

**RESPONSE TO THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY COMMISSION
PUBLIC CONSULTATION ON BUCKINGHAMSHIRE WARDS:
BUCKINGHAM CONSTITUENCY LABOUR PARTY
4 APRIL 2022**

Number of Councillors/Council Size

The Buckingham Labour Party believes the number of members elected to any council should be kept to the minimum required in order to conduct the business of the council and to represent the interests of their constituents effectively. This is to ensure that, as far as possible, public funds are focused on service delivery rather than maintaining an elected cadre of public officials.

We therefore support the Commission's recommendation for 98 councillors, as this seems to be an appropriate and fair balance for Buckinghamshire.

Wards/Elected Members

As explained in more detail below, we think that **smaller wards**, represented by **single members**, provide a more effective way in Buckinghamshire to secure equality of representation, better reflect the identities and interests of local communities, and deliver more effective and convenient local government.

Community Identity

Our founding approach is to recognise that there are multiple 'socioeconomic' hubs within Buckinghamshire, to which different communities gravitate. The current ward structure does not fully reflect or respect these local realities and community identities, impacting on how communities perceive themselves to be appropriately or adequately represented.

The 'gravitational forces' may vary between these hubs and their surrounding communities, but can largely be defined in terms of:

- centres of employment
- larger scale retail/commerce
- provision and administration of public services (health, welfare, education, etc)
- cultural, social and recreational facilities
- primary public transport routes
- organisation of leading charities, civil society, and community groups – and how they deliver their services and support to local communities

Many of the current wards in Buckinghamshire are geographically quite large. Communities within different parts of the ward gravitate towards different 'hubs', influencing how they perceive themselves and the issues relevant to their local community – often creating very varied and completely different concerns and issues between significantly-sized villages and communities within one ward (thus also often creating complex and additional workloads for those councillors).

Smaller wards, with single members, would help elected councillors be more effective in dealing with a more ‘homogenised’ electorate, with an increased likelihood that the electorate will feel better represented by a single councillor in a smaller electoral unit, than multiple elected officials who may not appreciate or adequately represent the concerns of a local community within their geographically-large ward electorate.

We note that this issue was raised in the first consultation phase by the High Wycombe Conservative Party, that multi-member wards created excessive issues for their individual councillors, leading to three of their councillors declining to re-stand for election. We return to, and amplify, this point in the sections below.

In developing plans for new wards, we therefore suggest that the Commission take into account and have due regard to the relative ‘gravitational pull’ of the key towns/urban hubs within Buckinghamshire – on how surrounding rural communities interact with those centres and how those communities’ identities (and local issues) are shaped by those interactions and civic relationships & interconnections, eg:

- North of Buckinghamshire tends to coalesce around Buckingham town, Milton Keynes, and over the county border, to Bicester
- Aylesbury ‘corridor’, stretching from Oxfordshire to Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire borders, including larger rural communities such as Haddenham, Wing, and Ivinghoe – though these communities also link with Oxford, Leighton Buzzard and Tring across county borders
- South Buckinghamshire (Chesham, Amersham, Beaconsfield) tend to have closer social and economic links/ties to London than the rest of Buckinghamshire

This approach to developing new ward boundaries would also be consistent with the Government’s intent underpinning the creation of the unitary authority to not “weaken local democratic engagement at the most local level” and to ensure “appropriate arrangements for civic representation for towns and parishes”¹.

Equality of Representation

The Commission has already analysed anticipated population changes in Buckinghamshire over the next 5 years². We note, as a general observation, that those current wards expected to reduce most in population (by >10%) tend to be in the south of the county, and those wards expected to see the largest population rises (in the 25-65% range, eg Aston Clinton, Stone & Waddesdon, Great Brickhill) are in the north of the county.

We assume such shifts in population will be reflected in how new wards are designed, and will necessitate some geographic reallocation of representation to reflect these shifts in population.

¹ Hansard, 1 November 2018, statement by Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2018-11-01/debates/18110124000013/LocalGovernment?highlight=javid%20buckinghamshire#contribution-CFDCACF2-9DEC-4050-AD42-A401511B499B>

² Local Government Boundary Commission, Electoral Figures <https://www.lgbce.org.uk/all-reviews/south-east/buckinghamshire/buckinghamshire-council>

Much of this population change is driven by large scale housing development, which has profound impacts on the nature of current wards. A good example of this is the Stone & Waddesdon ward, which is one of the largest current wards (by electorate and geography), and incorporates the two villages of Stone and Waddesdon, and the new housing development of Berryfields.

These three communities have very distinct and different characteristics, demographics, and issues. Waddesdon has civic and social associations with rural and farming communities to the north of Aylesbury; Stone has similar community ties more closely associated with villages and hamlets currently in the Bernwood ward to the west of Aylesbury; while Berryfields (in population terms alone) could justifiably be a new standalone ward in its own right.

When reviewing and proposing new ward boundaries, we urge the Commission to carefully consider the different demographics and identities of distinct local communities across the county – particularly where there is significant population and demographic change, eg Great Brickhill. Smaller, single member wards would help in addressing many of the current incongruences within wards and to best ensure changing local communities are more equitably represented in future.

Smaller, single member wards would also help the Commission align ward boundaries more closely with existing Parishes, which in Buckingham more closely represent and shape community identity and concerns than the current large, multi-member wards.

Given the geographic spread of many current wards, smaller wards would also help all Political Parties and electoral candidates to canvass more effectively, affording voters the benefit of hearing from each candidate before making their decision on which candidate to vote for.

Finally, we would like to note that under the large, multi-member ward system, at the last unitary authority elections in 2021, the Conservative Party won 77% of the seats on 47% of the vote³. Informal and anecdotal analysis of voting behaviours when selecting multiple councillors for large wards suggests that the outcome of an election may mask significant differences between the express will and opinion of voters in different local communities within a single ward.

Given the vicissitudes of the First Past The Post electoral system, moving to smaller, single member wards may not address this incongruence between proportion of vote share and proportion of electoral representation, and may indeed even exacerbate it. It is not the *outcome* of an election that is our primary concern, but the *principle* of ensuring, as far as is possible, that there is a more accountable and direct link between voters and their elected representative.

We believe that the significant differences that exist between local communities across Buckingham, even when just a few miles apart, mean that smaller, single member wards (aligned more closely with Parish boundaries) provide the *opportunity* for the expression of

³ Buckinghamshire Council Election Results, Thursday 6 May 2021

<https://buckinghamshire.moderngov.co.uk/mgElectionResults.aspx?ID=1&V=0&RPID=9203250>

more equitable democratic representation at the local community level than is delivered by the current large ward, multi-member framework.

Effective & Convenient Local Government

We are assuming that the Commission believes **98 councillors is sufficient for the unitary authority to conduct its business effectively**. Our comments are therefore focused on the burdens individual councillors bear in representing their constituents, and the confidence constituents have that their interests and concerns are being managed effectively.

We have heard concerns from our elected councillors, and from residents, about how effective (or convenient) dealing with casework or having an issue addressed is under the multi-member, large ward system. While there may be a point that it takes time for a new system to embed and operate efficiently, this assumes that the onus is on councillors and residents to adjust and amend to fit a process, rather than restoring a simpler, more traditional process that meets the needs of all concerned.

People are used, in Parliamentary terms, to having a clear and simple line of accountability to their representative. We strongly argue that a small ward, single member system would enhance transparency, accountability and effectiveness of the representative process at the unitary authority level.

The evidence we have heard about the current multi-member, large ward system includes:

- concerns that those councillors elected second or third at the election have different levels of commitment to being a councillor – with a view that if someone stands in a single member ward they are more likely to be committed to representing their constituents than someone who stood as a secondary or tertiary member of a Party ‘slate’
- where there is mixed political representation of councillors in a ward, it is unclear to residents which councillor they approach – at best potentially leading to all three councillors taking up an issue, at worst, the resident deciding not to raise their concerns
- particularly if there is mixed political representation, councillors may not liaise as effectively as desired, and end up duplicating effort by separately processing the same issue raised by a single constituent (wasting their – and council officers – collective limited time)
- also, where there is mixed political representation of councillors in a ward, it would seem some councillors are unwilling to work together for the greater good of their shared electorate

These concerns are not Party-partisan, and reflect issues raised by the High Wycombe Conservative Party in their response to the first consultation phase. In an ideal world the required cross-party co-operation between councillors from the same ward should not be an issue – but it is in the real world. Hence our preferred single, member smaller ward option.

Smaller wards with more 'homogenised' community issues/concerns would reduce and simplify casework for single elected members. It would also mean they would be required to attend fewer community meetings (eg Parish Councils) if they were representing a smaller ward.

In summary, we believe single member, smaller wards offer the following benefits:

- a) provide more direct accountability between constituents and elected members
- b) based on clearer and more 'homogenous' communities with a common identity
- c) simplified (and reduced) workload for elected councillors
- d) greater clarity for constituents in who to contact if they have a concern
- e) easier for all candidates to canvass at election times
- f) offer greater granularity of community-based wards to assist in future Parliamentary Boundary reviews – ie it is easier to move smaller units of 3-5k people, eg Berryfields is just 1 mile from centre of Aylesbury but will be in the proposed Princes Risborough constituency

We do not believe smaller, single member wards will create any additional burden or resource on the Council's Election Services Department, as there should already be sufficient polling stations across the county to have at least one in every ward. On count night, while there would need to be 98 separate wards (rather than 49), it would be an easier (and tested, traditional) counting process rather than the more byzantine and time-consuming process required for counting multi-member ballots, which creates an increased potential for counting errors.