

**Somerset Council**

**Constitution and Governance Committee**  
**9<sup>th</sup> September 2024**

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## **Proposed Council Size submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England**

Lead Officer: David Clark, Monitoring Officer, Service Director - Governance, Democratic and Legal Services  
Author: Scott Wooldridge, Head of Governance and Democratic Services and Steven Lake, Electoral Services Manager  
Contact Details: [scott.wooldridge@somerset.gov.uk](mailto:scott.wooldridge@somerset.gov.uk) or 01823 357628  
Executive Lead Member: Councillor Bill Revans, Leader of the Council  
Division / Local Member: All

### **1. Summary and background**

- 1.1.** As part of the development of proposals for the new Somerset Council, the council size (i.e. the number of councillors) and the boundaries for each division were agreed by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) for the first four years of the Council's existence. A full boundary review is now required to determine the arrangements for the next administrative term, following the next Somerset Council elections in May 2027.
- 1.2.** The appended report outlines work to date to develop a proposal for the size of the council, a forecast of electorate numbers in 2029, and a range of other evidence required by the LGBCE as the preliminary phase of the review. It seeks approval to the Council Size submission to the LGBCE by their deadline of 27 September 2024.
- 1.3.** The Council Size submission is recommending a council size of 96 councillors from May 2027. The submission also sets out the Council's request that the LGBCE's review considers changing the current terminology of divisions to wards.

In addition, the submission sets out that the Council welcomes the opportunity to inform the design of ward boundaries in LGBCE's next stage of the review. The submission states that wherever possible, there is a preference for predominantly single member wards to ensure that there is clear accountability for local communities, as set out in the Unitary Business Case. It also highlights that the Council recognises that one size does not fit all and there would be circumstances where multi-member wards may be more appropriate.

## **2. Issues for consideration / Recommendations**

### **2.1.** The Committee is recommended to:

- 1) Review and agree the proposed Council Size submission to the LGBCE; and
- 2) Consider whether to report the Committee's submission to the Full Council meeting on 26 September for information.

## **3. Background**

**3.1.** During the Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) process, a streamlined approach was taken to the identification of the council size and the divisional boundaries for the new Somerset Council. This resulted in a council size of 110 councillors and 55 divisions (based on the former County Council divisional boundaries). It was agreed at that time that a full boundary review would be undertaken in the first four year term of the new Council. The LGBCE contacted the Council in late 2023 to initiate the review.

**3.2.** LGBCE Reviews can be undertaken for a number of reasons, in addition to structural change of an authority. This includes:

- At the request of the local authority
- Electoral imbalance, if either:
  - (i) one electoral ward/division has a +/-30% variance with the local authority electorate average
  - (ii) or, 30% or more of the electoral wards/divisions have a +/-10% variance from the local authority average
- Time period since the previous review, which is normally around 12 and 16 years or every two to three electoral cycles.

**3.3.** The Electoral Boundary Review process comprises a full review of all council electoral divisions. There are five key stages as follows. The timescales in brackets are indicative:

- Preliminary Phase – Information gathering and electoral forecasts (to July 2024)
- Phase 1 – Council size, i.e. proposals for the total number of councillors/electoral divisions (revised to end September 2024)
- Phase 2 – Consultation on draft proposals and divisional arrangements, i.e. proposals for revised boundaries and names of electoral divisions (Autumn 2024 – Summer 2025)
- Phase 3 – Parliamentary approval of recommendations (Autumn 2025 - Autumn 2026)
- Phase 4 – Implement new electoral arrangements (May 2027)

**3.4.** In preparation for the analysis required to develop new proposals, LGBCE require a substantial amount of information. This includes the following:

- Geocoded Electoral Register
- Current and Forecast Electorate
- Forecasting Methodology
- Housing Development Data
- Polling District Maps
- Polling District Review Report

- Parish Electoral Arrangements
- Parish Ward Maps
- Local Orders
- Governance Changes
- Stakeholder Database

**3.5.** Work has been underway since the new year to ensure this information is available. This information will be submitted to the LGBCE by the end of September 2024, subject to the Committee's approval of the Council Size submission.

**3.6.** The most significant element of work in the preliminary phase is the development of electorate forecasts. The forecasts need to be five years beyond the review, which is 2029. LGBCE provide guidance on potential approaches, although it is for the Council to identify which approach is most appropriate. The Council must provide both the forecasts and justification for the projections submitted.

**3.7.** The draft forecasts have been produced using an electorate forecasting tool provided by LGBCE. This takes electorate data (at polling district level) for the last three years and, based on Office of National Statistics population estimates, forecasts likely electorate growth. Officers have then reviewed housing development data from Local Plan allocations and planning permissions for sites above 10 houses, mapped it to accurately identify in which polling district the development will be, before calculating the likely electorate figures associated with each development. As the population estimates within the forecasting tool must already have assumed some 'normal' level of housing growth, the additional housing figures have been reduced by 30% before being added to the forecasting tool's electorate prediction. This helps to reduce the likelihood of double-counting and avoid an over-inflated forecast.

**3.8.** The draft forecasts have been completed and once submitted to LGBCE are subject to their approval before being used as the basis of the Boundary Review. The forecasts predict a 7% increase in electorate to 467,403 by 2029. Based on the recommended 96 councillors, this would give an average of 4,868 electors per councillor in 2029.

**3.9.** Phase 1 – Council Size

During the first stage of the review, the LGBCE decides on the number of councillors required to enable the council to undertake effective decision making, to discharge its business and responsibilities successfully and to provide for effective community leadership and representation. The LGBCE seeks to understand elected member requirements across three aspects:

- Decision Making – how many councillors are needed to give strategic leadership and direction to the authority.
- Accountability and Scrutiny – how many councillors are needed to provide scrutiny, to meet regulatory requirements and to manage partnerships between the local authority and other organisations.

- Effective Representation – how the representational role of councillors in the local community is discharged and how they engage with people and conduct casework.

**3.10.** The political group leaders have been consulted on the development of the Council Size submission. The consensus from this was for a council size submission proposing 96 councillors for the next elections in May 2027.

**3.11.** Alternative Options considered

The consultation with the political group leaders considered a range of possible numbers of councillors, ranging from significant reductions to the recommended number of 96 councillors.

The consultation concluded that a large reduction in the number of Councillors would:

- Risk increasing the workload beyond a reasonable amount. This could create a barrier for any potential candidate from maintaining employment alongside being a councillor, which might reduce the opportunities for younger people to stand for elected office. It was also noted that many people have caring responsibilities and creating a larger workload could prevent people from balancing the different responsibilities, with carers disproportionately more likely to be women.

- Create much larger wards and/or a greater number of multi-member wards. This would be problematic for sparsely-populated rural areas, as to achieve electoral equality, the geographical area would need to be huge, and this wouldn't be conducive to Members being visible and available to communities. It could make it logistically challenging to attend face-to-face meetings given the travel time required.

- Save money from Member allowances and expenses, but that these savings would likely be reduced by the need for greater officer support to deal with casework and the increased workload in general.

#### **4. Consultations undertaken**

**4.1.** Briefings have been held for all councillors regarding the LGBCE review and consultation undertaken with the political group leaders. In addition, the Constitution & Governance committee has received updates on the review.

Officers from Democratic Services, Elections and Planning have worked together on the development of the submission.

#### **5. Implications**

**5.1.** Legal - The Local Government Boundary Commission for England is empowered to review the electoral arrangements of the Council as per the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009. The legislation states that 'the total number of members of the council' forms part of an authority's electoral arrangements. The Commission refers to this as 'council size'. The legislation does not set out how many councillors each

authority should have. It is the Commission's responsibility to determine the appropriate number of councillors for each authority. The Commission will always recommend a council size that, in its judgement, enables the council to take its decisions effectively, to discharge the business and responsibilities of the council successfully, and provides for effective community leadership and representation.

- 5.2.** Section 57 of the 2009 Act provides that the Council may request the LGBCE to make recommendations as to single-member electoral area. It further provides that the LGBCE must have regard to this request in making its decision. Further if it does not grant the request for single member divisions, it must notify the Council of the reasons for departing from such a request.
- 5.3.** Financial - The recommendation of 96 Councillors, if implemented, would reduce the cost of allowances and expenses. No additional financial implications have been identified.
- 5.4.** Equalities - No significant impacts were identified based on the recommendations, although it is highlighted that had an option for a significantly reduced number of councillors been recommended, this could have had an impact on age, sex and those with caring responsibilities. This is based on the limited ability of younger councillors to undertake a greater workload whilst balancing other employment, and for those with caring responsibilities who are disproportionately more likely to be women.

## **6. Background papers**

- 6.1.** Somerset Structural Changes Order 2022

**Note** For sight of individual background papers please contact the report author