

Divisions affected – All

COUNCIL

13 September 2022

Oxfordshire County Council Electoral Review

Report of the Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer

RECOMMENDATION

1. To establish a cross-party group with membership drawn from each political group following liaison with the Political Group Leaders. This will be supported by a technical officer group set up by the Director of Law and Governance.

Executive Summary

2. The Commission has informed the Council that it will be carrying out an electoral review. The last review was undertaken from 2010 to 2012 and implemented for the County Council election in May 2013. In common with a number of other county council areas, Oxfordshire is now due to be reviewed. Over the period since the last review significant variations have developed between the number of electors in each of the Council's divisions.

Timeline

3. Commission officials have held a preliminary meeting with the Leader of the Council, Chief Executive and Monitoring Officer to explain the review process. The next stage is to provide a briefing to all members and that session is being held on the rise of Council on 13 September 2022. A copy of the presentation that will be made to members is attached to this report.
4. The preliminary meetings allow Commission officials to outline the review process and helps them gain an understanding of key agendas and priorities for the Council.

5. The initial task for the Council will be to develop thoughts on proposed council size (the number of elected members) alongside assembling five-year electorate forecasts. Commission officials will liaise with Council officers to ensure that the figures are as robust as possible. This stage provides the opportunity to consider the number of elected members and to reflect on the role and contribution of elected members in modern local governance.
6. Commission officials are keen to gather views from the community and will hold a session that district, town and parish representatives can attend. They also encourage the Council to publicise the review through its own channels to others including the public, businesses and the voluntary and community groups.
7. The review timeline with key dates for the Council is summarised below:

Phase 1 -

Develop Council size proposal (number of councillors) – 13 September to 19 December 2022

Council size published by LGBCE – 14 February 2023

Phase 2 -

Consultation on division arrangements – 21 February to 1 May 2023

Consultation on draft recommendations – 25 July to 2 October 2023

Final recommendations published by LGBCE – 9 January 2024

Phase 3 -

Order laid before Parliament – Spring 2024

Order made by Parliament – Summer 2024

Phase 4 -

Implementation of new electoral arrangements – County Council election May 2025

LGBCE process

8. The Commission is an independent body accountable to Parliament and is not part of any Government department. It recognises that every council is unique and it does not have a policy as to whether the number of councillors should go up, go down, or stay the same.
9. In terms of the division arrangements, the Commission has three statutory criteria to follow in determining effective representation:

- Making sure that, within a council, each councillor represents a similar number of electors.
 - Creating boundaries that are appropriate and reflect community identities and interests.
 - Securing effective and convenient local government by undertaking reviews informed by local needs, views and circumstances.
10. The District Councils must be involved in forecasts as they hold data relating to the electorate in each area and as the authorities responsible for producing Local Plans they are able to provide future population estimates. The Commission can only consider population estimates for five years beyond the end of the review period. For county reviews, divisions are not allowed to cross district boundaries or extend beyond the county boundary, however minor the change might be.
11. In making its recommendations, the Commission cannot take account of political consequences or parliamentary boundaries. In the words of the Commission 'an argument that it ain't broke so don't fix it' cannot be made.

Corporate policies and priorities

12. 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

13. There is no specific budget for the review so costs will be 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 report.

Legal implications

14. The Local Government Boundary Commission for England is established under Section 55 of the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Consultation Act 2009. The Council is required by the Commission to respond to the electoral review and must meet the deadlines set by the Commission for each phase of the review.

Staff implications

15. Limited staff resources are available in Law and Governance to support the review. Extra capacity has been sought from the Association of Electoral Administrators to allow a specialist with electoral review knowledge to be engaged on a part-time basis to provide project management and ensure that critical deadlines are met.

Equality and inclusion implications

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

Risk management

17. Without external support, the Council could struggle to engage effectively in the review and not be able to make a well-informed response on council size and division boundaries. Data provided by the Council also helps others including political parties in making informed responses. The action taken to employ an electoral review specialist mitigates this risk and will ensure that the Council can meet LGBCE deadlines.

Anita Bradley

Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer

Annex: LGBCE electoral review timetable

Background papers: Please refer to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England website (www.lgbce.org.uk) for information on previous electoral reviews undertaken in Oxfordshire.

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