church
Southcote	Core of current ward, plus transfer of Minster ward west of railway, and boundary adjustments with Norcot ward.
Thames (new)	Southern part of Caversham ward and northern and eastern parts of Abbey ward.
Tilehurst	Core of current ward, with minor boundary adjustment with Norcot and Southcote wards
Whitley	Core of current ward, plus south-western part of Cburch ward; and less north-eastern parts to Church

6. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

- 6.1 The ward boundary review goes to the heart of promoting local democracy and electoral equality for local residents. It supports the promotion of the participation of Reading people in local democracy.

7. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

- 7.1 The LGBCE has carried out two consultations with the Council, as described above in section 4.

8. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

- 8.1 Under the Equality Act 2010, Section 149, a public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to
- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
 - advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
 - foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.
- 8.2 In this regard you **must** consider whether the decision will or could have a differential impact on: racial groups; gender; people with disabilities; people of a particular sexual orientation; people due to their age; people due to their religious belief.

- 8.3 It is not considered that an equality impact assessment is necessary for the purpose of responding to the LGBCE on the number of Councillors or ward boundaries. In this respect it is recognised that Reading is a thriving multi-cultural community, which is reflected in the composition of the current Council, and ward electorate.

9. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

- 9.1 There are no environmental concerns as a result of the LGBCE's review of ward boundaries in Reading.

10. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 The 2018/19 budget for electoral registration is £327k, and the budget for local elections is £190k: the cost of the review has been met from within these budgets.
- 10.2 The increase of the number of Councillors by two to 48 Councillors will increase the Councillors' Allowance budget by £16,440pa. The individual Councillor Allowance is to be linked to the increase in Local Government pay.

11. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Reports and maps submitted to the Ward Boundary Review Working Party.

LGBCE Draft recommendations 4th February 2020.

Report by the LGBCE dated 29 September 2020 Final Recommendations on the new Electoral Arrangements for Reading Borough Council.