

Buckinghamshire Council: consultation on council size

Purpose of this document

The Local Government Boundary Commission is inviting local people, parish and town councils and organisations to take part in a consultation about how many councillors the new Buckinghamshire Council should have from elections in 2025.

Deadline for responding to this consultation

We are consulting from 7 September to 2 November 2021.

You can give us your views:

- through our website <https://www.lgbce.org.uk/all-reviews/south-east/buckinghamshire/buckinghamshire-council>
- by e-mail to reviews@lgbce.org.uk
- by post to The Review Officer (Buckinghamshire), LGBCE, PO Box 133, Blyth, NE24 9FE

Introduction

Buckinghamshire is a new council that was formed in April 2020. The new council combined the former Buckinghamshire County Council, South Bucks District Council, Chiltern District Council, Wycombe District Council and Aylesbury Vale District Council into a single authority. It has a population of around half a million and covers an area of 604 sq. miles (1564 sq. km). There are many town and parish councils across the area, apart from High Wycombe.

Parliament decided to establish a new single council for the area in order to enhance local services provided to the people of Buckinghamshire, as well as improving strategic decision making and local partnership working with other public sector bodies.

To help get the Council established, it was proposed that it would initially comprise 147 councillors elected on the basis of three for each of the previous county divisions. However, this was purely an interim arrangement and this number of

members would only serve until 2025 by which time a full electoral review could be undertaken by the Local Government Boundary Commission. The Local Government Boundary Commission is the independent organisation that carries out these reviews.

The Commission is just starting that review and its first task is to determine the most appropriate number of councillors required by the new Council. An electoral review recommends how many members a council needs in order to carry out its business effectively and a pattern of electoral wards which is fair, reflects local communities and which promotes efficient government. All of the new council seats will be up for election next in 2025.

Why we are consulting

In all of our electoral reviews we aim to:

- Make sure that, within an authority, each councillor represents a similar number of electors
- Create boundaries that are appropriate, and reflect community ties and identities
- Deliver reviews informed by local needs, views and circumstances

As stated above, later in the process, we will be consulting extensively with local people and organisations on new ward boundaries. Before we do that, however, we need to decide how many councillors Buckinghamshire Council should have.

We have liaised closely with the Council and its members, seeking initial views about the number of councillors. This has led to various suggestions and we are now carrying out a consultation on the subject and we are keen to know what local people think. Traditionally, we have given careful scrutiny to proposals for in excess of 100 members to ensure effective and convenient local governance for residents which is a further reason for the consultation.

So far, we have received two submissions proposing significantly different numbers of councillors. One, from Buckinghamshire Council, proposed that 120 members should be elected to the Council. Another, from Buckinghamshire Business First, expressed a preference for a number between 65 and 80, but that the council size should be no larger than 98 councillors. We have provided links to both these submissions so that people can see the arguments that underpin these suggestions.

Given the significantly different proposals submitted to us, and the fact that this is a new council, we thought it was particularly important to ask the views of the wider community in Buckinghamshire before we decide the most appropriate number of councillors to represent the people of Buckinghamshire.

Our approach to deciding the number of councillors

We want to ensure that Buckinghamshire has the right number of councillors to take effective decisions, as well as represent the council on other bodies and ensure all local communities have an effective voice on the council.

We are seeking local views on the proposals listed below. We should stress that this is an evidence-based process and is not simply about which number is more popular. We are especially interested in your thoughts about the issue and **WHY** you support a specific number of councillors and/or reject another number.

Proposals being considered

The three proposals that have been put to us, so far, are:

- **120 councillors** - as proposed by the Council
- **98 councillors** - the number of councillors the former county council proposed to the Government in 2016 when a new unitary council was being considered.
- **80 councillors** - A report from consultants EY, commissioned by Buckinghamshire Business First in 2014, suggested a range of 65-80 councillors. At this stage, we have shown the top end of the EY bracket, since this may be more likely to ensure the long-term effectiveness of the council. However, we welcome alternative views.

Consultation questions

As indicated above, the Commission wants to know what people think about these options and why.

Issues to bear in mind

In explaining your views, you might find it helpful to think about the role of elected councillors and, also, aspects of how the council works in the same way that the Commission itself does when deciding councillor numbers. Specifically, this means:

- the way the Council is led, makes decisions, and operates:
 - its decision-making structure, leadership and committees
 - any delegation of decisions to council officers
 - how the Council handles such matters as planning, licencing etc
 - how the role and responsibilities of parish and town councils will evolve
- The way the Council's work is scrutinised by councillors in order to ensure that the Council is properly run and publicly accountable.
 - What is the structure by which councillors scrutinise decisions taken by the Council's leadership?

- The Council's interaction with, and representation, on other local and regional bodies
 - which local and regional bodies do councillors represent the community on? How does this important representational role interact with Council decision-making?
 - how local councillors represent their local communities and provide community leadership for residents.
 - how do councillors interact with parish and town councils, as well as residents and local community associations?
 - how are enquiries and issues raised by local residents handled by councillors?
 - how do councillors interact with local people? For example, face-to-face, constituency surgeries / email / social media etc
 - the role of councillors on community boards

Questions

- Do you feel that any of the suggested numbers put to us - 80, 98 or 120 – represents an appropriate council size for Buckinghamshire Council from 2025?
- If so, why do you feel that your preferred number is the 'best' choice? if possible, please refer to the aspects listed in the paragraph above in explaining your choice.
- If you don't support any of these numbers and want to suggest an alternative one, or if you prefer to express a more general view about the size of the Council but without specifying a figure, please explain why you feel this way. Again, it might be helpful to refer to the aspects listed above.

The reasons for your views, taking into account the issues to bear in mind, listed above, will be especially important to us and will help us to decide on the right number of councillors.

Next steps

The Commission will look carefully at all the comments that we receive, as well as at the submissions that have already been sent, and agree a new council size. Once it has decided how many councillors Buckinghamshire should have, the results of the consultation will be published along with an explanation of the Commission's reasons for its decision.

We will then start the process of drawing the new electoral wards. This process will take a number of months and, very importantly, will involve further rounds of consultation. We very much hope that as many local people and organisations as possible will take part in these consultations.

Background information

If you would like to know more about the various proposals that have already been put forward, these are available through the following links:

- Buckinghamshire Council report [1] [2]
- [The former Buckinghamshire County Council report](#)
- [Buckinghamshire Business First \(EY\) report](#)

Other resources

- The Council's corporate plan and priorities can be viewed on its website: <https://www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/your-council/corporate-plans-and-priorities/>
- Information on the Council's community boards can be found here: <https://www.buckinghamshire.gov.uk/community-and-safety/improving-your-local-community/>
- Further details on the Commission's approach to deciding on the appropriate number of councillors for a council can be found in our technical guidance: <https://www.lgbce.org.uk/how-reviews-work/technical-guidance>