

# **Formal response of Vale of White Horse District Council to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's warding proposal for Vale of White Horse district**

I set out in this letter the formal response of the council to the Commission's draft recommendations report published in November 2012.

Overall, we generally welcome the Commission's proposals. We note that 17 of the 22 proposed wards either wholly or mostly match the proposals that we submitted in August. Of the five that are different, we raise no objection to the proposal for a two member Cumnor ward covering the whole of Cumnor parish. We object to the other four changes and set out our reasons for this below. We also draw the attention of the Commission to an issue in the warding arrangements for Abingdon, a minor anomaly relating to Wantage and Grove Brook ward and three issues relating to parish warding arrangements.

## **Watchfield and Faringdon**

The Commission proposes to combine our proposed two member Faringdon ward with our proposed single member Watchfield ward to create a three member Watchfield and Faringdon ward. We do not support this proposal, nor do we find any evidence of support from the constituent parish councils.

The Commission's proposal would create a district ward combining the small, but growing, town of Faringdon with the village of Watchfield and a large rural hinterland. The justification seems to rest solely on the issue of good electoral equality. Nowhere does the Commission seek to argue that the proposal reflects community identity (one of three statutory criteria), we presume for the simple reason that it does not. In our view it also fails on the test of effective and convenient local government because it would require the ward councillors to focus on very different issues – the regeneration of Faringdon, which has a number of pressing economic and social challenges, whilst at the same time representing some of the most rural parts of the district. If the Commission had local knowledge, it would know that Faringdon merits discrete representation.

Turning to the electoral equality argument, we accept that the ratio of electors per councillor would be high if there was a two member Faringdon ward (at +13 per cent). However, this level of inequality did not deter the Commission when it reviewed Oxfordshire County Council and included a ward for Witney North & East with the same level of inequality and one for Didcot Ladygrove of 12 per cent. We have also found recent examples in reviews covering Boston, Purbeck, Slough and Daventry all with similar variances. In our opinion, the arguments

relating to community identity and effective and convenient local government strongly outweigh those around electoral equality.

## **Kennington**

The Commission proposes to merge our proposed two member Kennington and Radley ward with our proposed single member Sunningwell and The Hinkseys ward to create a three member Kennington ward. We do not support this proposal, nor do we find any evidence of support from the constituent parish councils.

Kennington and Radley are situated less than two miles apart on a fairly busy road that links Abingdon with Oxford. Kennington has an electorate that is too large for a single councillor but too small to justify two. Linking it with Radley parish to create a two member ward was a logical solution.

Sunningwell village sits some three miles from both Kennington and Radley. The direct road link is via a narrow, poorly used country lane. The A34 dual carriageway divides Sunningwell from Kennington and Radley and acts as a major barrier. Virtually all movement in and out of Sunningwell is to the north towards Oxford or the south towards Abingdon.

The villages of North and South Hinksey lie between the A34 and the River Thames, north of the Oxford southern bypass. They are quite isolated from other settlements in the Vale because the A34 acts as such a barrier.

So, we find no evidence to support the statement in paragraph 77 of the report that a three member Kennington ward has, "good internal access". Quite the contrary, in fact. We also reject the argument that the bottle-neck between Sunningwell and South Hinksey parishes is an impediment to these being included in the same district ward. The road link is a good one, very well used, linking Boars Hill with Oxford. Although there is a stretch of a few hundred metres where this link is in Kennington parish, there are no houses in this stretch and the parish boundary is literally a few metres to the north. This can be easily addressed as part of the community governance review that we have scheduled for next year.

We consider that our original proposal was sound and, with the benefit of local knowledge, the unusually shaped Sunningwell and The Hinkseys ward makes perfect sense. Whilst Kennington and Radley have good shared community identity, this does not extend to Sunningwell, North Hinksey or South Hinksey.

## **Abingdon Central and Fitzharris**

The Commission proposes to alter the boundaries between our proposed Abingdon Central and Fitzharris wards. We do not support this proposal, nor does Abingdon-on-Thames town council.

In paragraph 58 the Commission states, “Abingdon Town Council proposed a pattern of five two member wards based on the Council’s proposals, with one minor modification to take account of the town ward boundary.” We have sought clarification from the town council and it has confirmed that it did not seek a modification and agrees with us that Wootton Road forms a natural boundary between Central and Fitzharris wards. We can only assume that the Commission has misunderstood the town council’s submission. Our original proposal delivers good electoral equality and a strong boundary reflecting community identity. Please re-instate it.

## **Sutton Courtenay**

The Commission proposes to combine our proposed single member Drayton and Sutton Courtenay wards to form a two member Sutton Courtenay ward. We do not support this proposal, nor do we find any evidence of support from the constituent parish councils.

Drayton and Sutton Courtenay are two of the larger villages within the Vale. They have strong separate identities. With the addition of Appleford (in the case of Sutton Courtenay) and Milton Village (in the case of Drayton) they both form viable single member wards, with electoral variance of less 10 per cent from the average.

The Commission’s sole justification for combining them is given in paragraph 66; “we note the strong communication links between Drayton, Milton and Sutton Courtenay, and consider that Milton appears to look towards Sutton Courtenay rather than Drayton.” Again, this statement belies a lack of local knowledge. During the floods at the end of November and more recently over Christmas, the road connecting Drayton with Sutton Courtenay was closed for almost 10 days in total. It runs through the Thames floodplain and its closure due to flooding is not uncommon. Communication between the two villages is therefore not as strong as the Commission believes.

Movement in and out of Drayton tends to be north to Abingdon and south to the A34, Milton Park, Harwell and Didcot. The same applies to Sutton Courtenay, north to Abingdon (via a different route) and south to Milton Park and Didcot (again via a different route).

It is two miles from Milton village to the centre of Drayton, 1.5 miles to the centre of Sutton Courtenay. The suggestion that Milton village looks more to the latter

than the former does not stand up to scrutiny. In reality it looks just as much to the south and Didcot as either Drayton or Sutton Courtenay.

## **Blewbury and Harwell**

The Commission propose to combine our single member Harwell and Blewbury wards to form a two member Blewbury and Harwell ward. We do not support this proposal, nor do we find any evidence of support from the constituent parish councils.

Harwell is a parish that is experiencing rapid population growth. As well as the Great Western Park development on the boundary with Didcot (which is factored into our electorate projections) there are plans to build a further 2,000 houses between Great Western Park and the A34 that should come on stream at the end of the decade. We do not therefore consider that the variance of -12 per cent from the average electorate in 2018 is an impediment to creating a single member ward covering Harwell parish (minus that part that falls within Harwell Oxford Campus). On the contrary, within 10 years we would expect the electorate to be at or possibly above the average.

In paragraph 82, the Commission states, “this ward would unite the parishes of Chilton and Harwell, which have strong communication links along the A34”. Once again, this statement illustrates a lack of local knowledge. There is no interchange at Harwell, whilst the Chilton interchange on the A34 has no north facing slip roads. In reality, therefore, there is no link between the two villages via the A34.

We find it surprising that the Commission proposes linking Blewbury with Harwell because this requires (unless someone was taking an entirely artificial circuitous route) a journey through West Hagbourne parish in neighbouring South Oxfordshire. It is ironic that in the parallel report on South Oxfordshire the Commission uses the exact opposite argument to justify not linking West Hagbourne with parishes to its east as part of a district ward. This lack of consistency undermines the credibility of the proposals.

## **Other Issues**

### *Abingdon-on-Thames ward names*

The Commission’s proposed ward names for the five Abingdon-on-Thames wards do not include the town’s name as a prefix. We request that the final proposals prefix all of them with Abingdon-on-Thames. To have wards such as Central and Fitzharris without the town’s name preceding them will cause confusion.

### *Grove North/Wantage and Grove Brook boundary*

We propose a very minor modification to this boundary. The Commission has used Letcombe Brook to define a substantial part the boundary between Grove North and Wantage and Grove Brook wards, which we support. There is one road, called Kingfishers, accessed from Main Street in Grove where it makes sense to include all of the properties in Wantage Grove and Brook ward despite the fact that some of them are situated to the west of Letcombe Brook. This is because the only access, pedestrian or vehicular, to Kingfishers is from Main Street, which falls in Wantage and Grove Brook ward.

### *Harwell parish warding*

We think that the Commission has allocated the wrong number of parish councillors to each of the two wards. We calculate that Harwell ward should have nine members and Harwell Oxford Campus two, based on the agreed electorates.

### *North Hinksey parish warding*

The Commission proposes calling the southern ward of North Hinksey parish, South Hinksey. This is likely to cause great confusion as there is a separate parish of South Hinksey. We propose that this ward is named St Lawrence after the parish church.

### *Wantage parish warding*

We think that the Commission has transposed the number of councillors representing the two parish wards. Charlton should have 10 and Segsbury six.

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**Vale of White Horse District Council**