

Windsor and Maidenhead

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Comment text:

I completely endorse these comments

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Response to Ward Boundary review

1. The RBWM Council Meeting on 25th July 2017 decided in a vote of 41 to 6 to propose a reduction in the size of the Council to 43 Cllrs (or one each way) following a recommendation of its Electoral Review Working Group. The consequences of the reduction to 43 Cllrs were not considered in depth beyond administrative savings and comparisons with numbers of electors per Cllr in other Councils. The Working Group were not unanimously supportive about the reduction to 43 Councillors as the token non Conservative (my colleague Cllr Lynne Jones) pointed out that the resulting approx 25% reduction in number of Cllrs and would conflict with one of the three major principles of any review, as in many larger Rural Electoral Wards the Cllrs would not reflect the interests and identities of entirely separate communities. That was not mentioned in the Council Report.

2. The Local Government Boundary Commission for England response was that "it was minded to approve a 43 Member Council" and the Electoral Review Working Group and its Officers have worked hard to propose revised Ward arrangements to meet the most important requirement of the Review in what appears to be a pattern of an almost equal number of electors per Cllr or multiple number of Cllrs per Ward. The initial proposals were amended after other Cllrs' observations but larger Wards in rural areas due to the increased number of electors in them continue to fail to reflect the interests and identities of entirely separate communities.

The proposed merger of Old Windsor and Wraysbury Wards appears to be the worst case as it would bring together two entirely separate divided by the River Thames without any connecting bridge. Their current 2 Cllrs each would be reduced to sharing 3, and it could be possible for all 3 Cllrs to live in an entirely remote separate community on the other side of the Thames. Half of the electorate, approx 4,350, could be disenfranchised by not having a truly local Cllr. Those elected could know next to nothing about those residents and find it very hard work trying to meet and serve them or their concerns covering a diverse area from the M25 and margins of Heathrow Airport to the Windsor Great Park Village and Virginia Water Lake.

I respectfully suggest that if the number of Cllrs were increased to 47 with each representing 2661 electors (instead of 2908) and the boundaries of both Old Windsor and Wraysbury / Horton were slightly increased the electorate in each would be reduced sufficiently to retain the interests and identities of both communities and their separate Parish Councils within the 10% tolerance. Old Windsor Ward could be conveniently slightly extended by increasing the number of scattered dwellings on the adjacent Crown Estate's Windsor Great Park and Home Park land.

The proposed Eton Wick, Eton, Datchet & Horton Ward would present very similar problems with 4 entirely separate communities with two groups of entirely different interests.

Two Conservative Cllrs have spoken to me about their concerns with the abovementioned Wards and another from Maidenhead told me that the 25% additional workload may prevent that person from standing as a candidate in future (and no doubt many others). In each case those Cllrs raised the subject, not me. I haven't looked into the arrangements for the Sunnings, but I think that they have some concerns about their changed Ward boundaries which could have been avoided if there was a 47 Cllr Council. .

3. The third major consideration in the review is that it should promote effective local government.

There many reasons to dispute the statements in the RBWM Report that 25% fewer Cllrs would not impose a corresponding increase in workload because so many services have been outsourced to outside contractors and bodies. This is totally unrealistic as the responsibilities to run all the services

will not diminish and the resulting restriction of direct Cllr contact with "hands on" Officers is already compromising constituency work.

But it is far more significant that as there will be fewer Cllrs and fewer Panels (i.e. Committees) most of which will be far busier due to more transferred current and future responsibilities, so future Cllrs will obviously be far busier. The long lists of Panels and involvement in outside bodies should have been a stark reminder of just how busy many RBWM Cllrs are. I submit that none of the comparator Councils listed in the RBWM Reports have to deal with such huge problems on their doorsteps as those relating to noise, night flights, air pollution, road congestion, business demands and the constant expansion threats of Heathrow (already the busiest in Europe) upon the eastern end of RBWM and the fact that some of our Cllrs are deeply involved in related bodies (including Chairing) plus others that the RBWM report does not list.

How many Cllrs in other Councils have to constantly seek resolution of similar problems to those on our roads with rat running and overspill from the frequently gridlocked local M25 (another busiest in Europe problem), M4 and M3 as well as chasing other parties about major river flooding and sewage inadequacies?

The third wammy of the proposed reduction in number of Cllrs is at a time of unprecedented planned housing expansion which will explode the current average number of electors per Cllr from 1952 to a staggering 2908, is an unmentioned huge 49% increase in the number of electors each Cllr will have to represent.. That may be only a few voters per Cllr off the national average and only one voter off the chosen CIPFA 'family group' average, but the RBWM ethos of 'residents first' (which most of us actively support) already imposes a far heavier workload upon our Cllrs than in many other places. The use of CIPFA data for electoral comparisons is totally inappropriate as such comparisons are based on financial matters.

In addition we are already an extremely busy Council with planning applications and the Local Plan commits us to the enormous future activity of 742 per annum plus related infrastructure, despite 83% of its area being Green Belt. In this scenario the proposed merger of the workload of the Windsor Urban and Rural Development Management Panels may not be feasible, and the workload of the new Borough Wide DMP is not taken into consideration.

Perhaps a more useful Electors per Cllr comparison with adjoining Unitary Councils than CIPFA ones would be Bracknell Forest 2077 per Cllr, Wokingham 2299 per Cllr, while Runnymede (a Borough under Surrey CC) is thought to be about 2200 for each of 42 Cllrs despite having no education or highways responsibilities.

Although it is stated that cost cutting is not the objective, some of us think that the £150k to £200k claimed saving is a factor behind the proposed reduction in number of Cllrs., and also that the savings indicated are overstated as the overall costs of running the whole democratic process of Council related meetings would not be reduced in proportion to the number of Cllrs as is suggested in the Council Report.

4. Conclusion.

I respectfully suggest that the above observations provide more than sufficient evidence that the reduction in number of Councillors on the Royal (Unitary) Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead Council to 43 would be excessive

- as although new Wards could be created with acceptably close numbers of electors,

- some would not reflect the interests and identities of local communities and would be divided by inappropriate barriers such as the River Thames,
- the latter would not provide effective local government,
- the 25% reduction in number of Cllrs in a time of increasing activity would generate too high a workload for effective local government,
- the 29% increase in electorate per Cllr. would decrease a Cllr's effectiveness in constituency matters.

Furthermore the collective increase in workloads and time demands would deter many potential Cllrs standing for election, to the detriment of local democracy.

I respectfully request that you instruct the Royal Borough of Windsor & Maidenhead to revise its review to be based on the very minimum of 47 Councillors in order to allow sufficient flexibility to resolve the above mentioned failings and other problems in other Wards.

Yours sincerely

Malcolm Beer

Ward Councillor for Old Windsor (since 1995)

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