

READING BOROUGH COUNCIL
REPORT BY RETURNING OFFICER

TO:	POLICY COMMITTEE		
DATE:	26 SEPTEMBER 2019		
TITLE:	WARD BOUNDARY REVIEW WORKING GROUP		
LEAD COUNCILLOR:	CLLRS JASON BROCK/ ELLIE EMBERSON	PORTFOLIO:	LEADERSHIP/ CORPORATE & CONSUMER SERVICES
SERVICE:	ELECTORAL ADMINISTRATION	WARDS:	BOROUGH-WIDE
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1. PURPOSE AND SUMMARY OF REPORT

- 1.1 The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) is currently 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.
- 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.
- 1.5 The current timetable for the review is set out below in Section 4. The LGBCE's consultation is due to run until 4 November 2019 and it is recommended that an advisory cross-party Ward Boundary Review Working Group should be established to assist the development of the Council's response to the consultation. The Leaders of all the political groups on the Council are invited to be members of the Working Group or nominate another member of their group to attend on their behalf. The overall membership of the Working Group would be based on the following proportionality: 6 Labour; 3 Conservative; 1 Liberal Democrat; and 1 Green.
- 1.6 The terms of reference of the Working Group would be as follows:

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.

- 1.7 The Council's submission to the LGBCE on Council Size agreed at Policy Committee on 15 July 2019 was 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.

2.0 RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

- 2.1 That the Terms of Reference of the Ward Boundary Review Working Group be approved as follows:

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.

- 2.2 That the membership of the informal advisory working group be agreed at the meeting on the basis that all groups would be given the opportunity to be represented based on the following proportionality:

(6 Labour: 3 Conservative: 1 Liberal Democrat: 1 Green)

- 2.3 That Councillor Brock be appointed as the Chair and Councillor Page be appointed as the Vice-Chair of the Working Group.

- 2.4 That the first meeting of the Working Group be held on Wednesday 2 October 2019 at 7.00pm.

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, it is recommended that an informal advisory working group should be created consisting of a cross-party membership (6:3:1:1). The Working Group's recommendations would be considered by Council at its meeting on 4 November 2019.

4. REVIEW TIMETABLE

- 4.1 The LGBCE started the review in November 2018, and plans 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

4.2 The new electoral arrangements will be implemented at an ‘all-out’ election in 2022.

5. CONTRIBUTION TO STRATEGIC AIMS

5.1 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.

6. COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND INFORMATION

6.1 The LGBCE has already started the process of consultation with the Council, as described above in section 4.

7. EQUALITY IMPACT ASSESSMENT

7.1 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.

7.2 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.

7.3 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.

8. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

8.1 There are no environmental concerns as a result of the establishment of a Boundary Ward Review Working Group.

9. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

9.1 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.

9.2 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.

10. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None