



ALVECHURCH PARISH COUNCIL
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The Review Officer (Bromsgrove)
Local Government Boundary Review Commission for England
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08/05/2012

Dear Sirs

Local Government Boundary Commission Electoral Review of Bromsgrove District Council: comments to the Commission from Alvechurch Parish Council

1. The Local Government Boundary Commission has invited Alvechurch Parish Council among others to offer views on the electoral review it is conducting of Bromsgrove District Council (BDC). The review has been prompted by a request from BDC for a reduction in Council size to 31 Councillors (from 39) and leading to single member wards across the District.

2. The arguments in favour of this reduction as set down by the Leader of Bromsgrove Council seem to be chiefly around more efficient use of Councillors' time in the conduct of the necessary business of Bromsgrove Council. He presents time use data to show the under occupancy of the current group of 39 and points to greater efficiency through the reduction in 8 councillor seats. Though an estimate is given of 6.75 hours per week as typically spent by a Councillor on "ward work" the submission makes little reference to the current detail and likely increasing elements of the representative role of local Councillors. Plainly it is that role, as we see it played out in our part of Bromsgrove District, upon which we are better able to comment rather than on structures and processes of BDC and the number of Councillors required to deal with those most efficiently.

3. Alvechurch currently is represented by three Councillors serving on the BDC. No other electoral ward in Bromsgrove District has three and the proposed reduction to one Councillor, in the absence of information about ward boundary changes, represents a substantial reduction in the representation of the people. Alvechurch Parish Council itself has twelve Parish Councillors for its four wards as follows: Alvechurch (7), Hopwood (2), Rowney Green (2) and Bordesley (1). We are, and our parishioners appear to be, very content with this existing ward structure.

4. We have not been consulted by any of the party political groupings on Bromsgrove Council about the case for the proposed reduction in District Councillor numbers, the introduction of single member wards or about any of consequences that may arise for changing the existing District or Parish ward boundaries.

5. We have no strong views about retaining the existing number of Councillors serving on Bromsgrove District overall nor, on cost grounds, do we favour any increase. We are not persuaded there is a case for a reduction of eight Councillors. This is because of the likely impact in the representation of this Alvechurch Ward on the District Council and the expected “localism” developments requiring rather more community leadership and engagement from any Councillor representing a large and diverse Parish area like Alvechurch. The BDC proposed changes in Councillor numbers look to be a move away from the “going local” direction.

6. We acknowledge that two of the 3 District Councillors representing the Alvechurch Ward are long serving and hold important leadership positions within BDC. These are highly responsible and time consuming positions which inevitably impact on the available time for attendance at variously, Parish Council meetings and meetings of community forums like Partners and Community Together (PACT). In recent times there has been a marked absence from Parish Council meetings by District Councillors. (Attendance figures in the period from May 2011 to April 2012 follow: Councillor A, 3 meetings from 11; Councillor B, 2 from 11; Councillor C, 2 from 11)). This and absence from other community meetings is causing a lack of two way communication between on the one hand, parishioners and their Parish Council and on the other, District Councillors.

7. There is also the issue of dual-hatted Councillor positions with currently one of our District Councillors also holding County Councillor responsibilities. Understandably and with reference to public comments made by that Councillor, in balancing the substantial responsibilities of the two posts in relation to the available time, it is often the more local Parish dimension that gets the lesser amount of attention.

8. We wish to retain the current number of representatives or at least two. Our struggle to benefit substantially at local Parish level from our existing three District Councillors (which is not a matter of neglect on their part but a reflection of their engagement in volumes of business elsewhere in local government) may suggest that whatever the changes in councillor numbers, there is a need for imposed target attendance figures at Parish level. The number of District Councillors also has a future importance because we recognise and want to encourage the increasing expectations on the community leadership role of Councillors.

9. Worcestershire County Council has a current consultation document under the title “Think Local in Worcestershire”. The consultation derives from the Government’s interest in localism, being about “local communities taking more responsibility for the area where they live”. Among the key dimensions to “Thinking Local” envisaged by the County Council is that local Councillors (See page 4 in the document for references to both County and District Councillors) serve as effective community leaders enabling and encouraging active citizenship and speaking up for the communities they have been elected to represent.

10. As part of the localism movement, a parish like ours expects to produce in the coming years a substantial neighbourhood plan. This will have significant implications for land use for housing, business and recreation and bring associated work with District Councillors on planning matters (for which the District Council is the planning authority). It follows that we in Alvechurch PC view the submission to this review coming from the Wythall Residents Association as dealing better with the representational role of the District Councillor and its likely growth points associated with the localism movement.

11. We also side with the Wythall Residents Association view that a decrease of up to 4 BDC Councillor is more in tune with increasing efficiency in conducting Council business while not impairing the growing expectations around the District Councillors’ community leadership role.

12. This Parish Council's conclusion is that we are neither convinced now is the time generally to reduce to a 31 member District Council and to move to the single member ward, nor that it is right for application to our part of Bromsgrove District.

Yours faithfully

John Cypher
Chairman
Alvechurch Parish Council