

Minutes

of a meeting of the

Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee

held on Monday 19 February 2024 at 6.00 pm in
Meeting Room 1, Abbey House, Abbey Close,
Abingdon, OX14 3JE

Open to the public, including the press

Present in the meeting room:

Councillors: Oliver Forder (Chair), Max Thompson (Vice-Chair), Diana Lugova, Cheryl Briggs and Eric de la Harpe
Officers: Susan Baker (Electoral Services Team Leader), Emily Barry (Democratic Services Officer), Steven Corrigan (Democratic Services Manager), Chris McMullin (Electoral Services Officer) and Ben Silverthorne (Trainee Democratic and Electoral Services Officer).

Remote attendance:

Officers: Jeremy Lloyd (Broadcasting Officer)
Guests: Councillor Hayleigh Gascoigne

7 Apologies for absence

There were no apologies for absence.

8 Minutes

RESOLVED: to approve the minutes of the meeting held on 13 September 2023 as a correct record and agree that the chair sign them as such.

9 Declarations of interest

There were no declarations of interest.

10 Urgent business and chair's announcements

There was no urgent business or announcements from the chair.

11 Public participation

Councillor Hayleigh Gascoigne had registered to address the committee on agenda item 7 – Local Government Boundary Commission for England review of Vale of White Horse District Council warding arrangements.

12 Election of a vice-chair

Following Councillor Diana Lugova's appointment to Cabinet, the committee was asked to elect a vice-chair for the remainder of the municipal year 2023/24.

RESOLVED: to appoint Councillor Max Thompson as vice-chair for the remainder of the municipal year 2023/24.

13 Local Government Boundary Commission for England Review of Vale of White Horse District Council Warding Arrangements

The committee considered the report of the head of legal and democratic on warding arrangements for Vale of White Horse District Council including a summary of the representations which had been received from members since the publication of the agenda alongside a revised warding map.

Councillor Hayleigh Gascoigne addressed the committee. Overall, she was in favour of the proposal and the impact it would have on her ward – Blewbury and Harwell. She spoke in favour of the presumption for multi-member wards as it allowed two people to share the workload, brought different members strengths to the role and, in her view, enhanced both voter representation and the experience of being an elected councillor. Councillor Gascoigne also highlighted that the natural community identity for her ward sat with Didcot but that as this was in South Oxfordshire District Council it could not form part of this review. She did ask that this was considered in future boundary reviews.

In response to the points raised by Councillor Gascoigne, officers advised that the council could consider requesting a boundary review but that this would require agreement from South Oxfordshire District Council before consideration. The committee suggested that Councillor Gascoigne liaised with officers on progressing this request.

The committee asked the Democratic Services Manager if any thought had been given to the benefits of multi member wards when producing the report. The Democratic Services Manager confirmed that no thought had been given to this as no member comments had been received in advance of the production of the report.

The Democratic Services Manager highlighted to the committee that this stage of the review allowed the council to submit their proposals to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England but that this was not the council's review, and the Commission would make the final decision. Officers had considered the current warding patterns, the previous review documents and projected electorate figures when compiling the report. The Democratic Services Manager went on to advise that the revised map which had been circulated was to correct the incorrect boundary which had been drawn for Wootton and Marcham wards. He advised that the report content was correct and unaffected by the corrections made to the map.

The committee noted that previously a request to increase the number of councillors for Vale of White Horse District Council had been rejected by the Commission but that the ward review proposal proposed an increase in the number of councillors to 39 to achieve electoral equality.

The committee thanked officers for their work on the report and also noted that a number of members had now responded to the report. The committee asked how best to proceed in order that the comments received since the report had been drafted could be included. Officers recommended that the committee could request officers to redraft the report taking these comments into account.

The committee asked officers to confirm how the projected figures for the 2029 electorate had been calculated. The Democratic Services Manager confirmed the figure was calculated by colleagues in the policy and programmes team and looked at granted planning permissions, the local plan and projected developments.

The committee inquired as to the ten percent margin target, noting that some wards did not comply with this and asked if officers were confident the proposals would not be rejected on this basis. The Democratic Services Manager advised that in 2013 some wards which did not comply with the margin had been accepted. He went on to advise that community identity and the ability to prove the boundaries made sense were factors the Commission would take into account.

The committee asked officers to comment on the representations which had been received from members and whether or not these could be incorporated into a redrafted paper. The Democratic Services Manager confirmed that depending on the recommendations the committee made it would be possible for officers to redraft the report and to take account of member comments. The committee were keen to ensure that officers consulted with specifically affected ward members as the committee were conscious it comprised members largely from Abingdon.

Officers highlighted to the committee that the deadline for submission to the Commission was the 18 March 2024 allowing a limited amount of time for Council to reconsider a redrafted report. Officers therefore requested that the committee consider making a recommendation to Council to delegate authority to sign off of a redrafted report to the committee. Officers emphasised this was only delegation of the current stage of the review process.

RECOMMENDED to Council on 21 February 2024 to:

1. Request officers seek to address the comments raised by members on the draft proposals submitted to the Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee when drafting revised proposals.
2. Request officers consult with relevant ward members where appropriate when drafting revised proposals.
3. Request multi member wards are considered wherever practicable and community identity supports this.
4. Request officers circulate the redrafted proposals to all members for comments prior to further consideration by the Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee.

5. Delegate authority to the Community Governance and Electoral Issues Committee to finalise the report to be submitted to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England by the deadline of 18 March 2024.

The meeting closed at 6.34 pm