

Submission to Local Government Boundary Commission.

Richard Samuel, Liberal Democrat Councillor for Walcot Ward, Bath.

Characteristics of the ward.

Walcot ward is an inner city urban ward in Bath. It is very densely populated and is the highest ranked ward density in Bath and North East Somerset and also the smallest ward. It is the 8th ranked ward in terms of electorate within the Council area.

The ward comprises four distinct community areas. These are Fairfield Park, Camden, London Road and environs, and the Bathwick estate. Each of these communities is defined by road layouts and the location of local facilities such as shops and public services. All of the ward lies to the North of the river except for the Bathwick estate.

Fairfield Park is sited on steeply sloping land towards the edge of the Bath City boundary. The part within the Walcot ward is served by a local shopping area and Doctor's practice on Camden Road. A single bus route connects the area to the City Centre. Most of the housing is mid Victorian terraces with later 1960s infill. The area is very compact and densely populated and is separated from the adjoining Lambridge ward by Bay Tree Road. Many residents may choose to shop in the shops at Larkhall in Lambridge ward. The natural community however faces the other way towards the shops in Camden or the city centre.

Camden is the loosely described area covering the area beneath the steep cliff above Perfect View down to the London Road. It is characterised by steep streets of Victorian and Georgian housing and has changed little in character since it was constructed in the 18th and 19th century. There is one area of new build which succeeded slum clearance conducted by Bath City Council in the 1960s. A residents association – Camden Residents Association – covers most but not all of the area. The principal interests of the association are trying to tackle the negative impacts of traffic on the area. Camden is only 10 minutes walk from the city centre and there is a direct bus route with reasonable frequency. Many of the houses are in single household occupation although there are houses in multiple occupation in some streets. The population is stable and unlikely to grow significantly as there are very opportunities for new building. Whilst the Camden area extends to the junction of Camden Road and Lansdown Road, the ward itself ends at Gays Hill. Camden Residents Association however covers this area and has for example promoted the enhancement of council land in Front of Camden Crescent.

London Road and environs comprises the area of housing each side of the London Road from the river to the South and to the boundary with Camden in the North. The area is strongly characterised by very large Georgian houses from the boundary with Lambridge ward at Grosvenor Bridge Road all the way to Cleveland Bridge. The overwhelming majority of these six-storey houses are

divided into houses in multiple occupation. There are many side streets off the London Road which are cul-de-sacs thus providing no through routes. This results in stable groupings of houses. Many former commercial buildings have, in recent years, been converted to residential use. The London Road itself is a significant shopping area with a wide range of retail units providing an almost full complement of services. On the London Road there is also the Snow Hill estate built in the 1960s and one of the largest areas of social housing in the City. A local community centre serves the estate and the immediate area. There is also a local youth centre the Riverside nearby. The London Road and Snow Hill Partnership aims to represent the interests of residents and the commercial community by pursuing environmental and other improvements to the area. A large superstore – Morrison's – serves the area and is a community focus. Kensington Meadows is adjacent to this superstore and is a very large area of public open space available for recreation.

Bathwick Estate is the only part of the ward sited to the South of the River. It is a well laid out Victorian estate that is bounded by the river, Bathwick Street, and the Warminster Road. The housing pattern is well established with no opportunity for further development. It is largely single household occupancy and mostly owner occupied. It is represented by the Bathwick Estate Residents Association who are very active. Within this area a major regeneration project is underway – the restoration of the Cleveland Pools believed to be the first public outdoor lido in the UK opened in 1817. The pools are expected to open in 2020 once fully restored.

Could the ward boundaries change?

The first question to address is whether the entire ward should lie to the north of the river or straddle it as at present.

If the Bathwick estate which comprises a whole polling district was transferred to another ward then it would be logical to add this to the current Widcombe ward or Bathwick ward as the estate by itself it is not large enough to justify a single councillor. However if a policy decision were made to not have wards that straddle the river then this would have knock on consequences for the rest of Walcot ward. It would then be necessary to add electors to the ward to bring it up to the B&NES average. This could be done in two ways.

First the area from Gays Hill in the East to Lansdown Road in the West down to Pulteney Bridge via Broad Street in the South and across to Cleveland Bridge could be added to include the actual area of Walcot and Walcot Street

Second there is some limited scope to add an area of housing in Fairfield Park currently in Lambridge ward.

There is no scope to sensibly expand the ward in Bathwick across the A36 nor does it make sense to extend the ward across Claremont Road into Larkhall again in Lambridge ward.

What is the current workload like for ward councillors?

Walcot ward is represented by two ward councillors at present. A Conservative councillor and myself. I have found that there is a consistent workload of casework related to transport, parking, planning, and air quality issues. Both councillors support the resident associations described above and both are involved in the Cleveland Pools development. Although the ward is eminently walkable I would assert that the workload is too high for a single councillor to manage. This would be worsened if the councillor occupied a senior position on the council in addition. Therefore I do not consider that the current warding should be represented by less than two councillors.

Naming of the ward

The name Walcot is a misnomer in terms of the ward itself. Walcot is name of considerable antiquity dating back at least to Roman times. It is recorded that a Roman fort was sited north of the city controlling the access across the river and the route to London. Walcot Street is very well known in the city and the area around it is described as Walcot. However none of the area around Walcot sits in the current Walcot ward. If the ward was reorganised to include the actual Walcot Street then there is an absolute logic in retaining the current name.

Electoral equality for voters

Walcot has the highest electorate density per square kilometre in the Bath and North East Somerset area. The total numbers of electors per councillor is 2174 above the B&NES average of 2036. If it were considered necessary to reduce the electorate size to the current B&NES average this would suggest a loss of 138 electors per councillor or approximately 270 electors equivalent to around 350-400 homes. However if the average shifts as a result of the proposed move to 59 councillors then the average number of electors per councillor rises to 2243 – very close to the current Walcot figure. This suggests that no or very little change is required to the Walcot warding arrangements in terms of electoral equality. However see the comments above were the Bathwick estate to be removed from the ward.

Community identities and interests

I have described above the current communities that live within the ward and how they relate to local services. I see no merit in disturbing this established pattern of community life within Walcot's four communities nor any desirability in dividing those communities that exist.

Effective and convenient local government

As Walcot is a very densely defined ward with a small geographical boundary it is easy to maintain both an overview of community activity and detail. Issues raised by electors tend to be very local with the exception of local air quality which is a serious concern to most of the ward's residents. As I have

described above large scale change is unlikely in the ward and the largely residential nature of the ward promotes stability.

Conclusion

The existing warding arrangement for Walcot ward already meets representational and community requirements as described by the Commission. As the Council moves to a smaller representation of councillors overall it is my view that within this change there should be no change in the Walcot ward itself which should continue to be represented by two councillors broadly on the current boundaries. However I accept that consequential changes within Bath as a whole could lead to changes being necessary.

Richard Samuel

Liberal Democrat Councillor for Walcot