

FLETCHING PARISH COUNCIL

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Review Officer (East Sussex & Wealden)
LGBCE
14th floor, Millbank Tower
London
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Dear Sir/Madam

I write on behalf of Fletching Parish Council in response to your draft recommendations on the new electoral arrangements for East Sussex County Council and Wealden District Council.

Regretfully the parish council cannot support the recommendations made by The Local Government Boundary Commission and the electors affected, as well as many other electors in the community, are extremely concerned about the proposals for a new Shortbridge ward.

We understand that The Local Government Boundary Commission has certain statutory criteria which we believe the proposals do not meet for the following reasons:

a) Reflect community interests and identities

i) Fletching Parish Council

Fletching Parish Council currently represents the whole of Piltdown, Fletching and Sheffield Park, with 9 councillors in total. The proposed new Shortbridge ward would result in two thirds of Piltdown electors being represented by 8 parish councillors and one third being represented by 1 parish councillor. This would dramatically affect the current voting rights of approximately 110 electors. These electors have historically been able to vote for 9 parish councillors, but under the proposals they would only be able to vote for 1 parish councillor, to represent the Shortbridge ward.

ii) Piltdown Residents Association

The Piltdown Residents Association (PRA) was formed in January 2014 and has successfully brought the residents of Piltdown together as a community. The PRA has undertaken fund raising for a variety of initiatives and continues to work with the Fletching Parish Council on a number of important projects to enhance the Piltdown area, such as reducing the speed limits on Shortbridge Road and Golf Club Lane. The proposals would split these residents into two different wards, creating confusion, duplication and uncertainty. All the initiatives to date have had the full support of the parish council and existing district councillors and county councillors.

iii) Fletching Parish Action Plan

Following a survey of all the electors in Fletching parish in 2014, a Parish Action Plan was produced to determine the long term future of the community and how to change it for the better. The plan identified various initiatives for action, including the improvement of community facilities such as Fletching Recreation Ground and Fletching Village Hall. Road safety in the parish was also a concern highlighted by local residents. The plan will benefit all the electors in the Piltdown area.

iv) Fletching Festival

Following a survey of all the electors in Fletching parish in 2014, it was identified that a large annual event would help bring everyone in the parish together to have fun and build a stronger sense of community. The first Fletching Festival is scheduled for Saturday 16th July 2016 and the residents of Piltdown are heavily involved as both committee members and volunteers.

v) Piltdown Golf Club

The historic Piltdown Golf Club is a valuable asset to the local community and has a large membership. The proposals would result in this important facility being split between the Shortbridge ward and the Fletching/Danehill ward. This could lead to duplication and difficulty in dealing with planning applications affecting the club.

vi) Piltdown Man

In 1912 skull fragments were supposedly discovered in Piltdown and 'Piltdown Man' was nationally renowned as the 'missing link' between man and the apes. Despite being exposed by tests in the 1950s as an elaborate hoax, Piltdown is still famous today for the Piltdown Man.

The parish council feels that all of the above points are evidence of strong community interests and identity of Piltdown, which would be split up under the proposals.

b) Be based on strong, easily identifiable boundaries

The proposed boundaries do not satisfy this requirement and divide Barkham Lane, Shortbridge Road, Sharpsbridge lane and Golf Club Lane between the Danehill/Fletching ward and the West Uckfield/Isfield ward. Ownership of much of the farming land would also be similarly divided between the proposed different wards, as is the Piltdown Golf Club course.

Wealden District Council's original proposals to The Local Government Boundary Commission reflected a strong and easily identifiable natural boundary, using the River Ouse, Shortbridge Stream and Mill Hill Road. The boundaries suggested by LGBCE simply do not meet this criterion.

c) Help the council deliver effective and convenient local government

i) At parish council level

As previously mentioned, the proposed new Shortbridge ward would result in two thirds of Piltdown electors being represented by 8 parish councillors and one third being represented by 1 parish councillor. This would result in confusion amongst electors, duplication, increased administration/election costs.

ii) At district council level

The proposed new Shortbridge ward would result in two thirds of Piltdown electors being represented by a Danehill/Fletching district councillor and one third being represented by a West Uckfield/Isfield district councillor. This would result in confusion and duplication, increased administration and travel costs.

Both district councillors would have to be involved in issues affecting Piltdown as a whole and be required to attend Fletching Parish Council meetings. This would not be an effective use of councillors' time.

The West Uckfield/Isfield ward would be a predominantly urban area, with the Shortbridge ward being completely rural in nature. The total number of Shortbridge and Isfield rural electors would only constitute approximately 21% of electors in the proposed ward. Material planning considerations and policies are substantially different for rural areas and it would be inappropriate for rural electors to be represented by an urban based district councillor without this knowledge and expertise.

iv) At county council level

Fletching Parish Council currently holds quarterly meetings with East Sussex Highways and the East Sussex County Councillor representing the parish. These are important meetings, providing a communication link between parish and county and enabling us to progress high priority issues such as road safety.

The proposed changes would result in having to deal with two separate county councillors, one of which would be representing a vast urban area being North Uckfield/Isfield. Urban and rural county councillors may have differing priorities and this could result in confusion, duplication and increased administration and travel costs. The total number of Shortbridge and Isfield rural electors would only constitute approximately 7% of electors in the proposed ward.

In addition to Highways, we would also have to liaise with two different county councillors for other areas such as the Superfast Broadband project and public rights of way issues.

d) Our recommendations

We recommend that the following alternative solutions should be considered, in order of preference:

1. Ward: Danehill/Fletching/Isfield/Little Horsted

A new rural ward could be formed containing Danehill, Fletching (including Piltdown), Isfield and Little Horsted. This would be similar to the current electoral arrangement but excluding Nutley and parts of Maresfield. This would require the urban wards of Uckfield to be redefined in order to satisfy the electoral equality numbers, which would seem perfectly possible as Uckfield would only be losing 600 electors from Isfield and Little Horsted.

2. Ward: Isfield/Little Horsted/Framfield/Cross in Hand

A new rural ward could be formed containing Isfield, Little Horsted, Framfield and Cross in Hand. Piltdown would remain part of the Fletching/Danehill ward. This would also require the wards of Uckfield to be redefined as above, but possibly would not satisfy the electoral equality numbers.

3. Detached Ward: West Uckfield/Isfield

The proposed ward could be a detached ward, eliminating the need for a territorial link. This would result in all Piltdown electors being able to remain in the Fletching/Danehill ward. We understand that detached wards are not favoured by the Boundary Commission, but they are possible and would satisfy the electoral equality numbers. The boundaries of the River Ouse, Shortbridge Stream, Mill Hill Road (already an existing parish boundary with Isfield), which then turns into Rocks Road, are clear and identifiable boundaries. There would no longer be the need to annex a third of Piltdown electors.

4. Change the Fletching parish boundary

Whilst we appreciate that this is outside the remit of the Boundary Commission (notwithstanding your consent being required), we understand that Wealden District Council could undertake a Community Governance Review. This would make it possible to change the boundary of Fletching parish and move the Copwood area of Piltdown into Isfield parish. This would then remove the need for a detached ward and provide an Isfield parish territorial link and would only affect approximately 10 electors.

If you have any queries whatsoever, please don't hesitate to contact me. We hope you will take our response into consideration and keep us informed of any progress.

Yours faithfully

Mrs K Rumble