

Labour Group, Wyre Forest District Council

Submission to the Local Authority Boundary Commission

Ward Boundaries in a 33-Member Council

The Labour Group dissents from the official submission of the council.

In its statement accepting the request of Wyre Forest District Council to reduce its number of councillors from 42 to 33, we understood that the LABC sought, as its central aim, to ensure effective representation of local residents by councillors, including the representation of specific local communities. It is our opinion that the requirements of applying a ratio of one councillor to 2,482 electors and apportioning 33 councillors to the geographical areas of the district and their numerous geographically-defined communities, fail to achieve that central aim.

The case for reduction from 42 to 33 councillors was based on the supposed reduction in the tasks of district councillors. That case was accepted by the LABC and we will waste no time in resurrecting the debate about it. However, it must be said that there was no attempt to quantify the reduced role of councillors. Therefore, the reduction to 33 councillors, 25%, was not adduced from evidence that their tasks had reduced by 25%. Rather, it was chosen because it was a round figure, resulting in a substantial cut of 9, a number which implied that the work of the LABC would not be wasted on a minor endeavour.

The unjustified reduction means that two proposed wards, Bewdley and Rock, and Blakedown/Chaddesley/Cookley/Wolverley, named in the Wyre Forest majority submission as "Wyre Forest Rural", are not within boundaries which "reflect the interests and identities of local communities", (LABC website). Rock, in terms of geographical area the second-largest civil parish in England, is rural, and has several centres of population, eg, Far Forest, the village of Rock, Bliss Gate, Callow Hill and Heightington. Bewdley, by contrast, is urban, occupying, from a topographical perspective, virtually all the developable land available on the west bank of the River Severn. It is this part of the town which is proposed to be in the same ward as Rock. It contains the Georgian town centre and, in addition to serving the local shopping needs of Bewdley's 10,000 inhabitants, it has many pubs and restaurants. These cater for the many thousands of visitors to the town, in addition to locals. Bewdley and Rock, clearly, are two very distinctly different communities.

In the other example, the unsuitability of incorporating the three existing district council wards into one is emphasised by the way it is identified, having to remove the geographical references, because they are too long, and substitute with the name "Wyre Forest Rural". In terms of parish councils within the proposed new ward, there are six, Broome, Chaddesley Corbett, Churchill & Blakedown, Rushock, Stone, and Wolverley & Cookley.

Wolverley and Cookley, one parish, but two currently two one-member wards of the district council, have a closer relationship with Kidderminster than Blakedown or Chaddesley,

because of geographical proximity. Indeed the gap between both settlements and Kidderminster is a matter of a few hundred yards. One of the main secondary schools serving Kidderminster is located in Wolverley. However, both communities do have distinct identities other than as “suburbs” of Kidderminster. For example, community participation is high at Cookley Village Hall, opened in 2011, which, in addition to its indoor activities, boasts a range of sports facilities, including for football, cricket, bowling, BMX and skateboarding. In their relationship with Kidderminster, these two villages have a common denominator, but, conversely, their independence as communities from their much-larger neighbour is clear. Their similarity is recognised by the fact that they are combined as one parish, with an active parish council.

The mainly-prosperous Blakedown and Chaddesley two-member district council ward, with its five parishes, has a different orientation. In the north it is near the West Midlands conurbation. Many of its population are commuters. Other parts of the ward are nearly as close to towns outside Wyre Forest, namely Bromsgrove and Droitwich, as to Kidderminster. Within the existing district council ward, round-trip journeys of twenty miles, to deal with a concern of a resident, are not unknown, and this in a ward in which both currently-serving councillors actually live within the ward boundaries. There is a significant amount of liaison between the district councillors and the two larger parishes, Churchill & Blakedown and Chaddesley Corbett, the latter being amongst the leaders nationwide in pursuing a Neighbourhood Plan. The geographical extent of the proposed new ward is, of course, greater, so much so that is bigger than even than Bewdley and Rock.

The following observations about the inability of these huge wards, containing disparate communities, to be satisfactorily represented are made from the standpoint of one member seeking to serve the entire ward. The alternative, seeing the councillor as one of a team of three is unrealistic, for several reasons. Firstly, councillors in Wyre Forest will continue to be elected by thirds. Therefore, each councillor will come before the electorate of the entire ward when seeking re-election. It will hardly be a strong case to maintain that Bewdley Town, or Chaddesley Corbett, has been well served by an individual, but that Rock or Churchill & Blakedown have been neglected. If it is maintained that, democratic representation notwithstanding, councillors should divide the responsibility for serving these wards between them, how is such an arrangement to be agreed satisfactorily, if all the councillors happened to live in the same part of the ward concerned, Bewdley or Wolverley, for example? Also, would councillors of different political parties find it appropriate to rely on the work of people with whom they might disagree fundamentally in order that their individual duty, to serve all residents, is fulfilled?

Both of these proposed new wards are simply too large geographically to be served satisfactorily. Councillors are supposed to know their wards intimately, eg, which streets have ASB problems, which areas are most likely to flood, where problems of litter are greatest, how village and community halls are faring, what type of housing need requires to be addressed, etc, etc. Councillors in Bewdley and Rock would need to combine the knowledge of a densely-populated urban area with that of an unusually wide rural parish and its scattered communities. Councillors in Wyre Forest Rural would have an even larger geographical area to cover, requiring knowledge of many of the smaller settlements not even mentioned in the list of parishes to which reference was made earlier, but perhaps the

point is made forcibly enough by pointing out the requirement to maintain contact with six parish councils.

Finally, what of the concern expressed in local government circles about the lack of younger councillors currently serving? How could it conceivably be the case that an individual working five days a week could, in addition to attending formal district council duties, travel to meet local residents, whether for meetings, site visits or to deal with the problems of individual residents? We suggest that the task for a councillor, in gainful employment or retired, is far too onerous. The reduction to 33 councillors would lead to the diminution of representative democracy in these huge wards. The entire review of electoral arrangements in Wyre Forest should re-cast to avoid such an unsatisfactory outcome.

J Shaw, Leader, Labour Group, WFDC 9.12.13