

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL
REPORT BY RETURNING OFFICER

TO:	POLICY COMMITTEE		
DATE:	15 JULY 2019		
TITLE:	LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY COMMISSION REVIEW OF WARD BOUNDARIES 2019-20		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	CLLR BROCK	PORTFOLIO:	CORPORATE SERVICES
SERVICE:	ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATION	WARDS:	BOROUGH-WIDE
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1. PURPOSE AND SUMMARY OF REPORT

- 1.1 Further to Minute 56 of the Council meeting on 26 March 2019, the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) has given the Council notice that, based on its analysis of the 2017 annual canvass in Reading, it will be 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.
- 1.2 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.
- 1.3 The last review of ward boundaries in Reading was undertaken by the former Boundary Committee between February 2001 and June 2002, and was implemented from June 2004 (when we had all-out elections that coincided with the European elections). Therefore by 2019, the ward boundaries have not been reviewed for 17 years or changed for 15 years.
- 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 (one Councillor out of three retiring each year, with a fallow year every fourth year). The remaining ward was Mapledurham, with one Councillor being elected every four years.
- 1.5 The current timetable for the review is attached at **Appendix A**. The LGBCE gave the Council notice of their intention to conduct the review in April 2018. It held an initial meeting with the Leader, Chief Executive and Returning Officer on 19 November 2018. I briefed the opposition Group Leaders during January / February 2019. The LGBCE held a joint briefing for Group Leaders on 21 March 2019, followed on the same day by a full Briefing for all Councillors.

- 1.6 The LGBCE's Members' Briefing Pack for Reading, used on 21 March 2019, is at **Appendix B**. The LGBCE has since modified the timetable for the review to recognise delay resulting from the need to run unscheduled elections to the European Parliament.
- 1.7 The proposed submission to the LGBCE on Council Size is at **Appendix C**. This states a preference for a Council of 48 Councillors, representing 16 wards of comparable size, with 3 Councillors per ward, based on the retention of elections by thirds. This would represent an increase of two Councillors.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1 That the Council Size Submission, attached at Appendix C, and its stated preference for a Council size of 48 Councillors, representing 16 wards of comparable size with elections by thirds, be agreed and presented to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England.

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.

4. 2017 CANVASS POSITION

- 4.1. The LGBCE wrote to the Council in April 2018 to advise that, on an analysis of the 2017 annual canvass, the authority appeared to meet the criteria for inclusion in their review programme for 2019-20. This was because over 30% of the authority's wards (5 out of 16) had a variance greater than 10% from the authority's average ratio; and that the authority had been out of balance for the last year. No variance was over 30%.
- 4.2 The LGBCE Member Briefing, attached at Appendix B, shows the electoral register for 2018, published on 1 December 2017, giving a local electorate of 112,362, which was an increase of 2,964 on the 2017 register (109,398 - a 3.5% increase); and an increase of 9,282 on the 2016 register, which showed the full impact of Individual Electoral Registration (IER). This growth in local electorate shows the active steps that the Electoral Registration team have taken over the past four years to encourage electoral registration, in particular amongst those groups of voters most directly affected by IER: students and people living in houses in multiple occupation.
- 4.3 The 2018 register therefore established an average ward electorate of 7,329 for a three-Member ward, and 2,443 for the single-Member ward.
- 4.4. The ward analysis of the 2018 electoral register, published on 1 December 2017, showed that five wards (out of 16) had a variance from the average of over 10%, as explained below.
- Two wards - **Abbey** and **Whitley** - had an electorate which exceeded the average by more 25% and 15% respectively: this trend will continue as these are the wards where most new housing development up to 2029/30 will take place.
 - One ward - **Redlands** - had an electorate which was lower than the average by more than 20%. This is one of two wards which border the University of Reading

and which have a large number of student residents. It was impacted significantly by the introduction of IER, and is struggling to recover.

- The two remaining wards - **Church** and **Southcote** - had much smaller variances.
 - **Church** is the other ward which borders the University, and includes a number of Halls of Residence. Before the introduction of IER, Church had an electorate which was over the average and in December 2014 had a variance of +13.3%. It was disproportionately affected by IER, and the variance fell to -14% in 2015. Through targeted canvassing of university students, the variance was reduced to -12.0% in December 2017.
 - **Southcote** is the obverse of Church. It has a smaller electorate than some other wards. But it only moved beyond -10% (to -10.5%) in December 2017. In many ways this is a function of our success in growing the local electorate across the Borough following the introduction of IER: Southcote is a more settled, residential area of Reading, with less population churn, and has increased in electorate by a slower rate than the Borough electorate as a whole.

5. 2018 CANVASS POSITION

- 5.1 The Annual Canvass for 2019, and the electoral register published on 1 December 2018, showed a local electorate of 111,168, a slight fall on the 2017 canvass result. This gave an average ward electorate of 7,250 for a 3-member ward, or 2,417 for a single member ward. The variances in Abbey, Redlands and Whitley ward had all grown, to 27%, -26%, and 22 % respectively. The variance in Church ward had grown to -14%, but that in Southcote had fallen, reducing from -10%, to -9%.
- 5.2 When this exercise was repeated two months later, based on the February 2019 rolling register, the variances in Abbey, Church, Redlands and Whitley wards had continued, and Park ward had also just moved to -10%.
- 5.3 In conclusion, the LGBCE are correct in saying that five of our wards are varying from the ward average by more than 10%. The variation in Abbey and Whitley wards is now well over +20%, and will continue to grow through new residential developments in those wards. The variation in Redlands ward is also now over -25%. These are the three outliers. The variations in Church, Park and Southcote wards are nearer to -10%, and falling, and all three wards can fall in or out of the variance range through rolling registration.

6. REVIEW PROCESS

- 6.1 The LGBCE review will take between 12-18 months, with 5 stages:
 - 1) Discussion with the Council about the size of the Council (total number of Councillors). This will require the authority to indicate whether it wishes to retain elections by thirds, or to move to either election by halves or all-out elections. The authority can also decide whether it wants to reduce (or increase) the number of Councillors.

- 2) More detailed consultation on the warding pattern for the authority, to achieve (1). This will involve public consultation, including political parties. It will take 8-10 weeks.
- 3) The LGBCE present their draft recommendations for the authority in the light of (2), for further consultation. Another 8-10 weeks.
- 4) The LGBCE publish their conclusions
- 5) The conclusions are actioned through Order in Parliament.

6.2 The LGBCE started the review in November 2018, and now plan to conclude it by 30 June 2020. The anticipated time-table for the review is as follows:

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

6.3 The new electoral arrangements will be implemented at an ‘all-out’ election in 2022. This would coincide with the next General Election, if held in line with the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011.

6.4. One factor in any future review may be the Parliamentary constituency boundaries, which the LGBCE will not be able to change. In this regard, Whitley and Church, whilst adjacent wards in South Reading, are in different constituencies.

6.5 For authorities like Reading, which elect by thirds, and want to continue to do so, the LGBCE will look to produce a proposal that gives three-member wards across the whole Borough, although the predecessor Boundary Committee (BCEC) deliberately made an exception in Mapledurham in 2002. Therefore at stage (1), they will be looking to see whether it is possible to establish a size for the Council that is divisible by 3, whilst ensuring that the resultant wards have electorates within the +/- 10% variance that will continue for at least five years following implementation (ie until 2027).

Frequency of Elections

6.6 An initial decision, therefore, is whether the Council wishes to continue to hold elections by thirds. The pros and cons of holding elections by thirds were reviewed by the Council in its response to the Electoral Commission’s 2005 consultation paper on periodic electoral reviews; and again by full Council in October 2009. The Council’s response, which was agreed by the then three Group Leaders, considered

that elections by thirds have a number of important benefits which are summarised below:

- Continuity of experience and representation - two-thirds of the Council will continue beyond the election.
- Promoting political stability - there will be continuing Councillors on the authority from most parties to provide experience and stability to local government.
- Encouraging participation in local democracy - elections are held most years, the electorate is canvassed, participation is encouraged, politicians are encouraged to keep in touch with and be active for the electorate, there is a built-in annual incentive of losing seats if constituents' concerns are not addressed.
- Keeping the electoral machine 'well-oiled' - both for the authority and for political parties, helping to maintain and refresh the pool of experienced Councillors, party workers and electoral registration staff.
- Political accountability - elections are held shortly after the first new Council Tax bills are received, local parties have to justify themselves to their electors every year for difficult or controversial decisions taken during the year, Councillors are encouraged to keep in touch with their electorate, the electorate has an annual opportunity to comment on the Council's performance, successes and failures.
- Moving from regular, annual elections to elections every four years was likely to be counter-productive in addressing falling turnouts, in particular if it weakened the effectiveness of local party election machines, and broke the routine of annual voting.
- Multi-Member wards have advantages in urban areas where local communities are large, and would require some artificiality to split them into smaller, single-Member divisions.
- Multi-Member wards are better served by a number of Councillors who can specialise in different areas of interest, and are able to represent the diversity of the population they serve. They encourage team working by ward Councillors (especially if all from the same party). In the context of modernised local government and the separation of executive and scrutiny functions, they help ease the potential demands on Lead Councillors, Committee Chairs and other office holders of the authority, by giving a broader base of fellow Councillors to share constituency caseload and attendance at community meetings.

6.7 The alternatives for local authorities to holding elections by thirds are either to hold elections by halves (every two years); or all-out elections every four years, when the whole Council stands down and is re-elected in one go. The principal arguments for moving to all-out elections are cost and the leading group having the ability to take a longer term view with a clear mandate to act.

It costs the authority around £190k to run an election, which is currently incurred in three years out of four. However, where the election coincides with a national election or referendum, including the Police & Crime Commissioner elections, then

we recover around half of the cost from the Government, reducing the cost to the authority to around £95k. This will be the case in 2020, when the local elections will coincide with the next PCC elections; and 2022, when they should coincide with the next scheduled General Election. There will be no local election in 2021, which is the next fallow year (when County Council elections are held). Therefore the first year in which the Council will have to meet the full costs of running a local election should be 2023.

7. ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

7.1 The LGBCE's Reading Member Briefing (Appendix A) makes clear that the review will have two distinct parts:

Part 1 - Council size - determining the total number of Councillors to be elected (currently 46)

Part 2 - Ward boundaries - re-drawing these to meet the LGBCE's statutory criteria.

The LGBCE will not consider ward boundaries until they have determined the size of the Council at part 1. This is the decision the Commission will make on 20 August 2019.

Part 1 - Council Size

7.2 The LGBCE will make its judgment on Council size by considering three broad areas:

1) Governance arrangements

- Does the Council have the right number of Councillors to manage the business of the authority in an effective way, now and into the future?

2) Scrutiny

- How does the Council scrutinise decisions of itself and other local bodies?

3) Representational Role of Councillors in the Local Community

- How do Councillors routinely engage with their communities in different ways?

7.3 In order to achieve a more inclusive decision-making structure, and overcome the problems caused by the previous Cabinet/Executive arrangements, Reading adopted a committee system of governance in 2013. This therefore involves councillors from all political groups in the authority's decision-making process. It has also resulted in main-streaming the scrutiny functions in the remit of all the three programme Committees as is set out in more detail on page 4-8 of the attached Size Submission Template.

7.4 The LGBCE requires authorities to complete a Council Size Submission, based on a standard template, which specifies topics and key lines of explanation. The Council's submission is at **Appendix C**.

7.5 In the submission, the Council is invited to indicate its preferred number of Councillors, and its reasons for this. The LGBCE will agree the total number of

Councillors at its meeting on 20 August 2019. In this regard they will be looking for indications of the following:

- Whether the authority wants to stay with elections by thirds, or to move to a different arrangement, which could be elections by halves, or all-out elections.
- Whether the authority wants to change the number of Councillors elected:
 - In 2002 the BCEC proceeded on the basis that current Council size facilitated effective and convenient local government, unless the authority had good arguments why this was not the case.
 - The BCEC also had a presumption against dramatic changes in Council size, up or down, which could be detrimental to the functioning of local democracy:
 - too few Councillors could mean that the interests of residents were not adequately represented
 - too many Councillors could lead to difficulties in the internal management of the Council.

7.6 The Council's response, supported by the evidence presented in Appendix C, is that it wishes to stay with elections by thirds, with an equal number of three-member wards; and it wants this to be 16 wards, which will increase the size of the Council to 48 Councillors.

7.7 A particular factor here is the growth of the Borough's population and electorate, and the impact on this of retaining an average ratio of around 2,500 electors per Councillor. In this regard:

- The Borough's population has grown from 135,000, in 1981, to 163,000 today (a 21% increase over 38 years), living in 66,000 households
- The Profile of Reading on the Council's website projects the population increasing further by 12.5% by 2039, to 181,900, living in 77,000 households
- The Council's report on Residential Planning Commitments at 31 March 2019, published in July 2018, identified nearly 4,000 new hard commitments for new dwellings, with a further 3,000 soft commitments in the planning pipeline, giving a projected total of around 7,000 new dwellings. The majority of these are in Abbey (3,333) and Whitley (2,144) wards.
- On the basis of new residential approvals, the resident adult electorate (not including students) is projected to grow by 15,600 by 2036, to take the Borough electorate to around 126,800. The bulk of this growth will be in Abbey (7,300) and Whitley (3,000) wards.
[NB - there is a need for some caution for Abbey ward, as not all the new dwellings may be lived in as the principal place of residence by people qualified to vote].

7.8 On these projections, it is reasonable to project a significant increase in the local electorate, rising from 112,362 in 2017 to around 126,800 by 2036. In this respect:

- To maintain the current ratio of 1 Councillor to 2,443 electors would require at least 51 Councillors and 17 wards
- The recommendation for 16 wards and 48 Councillors would give an average ratio of 2,642 per Councillor

- Reverting to the pre-2005 situation of 15 wards and 45 Councillors would give an average ratio of 2,820 electors per Councillor.

Part 2 - Warding Patterns

7.9 Once the LGBCE had determined the size of the Council, on 20 August 2019, they will then launch a public consultation on warding patterns, to run from 27 August to 4 November 2019. In this, they will be looking at the best arrangements to balance their statutory criteria. These are:

- delivering electoral equality for local voters
- recognising the interests and identities of local communities, with easily identifiable boundaries which do not split local ties
- effective and convenient local government - so that wards can be represented effectively by their electoral representative(s)

7.10 In doing this, they may consider:

- Whether the authority sees any geographic boundaries as desirable to maintain to protect local ties. In this respect, in 2002, the authority argued strongly for keeping the Thames as a boundary, and not having wards that crossed between Reading and Caversham - and the BCEC agreed.
- Whether the authority wishes to continue to have elections by thirds - in which case the LGBCE has indicated that it will look to establish three-member wards across the whole Borough, and end the anomaly of a single Member ward.
- Whether there are grounds for changing the names of any wards.

8. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

8.1 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.

9. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

9.1 The LGBCE has already started the process of consultation with the Council, as described above. It will launch the first of two public consultation exercises in the autumn of 2019, also as described above in 6.1 to 6.3.

10. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

10.1 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.

- 10.2 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.
- 10.3 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.

11. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 11.1 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.
- 11.2 The Councillors' Allowances budget for 2019-20 is £448,597.
- 11.3 If the number of Councillors is increased by two to 48 Councillors this will increase the Councillors' Allowance budget by £16,440pa. The individual Councillor Allowance is to be linked to the increase in Local Government pay.

12. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Residential Planning Commitments at 31 March 2018 (published July 2018)
Voting Age population as a Result of Housing Development 2019-20 to 2035-36
(internal Planning paper)
Borough Profile on Council Website