

Divisions affected – All

COUNCIL
28 MARCH 2023

ELECTORAL REVIEW: DIVISION PATTERNS

Report of the Director of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Council is RECOMMENDED

To submit the attached report at Annex 1 to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England as the formal Council response to the current consultation on Division patterns. This sets out proposed boundaries and names for the County Divisions in each of the five District areas: Cherwell, Oxford City, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire.

Background

2. The Electoral Review is formally split into two phases:
 - a) Council Size including development of electorate forecasts
 - b) Division electoral arrangements setting the boundaries for each County Division.
3. On 13 December 2022, Council agreed a Council Size submission of 69 members, an increase of six members. This was submitted to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (the Commission). The submission included a request for single-member Divisions. Supplementary information was provided in early January 2023 to support the case for an increased number of members.
4. On 28 February 2023, the Commission announced that it supported a Council Size of 69 members and acknowledged the request for single member Divisions.
5. The number of registered local government electors in Oxfordshire, as of 1 December 2022, is 521,890. It is projected to increase to 581,127 by 2029. The growth will not be evenly spread and would lead to greater electoral inequality without this review.

6. There will be an average of 8,422 electors per member based on the projected Oxfordshire electoral population in 2029 compared with the current figure of 8,284 electors per member (Council Size 63). The expectation is that wherever possible as a result of this review all Divisions will have a variance of less than 10%.

Timeline

7. Summary:

The Commission consultation on Division arrangements – 28 February to 8 May 2023.

The Commission consultation on draft recommendations – 1 August to 9 October 2023.

Final recommendations published by the Commission – expected to be January 2024.

8. The Commission's recommendations will be laid before Parliament and become effective for the next County Council Election in May 2025.

Electorate forecast methodology and number of County Divisions in each District

9. The number of planned residential dwellings for each expected development site, from 2022 to 2029, has been provided by Planning Services at each of City and District Councils and collated by County officers. Each of the development sites have been linked to their polling district, using the forward plan maps and Geographic Information System (GIS) mapping.
10. The forecasts for Oxford City use a slightly modified methodology due to the number of students. Students are more inclined to register ahead of a Parliamentary General Election than at other times. They have been absent for the past two years due to the Covid-19 pandemic but are now returning to Oxford and registering to vote.
11. For polling districts in Oxford City that have seen an increase in electors between January 2020 (the first full Register of Electors since the 2019 General Parliamentary Election) and now, the higher electorate count has been used. These are primarily residential areas with few students.
12. For polling districts in Oxford City that have seen a decrease in electors since January 2020 (mainly student populations), the average between the January 2020 and current electorate counts has been used. This recognises that the

number of students in January 2020 was an accurate and valid count, takes into account the changes in recent years, and recognises that student populations, whilst present, do not always register to vote consistently. The Commission accepted the electorate forecasts as submitted in December 2022 following Council consideration of the proposed Council Size.

13. The number of elected members in each District area reflects the higher levels of population growth in towns and villages outside the City of Oxford. These include Abingdon, Banbury, Bicester, Didcot, Henley, Kidlington, Thame, Wantage and Witney.

14. The changes are as follows:

	63 members	Change	69 members
Cherwell	14 members	+2	16 members
Oxford City	14 members	-1	13 members
South Oxfordshire	13 members	+2	15 members
Vale of White Horse	12 members	+2	14 members
West Oxfordshire	10 members	+1	11 members

Review process

15. Following the Council meeting on 7 October 2022, a cross-party working group was established comprising the following members:

Liberal Democrat Green Alliance – Cllrs Robin Bennett, Neil Fawcett, Freddie van Mierlo and Alison Rooke

Conservative Independent Alliance – Cllrs Kieron Mallon, Ian Snowdon and Ted Fenton

Labour and Cooperative Party Group – Cllrs Brad Baines and Andrew Coles (later replaced by Cllr Michael O'Connor)

Non-aligned Independent – Cllr Stefan Gawrysiak

Cllr Stefan Gawrysiak was appointed as chair

16. A technical officer working group was set up to coordinate the gathering of information to support the review. This includes the Electoral Managers from the five City and District Councils along with officers from the County Council's Geographic Information System Mapping, Democratic Services and Communications Teams.

17. Seven meetings of the cross-party member working group have been held to develop Division patterns in each of the five Districts: Cherwell, Oxford City, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire.

18. The Commission's criteria for determining Division patterns includes three main elements:
 - Delivering electoral equality for local electors - this means ensuring that each councillor represents roughly the same number of electors so that the value of each person's vote is broadly the same regardless of where they live in the local authority area.
 - Interests and identities of local communities - this means establishing electoral arrangements which, as far as possible, avoid splitting local ties and/or boundaries where these are easily identifiable.
 - Effective and convenient local government - this means ensuring that the Divisions can be represented effectively by their elected representative and that the new electoral arrangements, including both the council size decision and Division arrangements, allow the local authority to conduct its business effectively.
19. Each District area was considered in turn by the working group with members having an opportunity to examine draft proposals ahead of each meeting. It is almost impossible to draw ideal boundaries across the County and in the Commission's own words the aim should be to reach the 'least worst option'. Wherever possible, Polling Districts, Parishes and District Wards have been used as the building blocks for County Divisions.
20. The local knowledge of members allowed a pattern of Divisions to be developed that as far as possible reflects the interests and identities of local communities. Ultimately though the number of electors is the determining factor as the Commission will normally only accept Division boundaries that result in a number of electors that are within a 10% variance of the average. Where an exception has been made, the tolerance is very small, for example Cropredy and Wroxton at -10.6% and Adderbury, Bloxham and Bodicote at -10.4%.
21. Detailed discussions took place with a range of options considered for each area. Members outside the working group engaged in drawing Division boundaries. The draft proposals for each area were revisited by the working group before finalising the recommendations to Council.
22. Wherever possible, Division boundaries outside the City have been drawn around towns and larger villages, although in some instances it has been necessary to combine parts of urban areas with neighbouring rural areas to reach the required number of electors. Inevitably this approach has led to some Divisions covering large rural areas with a significant number of

parishes. It is recognised that it is less than ideal for one councillor to represent a geographically large area with numerous parishes but, on balance, drawing boundaries around larger settlements is of higher importance.

23. The wider membership of the Council has been kept informed through briefing notes and an online session for all members ahead preparation of the final report. All of the political groups were also offered the opportunity for a separate briefing.

Division names

24. The naming of Divisions was considered by the cross-party working group once a position had been reached on the boundaries for individual Divisions. This is a relatively simple process where Divisions cover a particular town or village but it is much less easy for Divisions that cover a wider rural area with a number of smaller settlements. The Commission is highly unlikely to accept a Division name that includes more than three areas. For example, 'Adderbury, Bloxham & Bodicote' is acceptable but 'Adderbury, Bloxham, Bodicote & Milton' is not.

Consultation responses

25. The members of the cross-party working group have undertaken an intense piece of work with meetings held at least weekly through February and March so that a report can be submitted to Council on 28 March 2023. This allows the work to be completed ahead of the pre-election period for the District elections in Cherwell, South Oxfordshire, Vale of White Horse and West Oxfordshire on 4 May 2023.
26. The formal consultation period on Division patterns will not end until 8 May 2023 and individual members, political groups and others are encouraged to make their views known to the Commission. The Commission values all responses as they serve to indicate the level of support for the proposals. Political groups and individual members are encouraged to respond to show their support or otherwise for the Council submission. If there are aspects of the submission that a political group or individual member is uncomfortable with then they should highlight that to the Commission and suggest an alternative. In making changes, however, they should be mindful of the impact on elector numbers, both in that Division and others in the District area.

Corporate policies and priorities

27. The electoral review is an essential part of good governance for the Council and will ensure that the electorate is represented fairly across the county.

Financial implications

28. There is no specific budget for undertaking the review so costs are being met from General Balances as a supplementary estimate – it is unplanned expenditure but necessary. The costs will be monitored by Law and Governance and reported through the Business Management Monitoring report. The increase in Council Size from 2025 will result in additional costs relating to members including allowances, travelling and officer support.

Comments checked by: Lorna Baxter, Director of Finance

Legal implications

29. The Local Government Boundary Commission for England is established under Section 55 of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Consultation Act 2009 (the 2009 Act) and under Section 56 of the 2009 Act 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 for that area. The Council is requested by the Commission to respond to the electoral review and in doing so must meet the deadlines set by the Commission for each phase of the review.
30. Following the completion of the full consultation process and review the Commission will under section 58(4) of the 2009 Act publish a report stating its recommendations for changes to the electoral arrangements for the county of Oxfordshire. This will in due course be brought into legislation by laying an Order before both the House of Commons and the House of Lords using the Negative Procedure. The Order will automatically become law unless there are objections to it within a specified period (usually 40 days).

Comments checked by: Anita Bradley, Director of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer

Staff implications

31. Limited staff resources are available in Law and Governance to support the review. Extra capacity has been sourced from the Association of Electoral

Administrators to allow a specialist with electoral review knowledge to be engaged on a part-time basis to coordinate activities and ensure that critical deadlines are met.

Equality and inclusion implications

32. The electoral review will help in ensuring that the electorate in Oxfordshire, including minority and protected groups, are fairly represented.

Anita Bradley

Director of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer

Annex: Oxfordshire County Council LGBCE submission on Division patterns.

Background papers: Electoral Review report to Council 7 October 2022

Council Size report to Council 13 December 2022

Local Government Boundary Commission for England website - <https://www.lgbce.org.uk/all-reviews/south-east/oxfordshire/oxfordshire-county-council>

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