

Please attached the response from Natland Parish Council to the LGBCE consultation of Ward Boundaries in South Lakeland.

Many thanks,

Regards

Kevin M Price. Parish Clerk.

Electoral Review of South Lakeland District Council – consultation on LGBCE’s draft recommendations

Submission from Natland Parish Council

Introduction

Natland civil parish is a rural community with an electorate of 710 (but growing rapidly), centred on the village of Natland and in close proximity to the large urban settlement of Kendal and its outlying suburb of Oxenholme.

Historically Natland has sought to maintain its distinct character and separation from Kendal. This aspiration has been expressed through a number of local plan consultations and two Parish Plans (published in 2004 and 2014).

The Council’s submission in a nutshell

The Council strongly prefers a system of single-member wards, opposes hybrid rural/urban wards, wishes to be grouped with rural communities on the same side of significant communication barriers, and deplores the excessive importance accorded to the goal of electoral numerical equality.

Single-member wards

Natland Parish Council is strongly in favour of single-member wards. It is important that electors know clearly and unambiguously who their district councillor is and that responsibility and accountability are not split between councillors who may be from different political parties. Electors could feel confused about which member to approach with their problems (why not all of them?). If members aren’t well distributed geographically in their Ward parts of it may be poorly represented. Such a system would fail to provide for effective and convenient local government.

If SLDC were to continue to be elected by thirds, the need to secure effective and convenient governance should override any presumption that the number of councillors per ward should be divisible by three. The Council appreciates that Section 56 and Schedule 2 of the LDED&C Act 2009 obliges LGBCE to “*have regard to.. [inter alia] the desirability of securing that each electoral area in the district returns an appropriate number of members to the council*”, and that number is “*appropriate...in the case of a scheme for elections by thirds, if it is divisible by 3*”. But that is not an absolute requirement and should be weighed against the other statutory objectives.

Why such a high intensity (three times in every four years) of voter activity is felt “appropriate” is not explained in the legislation, but there is a clue in paragraph 20 on page 6 of the Draft Recommendations which states: “*local authorities that elect by thirds will have a uniform pattern of three-member wards so that every elector has the same opportunity to vote whenever local elections take place.*”

If that is the reason then it is a spurious one. In South Lakeland it doesn’t appear to be an issue at present when voters go to the District polls one year in four, and in each of the three

voting years two-thirds of them don't get the opportunity. Furthermore, increasing the frequency of voting may cause resentment and reduce the turn-out. And it would waste scarce resources.

The requirement in a three-member ward that electors be given the opportunity to vote for their district councillor in three years out of every four is burdensome, expensive and confusing, thereby undermining effective and convenient local government.

Hybrid rural/urban wards

Natland Parish Council is firmly of the view that wards comprising a mix of urban and rural communities, such as the present "Kendal Oxenholme & Natland" ward, do not adequately meet the need to reflect the identities and interests of local communities.

At a previous review in 2005-07 Natland Parish Council felt that creating a new ward combining Natland with Oxenholme and part of SE Kendal was not in Natland's interest and that an entirely rural ward, combining Natland with adjacent rural parishes such as Sedgwick, Stainton etc would be preferable. This view was confirmed by the 2006 Review of the 2004 Natland Parish Plan (out of 106 (30%) household questionnaire responses, 84 (79%) said Yes, 12 (11%) No, and 10 (10%) Don't Know). This view did not prevail and the present ward emerged, combining Natland (electorate 710 in 2015, estimated 1011 in 2021) with Kendal-Oxenholme (1072 and 1328 respectively). So the rural element of the ward can be outnumbered by the urban element, with its potentially different needs and aspirations.

The proposed "Levens & Stonecross" ward

Examination of the 2015 and 2021 electorate statistics shows a split between 'urban' (Kendal Stonecross) and 'rural' (Natland, Helsington, Levens and Heversham) of about 45% to 55%. This would clearly be a hybrid urban/rural ward and fail to provide for effective and convenient local government for the reasons given above.

Natland would be separated from the rest of the proposed ward by the River Kent and the A6/A591 road. Parishes on the same side of that barrier as Natland, such as Stainton, Sedgwick, Hincaster and Preston Richard, would have a better sense of a common identity. They share a common road communication corridor (A65 and C5071), are more likely to use the community facilities of Natland – its shop/post office, village hall, church and primary school – and share its bus services.

Numerical equality – a false idol?

The only reason for instigating this Review is that South Lakeland failed, by a relatively small margin, to meet one of the criteria for electoral equality.

Clearly it is easier to meet the variance criteria of electoral equality by grouping together larger numbers of parishes. But is such an emphasis on electoral equality justified? The present over-importance of electoral equality seems to be driven by the currently growing populist misconception that elected members are, in some sense, 'mandated' in that they are expected to make decisions in accordance with what their electors want. But our system of democracy is 'representative', not 'participatory', in which elected members are expected to use their own judgement to decide what is in the best interests of the whole District and not just their own Ward. That is the correct understanding of British representative democracy as first articulated by Edmund Burke over 200 years ago.

When councillors act in that correct way – using their local knowledge to represent their electors to their fellow councillors but taking decisions in the best interests of the whole District – the perceived unfairness of unequal electoral size is largely mitigated.

The current trend towards a more populist interpretation of democracy could well be reversed as the unwisdom of taking difficult decisions by plebiscite is realised.

If the above reasoning against the paramountcy of electoral equality is accepted, then the Review should be regarded as unnecessary and abandoned.

Conclusion

In a reference to the presumption of a uniform pattern of three-member wards, the Draft Recommendations document says (paragraph 22 on page 7) - *“if it can be clearly evidenced during this consultation that such a pattern would not meet our statutory criteria, we may be prepared to depart from that presumption”*. That principle raises a glimmer of hope. Natland Parish Council contends that the proposed three-member ward comprising urban and rural communities in roughly equal measure and joining weakly-linked rural parishes fails to satisfy the statutory criteria of reflecting community identity and providing for effective and convenient local government. Therefore the Review’s proposals should be radically altered or the Review abandoned.

Kevin M Price.

Clerk to Natland Parish Council