

Draft Response to Local Government Boundary Commission for England Draft Proposals for Worcestershire County Council

On 9 January 2024, the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) published its draft proposals for county council electoral division boundaries in Worcestershire. This report contains the response to the proposals from Worcestershire County Council using the criteria set out by the LGBCE:

- a) **Electoral equality** – that each Councillor represents a similar number of electors
- b) **Convenient and effective local government** – to propose divisions that use clearly identifiable boundaries, have appropriate names and make it as easy as possible for the councillors to do their jobs, and
- c) **Community identity and interests** – reflect the communities people live in.

Background

In 2022 the LGBCE announced that it would be carrying out a review of the electoral boundaries of the County Council. The electoral boundaries in the county were last reviewed in 2004. The first stage of the review considered the number of County Councillors and whether there should be any change to the current total (57). The LGBCE concluded that 57 remained an appropriate number of Councillors.

The County Council responded to the LGBCE's 'communities' consultation which ran between 16 May and 19 September 2023. The County Council's proposals for the pattern of divisions were based on the estimated total number of electors in 2029 and addressed the LGBCE's criteria set out above. It aimed to achieve divisions where the number of electors in each was fewer than plus or minus 10% variance from the authority average per councillor. The Council's submission was agreed at the Council meeting on 14 September 2023. The Council's proposals reduced the number of divisions where the variance was estimated to be greater than plus or minus 10% in 2029 from 23 to 5.

The LGBCE has reviewed the Council's proposals alongside responses and comments submitted to them by Councillors, Parish Councils, other organisations and members of the public. Their draft proposals have adopted many of the Council's suggestions, with minor amendments in some divisions and more substantial changes elsewhere. The Council's response is arranged by each District Council area in turn.

Bromsgrove

Alvechurch and Wythall

Map 1

The LGBCE propose that a two-member division is created for Alvechurch with Wythall.

Members have expressed concern that a two-member division for a large geographical area which is largely rural will impact adversely on councillors' workloads. Additional time would be needed to liaise about issues to avoid duplication and the local representational role would be more complex.

An alternative proposal would be to use the A435 as the boundary for Wythall division so it would include most of the Wythall settlement. Alvechurch would then have an electoral

variance of 12% and Wythall would be 1%. Whilst the proposed Alvechurch division would be over tolerance, Councillor workloads would be more manageable for members in this largely rural area if single member divisions were retained. Alvechurch will then predominantly reflect the rural aspect with Village centres.

In Wythall, whilst not achieving the overall desire of alignment of the Parish, the Council's proposal improves the current division as it brings the vast majority of the residents of Wythall into one division that aligns with the community's view.

Bromsgrove East and Bromsgrove South

Map 2

Since the publication of the Boundary Commission's proposals, The Council has been notified of a proposal being considered by Finstall Parish Council to change the Parish boundary.

The Parish Council is seeking to redraw the boundary of the Parish at Railway Walk along the railway line to move Field View House into Bromsgrove South division from Bromsgrove East. Due to lack of easy access to the centre of Finstall, this area could be considered remote from the Finstall community. There is no connection between the block of flats and the parish. The proposed change would achieve a more clearly defined boundary and electors would not have to travel so far to vote.

The electoral equality for Bromsgrove South division would increase from 9% to 10% as a result of this change, with Bromsgrove East unchanged at -2%.

Clent Hills

The Council noted that the LGBCE recommend moving Bell End and Bell Heath from Clent Hills division to Woodvale to achieve electoral equality. The LGBCE has also acknowledged the issue of most of the division boundary adjoining another District and forming part of the county boundary. However, the community in Bell End and Bell Heath is in Belbroughton parish and residents go to Belbroughton and Hagley in the current division for shopping. The closest doctor's surgery is in Belbroughton too. Residents are also not in the catchment for Woodvale school, they look to Hagley for schooling.

The Council has looked at a potential alternative where Bell End and Bell Heath would be retained in Clent Hills, but the boundary with Beacon division would be moved to run along the M5 motorway. This would reduce the percentage over tolerance in Clent Hills from 13% to 12%. However, this would affect polling districts BRE and BRG. The proposed change would result in splitting parish wards and leave 3 electors in one ward in polling district BRE and one with 24 electors in BRG. On balance the Council considers that this would not fulfil the criteria in terms of electoral efficiency and should not be pursued.

The Council acknowledges that its original proposal not to change the boundary of this division does not achieve electoral equality but having examined alternatives which do not meet the criteria, suggests that in this instance the local community links and constraints imposed by the division's location have sufficient weight to enable the current boundary to be retained.

Woodvale

The Council does not support the LGBCE proposal to move Bell and Bell Heath into this division for the reasons set out at Clent Hills above.

Worcester City

Nunnery and Warndon Parish

The LGBCE proposes to move the boundary with the current Warndon Parish division to the north of the Council's proposed boundary. The LGBCE refers to the extension into Leopard Hill 'to account for upcoming developments and to follow B463 road'.

The Council considers that this approach is inconsistent with the basis on which electorate numbers were calculated for 2029, where details of known developments only were included. No development is proposed or agreed for this area; it does not feature in the current draft local plan.

The Council's proposal achieved a coterminous boundary with the parish and considers that this supports local community identity. However, the Council acknowledges that if its proposed boundary is retained and no other changes are made, Nunnery Division would be minus 14%, so over tolerance for electoral equality. There is limited option to move electors from neighbouring divisions which meet the other criteria. The Council's proposal to move polling district B4 from the St Peter division, which could balance out retaining this boundary at the north, has been rejected by the LGBCE on the grounds that it did not reflect community identities and interests.

Whilst understanding the Commission's proposal to change the name of the Warndon Parish division to St Nicholas and Leopard Hill to reflect the parish wards, the Council considers that the name 'Warndon Villages' is more identifiable for electors in that area of Worcester.

Riverside

Map 3

The LGBCE has proposed the boundary between Riverside and St John along Himbleton Road should run along the road rather than behind houses as was proposed by the County Council. The LGBCE says that this is to provide a clearer boundary.

The Council does not support this change as it splits electors from their closest polling station. As well as reinstating this boundary it is suggested that a small number of properties between The Spinney and Martley Road are included in the Riverside Division for the same reason. This has minimal effect on electoral equality (with the variance in Riverside changing from -4% to -2% and in St John from -4% to -7%) and supports electoral efficiency.

Wychavon

Evesham South

Map 4

Council proposals extended Harvington division further into Evesham town. It has since been pointed out that this removes from an Evesham division some key facilities and buildings with which residents identify the town – the Bell Tower, the library and other civic buildings.

The LGBCE has considered alternatives proposed during the consultation and rejected them because of the adverse impact on electoral variances which were not balanced out by consideration of the other criteria.

The Council proposes a modified approach to keep these facilities in an Evesham division and reflect community identity. This would be to split polling district BE and move the boundary between Evesham South and Harvington to include Evesham High Street as far as Swan Lane in Evesham South Division, as well as the area south of Swan Lane and on the west side of Chapel Street and Cowl Street. This increases the percentage variance of Evesham South to 11.9% but the Council suggests that the community connections within the town are a sufficient argument to make this change.