

SUBMISSION

From: Buckinghamshire South Liberal Democrats
To: Local Government Boundary Commission for England
Re: Warding arrangements for the Buckinghamshire Unitary Authority
Date : 25th March 2022

BACKGROUND

This note sets out the reasoning and relevant factors for recommending a new ward pattern in Buckinghamshire. It uses evidence from the South Buckinghamshire region. It further suggests a potential ward structure in the south of the county.

Last year the commission announced it was minded to recommend a 98-seat size of council. The Liberal Democrats welcome this as it aligns with our manifesto proposal. We believe this is an effective and efficient size of council. We would further suggest that the **current** ward pattern is not fit for future purpose in South Buckinghamshire for the following reasons:

- The area requires nineteen councillors which implies a mixture of one and two member seats and/or adding voters from other neighbouring parishes to create the best overall voting size.
- The current ward pattern also results in 'domino' fragmentation of communities. For example, part of Gerrards Cross is moved into Denham, resulting in part of Beaconsfield Old Town being moved into Gerrards Cross. Farnham Parish [Common and Royal] is split between two other wards and Marlow loses part of the town to villages to the east
- In some cases, the boundaries are not clearly identifiable and have to operate across parish boundaries resulting in odd sized parish wards [Gerrards Cross East is a good example]

OUR APPROACH

We have therefore looked at trying to create a completely new pattern of wards in the area that reflects the key criteria set out in your documentation, namely:

- Similar voting size per councillor [now and in the next 5 years]
- Greater community cohesion
- Clearer identification

KEY FINDINGS

Buckinghamshire is a diverse County encompassing rural urban and mixed communities. The geography, demographics and needs of those communities vary significantly and any optimal warding pattern for our County is unlikely to result in a single standardised pattern across the county.

Rural areas can present significant geographical challenge if a two-member ward pattern is adopted, potentially encompassing up to sixteen parish councils. This is unlikely to represent a recognised or common community under a single ward. A smaller, single member, ward would be easier to define by communities and manage as a Councillor.

In contrast urban areas are compact but also often challenged, in socio economic terms, creating both a greater volume as well as more complex case work per thousand voters than rural areas. This compactness is also often reflected in greater community identity and cohesion. This can often lend itself to two member wards, thus avoiding the artificial division of urban communities.

We have found it impossible to develop a coherent response applying the above three factors in a pure two-member ward pattern.

It is clear to us in Buckinghamshire South that community cohesion often works best with a single member ward - the smaller size working well in generating more community and parish relevant ward boundaries whilst retaining a similar voting size per councillor. It also reduces the geographic spread of a ward and thus generates better identification. However, in some urban areas it is also true that a two-member ward could reflect community cohesion better than an artificial split of the community into two single member seats.

We therefore believe that a combination of 1 and 2 member seats would work well to deliver the best level of community cohesion and continue to deliver similar electoral size per councillor.

An example of how this hybrid 1 & 2 member ward pattern could work in the south of the county is shown below.

Ward	seats	Polling districts	2021 Electorate	% Variance	2027 Electorate	% Variance
Beaconsfield	2	SA, SBC, SC, SB	9,082	+8	9,330	+3
Bourne End	1	BA	4,428	+6	4,936	+9
Burnham Beeches	1	SD	3,935	-6	4,118	-9
Burnham Church & Taplow	1	SDA, BB, SET	3,764	-10	3,999	-12
Burnham Lent Rise & Dorney	1	SEB, SED	4,145	-1	4,229	-6
Denham	1	SJ, SJHD, SK, SJHD	4,402	+5	4,867	+3
The Farnham's	1	SFN, SFC, SFS	4,751	+13	4,975	+10
Flackwell heath	1	BC	4,527	+8	4,702	+4
Gerrards Cross , Hedgerley and Fulmer	2	SWF, SGE, SGN, SGS, SFH, SKA	8,047	-4	8309	-8
Iver Village & Richings Park	1	SIR, SIV	4,466	+7	4,599	+2
Iver North & Wexham [to be 2 separate seats]	2	SIT, SWG, SWS, SJA, SV, SIS, SVW	7,531	-10	7,881	-13
Marlow Southeast and Little Marlow	1	BD, BE, BG	3,800	-9	3,929	-6
Marlow North	1	BK, BL	4,540	8	4,719	4
Marlow West Central	1	BJ, BM, BF	3,952	-6	4,100	-9
Stoke Poges	1	SS	3,886	-7	4,013	-11
The Wooburns	1	BH, BJ	3,986	-5	4,319	-4

Assumes 19 councillors in our area. The above table is based on your excel spreadsheet, 4,192 average electorate per councillor in 2021 and 4,521 in 2027 with a core variance of +/- 10%

THE KEY BENEFITS OF THIS WARD PATTERN ARE:

- Beaconsfield regains its famous old town and Wilton Park [SB] which had been transferred to Gerrards Cross
- The Farnhams [Common and Royal] are reunited as one electoral community following the parish boundary
- Burnham is reunited as one community with three separate wards [Beeches, Church & Taplow, Lent Rise & Dorney] accommodating the small nearby parishes of Dorney, Hedsor and Taplow on the Thames River border of the county.
- Flackwell Heath becomes a seat in its own right
- Gerrards Cross regains the East town council ward from Denham and gains the Parish of Fulmer which has a direct link into Gerrards Cross via the Fulmer Road.
- Marlow has three seats including all of Marlow town and includes Little Marlow to the East.
- Bourne End and The Wooburns are separated into two separate seats reflecting their communities and following their respective parish boundaries.
- Stoke Poges becomes a seat in its own right, using their parish boundary and moving Wexham into Iver
- Iver has three seats - Iver Village and Richings Park [1 councillor] , Iver North and Wexham [2 councillors, boundaries to be determined to create 2 wards]

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

The original county wards were based on the old district council boundaries. As we are now a unitary authority we should look to see if wards could cross those boundaries, to deliver better average electorate figures. Specifically, we looked at:

- **Austen Wood [CF 1725/1975]** - We have looked at the indistinct borders between Gerrards Cross and Chalfont St Peter. This is an area which many residents consider to be in Gerrards Cross. However, this crosses parish boundaries and does not help achieve an electorate closer the average. One solution to this might be to move SKA [552/595] back into Denham [see below in Downsides]
- **Penn** - The area of Penn directly bordering on Beaconsfield is another area that many residents see as a part of Beaconsfield. However, this would require the crossing of a parish boundary with no benefit of creating an electorate closer to the average. Although longer term this might work
- **Marlow** – Marlow is currently three seats. There is potential to add areas to the west, like Great Marlow and north, with Marlow Bottom to improve the electoral balance. By including Marlow Bottom [RG 2520/2605] and Great Marlow [RF, RI, RJ, RG 1,039/1,169] we can build a total electorate of 15,851 [-5] 16,522 [-9] which generates four seats in total. Potentially 1 urban 2 seat ward and 2 single member outer wards

DOWNSIDES

All ward patterns are a compromise and it's rare that a perfect solution can ever be achieved across all the criteria. The one downside in our proposed pattern is around Denham. Denham Parish is on the border of the county and its ward pattern options are therefore limited. Overall Denham Parish

has five polling districts and is too large a parish to be one seat but not large enough to accommodate two seats. It is 47% over the 2021 target electorate per councillor and 46% over the 2027 target. It is therefore the only parish that needs to split across unitary wards. We are suggesting that New Denham [SJA 1203/1343], below the M40 joins the Iwer north seat and Tatling End [SKA 552/595] joins Gerrards Cross. We can then create a Denham ward seat that contains the vast majority of Denham and remains within the electoral size guidelines.

IN CONCLUSION

- We fully support the electoral commission proposal for 98 councillors in Buckinghamshire
- Our attempts to use a uniform two-seat ward pattern forced us to break up and merge parts of different communities to achieve an electorate per councillor that fits within the guidelines supplied. We believe this is sub-optimal
- **We suggest that a Hybrid one and two member ward pattern is not only viable but also delivers better community cohesion, whilst still operating within the average electoral size guidelines per councillor**
 - Single member wards, especially in rural areas where distance between different communities becomes a factor, work well to reflect strong local communities.
 - Two member wards, in urban areas, allow us to maintain community cohesion without creating artificial boundaries. Although in many areas the boundaries of the parish /town wards can be used.

The example exercise outlined above has been conducted with the support of many of our members but has not been shared with local Parish or Town Councils and should therefore be considered as a proof of concept only. We recognise and respect that local communities will have specific local suggestions.

We look forward to seeing your proposals and are available for any further consultation or a review of evidence exercise as you see fit.

Yours sincerely

Julian Ingram
Chair Buckinghamshire South Liberal Democrats

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