

Local Government Boundary Review Wyre Forest

Statement by the Labour Group

The Labour Group has made two previous submissions to the Commission. The first opposed the reduction from forty-two councillors to thirty-three, the second illustrated the impracticability of accommodating satisfactory democratic representation with the confines of a thirty-three member council. Opposition to this reduction in numbers remains the Labour Party's primary policy position. The following contributions provide examples of the fundamental failure of the Commission's warding proposals to achieve its declared aims of protecting community identity and achieving easily identifiable boundaries.

From Cllr Chris Nicholls

As ward councillor for Cookley, I wish to make the following comments in relation to the proposed Wyre Forest Rural Ward.

In your draft recommendations you state that

"We aim to ensure that the council's wards reflect, as far as possible, the interests and identities of the local communities across the District."

Cookley and Wolverley co-exist as one parish council and do share community links as a consequence of their close proximity. They have absolutely nothing in common with Chaddesley Corbett, Broome, Rushock and Blakedown. In fact, there is a considerable geographical distance which does mean that these areas are not neighbours and community ties do not exist, For instance, within education, students attending Cookley Primary School go on to secondary education at Wolverley High School. Local communities from Chaddesley Corbett, Broome, Rushock and Blakedown have separate educational catchment areas, which further highlights the fact that they have separate identities.

It is both my opinion and the view of many of my constituents that this huge rural ward does not satisfy your criteria. Furthermore, the vastness of the ward does not "help the council to deliver effective and convenient local government". This set of proposals does nothing at all to promote local democracy – quite the opposite, in fact. Under your questions for effective local government is the point

"Are any of the wards too large or too small to be represented effectively?"

This proposed ward is too large and will be difficult to represent effectively. Transport links? – public transport is poor. Facilities and community interests do not reflect shared interests – these are very different communities and this has not been reflected in the Commission's recommendations. These recommendations will destroy local democracy – all the Commission seems interested in is numbers for each ward councillor. This does not take into account the sheer vastness of the area. Cookley and Wolverley should retain their identities and close links and have two ward councillors. There is no cohesiveness in these proposals and they do not in any way "ensure that the council can discharge its roles and responsibilities effectively". This is indeed a sad day for local democracy if these proposals

are accepted. The result of the adoption of these proposals will be to further distance the electorate from those who are elected to serve them.

From Cllrs V Higgs, R Lloyd & J Shaw

We note the criteria on which the commission states that it bases its decisions. With reference to its proposed creation of the wards of Severn Valley, Mitton, and Areley Kings & Riverside to cover representation for Stourport, we consider that the proposed wards contradict the following statements of principle found in the Commission's documents, "the desirability of arriving at boundaries that are easily identifiable" and "the desirability of fixing boundaries so as not to break any local ties". The most obvious contravention is found in the proposal to place parts of Burlish Park and Lickhill into a Severn Valley ward, the boundary of which could not be said to be logically identifiable and which would see those areas divided from their local communities, because they would be represented by councillors whose primary focus would be on Wribbenhall, Bewdley, not Stourport.

The Commission justifies its proposals on the grounds that the appropriate "councillor/local-residents-represented ratio" is achieved and the desirability of having three-member wards throughout the district. However, we see three-member wards as no more than a numerical convenience. We consider that the proposal for a three-member Lickhill ward and two members each for Mitton and Areley Kings contains all of Stourport's residents within Stourport-only wards, according to the prescribed ratios and, therefore, better meets the "identifiable boundaries" and "community identity" principles referred to above.

From Cllr N Knowles

I object to the changing of the ward boundary. Franche is a long-established community based on the old village of Franche, mentioned in the Domesday Book in 1086.

Franche has a sixty year-old former council estate, a 45 year-old housing estate of owner-occupiers and a main road system into Kidderminster. There is a Green Belt area around this conurbation and Puxton Marsh, a nature reserve with SSSI status. A former General Hospital is now converted to housing and, at the southern end, a large retail park is established. The River Stour runs through the ward and a canal skirts the boundary.

I consider three ward councillors in Franche to be the proper number as per voter representation.

The balance between District and County Councillors and the geographical area we represent is a proper and good balance.

Kidderminster does not have a town council. Therefore, citizens are denied democratic support available to residents in the rest of Wyre Forest District and the dis-establishment and loss of nine councillors will have a negative effect on democratic provision in Franche and Kidderminster.

The population of Franche and Kidderminster has grown, requiring more councillors, not less, hence the need for a town council.

Conclusion

With devastating financial cuts to our council services, food banks, (two in my ward), the loss of identity caused to Franche Ward by this unnecessary change would cause two communities to be alienated, Franche and Habberley North.

From Cllrs L Hyde, M Kelly & B McFarland

We write as elected members of Wyre Forest District Council to express our concern at the proposed dismemberment of our community, viz, the Habberley and Blakebrook Ward. We suggest that the Commission is not adhering to its own guidelines : in your draft recommendations you state

“We also aim to ensure that the council wards reflect, as far as possible, the interests and identities of local communities across the District.”

How can the division of Habberley Estate reflect this guideline?

We note the Commission’s proposals for eleven three-member wards and express strong concerns about whether some of them comply with its own policies, an observation also commented upon by Wyre Forest District Council. Why the deviation from the council’s original suggestion of nine three-member and three two-member wards? Indeed why the reduction to thirty-three members in the first place?

The current Habberley and Blakebrook Ward is well-established and cohesive, with distinct boundaries. It contains a wide range of housing, including the largely social housing of Habberley Estate. It is served by St John’s Primary School and Baxter College 11-18 secondary school. Both schools have a wide range of intake and continue to improve in performance. The Knoll private school is also located within the ward. There are also three units of sheltered accommodation and four nursing homes serving the needs of elderly people. This is in addition to bungalows and flats largely occupied by the elderly. At the other end of the age range, a well-attended nursery is located within the current ward.

It could be argued that, in a larger ward, the inclusion of the Franche and Ferndale Estates, together with the whole of the supermarket side of Franche Road would enhance community cohesion, in that the Franche Estate would form a continuation of the Trimley Drive area, because the Ferndale Estate has a geographic synergy with Franche Estate, being across the main road from it, and the inclusion of the whole of the Co-op side of Franche Road would simply be an extension of the current ward boundary. This would not only form a cohesive community with well-defined geographic boundaries, but would also conform to the proposed councillor-to-electors ratio.

(A longer version of this final article has been submitted independently)

It is to be hoped that the Commission will accept the observations and proposals included in this response as a serious attempt to retain local democracy, social cohesion and sound geographical boundaries and, therefore, be seen as reflecting the true spirit of the Commission’s own guidelines. - Jamie Shaw : Leader, Labour Group WFDC

