

Council Report



Report of Chief Executive

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Agenda item no 11

Response to the Local Government Boundary Commission's Warding Proposals for South Oxfordshire

Recommendations

1. to authorise the chief executive to prepare and submit the council's formal response to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's warding proposal for South Oxfordshire reflecting the outline response set out in appendix A to this report, having first consulted with the members of the electoral review working group
2. to authorise the chief executive in consultation with members of the electoral review working group to incorporate in the final submission minor changes to the proposals contained in the outline response where there is clear cross-party support for so doing

Purpose of Report

1. On 12 November, the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) published its proposed warding pattern for the district. This is the latest stage in its electoral review of South Oxfordshire. This report outlines the proposed response of the council to the proposals and seeks delegated authority for the chief executive to submit a full response, having first consulted with members of the electoral review working group.

Strategic Objectives

2. None of the council's strategic objectives are directly relevant to this report.

Background

3. In March this year the LGBCE commenced an electoral review of South Oxfordshire district at the council's request. In June it announced that it was minded to recommend (ultimately parliament takes the decision) a council size of 36. This was the number that we had proposed.
4. At its meeting on the 30 August, council agreed a submission to the LGBCE showing its proposed warding arrangements i.e. the geographical areas that we would wish to see each of the 36 councillors representing. The LGBCE also received a number of other submissions, mainly from various parish and town councils.
5. In November the LGBCE published its draft warding proposal (go to www.lgbce.org.uk to view this). It is fair to say that there was not a high correlation with what we had put forward. Of the 20 wards proposed by the LGBCE only eight matched our submission, although a further two were broadly similar (plus or minus a single parish).
6. In particular, the LGBCE proposed a far higher number of two and three member wards than we had done. It paid little heed to our argument that wherever possible representation by a single councillor is best as this aids clarity and accountability.

Proposed Response

7. The all party electoral review working group (comprising Cllrs Davies, Leonard, Midwinter, David Turner and Wood) has met to consider the LGBCE's proposal. Attached at appendix A is the outline of the response that the working group wishes to make. If council is content to agree this, then the recommendation is to give delegated authority to the chief executive to submit a response by the deadline of the 7 January in line with appendix A, having first consulted with the members of the working group.
8. The reason for the recommendation is that there are a further three weeks available after this meeting in which the response can be finessed to give it maximum impact; to agree the full response at this meeting would require unnecessarily rushed drafting and potentially a weaker submission.
9. The delegation would extend to proposing changes to ward names and making minor changes to ward boundaries where there is a clear support for so doing. Many parish councils will not feed views back until after the council meeting and it is important that our response reflects these where appropriate.

Financial Implications

10. There are no financial implications arising from this report.

Legal Implications

11. There are no legal implications arising from this report.

Conclusion

12. Council needs to agree how it wishes to respond to the warding proposals proposed by the LGBCE. The proposals are disappointing as they do not correlate well with what we put forward. However, if we are to get the LGBCE to change its mind we must harness sound arguments that meet its criteria. The outline response in appendix A endeavours to do this.

Background Papers

- All of the background papers are to be found on the LGBCE's website www.lgbce.org.uk. It contains all public documents pertaining to this review to date.

Appendix A

Outline response to the LGBCE's warding proposal for South Oxfordshire

Preamble

The preamble will express disappointment that the LGBCE's proposals differ so markedly from those of the council. In particular it will draw attention to the fact that the LGBCE appears to have disregarded our preference for single member wards wherever feasible. It will point out that it was not practicable to ask for a single member review (where all wards are single member) because of the volatility of electorate numbers in Didcot resulting from the scale of housing growth.

We will note that we have accepted the argument for multi-member wards in the three market towns, which brings them into line with Didcot, but remain opposed to multi-member wards in the rural parts of the district, except where there is a clear local preference for the LGBCE's proposals.

Wheatley

LGBCE proposal:

To combine our proposed single member Wheatley and Forest Hill & Holton wards into a two member Wheatley ward

Parish council views:

From what we know so far, most of the parish councils in our proposed single member Forest Hill and Holton ward do not favour being in a two member ward with Wheatley. We do not yet know the views of Wheatley parish council.

Analysis:

On the face of it this is one of the weaker proposals from the LGBCE. We can achieve good electoral equality with two single member wards and there is emerging evidence that the rural parishes would prefer separate representation to Wheatley. Our proposal would be strengthened by cutting back the proposed Wheatley ward to the parish boundary (it currently takes in about 160 properties in Holton parish south of the A40). This will overcome one of the concerns of the LGBCE regarding internal access. We will emphasise the different nature of the largely built up Wheatley parish and the very rural parishes to the north.

Recommendation

OBJECT to the proposal and restate case for two single member wards but on slightly different boundaries

Henley and Thame

LGBCE proposal

To create three member wards covering the whole of both towns.

Parish council views:

Both Thame and Henley town councils support a single three member ward covering the whole town.

Analysis

The LGBCE rejected our arguments about improved accountability through having single member wards within Henley and Thame. We could remake these but in light of the views of the two town councils we are unlikely to succeed.

Recommendation

Raise NO OBJECTION to the proposal.

Chalgrove

LGBCE proposal

Include Cuxham with Easington parish (from our proposed Watlington ward).

Parish council views

We do not have any views on this proposal to date.

Analysis

This move makes very little difference to our proposal as the electorate is less than 100. It would improve electoral equality in Chalgrove and worsen it in Watlington but in both cases the revised electorates would still be within an acceptable tolerance. If Swyncombe is added to Watlington ward (see below) then electoral equality is not an issue.

Recommendation

Raise NO OBJECTION to the proposal.

Watlington

LGBCE proposal

Remove Cuxham with Eastington parish (to our proposed Chalgrove ward) and add Swyncombe parish (from our proposed Peppard ward).

Parish council views

We do not have any views on this proposal to date.

Analysis

This is a fairly straightforward swop that improves electoral equality. Removing Swyncombe from our proposed Peppard ward is manageable as Nuffield is now included in that area.

Recommendation

Raise No OBJECTION to the proposal.

Chinnor

LGBCE proposal

To combine our proposed Chinnor North and Chinnor South wards into a two member Chinnor ward.

Parish council views

We understand that Chinnor parish council is content with this proposal. However, we also understand that Towersey parish council would prefer to link with Thame and that Sydenham parish council would prefer a rural ward covering the villages around Chinnor.

Analysis

The LGBCE's comment that we have divided Chinnor arbitrarily has some truth. Chinnor is too big to have a single member ward in its own right so we needed to split the village to allow the creation of two single member wards, each covering part of Chinnor and a number of rural parishes nearby. Towersey's preference to link with Thame would run contrary to our view that towns should have separate representation from their surrounding villages. Sydenham parish council's suggestion of a rural ward would not work because Chinnor, in isolation, is too large to have a single member and too small to warrant two members.

However, given the general view from the rural parish councils that Chinnor issues would dominate in a two member Chinnor ward we will re-state our case for separate Chinnor North and Chinnor South wards.

Recommendation

OBJECT to the proposal and restate case for two single member wards.

Benson

LGBCE proposal

To combine our proposed Benson Village and Crowmarsh & Ewelme wards (minus Nuffield parish) into a two member Benson ward.

Parish council views

We understand that Benson and Ewelme support being in the same ward and that Benson does not support the parish being split between two wards (as per our proposal). We have not had a view from Crowmarsh or Warborough parish councils to date.

Analysis

Our original proposal sought to achieve separate representation for Benson and Crowmarsh Gifford villages to aid accountability. Other proposals dictated that this could only be achieved by separating RAF Benson (and placing this in the Crowmarsh & Ewelme ward) from Benson Village. In light of the views of Benson and Ewelme parish councils we may, on balance, wish to accept this proposal. Removing Nuffield parish improves electoral equality and potentially helps us argue for the reinstatement of a single member Peppard ward.

Recommendation

Raise NO OBJECTION to the proposal.

Didcot South, Wallingford and Cholsey

LGBCE proposal

To merge our proposed single member Cholsey and Brightwell Wards, minus East and West Hagbourne parishes that go into Didcot South, plus the Winterbrook area from our proposed Wallingford Winterbrook ward. To combine the remaining part of Wallingford Winterbrook ward with our proposed Wallingford Castle ward to create a two member Wallingford ward.

Parish council views

Although we have yet to receive anything formally, we understand that most if not all of the parish councils affected by these proposals are unhappy, some for different reasons. There is no support that we are aware of for including East and West Hagbourne parishes in Didcot South ward; there is little appetite for a large two member Cholsey ward covering Moulsoford to Long Wittenham; and we understand that Wallingford town council intends to clarify its position to make the LGBCE aware that it considers the ward boundary for the Wallingford ward should extend to the by-pass around the town.

Analysis

These are perhaps the most controversial proposals put forward. We did not anticipate the inclusion of the Hagbournes in a Didcot ward. Unfortunately, as referred to in the LGBCE report, there does appear to have been an error in the electorate numbers for Didcot South that may, in part, have led to the proposal. We can address that error, however, within the town by redistributing the electorate between Didcot West and Didcot South and will agree precise boundaries with a representative from the Conservative and Labour groups.

We will appraise the LGBCE of the strongly held local view that the Hagbournes are distinct from Didcot and that the issues they face are different from those of the town, which would make it difficult for councillors to represent both effectively. We will counter the argument about communication from the Hagbournes to the rest of the ward in a variety of ways, including pointing out inconsistencies with the approach to joining Harwell and Blewbury parishes in the parallel proposals that the LGBCE has published for the Vale.

Matters are complicated in the Wallingford area by the fact that since we made our submission the new housing on the edge of the town has moved from the south (in our proposed Wallingford ward) to the west (part of which is in our proposed Brightwell ward). We do not yet have any details of the phasing of this development, but any increase to the electorate in our proposed Brightwell ward would present problems as it is already on the large side to support a single member. Consequently, we will propose that the boundary of the two member Wallingford ward extends to the whole length of the by-pass from where it starts on Wantage Road to the bridge over the Thames.

By doing this we can once again have single member wards for Cholsey (covering the whole of Cholsey, minus the Winterbrook area, and Moulsoford parishes) and Brightwell (covering the whole parishes of Aston Tirrold, Aston Upton, East Hagbourne, West Hagbourne, Long Wittenham and Little Wittenham plus Brightwell-cum-Sotwell parish minus that part east of the Wallingford by-pass).

Recommendation

OBJECT to the proposals for the Didcot and Wallingford area, with the exception of the proposal to create a two member ward covering Wallingford, and argue for re-instatement of our original proposals with an adjustment to the boundary of the Wallingford ward to include that part of Brightwell-cum-Sotwell parish east of the bypass.

Sonning Common and Woodcote & Rotherfield

LGBCE proposal

To merge our proposed single member Woodcote and Peppard wards minus Swyncombe parish to Watlington ward, plus Nuffield parish from our proposed Crowmarsh and Ewelme ward and Rotherfield Greys parish from our proposed Shiplake ward. To merge the remainder of Shiplake ward with Sonning Common.

Parish council views

Seven parish councils wrote to the LGBCE saying that they wished to be in the same ward. It regarded this as strong community evidence and used it to justify its two member Woodcote and Rotherfield ward. We can assume they will support the LGBCE's proposals. We have already heard from Sonning Common, Binfield Heath, Shiplake and Harpsden parish councils, none of whom support the LGBCE's proposal. All would like to see our original proposal re-instated.

Analysis

The LGBCE's proposal creates a very large two member ward stretching from Woodcote to Assendon. If this remains intact, it is difficult to see any alternative to the rest of the LGBCE's proposals for this part of the district. We do not yet know the views of Woodcote parish council but, given the broad support of the other parish councils in the proposed ward, it is imperative that the parish councils in the proposed Sonning Common ward object to the proposal if we are to gain sufficient impetus to mount a challenge.

Combining Sonning Common and Shiplake has very little merit as these are quite distinct settlements (Sonning Common has almost exactly the right electorate for one councillor in its own right) with different identities. To achieve a separate ward for Shiplake will require the inclusion of Rotherfield Greys to improve electoral equality. Moving Nuffield parish out of the proposed Benson ward is helpful because it improves electoral equality if the LGBCE reverts to our original proposal for a single member Peppard ward.

Recommendation

OBJECT to the proposal and restate case for two single member wards.

Town warding proposals for Didcot

LGBCE proposal

To create a town ward covering the area south of the railway line and east of Jubilee Way called Richmead.

Town council view

The town council does not support calling this ward Richmead, it considers that Millbrook is a more appropriate name.

Analysis

This area is commonly known as Millbrook and this is a far preferable name to Richmead, which has no local resonance.

Recommendation

OBJECT to the naming of Richmead town ward in Didcot and propose Millbrook as an alternative.

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