

The
Local Government
Boundary Commission
for England



Electoral reviews:
what they are and how you can
get involved

Translations and other formats

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Electoral reviews:

what they are and how you can get involved

Advice on the purpose and conduct of the electoral review being carried out in your area

April 2010

What is the Local Government Boundary Commission for England?

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) is an independent body set up by Parliament in April 2010. It is independent of Government and political parties, and is directly accountable to Parliament through a committee chaired by the Speaker of the House of Commons.

The LGBCE's main role is to conduct electoral reviews of local authorities in England with the aim of ensuring that, within each council area, the number of electors represented by each councillor is approximately the same. Other duties include reviewing the boundaries between local authority areas and, on request, advising the Government on local authority bids for unitary status. This document contains advice on the conduct of electoral reviews only.



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Introduction

What are electoral reviews?

The main aim of an electoral review is to try to ensure that each councillor on any district or county council represents approximately the same number of electors as his or her colleagues on that council – this contributes to a fairer electoral system and is usually called ‘electoral equality’. The LGBCE will conduct a review and make recommendations which will aim to improve any electoral inequality, while at the same time trying to ensure that we reflect communities in the area and provide for convenient and effective local government.

Our three main considerations – equalising the number of electors each councillor represents; reflecting community identity; and providing for convenient and effective local government – are not ones we have decided on; they are set out in legislation¹ and our task is to strike the best balance between them and other factors when making our recommendations.

We also publish a more detailed publication on our website² – *Electoral reviews: Technical guidance* – which contains all the statutory information, along with much more detailed guidance on the review process. However, many people will not require such a level of detail and this document is intended for those, especially local residents, who simply wish to get involved in the review and make proposals to us.

1 Schedule 2 to the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009.

2 www.lgbce.org.uk.

Why do we conduct them?

The population of any local authority area is constantly changing, with people moving in and out of area, as well as others who are moving between different parts of the same authority. This is particularly the case where areas are experiencing major growth or regeneration initiatives. As a result, the levels of electoral representation change, with some councillors representing considerably more – or fewer – electors than their colleagues. When these imbalances become significant, an electoral review is required to re-draw the ward or division³ boundaries and reduce such imbalances across the local authority.

Where there is evidence that population movements have caused imbalances in the ratio of councillors to electors, we will conduct a review of the area with a view to improving any imbalances in the number of electors represented by each councillor. If requested to do so by a local authority, we can also carry an electoral review with the aim of moving towards single-member wards or divisions across the authority. We may also conduct an electoral review as a result of local government reorganisation, where new local authority areas are established. Finally, we might also conduct a review if a local authority decides to change the frequency of its elections.

We know that change can often be difficult to justify and people may find it difficult to understand why electoral boundaries in their area need to be altered at all if the number of electors in their ward or division is at or near the average for the council. The problem is that we have to consider the area as a whole. Changing boundaries in one part of the district or county where there are significant imbalances will inevitably have a knock-on effect right across the local authority area.

³ All district and borough councils in England are divided into 'wards' for the purposes of electing councillors; all county councils are divided into 'divisions' for the election of county councillors.

Each electoral review will be of one specific district or county council.⁴ A review of a district council only affects the wards in that district, not the divisions in the county. Similarly, a county review affects only the divisions and not the district wards within the same area. In both district and county reviews, parish council wards may be altered, but the external boundaries of parishes may not.

How will our recommendations affect you?

Our recommendations will alter the electoral arrangements for your council. By 'electoral arrangements', we mean the number of councillors who sit on your local district or county council, the ward or division you live in, the external boundaries of wards, divisions or parish wards, or your ward or division name.

It is very important to us that we understand as much as possible about the views of local people and the communities in which they live so that we can make recommendations that are appropriate for the area concerned. If you have views on any of these issues it is important that you contribute to the review during the consultation stages. Details of how to do this follow later in this document.

There are a number of matters which some people think might change following an electoral review but which, in practice, do not. We cannot amend the *external* boundaries of councils as part of an electoral review – hence the review will not change which local parish, district or county council area you live in. We can review external boundaries of local authorities as part of a separate 'boundary' review; as part of such a review we can propose consequential changes to electoral arrangements. Such reviews are not covered by this document.

⁴ Throughout this document, 'district council' can refer to borough, city, metropolitan or unitary districts in England.

Similarly, our recommendations do not affect council tax levels, or result in changes to electors' addresses or postcodes. Nor is there any evidence that these recommendations will have an adverse effect on house prices, or car and house insurance premiums. They do not determine the size and shape of polling districts, or the location of polling stations, both of which are decided by the local authority. We do not therefore take into account any evidence based on these factors.

Finally, we do not take account of Parliamentary constituency boundaries in our work, nor are we responsible for any changes to them. These are the responsibility of the Boundary Commission for England,⁵ which is a separate body.

⁵ www.boundarycommissionforengland.org.uk.

How can you get involved?

We firmly believe that local people are best placed to tell us about the electoral arrangements for their area. While we encourage the local authority itself to propose revised electoral arrangements to us, having first consulted local people, we also rely on individuals to submit proposals to us directly and to comment on any proposals that might come from the council or political parties. We judge all proposals on their merit, and the quality of evidence provided, rather than the source from which they come. Our review process consists of at least two sets of public consultation, each of which is followed by analyses of the submissions we receive. We publish a report at the end of each analysis stage – the first is called ‘draft recommendations’ and the second ‘final recommendations’ – based on the submissions we have received, and our judgements on them.

Accordingly, we encourage everyone in the local area to get involved in the review by submitting proposals to us, or by commenting on our or other people’s proposals. We think our recommendations are much more likely to have a sound foundation where they are based as much as possible on local submissions supported by argument and evidence, rather than those we have had to come up with ourselves in the absence of persuasive proposals from the local area itself.

We are keen to ensure total transparency in the review process. All the comments and submissions that we receive are published on our website⁶ and sent in hard copy to your local authority’s offices for anyone to inspect (for data protection purposes, names and addresses of private individuals are removed). This ensures that everyone with an interest in the review has access to the same information that we have.

⁶ www.lgbce.org.uk.

We appreciate that many local people wishing to get involved in the review will not have access to the same sort of resources that the council, political parties or some parish councils have. We will therefore publish resources such as maps of existing wards, polling district maps (if supplied by the council) and details of the number of electors in each ward or division, in order that everyone can have access to and use this information. Our intention is that all these resources will be available on our website. However, much of this material is only available from local authorities. Accordingly, we are dependent on their cooperation in making these resources available.

We also recognise that, for many people, the main concern will be about defining their immediate local community. Often there is a desire to retain the existing arrangements due to historical concerns, irrespective of any imbalance in the number of electors represented by each councillor. While we understand such attachments, we have to balance a number of factors and have to make recommendations for the local authority area as a whole. As a consequence, the most persuasive suggestions we receive are those that bear in mind the effects of their proposals on the whole area and all of the criteria⁷ we work with. Our recommendations will seek to reflect the best balance between the criteria, across the whole authority concerned. This may at times conflict with the wishes of one specific area of the community.

Above all we want to hear your views, what you think, and why. In deciding what we feel is the most appropriate pattern of wards or divisions to recommend for your local authority, we need as much clear and well-argued evidence as possible. This means that proposals

⁷ Electoral equality (measured as the number of electors represented by each councillor), community identity, convenient and effective local government and the electoral cycle of the council.

supported by evidence and argument are much more persuasive than simple assertions or pre-prepared and duplicated letters.

The review process

The review process is normally in four distinct stages (Table 1).

Table 1: Typical electoral review process		
Stage	Details	Length
Council size consultation	Where possible and practicable we will conduct a short consultation specifically on council size (the total number of councillors to be elected to the council)	10 weeks
One	Consultation stage on electoral arrangements – we encourage everyone to write to us and tell us what they think, using good argument and evidence rather than assertion	Typically 12 weeks
Two	Our deliberation based on submissions received and preparation of draft recommendations	Typically 10–14 weeks
Three	Publication of draft recommendations and consultation on them – please write to us and comment on our draft recommendations, either in support or opposition, and give reasoned arguments and evidence to back up your comments	Typically 12 weeks
Four	Our deliberation based on the comments on our draft recommendations, formulation and publication of final recommendations	Typically 10–14 weeks

Normally, a review begins with a first 12-week consultation period (called Stage One), during which everyone is invited to make proposals to us on the future electoral arrangements for the council. By electoral arrangements we mean:

- the total number of councillors to be elected to the council
- the number of councillors to be elected from each ward (for district reviews) or division (for county reviews)
- the number of wards or divisions
- the boundaries of wards or divisions
- the names of wards or divisions
- any parish electoral arrangements

We may wish to consult separately on the number of councillors elected to the council. The purpose for doing so would be to reach initial conclusions on that matter before inviting all those affected to submit their views on the number and pattern of wards, and the number of councillors to be elected from each. Our website and local media will make clear if this is the case with the review of your council.

During the whole review process, we will take all steps necessary to publicise the review in the local area, including issuing press releases, sending posters to the council and all parish councils (including in other languages if required), offering staff and members of the Commission for local media interviews and writing to key stakeholders. We will also encourage the local council and major political parties to be as proactive as possible in publicising the review.

Electoral reviews: what they are and how you can get involved

During the review, we may also wish to consult on specific issues or within a specific area if the arguments received are finely balanced. We will write to interested parties or use local media to do so.

The LGBCE's considerations

There are a number of formal considerations which we have to take into account when we conduct electoral reviews. Full details, including legal references, are available in our *Technical guidance* publication, which can be found on our website. However, a number of them are highlighted in this chapter, which sets out the main considerations used when we conduct electoral reviews.

Council size

Our first consideration when conducting a review is that of 'council size'. This is the term we use when referring to the total number of councillors elected to a district or county council. It is necessary for us to make a decision on council size at the start of our deliberations, as this determines the optimum number of electors each councillor should represent. For example, if a local authority has an electorate of 50,000 and we decide on a council size of 50, we know that the optimum number of electors each councillor should represent is 1,000.

We attach a great deal of weight to this decision. For that reason, if time and other considerations allow, we will try to consult separately on council size, to establish people's views on this issue without reference to other matters such as ward or division boundaries. In reaching conclusions on the most appropriate council size for an authority we will be looking for arguments and evidence in relation to a number of factors. These include the council's responsibilities, councillors' representational role in the area, how the council 'works', how the number of councillors proposed relates to the council's style of political management, and how effectively the councillors would work together and run the council.

There are a number of matters we disregard when reaching views on council size, such as arguments that the number of councillors should increase just because there is an increase in electorate. Nor do we take account of comparisons of council size between local authority areas. Our view is that each local authority is unique and needs to reflect the area it serves in the way thought best. Similarly, 'benchmarking' of the number of electors each councillor represents across authorities is neither appropriate nor practicable.

Once we have made a decision on council size, we have our optimum ratio of electors per councillor. We will then consider the rest of the electoral arrangements as a whole; that is the number, names and boundaries of wards or divisions; the number of councillors to be elected from each ward or division; and any parish electoral arrangements.

Number of electors per councillor

Equalising the number of electors represented by each councillor is only one of the considerations we are required to take into account that can be measured objectively. By contrast, the other two main factors – reflection of community identity and convenient and effective local government – are more subjective factors. Accordingly, we aim to achieve good levels of electoral equality in all electoral reviews.

We recognise that it will never be possible to achieve absolute electoral equality across the whole of a local authority area. The geography of the area, or the pattern and size of the communities within it, can result in variations from one ward to another. However, we take the view that we

should at least start by trying to achieve as good a level of electoral equality as possible, and only then adjust to reflect other factors, such as community identity. We aim to publish draft recommendations that reflect all the factors so that local people have a chance to comment on them before we publish our final recommendations.

The degree of variation between wards we are likely to accept will depend very much on the quality and strength of the arguments and evidence we receive. Generally speaking, the main grounds people use in arguing in favour of an electoral variance is that the resulting ward pattern would reflect community identity. This issue is discussed below.

Community identity

The other two main considerations we are required to take into account are harder to define, as they cannot be measured and can often mean many different things to different people. It is essential, therefore, that if you are making a case on the basis of 'community identity' that you write to us and tell us what and where your community is and, more importantly, what defines it and marks it out as a separately identifiable community.

For some, community identity could be defined by the location of public facilities such as doctors' surgeries, hospitals, residents' associations, libraries or schools. Indeed, an evaluation conducted by the Electoral Commission into the conduct of electoral reviews revealed that our stakeholders feel that the location of public facilities can provide some evidence of the existence of community identity but that such arguments cannot be considered in isolation. It will certainly not be the case that mere assertion that such facilities exist can justify a community identity argument.

For others, an area's history and tradition may be the basis of its sense of community identity. However, communities are constantly evolving over time and historical considerations may not have such importance in areas which have been subject to recent development or population dispersal. Major roads could be seen to be the focus of an area if they are the location of shops or community facilities which people visit regularly. Alternatively, major roads, rivers or railway lines could be seen as physical barriers marking the boundary between different communities.

We understand that people have strongly held views about their communities and the impact that new warding arrangements may have on them. It is important to us that we hear all those views. However, we ask that, rather than simply relying on assertion, people explain carefully to us in terms that might be understood by those not living in the area, why a particular warding pattern we have proposed would – or would not – have an adverse effect on their community. What may be self-evident to local people who work or live in an area may not be obvious to us. It is for that reason we need to have well-argued evidence of community identity if we are to move away from equality in the number of electors each councillor represents. We will take into account all proposals we receive but those which are supported by argument and evidence are likely to carry more weight with us.

The example, overleaf, of an electoral review we conducted in Taunton Deane Borough Council shows how evidence we received during Stage Three of the review process persuaded us to change the balance between trying to achieve electoral equality and reflecting the community identity in the area.

Case study – Taunton Deane Borough Council

During the first consultation stage of our review of Taunton Deane,⁸ we received limited evidence of community identity for the wards of Bishop’s Lydeard, Bradford-on-Tone, Milverton & North Deane and Wiveliscombe & West Deane. As a result, we proposed our own combination of areas to make these wards, which would have resulted in very low levels of electoral inequality. Given the lack of well-evidenced argument regarding the community in this area, we had to ensure that we were getting as close as possible to achieving electoral equality, given the parishing arrangements and the geographic nature of the area.

However, during Stage Three we received significant opposition to our draft recommendations. A number of respondents argued that the existing arrangements better reflected community identities in the wards, and that the higher levels of electoral imbalance that resulted would be justified by the better reflection of communities. The residents cited the existence of an Area Partnership and Community Office encompassing these areas, transport links and public facilities, and a number of other factors.

We were persuaded to change our recommendations for this area by the evidence provided during the second consultation stage. As a result, we recommended a ward which had 14% more electors in than average, but felt that this was justified by the improvement in the reflection of communities we had provided. A more detailed account of this issue can be found in the final recommendations report for Taunton Deane, available on our website.

⁸ This review was carried out by our predecessor the Boundary Committee for England, who worked to the same criteria and processes.

Convenient and effective local government

Convenient and effective local government is also difficult to define; it is the fundamental consideration at the start of the review when we take our decision about council size, but is often overlooked as a consideration by people making proposals to us on warding arrangements. The impact of proposals on individual councillors needs to be considered, as a ward may be so large in terms of area or electorate, or have such a large number of parish councils, that it prevents a councillor from effectively representing the ward. Equally the ward could be too small and may not provide the scope for a councillor to contribute effectively to the council.

Arguments have been made in the past that if all wards in a district return the same number of councillors this helps the local electorate to understand and therefore engage with local government. Proposals for a uniform pattern of wards will need to demonstrate how this aids the provision of effective and convenient local government and why any deterioration in equality of representation or community identity should be tolerated.

When we are conducting a review of a county council, we will also be seeking to ensure that 'coterminosity' between district wards and county divisions is achieved. Coterminosity occurs when district ward boundaries are used for county division boundaries; this is also a consideration of convenient and effective local government, and further details on how we take it into account are available in our *Technical guidance*.

Wards and divisions: number of councillors, boundaries and names

There is no limit or prescription on the number of councillors that can be elected from any ward or division. However, for reasons of accountability, we would be extremely unlikely to recommend wards or divisions with more than three councillors. In certain electoral reviews, we can be asked by local authorities to conduct the review with a presumption towards single-member wards or divisions; however, this presumption does not take precedence over the considerations of equality in the number of electors each councillor represents, reflecting community identity and providing for convenient and effective local government. We will have to satisfy ourselves that these are suitably balanced when recommending single-member wards or divisions. Additionally, when conducting reviews of councils which hold elections by thirds or halves, we will also look to have the appropriate number of councillors in each ward. For councils that elect by thirds, that means three councillors per ward and for those that elect by halves, two members per ward.

When considering the external boundaries of wards and divisions, we will seek to tie them to some easily identifiable feature such as roads, railway lines or rivers. There may be some occasions when we will run boundaries down the backs of properties in order to unite properties on both side of a road in the same ward.

The names of wards and divisions can often be of great importance to people locally. We rarely have strong views on the names of wards and will look to use locally generated names where possible. Where there is no consensus, we will make our decision based on which name we consider best reflects the communities within the ward. We will also

seek to ensure that ward names are sufficiently distinct from other ward names in the district to avoid confusion for councillors and electors. A district or county council can change the name of a ward or division if it sees fit, outside of an electoral review.⁹

Parishes

Our recommendations can affect the electoral arrangements of parishes. This is because the legislation to which we work states that, where practicable, a parish must not be divided between district wards or county divisions without itself being divided into wards along the same boundary. We will try to formulate our recommendations using whole parishes as building blocks; however, it is often necessary to split larger parishes in order to ensure equality in the levels of electors per councillor at a district or county level. Therefore, if our recommendations split any parish we must also split that parish into parish wards, and make recommendations as to the number of councillors elected to the parish council from each ward.

As stated previously in this document, we cannot make changes to the external boundaries of parishes as part of an electoral review.

9 Under the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007.

What happens at the end of a review?

The publication of our final recommendations marks the end of the review process. There is no provision in legislation for us to consider further representations at that stage. Our recommendations must be approved by Parliament before they come into force.

Once the review is complete, we will make arrangements to implement our recommendations. A legal document – known as an ‘Order’, outlining the proposed electoral arrangements – will be laid in draft for 40 working days in both Houses of Parliament.

If no objections to the Order are made in Parliament within 40 working days, our final recommendations will be confirmed and the new electoral arrangements will be implemented. Parliament can either accept or reject the draft Order, it cannot modify it. The Order will state when the new arrangements will come into force.

While Parliament’s decision is final, it may be possible to challenge it in the courts and the Parliamentary Ombudsman is entitled to consider any allegations of maladministration.

FAQs

What are wards and divisions?

Every district is divided into wards, and county into divisions. Each ward or division is represented by councillors who are elected from those wards or divisions. Only residents of the ward or division can vote for the candidate who will represent that ward or division.

Is the Local Government Boundary Commission for England affiliated to any political party or government department?

No. We are a completely independent body, and are not sponsored by a government department. Commissioners are not permitted to conduct any political activity or have any party affiliation.

Will an electoral review affect my house value, council tax, insurance premium, stamp duty, postcode, school catchment area or hospital?

No. The review is concerned with electoral matters only; all the above factors are decided by other organisations or factors.

Will this review affect the dates or years of elections?

We can only implement new electoral arrangements for borough, district and county councils in the authority's normal year of election. However, we can make transitional changes to the years in which parish and town council elections take place.

My ward is not changing so why do we need an election?

We consider that a fresh mandate is necessary for a council that has had an electoral review. Therefore, all of the existing wards will be abolished and new ones established that will come into force at a whole-council election.

When the wards are changed what happens to the county division and parliamentary constituency boundaries?

Each review will be of one local authority and we will only look at the electoral arrangements of that authority. Consequently, if we are reviewing a district we will not be altering any county division boundaries, and vice versa. We have no involvement with parliamentary constituency boundaries, which are reviewed by the Boundary Commission for England – a separate body. They may conduct interim reviews following any electoral review we carry out; but this is entirely at their discretion.

How do the external boundaries of the parish, district or county change?

For parish boundary changes, the local district council can conduct a review and implement the recommendations, subject to the provisions of the Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Act 2007. We can conduct boundary reviews of district or county councils, either at the request of the Secretary of State, at the request of the relevant authority or if we identify boundary anomalies which in our view warrant a review. However, we cannot recommend changes to external boundaries as part of an electoral review.

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