

Decision Report

Committee: Constitution and Governance
Meeting Date – 14th January 2025



Local Government Boundary Commission for England – Somerset Council Submission for Phase 2

Chair of Committee: Councillor Ross Henley
Local Members and Divisions affected: All
Executive Director: Alyn Jones

Executive Summary

The report provides an update regarding the work of the Electoral Review Working Group established to consider the Council's proposed Phase 2 submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE).

Recommendations

That the report and recommendations of the Electoral Review Working Group (see Appendix A) be considered and finalised for submission as the Council's Phase 2 response to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England.

Reasons for Proposals

To enable the Council's views to be considered as part of the electoral review of Somerset Council by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England

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Main report and supporting information



The Electoral Review Working Group has met on six occasions during Autumn and Winter 2024 and it has produced a scheme in accordance with the Council's brief that it wished to have predominantly single member electoral divisions. The scheme prepared has 95 members in 89 single member and 3 two member divisions.

The final meeting of the Working Group was held on 3 January, and the report setting out the conclusions will be circulated as soon as possible before the Constitution & Governance meeting on 14th January 2025. The Council's submission must be made by 20th January 2025.

Background and purpose of report

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.

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:

1. Preliminary Phase – Information gathering and electoral forecasts (to July 2024)
2. Phase 1 – Council size, i.e. proposals for the total number of councillors/electoral divisions (revised to end September 2024)
3. Phase 2 – Consultation on draft proposals and divisional arrangements, i.e. proposals for revised boundaries and names of electoral divisions (Autumn 2024 – Summer 2025 through two community consultations each lasting approx. 10 weeks)
4. Phase 3 – Parliamentary approval of recommendations (Autumn 2025 - Autumn 2026)
5. Phase 4 – Implement new electoral arrangements (May 2027)

The review will consider the following statutory criteria:

- **Electoral Equality** – Each Councillor should represent, as closely as possible, the same number of electors. This should consider electoral forecasts to future-proof the review for up to 5 years.
- **Community Identity and Interests** – A shared sense of community should be reflected in ward/division boundaries e.g. common shops, schools, sports facilities, places of worship, residents' associations and community groups.

- **Convenient and effective local government** – Strong and identifiable boundaries and ward names that are recognisable.

The review will **not** take into account:

- The political consequences of any boundary changes;
- Parliamentary boundaries;
- The overall size of the Council area and boundaries with neighbouring unitary / county Councils.

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.

At its meeting on September, the Council agreed to make a council size submission to the LGBCE for 96 councillors as part of Phase 1 of the review process.

The Phase 1 submission stated that wherever possible, there is a preference for 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.

The LGBCE confirmed their 'minded to' decision to accept the Council's proposed Council Size of 96 Elected Members on 22 October when phase 2 of the consultation was launched.

An electoral review working group was established in Autumn 2024 to provide member oversight and engagement into Phase 2 of the review process.

This report is to advise the Committee of the completion of the work of the Working Group and report the outcome and recommendations to the Committee for consideration and approval on behalf of the Council.

Links to Council Plan and Medium-Term Financial Plan

None

Other options considered

None

Key considerations for the Council

To submit its views to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England within the Commission's timetable

Legal and Procurement Implications

The Commission's timetable must be adhered to.

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.

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. Furthermore, 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.

The terms of reference for the Constitution & Governance Committee set out that the Committee oversees the Council's input and response to electoral reviews.

Financial Implications

A reduction from 110 councillors to 96 Councillors, if implemented as a result of the LGBCE's review, would reduce the cost of allowances and expenses. Based on the Members Budget 2024/25 reducing to 96 Councillors would save approximately £224,000 per annum in allowances and travel expenses. No additional financial implications have been identified.

HR / Workforce Implications

No further implication.

Equalities Implications

No specific implications.

Community Safety Implications

There are no specific community safety implications,

Climate Change and Sustainability Implications

None.

Health and Safety Implications

None

Social Value

It is important that, so far as possible, electoral divisions cover cohesive areas.

Equality

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.

Background Papers

1. Somerset Structural Changes Order 2022
2. Report to Constitution & Governance Committee on 9 September 2024
3. Report to Full Council 26 September 2024 – Council Size submission to LGBCE
4. Council Constitution

Appendices

Electoral Review Working Group report (to follow)