

Local Government Boundary Commission Review

Wyre Forest District Council

Submission from the Labour Group

Introduction: The Changing Context

In 2011, when Wyre Forest District Council took a majority decision to volunteer itself for a twenty-five percent reduction in democratic representation, the notion of the “Big Society” was being promoted by Conservative and Liberal opinion. The State, even in its modest manifestation as a district council, was to be shrunk. Volunteer effort and community action was to replace it. “Community asset transfer” was the mechanism by which diminished local authorities were to transfer the buildings in which the new voluntarism would spark a resurgence of community values. Wyre Forest District Council was in the vanguard: its Civic Centre and Civic Hall buildings were due to become surplus to requirements and the council-run Stourport Sports Centre was deemed unaffordable in the medium-term. They were duly earmarked for transfer to the community. Word came down from Westminster that the Stourport project was one of five across the nation which would establish the credentials of the Big Society. Unfortunately for its promoters, it proved impossible to mobilise “the community” in Wyre Forest, (and in the other four locations, which were never precisely identified), to such an extent that, in 2013, the phrase “Big Society” is hardly heard, nationally or locally. Therefore, the philosophical basis on which the decision to downsize democratic representation was taken, namely, a more dynamic community speaking up for itself and getting things done in its locality, is discredited. By this yardstick, the decision of the council to reduce the number of councillors is unjustified.

Of course, it is true that the role of the district council is being diminished nonetheless, as government grant is slashed and the base budget reduced by the acceptance of one-off subsidies in lieu of council tax rises. However, even if some services cease to be provided, the role of the district council will still be highly significant to every local resident. There is no direct correlation between level of service and number of councillors, (see reference to number of Stourport town councillors under “Localism”), and, therefore, it is not necessarily the case that a lesser level of service should equate to a lesser number of councillors.

Democratic Representation in Wyre Forest: Excess or Deficit?

At the present time, the proposal to reduce democratic representation by 25% on WFDC is paradoxical, being on the agenda at the same time as the council is consulting on precisely the opposite, in the form of a possible Kidderminster Town Council. With reference to the largest settlement in the district, comprising over 50% of the district’s total population, a case is being made to increase, not decrease, democratic representation. Is it logical for the council to face in opposite directions at the same time?

Addressing the “Localism” Agenda?

It could be argued that, should Kidderminster acquire a town council, there could be a significant transfer of services from district to town, justifying a reduction in WFDC

councillor numbers. However, precedent suggests not, because neither of the two existing town councils in Wyre Forest, Bewdley and Stourport, are major service providers. Bewdley's role is minimal, while Stourport's, delivered by a part-time town clerk, a part-time secretary, an honorary treasurer, a part-time lengthsman, four grounds maintenance workers and eighteen councillors, amounts to a revenue expenditure of only c£170,000 per annum. Even when faced by the loss of an amenity which WFDC could no longer afford to maintain, the paddling pool at the riverside, the town council failed to respond to the Localism Agenda and refused to take on responsibility for it.

Nor can the transfer of WFDC's Civic Centre and Civic Hall be seen as evidence of its diminished role, as the council's official submission suggests. It is planned that the complex will come under the joint ownership of Stourport Town and Worcestershire County councils, but only because WFDC has moved to new purpose-built headquarters.

Cut the number of Councillors, or Cut Their Cost?

It is clear in the council's official submission that public sentiment is directed at cutting the cost of councillors, not necessarily their number. £50,000 is the saving identified for 15-16 by reduction to thirty-three councillors, almost exactly the same sum as can be saved if the council of forty-two members would accept the recommendations of an independent remuneration panel to cut their over-generous allowances.

Removal of Services, therefore Reduction of Councillors?

The official submission maintains that the transfer of housing stock to the Community Housing Group has led to a decreased role for WFDC. This may be true for the officer corps, but is less so for councillors. In terms of involvement as members of the governing structure of GHG, there is a direct entitlement to nine positions for councillors, admittedly a lesser number of seats than in the days of the council's Housing committee, but for six of the nine, a greater time commitment than would have been the case of old, because Community Housing committees meet monthly. Moreover, WFDC, like all other district councils, still has a range of specific roles in social and affordable housing in terms of strategic policies, planning powers and funding, with which councillors have to engage through the Scrutiny process.

Also, by way of illustration of the many Housing functions still the responsibility of the district council, one can cite the Housing review panel which has met eleven times during 12-13, examining many areas of the district's continuing involvement in Housing, (mainly outside the Planning function), including issues concerning privately-owned and privately-rented properties, advice services, Homelessness and the Disabled Facilities Grant. Its recommendations have made councillors more aware of the council's continuing role in Housing, furnishing them with much great knowledge with which to engage in debate and, possibly, make future policy recommendations.

Moreover, councillors' ward caseloads feature as many social/affordable housing-related issues as they did in the years when the stock was council-owned. Therefore, there is little or no justification for claiming there is less for councillors to do because of the removal of WFDC's housing stock.

Implementation of Shared Services

Many shared services, e.g., Payroll, Human Resources and Building Control, were rarely, if ever, major consumers of councillors' time while confined within the sole responsibility of WFDC, therefore their validity as evidence for lesser councillor involvement is highly questionable. Those which were, e.g., Economic Development and Environmental Health continue to be so, though it is true to say that, in terms of governance, most councillors have only a passive role, being represented by perhaps two councillors on a joint-authority board. However, through Members Forums, working parties, the opportunity to scrutinise and the budget-making process, there is still scope for very significant involvement.

Modern Executive Arrangements

It was not the intention of the Cabinet/Scrutiny model to reduce democratic representation. It is the means by which the conduct of council business is carried out in most councils and there is no general wave of sentiment that this "new(er) order" requires less councillors to run it. A reason why a case can be made out for a reduction of councillors in WFDC's case is the relatively ineffective way in which Scrutiny operates, through one committee only. The entire process, which on WFDC includes policy recommendation, is overwhelmed by paperwork, (whether read on screen or from hard copy). It has not been unusual for the committee to have to read a perhaps-one hundred-page Planning document and another of seventy pages on Housing, as part of an agenda which might contain four or five other significant items of business. A scrutiny process divided between two committees, (as, actually, has been introduced in 13-14, "for one year only"), would be a much more effective means of dealing with council business and would provide a meaningful role for perhaps twenty-eight backbench councillors. Additionally, it would present the opportunity of scrutinising partner organisations, as the original legislation intended.

A properly-functioning scrutiny process, in conjunction with the council's regulatory committees, the workings of the Cabinet and Cabinet members' consequent responsibilities in the wider local government world, plus the range of other duties undertaken by the leadership teams of the political groups, gives scope for a positive contribution to council business by more than thirty-three councillors.

Increased Community Involvement

The official council submission makes reference to the strong community engagement of certain councillors and the "more reactive" role of others. In fact, most councillors are in the former category and many of them are seeing their workload in this sphere increase. Attendance at Tenants Consultative Committees has long been a duty of councillors, and, as some of them transform into mixed-tenure residents associations, councillors' attendance becomes even more desirable. To this add the expectation of attendance at bi-monthly or quarterly PACT, (Police and Community Together), meetings, participation in community initiatives generated by the district's three Areas of Highest Need, membership of community hall management boards, liaising with "Friends of.." groups, membership of school governing bodies, to which some councillors have been "head-hunted", because of their prominence in their wards.... and so on, for this is not an exhaustive list. It is no exaggeration to maintain that a councillor's community engagement role can entail three

formal meeting in one week. Clearly, a twenty-five percent reduction in councillor-resource would impact negatively on this desirable interaction between democratically-elected representatives and their local communities.

Councillors in Full-Time Employment

It is generally accepted that, if a body of councillors is to be representative of the community it serves, there should be amongst its number those who are in full-time employment. There are already too few who fit into that category in Wyre Forest, because current demands are too onerous. Should there be a decrease of 25% in the number of councillors, the workload on the lesser number will increase, so making it less possible for those in full-time employment to offer themselves for service.

Conclusion

The Labour Party does not accept the argument for a reduction the number of councillors by 25% and, if in power, would not have considered a submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission. Therefore this paper is reactive, seeking to show the flaws in the official council document, from their philosophical roots to the series of examples presented in justification. As a left of centre party, we promote change to bring about a fairer society and we are certainly prepared to consider alternative arrangements both in the way in which public services are carried out and the community is represented, so we do not have a closed mind on such matters. However, we oppose the council's current proposals and summarise those reasons below, offering our alternative suggestions.

1. Commission officials, in their presentation to Group Leaders, suggested they were predisposed to 3-councillor wards as a default position. We believe that a reduction in wards and the consequential increase in residents per new ward would be counter-productive to the desire to increase local democracy.
2. Accommodating the WFDC-favoured option of 33 councillors could result in a decrease from 17 to 11 wards, or other significant reduction in the number of wards. We submit this would decrease the identification of local communities with their elected representatives and confuse the electorate.
3. Any increase in ward size, with the consequential reduction of nearly a third of wards and reduction of 25% of councillors, will significantly increase the current work load of those remaining. This, in turn, will undermine efforts to bring in more councillors in full-time employment. With the increasing ward-based work taking a greater length of time, as opposed to "in council" responsibilities, a stronger presence and input is required from councillors, not a reduced one.
4. Whilst not favouring a significant reduction in ward numbers or size, we do, of course, accept that some fine tuning of existing ward boundaries may be both possible and necessary to produce a better balance of representation. This, in turn, may offer opportunities to reduce, or possibly even increase, the number of councillors in some wards.

5. We consider that suggesting a set number of councillors as a prescriptive number on which to start this review, based on nothing more than a desire, unsupported by evidence, to reduce the number of elected members, is both flawed and fraught with potential problems. Therefore our favoured option, and alternative to the formal council submission, would be for the Commission to review ward boundaries first, to assess the need for changes within the current 17. Then, consequential on the outcome of that review, the “best fit” could be recommended for the number of councillors it considers necessary to service effectively the needs of the community. We are not averse to changes but we believe they must be based on what is best for the electorate and for local democracy. We believe the formal Council submission does not address that fundamental purpose of local government and is only based on reducing the number of councillors for the sake of reduction.

Jamie Shaw : Leader, Labour Group, WFDC 22.5.13