

Further Electoral Review of Stafford Borough Council Submission by Councillor Robert Stephens and Neil Thomas

Introduction

This is an independent submission by Councillor Robert Stephens (who represents the Milford ward on Stafford Borough Council) and Neil Thomas, a Doxey parish councillor and political journalist who has previously made submissions to the LGBCE and its predecessor concerning the last two reviews of Staffordshire County Council's electoral arrangements.

Councillor Stephens made a representation to the Commission at the preliminary stage on council size. Mr Thomas did not.

Neither of us supported a reduction in the size of the council but since the Commission is minded to do so we are making what we regard as a constructive submission.

Council size

For reasons we explain in more detail below, we believe it is more practical to reduce the number of councillors to 44 than to 40 as proposed by Stafford Borough Council.

The main reason for this lies in the difficulty inherent in dividing Stafford town into meaningful wards represented by 19 councillors – the number required if the total number is to be only 40. We contend coherent boundaries are more easily achieved if Stafford town were to be represented by 21 councillors.

Inevitably, the need to achieve a good degree of electoral equality requires that Stone town should be represented by six councillors and the countryside surrounding both towns by 17 – one more each than is proposed by the borough council. The average number of electors per councillor with 44 members would be 2,315.

Our submission would reduce the number of councillors by more than 25%, compared with the 32% advocated by the Conservative and Labour parties in their submissions.

We note that the Commission has announced it is minded to reduce the number of members of Lichfield District Council, which adjoins Stafford Borough, from 56 to 47 – a reduction of only 16%.

Even if the Commission does not see fit to accept this argument, we hope that what we have to say about issues of community identity will be helpful in arriving at an overall solution.

Community identity

We believe that the proposals put forward by the Conservative Party and endorsed by the council on December 19th, 2013, fall well short of the principles set out in the rules the Commission is obliged to follow.

We believe that the counter proposals put forward by the Labour opposition are better in some respects, but in others have their own shortcomings.

To some extent, these are due to the problems inherent in reducing the number of councillors to 40, particularly in Stafford town. Others cannot be explained by this and must be due to a desire to suit the electoral advantage of one party or another.

We greatly regret that neither the political parties nor the borough council attempted to carry out any public consultation exercise on their proposals. The first the general public knew about the details of what was proposed (which was not much) was when the agenda of the special council meeting of December 19th was published a week earlier.

Principles for selecting boundaries

We believe that ward boundaries should, wherever possible, be identifiable and intelligible to the electors concerned. We take full account of the rules the Commission must follow.

Where possible, our proposals seek to use as ward boundaries natural or semi-natural physical features such as rivers, streams and substantial open spaces.

Major man-made physical boundaries are our second preference. These include canals, railways (both those in use and dismantled ones), and major roads.

Parish boundaries are respected in the countryside, in Stone and in those parts of Stafford town which have them.

We also take account of the rule requiring the Commission to avoid breaking existing community ties. Where possible, we prefer to leave boundaries alone if the resulting wards offer a good degree of electoral equality.

Both submissions put forward by the major political parties are defective and inconsistent in all these respects, as we explain in detail below.

Town and country

We agree with the political parties that it is preferable to keep town and country separate at borough ward level. With the exception of Creswell parish, we do not propose to cross the outer boundaries of Stafford or Stone towns into the surrounding countryside.

However, a problem arises with the boundary between our proposed Littleworth and Milford wards (the council's Kingston Hill and Milford & District wards).

Polling districts LIF and MDF are divided by a line which was once intended to be the route of the Stafford Eastern Bypass. This now divides a housing development connected by Kensington Drive, which is itself divided by it.

The same line serves as the boundary between Hopton & Coton parish and the unparished part of Stafford town, even though the bypass is no longer expected to follow it.

We agree it would make sense to alter this boundary at ward level (Hopton & Coton forms part of the Milford ward which Councillor Stephens represents) but the rules require ward boundaries in parished areas to follow either parish or parish ward boundaries.

The Commission has no power to alter parish boundaries and we doubt that it would be practicable to form a parish ward comprising such a small number of electors.

We suggest, therefore, that the borough council reviews this parish boundary using the powers available to it so that this ward boundary can also be reviewed in future, as we are sure will soon be necessary.

The distinction between town and country is complicated in some areas by the emerging local plan for Stafford Borough in which substantial housing developments are proposed on the edge of the current boundary of Stafford town.

One such proposal for a strategic development location is north of Stafford, off the Beaconside Road, in Creswell parish, opposite the Parkside estate (polling district HOB). The growth in the electorate of Creswell forecast by 2019 reflects this and consequently informs our proposal to include Creswell parish in a ward which otherwise lies within the present town boundary.

The number of councillors for each ward

The rules allow for each ward to be represented by one, two or three councillors. The Conservative Party submission (endorsed by the council) proposes only single- or two-member wards.

No reason is given for this and we find it surprising since 30 of the existing 59 councillors represent wards with three members. Together these wards account for half the total electorate of the borough.

In several cases, this aversion to three-member wards and preference for single-member ones results in the division of existing wards in ways which unnecessarily break existing community ties.

We recognise that the creation of three-member wards in the countryside with a reduced number of councillors could result in the creation of some geographically very large wards. We regard this as undesirable as some parts of Stafford Borough are sparsely populated. Only one of our proposed wards in the countryside would have three members.

We are not proposing any single-member wards but this does not reflect any fundamental objection to them in principle. None of the three existing single-member wards has enough electors to survive if the number of councillors is reduced and we

have found it simpler to merge them with one or more two-member wards, or parts of them.

Our proposals in detail

Stafford town

Our principal objection to the submission by the Conservative Party (endorsed by the borough council) and the counter proposals of the Labour opposition concern the treatment of Stafford town.

The Conservative Party's proposal would divide Stafford town into 14 wards represented by 19 councillors, compared to 12 wards and 29 councillors at present. The Labour Party proposes 12 wards represented by 19 councillors.

Our proposals would result in nine wards represented by 21 councillors. Three of the proposed wards would have three members and the remainder two each.

With the exception of the Forebridge & Queensville ward, where the River Sow is bridged in several places in the town centre, no ward we propose crosses the River Sow or the River Penk, both of which are major natural dividing lines.

Elsewhere, we regard Stafford Common as a semi-natural dividing line rather than as a focus of community identity, as is advocated by both the political parties.

Apart from the overseer's cottage (Common House) in the far south-eastern corner, the common amounts to more than 50 hectares of grazing land completely uninhabited by human beings. Moreover, with the exception of a few houses in Common Road, the land to the east of the common and north-west of the dismantled Stafford-Uttoxeter railway line is given over to industrial and commercial uses.

If the common were genuinely a community focus, the political parties would advocate the inclusion of the Parkside estate (HOB polling district) in the Common ward. Neither does so.

We agree that the dismantled Stafford-Uttoxeter railway line is a good boundary between the Common ward and Holmcroft & Tillington (as we call it) but are surprised both propose to depart from it east of the A34 Stone Road. Immediately north of the disused railway line here is the part of the common known as Stone Flats, which makes it an even more significant dividing line.

We agree with the Labour Party that the boundary between the Common and Coton wards is debateable territory. Our solution is to merge these two wards, with the addition of the LIA polling district of Littleworth ward, which used to be part of Coton.

We also agree with Labour that the remainder of Littleworth ward should remain undivided, perhaps renamed Littleworth and Kingston Hill to reflect its identity more fully.

We also propose the transfer to Common & Cotton of the FRG polling district from Forebridge ward, which used to be part of the Common ward. To this might be added FRB polling district north of Gaol Square and FRF polling district north of Doxey Road, although these changes are somewhat academic as no-one lives in these areas.

Castletown (FRF polling district) was until 2003 part of Tillington ward and it is joined to Doxey and Virginia Park (TLC and TLB polling districts) by the Doxey Road. However, it is also closely linked to the town centre and we prefer to maintain these community links.

Some of the links run through Victoria Park which is supported by a voluntary group of Friends, whose members include both local residents and volunteers from elsewhere in the borough.

We agree with both parties that ROB polling district of Rowley ward properly belongs with the Highfields estate but we see no need for the Conservative proposal to separate Highfields from Western Downs.

We also agree with both parties that part of ROA polling district, east of the A449 (Park Crescent, Rowley Bank and part of Rising Brook) can reasonably be added to the Manor ward. We have no strong views on the Conservative proposal to transfer Hyde Court, at the far south-eastern end of West Way, from Manor to Highfields but prefer to leave it where it has been for many years.

Rowley ward (ROD polling district) north of the A518 (Newport Road and Castle Bank) is already part of the Gnosall & Doxey county electoral division and we contend it makes sense for most of Rowley to be combined with Doxey and Virginia Park.

Up to 2,200 homes are due to be built at Burleyfields under the emerging local plan. The Castle View housing estate in Doxey parish is nearing completion and a further development south of Doxey is likely to be the subject of a planning application during 2014. (The developer Bellway carried out a public consultation on this proposal in November and December 2013.)

Part of the Saint-Gobain factory in Doxey has recently been demolished to make way for a future housing development, as has the former Castle Works industrial estate in Rowley ward. The remaining open space between Doxey and Castlefields is fast disappearing, a fact which should not be ignored by the Commission.

A new road link is planned from the roundabout at the end of Martin Drive, in Castlefields, to the Doxey Road bridge over the railway line. At the examination-in-public of the local plan on October 29th, 2013, a representative of the county council stated this link could be constructed as early as 2017. This would open up Burleyfields for further housing development.

The Silkmore Drain forms a significant barrier between the two parts of the existing Penside ward to the north-east and south-west of it. Even in summer, the land between these two parts is wet and it is heavily flooded in winter (as it is now).

We therefore propose that the Silkmore and Rickerscote areas (PKC and PJA polling districts) are merged with the Manor ward and part of Rowley (ROA east of the A449) to form a three-member ward. Road bridges over the railway line connect these areas in Rickerscote Road and Gravel Lane, as does a footbridge at the end of Exeter Street and Rowley Grove.

Meadowcroft Park and adjoining areas north of Silkmore Lane and part of Queensville (PKD and PKB polling districts) would then join the remainder of Queensville in an enlarged Forebridge & Queensville ward.

Baswich and Weeping Cross have formed a distinct part of Stafford ever since they were added to the old borough in 1934, being separated from the rest of the town by the River Penk, the Staffordshire & Worcestershire Canal and their associated washlands.

The boundary between Baswich and Weeping Cross themselves, however, is a debateable point. We agree with the political parties that the A34/A513 (Radford Bank and Weeping Cross) is a suitable boundary for borough ward purposes and propose that each ward should have two councillors.

Stone town

We propose that Stone town should remain divided into three wards represented by six councillors, two to each ward. The boundaries between these wards will need some adjustment.

Historically, Stone lay north-east of the River Trent and Walton to the south-west. (The ancient parish of Stone was very extensive and included the present town, Stone Rural parish, Hilderstone, Fulford-in-Stone and even Normacot, which is now in the City of Stoke-on-Trent.

The present Walton ward includes 166 electors east of the River Trent in Cauldon Drive and roads linked to it. These electors are physically detached from the rest of Walton ward, although linked to it by the A34.

We propose that these electors should transfer to Stonefield & Christchurch ward, to which they are linked both by the A34 and by Trent Road. Walton's northern boundary would continue a little further east along the railway line until it crosses the River Trent.

The Conservative Party (endorsed by the council) proposes that the Trent & Mersey Canal should be the boundary between Stone proper and Walton. While we accept that this is a clear boundary and tidier than the meanderings of the River Trent, we believe more than 300 residents of the Newcastle Road area would be very surprised to find themselves in Walton. This proposed boundary change is not strictly needed in order to achieve variations in electoral equality of less than 10%.

We agree with the Labour Party that the division of Stone proper into two wards along a completely unfamiliar boundary makes little sense. If the Commission agrees

to a council size of 40 members, Stonefield and St Michael's should be a single ward with three members.

On the other hand, if the Commission accepts our proposals, the boundary between Stonefield & Christchurch ward and St Michael's ward will need to be adjusted to provide better electoral equality.

We propose that St Michael's ward should be extended northwards along the Stoke-on-Trent-Colwich railway line as far as Church Street and then westwards along the southern side of Church Street (alongside the boundary of St Michael's churchyard) to its junction with Lichfield Street (up to 450 electors). Stafford Street and everything north of it would remain in Stonefield & Christchurch.

The boundary changes we propose for Stone are much more modest than those put forward by the political parties and we believe they will be far more intelligible and acceptable to the electors affected.

The countryside

In the countryside, we propose eight wards to be represented by 17 councillors.

As stated above, we are anxious to avoid creating rural wards covering very large geographical areas. At present, the largest ward in area is Eccleshall. None of our proposed wards would be larger than this and Eccleshall itself would be slightly reduced in area.

We propose that Fulford ward should remain unchanged and represented by two councillors rather than three.

We propose that Barlaston & Oulton ward should be merged with Milwich ward, except for Fradswell parish (MHA polling district). Barlaston & Milwich ward would be represented by two councillors.

We appreciate that this appears to go against the Commission's reluctance to accept "doughnut" proposals. We point out, however, that the only part of the present Milwich ward which would surround Stone town is the Aston parish ward of Stone Rural parish.

Aston-by-Stone is closely connected to both Sandon and Burston by the A51 trunk road and all the other settlements in this proposed ward are interconnected by a network of roads well-known to its inhabitants.

We do not accept that the Conservative Party's proposed Swynnerton & Oulton ward is any better in this respect. On the contrary, we believe most electors in this part of Stafford Borough would regard the supposed community links between Swynnerton and Oulton as tenuous in the extreme.

We propose that Standon parish (ECJ polling district) should transfer from Eccleshall ward to Swynnerton ward. Swynnerton would continue to be represented by two

councillors while the remainder of Eccleshall ward would have its representation reduce from three to two councillors.

Most of Seighford ward, except for Creswell, Marston and Whitgreave parishes (SFA, SFD and SFI polling districts) would merge with Church Eaton ward and with Moreton parish ward of Gnosall. The new Church Eaton & Seighford ward would be represented by two councillors, as would the remainder of Gnosall & Woodseaves ward.

Milford ward would be enlarged to include Salt & Enson parish from Chartley ward and Marston and Whitgreave parishes from Seighford ward. Until 2003, Hopton & Coton, Marston, Salt & Enson and Whitgreave parishes formed the Beaconside ward and this arrangement will reunite them. The new Milford ward would be represented by two councillors as at present.

The remainder of Chartley ward would be merged with Haywood & Hixon ward, along with Fradswell parish from Milwich ward. The new Haywood & Hixon ward would continue to be represented by three councillors, the only such ward in the countryside.

Technical information

| New ward | Polling districts | Electorate in 2019 |
|--------------------------|--|----------------------------|
| Barlaston & Milwich | BAA, BAB, BAC, BAD, BAE, BAF, BAG, MHB, MHC, MHD, MHE. | 4,981 Two councillors |
| Baswich | BSA, BSB, BSC, BSD, WXA. | 4,684 Two councillors |
| Church Eaton & Seighford | CEA, CEB, CEC, SFB, SFC, SFE, SFF, SFG, SFH, GWE. | 4,698 Two councillors |
| Common & Coton | CMA, CMB, CMC, CNA, CNB, CNC, FRG, LIA. | 7,343 Three councillors |
| Doxey & Rowley Park | ROA (part), ROC, ROD, TLB, TLC. | 4,528 Two councillors |
| Eccleshall | ECA, ECB, ECC, ECD, ECE, ECF, ECG, ECH, ECI. | 4,695 Two councillors |
| Forebridge & Queensville | FRA, FRB, FRC, | 4,865 |

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|--------------------------------|--|----------------------------|
| | FRD, FRE, FRF, FRH, PKB, PKD. | Two councillors |
| Fulford | FDA, FDB, FDC, FDD. | 4,943 Two councillors |
| Gnosall & Woodseaves | GWA, GWB, GWC, GWD, GWF, GWG, GWH. | 4,815 Two councillors |
| Haywood & Hixon | CHA, CHC, CHD, HHA, HHB, HHC, MHA. | 6,688 Three councillors |
| Highfield & Western Downs | HWA, HWB, HWC, HWD, ROB. | 4,855 Two councillors |
| Holmcroft & Tillington | HOA, HOB, HOC, HOD, HOE, SFA, TLA. | 6,859 Three councillors |
| Littleworth & Kingston Hill | LIB, LIC, LID, LIE, LIF. | 4,398 Two councillors |
| Milford | CHB, MFA, MFB, MFC, MFD, MFE, MFF, SFD, SFI. | 4,786 Two councillors |
| Rickerscote & Rising Brook | MAA, MAB, MAC. MAD, PKA, PKC, ROA (part). | 7,052 Three councillors |
| St Michael's | STA, STB, STC, SCD (part). | 4,214 Two councillors |
| Stonefield & Christchurch | SCA, SCB, SCC, SCD (part), WAA (part). | 4,195 Two councillors |
| Swynnerton | ECJ, SWA, SWB, SWC, SWD. | 4,557 Two councillors |
| Walton | WAA (part), WAB, WAC, WAD, WAE. | 4,533 Two councillors |
| Weeping Cross | WXB, WXC, WXD. | 4,110 Two councillors |

The average number of electors per councillor for a council with 44 members would be 2,315 by 2019.

Proposed ward names

We propose to keep existing ward names in most cases, combining names where two wards are combined. This accounts for our choices in the cases of Barlaston & Milwich, Baswich, Church Eaton & Seighford, Common & Coton, Eccleshall, Fulford, Gnosall & Woodseaves, Highfields & Western Downs, Milford, St Michael's, Stonefield & Christchurch, Swynnerton. Walton and Weeping Cross. In the case of the last, we see no need to add Wildwood to the existing name, but have no objection to it either.

Further explanation is perhaps needed in some other cases. Doxey & Rowley Park is preferred to just Doxey & Rowley because it is the Rowley Park part of the ward that would be retained.

Forebridge & Queensville is thought necessary because the whole of Queensville would be included instead of being divided between Forebridge and Penkside.

Haywood & Hixon remains unchanged because Little Haywood, Great Haywood and Hixon remain the three largest settlements in this proposed ward, even though it would be extended to the north.

Holmcroft & Tillington reflects not only the addition of part of the present Tillington ward but because historically Tillington parish extended into most of the existing Holmcroft ward and beyond it into Creswell parish, including the area where a large housing development is expected.

While we do not support the proposal to divide Littleworth from Kingston Hill, we believe a combination of the two names more accurately reflects the character of this ward.

Rickerscote and Rising Brook are not currently used as ward names but we believe this more accurately reflects the character of this proposed ward. Manor and Penkside are both artificial names which are not used outside ward nomenclature.