



Report to: Council, 5th July 2022

Report of: Corporate Director- Planning and Governance

**Subject: THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND:
ELECTORAL REVIEW – WARDING ARRANGEMENTS CONSULTATION**

1. Recommendation

1.1 That the Council agrees the Warding Arrangements Submission set out in Appendix 1 as its collective response to the initial consultation being undertaken by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England and authorises the Corporate Director - Planning and Governance to submit this document to the Commission, on behalf of the Council.

2. Background

- 2.1 The Local Government Boundary Commission (“the Commission”) is undertaking a periodic electoral review of Worcester City Council. The review commenced in 2021 and as part of the first stage of the review, the Council made a submission to the Commission in February 2022, as to the number of councillors that Worcester City Council should have. This submission was supported by a large amount of information and data required by the Commission relating to governance arrangements and electorate population forecasts up to 2028.
- 2.2 The Council submitted that the number of councillors should remain the same as currently: 35. The Council’s submission stated that a slightly higher number of councillors, between 36 and 39, could also be supported, but that its current number, 35, was preferred.
- 2.3 Simultaneously the Council resolved that it should change its electoral cycle from elections by thirds, to whole-Council elections. One consequence of this decision to move to whole-council elections is that, for the purposes of the Commission’s review, the number of councillors representing each ward in the city may be any number from 1 to 4, with 3 councillors typically being the highest number representing each ward.
- 2.4 In May 2022 the Commission notified the Council that it is minded to recommend (to HM Government) that the Council size should be 35 councillors and so the Commission’s review has moved to the second stage; to determine revised warding arrangements, based upon 35 councillors representing the district.
- 2.5 The initial phase of the Commission’s warding arrangements is a public consultation running from 17 May until 25 July 2022. The Commission has been publicising its review in Worcester and contacting local stakeholders.

The Commission invites responses either on whole-district basis, or on very localised issues, and from organisations as well as individuals and community groups. The three main criteria set by the Commission in determining warding arrangements are essentially:

- (i) Delivering electoral equality for local voters;
- (ii) Reflecting the interests and identities of local communities;
- (ii) Promoting effective and convenient local government.

- 2.6 In response to feedback during this initial consultation phase, the Commission expects to publish its proposals for the warding arrangements for Worcester in the late Autumn and run a further public consultation on those proposals between 1 November 2022 and 9 January 2023. Following that, the Commission expects to publish its final report on Worcester in March 2023 before submitting its proposals into the Parliamentary process.
- 2.7 Unlike the previous stage of the Commission's review, there is no requirement for the Council to submit an agreed response to the warding arrangements consultation. However, any agreed response which the Council is able to submit, will be helpful for the Commission's review and gives the Council the opportunity to have its say. To this end, officers have been working with Members to develop proposals for warding arrangements in the district which may be able to achieve consensus support from Council Members.

3. Preferred Option

- 3.1 The preferred option is to approve the draft Submission which is set out in Appendix 1. This has been prepared following discussions with the 4 Political Group Leaders as well as individual workshops with each Political Group on the Council. The Submission attempts to strike a balance between useful levels of detail, where that can be agreed by Members of the Council, and providing high level statements of principle, where detailed implementation cannot be agreed by Members of the Council.
- 3.2 It should be noted that individual Members and Political Groups are also at liberty to make their own submissions directly to the Commission.
- 3.3 Because the Council operates a committee system of governance and currently has no overall political control, officers propose that any Submission which is put before full Council should have the support of all 4 Political Group Leaders. This is to try to be consistent with the spirit of the Group Leaders protocol in the Constitution and avoid the scenario where a document submitted to the Commission which purports to be a "Council Submission" has only actually received a qualified endorsement through a majority vote at the Council meeting.
- 3.4 Overall, through the development of this Submission by officers and Members, there has been a good deal of consensus emerging as to the nature and extent of changes that might be required to adjust warding arrangements to meet the Commission's three criteria. For example, there appears to be consensus that most wards do not require adjustment and could already be said to meet the Commission's criteria. Similarly, there appears to be consensus that the best way to address the electoral inequality in the existing Cathedral ward is to divide this ward into two new wards, each having 2 councillors, with proposals for the potential boundary lines and names for these wards also appearing to achieve consensus.

- 3.5 The issue on which consensus has not been reached between the 4 Political Group Leaders is how to implement the consequential changes which arise from dividing the Cathedral ward into two new wards, particularly the need to release a councillor from another ward (and hence realign that ward) in order to be able to create 2 x 2 councillor wards. Therefore, options considered are set out in the Submission, but no commentary given as to relative advantages or disadvantages of these. Similarly, Gorse Hill ward remains below the Commission's target 10% tolerance for electoral equality, but no commentary is given as to whether and how this is addressed.
- 3.6 The Commission has made it clear that as an independent statutory organisation it will review every ward in the district against its criteria and so may reach different or similar conclusions to the Council.
- 3.7 Some Members have suggested that the decision to maintain a Council size of 35 councillors might be revisited, on the basis that having 36 councillors would enable some more expedient decisions about the warding patterns. This has been referred to in the Submission as an option (noting that Council had voted in support of a number of up to 39, with 35 being the preference). However, it should be noted that the Commission has moved past this stage of its review and may not wish to revisit the question of Council size, if it considers it can apply its statutory criteria effectively to warding patterns with 35 councillors as the recommended size.

4. Alternative Options Considered

- 4.1 As noted above, there are alternative options of not making a Council submission at all or making a submission which is not supported by all 4 Political Groups. These alternative approaches are not recommended for the reasons set out in the main part of the report.

5. Implications

5.1 Financial and Budgetary Implications

None identified.

5.2 Legal and Governance Implications

The legal and governance implications are as set out in the main part of the report. This is a review led by an independent statutory organisation, with the Council being a participant and consultee in the process.

5.3 Risk Implications

There is a risk that the Commission's proposals do not accord with what Council Members and officers consider would work well for Worcester. This risk is mitigated by making a submission which represents the collective view of the Council. The risk can be further mitigated by responding to the next phase of consultation, in the Autumn.

5.4 Corporate/Policy Implications

None identified at this stage: if the Commission does ultimately recommend changes to the Council's warding patterns then the Council will need to prepare for these changes before, they are adopted.

5.5 Equality Implications

No specific implications for equality, diversity and inclusion were identified in the preparation of this Submission, except to note that community identities were considered at a very localised level by officers and Members when reviewing warding arrangements.

5.6 Human Resources Implications

None identified.

5.7 Health and Safety Implications

None identified.

5.8 Social, Environmental and Economic Implications

The overall objective of the review of warding arrangements is to ensure electoral equality, which is intended to have a positive impact on individuals' satisfaction with local government representation.

Ward(s): All
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Background Papers: Appendix 1: Draft Council Submission