Review of Electoral Arrangements for West Berkshire

Comments by West Berkshire Council Liberal Democrat Group

General:

The Group concurs with the majority of the LGBCE’s draft recommendations with the exception of those for three-member wards. Three-member wards make member accountability difficult because of their large electorates and, in the case of rural wards, their large sizes. Their large size and electorates make them less likely to reflect community identities and interests, and make providing effective and convenient local government difficult. It is more likely that a three-member ward will carry a non-effective councillor.

Newbury and Thatcham area:

LGBCE’s proposed Thatcham Central and Crookham ward covers both town centre and rural areas, separated by the railway, river and canal. It is difficult to travel between the two parts because of the busy level crossing over the railway, where there are frequent long traffic hold-ups because of the high frequency of trains. The rural area consists of countryside with dispersed settlements. The commission’s proposal for the town council is for eight town councillors, out of a total of 18, to represent this ward. This group of councillors could dominate the town council, particularly if they represented a residents’ group or single-issue action group. The Group would prefer a two member ward representing the area north of the railway and a separate single member ward representing the rural area south of the railway.

LGBCE’s proposed Greenham ward covers both town centre and suburban areas. Part is covered by Greenham Parish Council and part is covered by Newbury Town Council. The two parts are covered by different primary and secondary school catchment areas. The Group believe that the warding pattern should be changed to respect these differences.

Eastern Area

The Group concurs with the commission’s proposals for the single-member Theale ward.

LGBCE’s proposed three-member Burghfield and Mortimer ward, however, covers two discrete settlements based on Burghfield Common and Mortimer. Both have their own shopping facilities, GP practices and primary schools. Both areas also have their own churches, public libraries and sets of public houses. They each also have their own football clubs and Women’s Institutes. Both Burghfield Common and Mortimer are “rural service centres” in West Berkshire’s Local Plan Core Strategy. Mortimer has an adopted Neighbourhood Development Plan and one is being developed for Burghfield. Thus these two areas are separate distinct communities and should therefore be contained in different wards.

LGBCE’s proposed Bucklebury and Aldermaston ward covers a very large geographical area covering 12 parishes. The areas roughly north and south of the A4, railway, canal and river are very different areas. The former is mainly in the North Wessex Downs AONB and the latter in the Kennet Valley, with its flooding and gravel extraction problems. The Aldermaston area also suffers from the pressures and problems caused by the Atomic Weapons Establishment and surrounding industrialised area. It would be very difficult for such a ward’s members to be familiar with the very disparate set of issues from the different areas. Aldermaston, Bradfield, Brimpton, Bucklebury, Englefield and Woolhampton all have village shops, primary schools and churches. All these, with the exception of Englefield, also have pubs (Englefield has a social club). Aldermaston, Bradfield South
End and Woolhampton are all identified in the West Berkshire’s Local Plan Core Strategy as “service villages”. Thus, the proposed ward comprises several distinct communities and these should be recognised by the warding pattern.

**Northern Area**

Purley-on-Thames and Tilehurst are separate communities, evidenced by the fact that they are represented by separate parish councils.

Purley and the northern part of Tilehurst experience different problems and pressures:

- The lower part of Purley-on-Thames is frequently flooded
- The proposed “North Tilehurst” ward has experienced pressures caused by extensive housing development in the last few years. These pressures will be increased by the large housing sites that have been allocated in the area by the Housing Site Allocations DPD.

Purley is served by shops in Purley village, Knowsley Road and Overdown Road. Inhabitants of northern Tilehurst look to the shopping areas in The Triangle (in Reading) and City Road, in addition to the shopping area in Overdown Road.

Purley is covered by the catchment areas of Purley Church of England, Long Lane and Westwood Farm primary schools whereas north Tilehurst is in the catchment area of Downsway Primary School.

These areas should therefore be covered by different wards based, as far as possible, on the boundaries of Purley Parish Council and the northern part of Tilehurst Parish Council.

**Western Area**

LGBCE’s proposed Hungerford and Kintbury ward covers disparate areas based on Hungerford and Kintbury. Hungerford is a medium-sized town with urban type issues whereas the area based on Kintbury is rural with dispersed, small, settlements. Hungerford and Kintbury each have their own railway stations, primary schools, churches, pubs and shopping centres. They also have their own football, cricket (Hungerford and Inkpen), bowls and tennis clubs. Both also have their own scout troops. Hungerford is a “rural service centre” and Kintbury a “village service centre” in West Berkshire’s Local Plan Core Strategy. These two areas are therefore distinct communities and should be represented by separate wards.