

Divisions affected – All

COUNCIL

13 DECEMBER 2022

ELECTORAL REVIEW: COUNCIL SIZE

Report of the Director of Law & Governance and Monitoring Officer

RECOMMENDATION

1. The Council is RECOMMENDED

To agree to the Council Size submission attached to this report which recommends to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) that

- a) The number of elected members should be increased by 6 from 63 to 69
- b) There should be single-member Divisions if possible

Background

2. The Electoral Review is formally split into two phases:
- a) Council Size which includes development of electorate forecasts
 - b) Division Electoral Arrangements which involve setting the boundaries for each County Division.

3. The review timeline with key dates for the Council is summarised below:

Phase 1 -

Submit Council size proposal (number of councillors) – no later than 5 January 2023

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

The recommendations are laid before Parliament and will become effective for the next County Council Election in May 2025.

Council Size

4. The initial stage of an Electoral Review is to identify and confirm the preferred Council Size. This is the number of elected members who will serve on the Council and should be the number required to deliver effective and convenient local government.
5. The final Council Size will determine the average number of electors per member, and this is used to determine Division patterns. The LGBCE may amend the agreed figure up or down by 1 or 2 later if necessary.
6. The LGBCE does not have an initial view on whether there should be an increase, decrease or no change in the Council Size. All submissions must be evidence-led and justifiable.
7. The LGBCE has provided guidance that highlights areas that should be considered when developing a proposal for Council Size:
 - a) The governance arrangements of the Council and how it takes decisions across the broad range of its responsibilities.
 - b) The Council's scrutiny functions relating to its own decision making and the Council's responsibilities to outside bodies.
 - c) The representational role of councillors in the local community and how they engage with people, conduct casework and represent the Council on local partner organisations.

Electorate forecast methodology

8. The underlying data was provided by the five District Councils using figures from the electoral register published on 1 September 2022.
9. The electorate forecast methodology has been documented and shared with the LGBCE for comment. The number of planned residential dwellings for each expected development site, from 2022 to 2029, has been provided by Planning Services at each District Council and collated by County officers. Each of the development sites have been linked to their polling district, using the forward plan maps and GIS mapping systems.
10. The forecasts for Oxford City use a slightly modified methodology due to the number of students. Students typically register more in advance 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.

11. For polling districts in Oxford City that have seen an increase in electorate 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 electorate since January 2020 (mainly student populations), the average between the January 2020 and current electorate counts have 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, don't always register to vote consistently. The LGBCE have indicated that they are happy with this methodology.
13. The LGBCE requested some changes to the overall model, as the provisional increase was greater than they anticipated. As a result, the model has been adjusted in line with their suggestions (such as not assuming that all electors will move in and register to vote immediately after completion of properties).
14. The electorate forecast model has been built and tested, using provisional electorate counts and final planning data. The number of registered local government electors, as of 1 December 2022, is 521,890. It is projected to increase to 580,747 by the year 2029. The growth will not be evenly spread but would lead to greater electoral inequality without this review. The expectation is that, as a result of this review, all divisions will have a variance of less than 10%.

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
Non-aligned Independent – Cllr Stefan Gawrysiak

Cllr Stefan Gawrysiak was appointed as chair. Cllrs Ian Middleton, Jane Murphy and Eddie Reeves also attended meetings as substitutes.
16. A technical officer working group was set up to coordinate the gathering of information to support the review. This included the Electoral Managers from Cherwell District Council, Oxford City Council, South Oxfordshire District Council, Vale of White Horse District Council and West Oxfordshire District

Council along with officers from the County Council's GIS and Democratic Services teams.

17. A survey was sent to all members to gather views around workloads, capacity and other duties. The anonymised results are included in the submission.
18. Three meetings of the cross-party member working group were held to develop the Council Size submission. In undertaking their work, members were conscious of the national context in terms of legislative requirements and cost-of-living pressures. They were mindful of financial pressures and noted that any increase in the total number of councillors will lead to higher costs for the Council, due to allowances and on-costs in terms of additional officer support. However, the increasing electoral population will result in higher revenue from Council Tax. It is recognised that there is a cost associated with effective democracy and proper representation.
19. The county has a major city in Oxford, a number of market towns and a large rural area covered by parish councils, all with their own distinct styles and communities, and the issues experienced and resulting case work for councillors differ significantly.
20. In light of the Council motion on 1 November 2022, consideration was given to the potential impact of changing governance from cabinet and leader to a committee system. Some members of the working group had experience of the committee system prior to the introduction of new governance arrangements through the Local Government Act 2000. Although the workload would be spread among members in a different way, they believed that the overall level of activity was likely to be broadly similar and would not require more or fewer members than under a cabinet and leader.
21. County Councillors provide a vital role in representing their local communities and therefore it is important that the number of electors they represent does not rise excessively. With significant growth in the electorate, the only way this can be achieved is through an increase in the number of elected members on the Council.
22. A range of options for Council Size were considered by members of the working group. These ranged from keeping the current number of members to increasing the Council Size to 72. After a lengthy discussion, a cross-party consensus was reached on a Council Size of 69. This results in an average of 8,417 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).

23. There was strong support across the working group for single-member Divisions and for an odd (rather than even) total number of members.

Corporate policies and priorities

24. 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

25. 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 report. If the Council Size is increased from 2025 there will be additional costs relating to members including allowances, travelling and officer support.

Legal implications

26. 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

27. 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 coordinate the collation of information and ensure that critical deadlines are met.

Equality and inclusion implications

28. 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 Council Size submission

Background papers: Electoral Review report presented to Council on 7 October 2022

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

Contact Officer: Simon Harper, Head of Governance
Email simon.harper@oxfordshire.gov.uk

December 2022