

## REPORT

**Date:** 13<sup>th</sup> September 2023  
**Councillor:** David Cooper  
**Meeting:** Full Council – Tuesday 19<sup>th</sup> September 2023

### Boundaries and Community Governance

#### Context

Changes to the Town Council's electoral arrangements are likely to take place before the next scheduled elections in May 2025, through two mechanisms:

1. The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) is currently carrying out a review of Shropshire Council's electoral arrangements. This review is focussed on the electorate size and area covered by Shropshire Council divisions. However, when changes to principal council electoral divisions mean that a boundary would bisect an existing parish or parish ward, LGBCE MUST consider the parish electoral arrangements as well and propose appropriate parish ward boundaries, number of councillors, and ward names. LGBCE published initial proposals for comment in May 2023. LGBCE is due to produce its final recommendations on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2023, but it may decide to produce further draft recommendations for consultation based on the feedback from the previous consultation. If it produces its final recommendations, a draft order is sent to parliament after 3 weeks and parliament approves or rejects the draft order after 40 session days.
2. A Community Governance Review carried out by Shropshire Council. The leadership of Shropshire Council has indicated a desire to carry out a County-wide Community Governance Review during the current councillors' term of office. The decision taker in this case is Shropshire Council, but they may not make changes which conflict with what LGBCE is proposing. LGBCE electoral reviews may not create or dissolve parishes or change their external boundaries, but Community Governance Reviews can. A review must be completed within 12 months once initiated by a resolution of the principal council, and around 6 months would be needed after the end of the review to make the necessary arrangements prior to the next scheduled election. There is likely to be a staged consultation process similar to the one carried out for the principal council review. It is understood that Shropshire Council may not initiate a Community Governance Review until LGBCE's review has been completed.

#### Considerations

Both principal council electoral reviews and Community Governance Reviews are based around 3 key criteria:

- Electoral equality. Voters everywhere within an authority's area should have a similar level of influence when electing councillors i.e. a broadly similar number of voters per councillor.
- Community identity. A sense of community is often shaped by the amenities and services people use: shops, places of worship, schools and other facilities. It can also be shaped by attachment to representative organisations like tenants and residents' associations, community organisations and local business forums.
- Convenient and effective local government. Electoral divisions and wards should use clearly identifiable boundaries, have appropriate names, and be structured geographically in a way which supports councillors doing their jobs.

Differences in Council Tax and the services provided by councils are often raised in the context of parish boundaries, but these are not formally matters which can be considered through the Community Governance Review process.

### Process

LGBCE's initial proposals and submissions by Shropshire Council both involve significant changes to the Shropshire Council divisional boundaries in the Bridgnorth area and consequent amendments to Bridgnorth Town Council wards. This is likely to mean that the ward boundaries and number of Bridgnorth Town councillors in each ward, within the existing Bridgnorth Town Council boundaries, are set through the LGBCE Shropshire Review process, rather than the Community Governance Review process. The Community Governance Review process would then focus on whether the Town boundaries with neighbouring parishes should be changed and if so what would be appropriate electoral arrangements. It is thus suggested that a working party which looks at both review processes is formed. This would likely involve:

- Assimilating the published criteria for reviews
- Developing a good knowledge of local geography, population distribution (current and forecast) and evidencable community linkages.
- Drafting Town Council representations on the LGBCE Shropshire Council proposals and proposals for Bridgnorth Town wards.
- Drafting initial representations by the Town Council on community identity and whether boundaries between Bridgnorth Town and neighbouring parishes should be altered (or parishes merged) as part of the Community Governance Review Stage 1 consultation.
- Drafting Town Council representations on Community Governance Review proposals, when formulated.

### Recommendation

That the Town Council appoint a working party of at least 3 members to consider future electoral arrangements. Members should be able to commit to working on this topic through to late 2024.