

Response to Local Government Boundary Commission for England: “New electoral arrangements for Wyre Forest District Council, April 2014”

Introduction

1. Wyre Forest District Council welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Boundary Commission’s proposals that were published on 15 April. The Council is grateful for the consideration that the Commission has given to the proposals for ward boundaries that the Council submitted in 2013.
2. The Council notes that the Commission has proposed a universal pattern of 3 member wards. This differs therefore in a number of significant respects from the Council’s submission, which was for nine 3 member wards and three 2 member wards. There are also some more minor differences in terms of the precise boundaries of wards, particularly in Kidderminster.

Concerns about how the proposals comply with the legislation and the Commission’s guidance

3. The Council is aware that some of the Commission’s proposals, in particular for the proposed Severn Valley Ward, are controversial locally. There are serious concerns about why the Commission has given greater weight to having a universal pattern of three member wards than to other factors such as community identity or parish/town boundaries. Electoral equality can still be achieved even with a mixture of two- and three-member wards where appropriate. The Commission’s own guidance says: “The importance of parishes should not be underestimated given that, where they exist, we will seek to use them as the building blocks for wards”. The Council considers that aspects of the Commission’s proposals contradict the following statements of principle, namely “the desirability of arriving at boundaries that are easily identifiable” and “the desirability of fixing boundaries so as not to break any local ties”.
4. In these respects, the proposed Severn Valley Ward is an example of whether the rules on reflecting the interests and identities of local communities have resulted in proposed electoral arrangements which, as far as possible, maintain local ties and where boundaries are easily identifiable. The proposed ward would divide parts of Burlish Park and Lickhill from their local community in Stourport and place them with another distinct community which forms part of another town. The proposal seems anomalous when compared to electoral arrangements for town council wards (which naturally are confined within the towns) and for county council divisions. There is a county electoral division for the whole of Stourport and no part of Bewdley is joined to part of another town. Indeed, under current electoral arrangements at town, district and county level in Wyre Forest, no part of one town is joined to part of another town.
5. While the Council shares these serious concerns, its policy position is to note the Boundary Commission’s proposals for eleven 3 member wards, subject to some detailed points below. However the Council seeks a written response from the Commission on why these aspects of its proposals for Wyre Forest – if it decides not to alter them - appear to be contrary to its own guidelines.

Broadwaters

6. The Council supports the Commission's proposals for the boundaries for this ward. It does not support the alternative approach on which LGBCE seeks views (paragraph 39 of the consultation document) which would exclude from Broadwaters the area between town centre and Chester Road North; and include instead the area between Chester Road North and the edge of town. The Council does not support the alternative approach because it would seem to split Horsefair and its surrounding streets. This would split an identifiable community, and therefore would not be consistent with the Commission's policy to support maintenance of local ties.

Offmore & Comberton

7. The Council broadly supports the boundaries for this proposed ward. However it believes that community ties would be better maintained by including in this ward the triangular area bounded by Chester Road North, Comberton Road and the railway which at present are parts of GR-D1 and GR-D2. This would continue the use of the railway as a natural boundary, in line with the Commission's approach for much of the western boundary between Aggborough & Spennells and Foley Park & Hoobrook.
8. Based on the present electoral roll, this alternative approach would add 564 electors to Offmore & Comberton, resulting in a ward that was approximately 4% above electoral equality, and remove an equivalent number from Aggborough & Spennells, resulting in a ward that was about 6% below electoral equality. In both cases, the wards would remain well within the 10% variance accepted by the Commission. As the triangular area described is already fully developed, there is highly unlikely to be any significant variation in electorate numbers in 2019.

Sutton Park & Habberley South

9. The Council notes that the proposed ward addresses the ward boundary anomaly in Lansdown Green and includes the whole of Bewdley Hill in one ward. It believes that there are good reasons why the boundary between this ward and the proposed Franche & Habberley North ward should follow the same boundary as the county council divisions. This will assist in minimising confusion among voters. The Council therefore proposes that the small part of the present HA-B1 polling district in Habberley & Blakebrook ward centred on Abbey Road and the northern side of Cathedral Avenue should instead form part of the proposed Franche & Habberley North ward. Based on the present electoral roll, this alternative approach would add 213 electors to Franche & Habberley North, resulting in a ward that was approximately 6% above electoral equality, and remove an equivalent number from Sutton Park & Habberley South, resulting in a ward that was close to electoral equality. In both cases, the wards would remain well within the 10% variance accepted by the Commission. As the area described is already fully developed, there is highly unlikely to be any significant variation in electorate numbers in 2019.

Bewdley & Rock

10. The Council broadly supports the boundaries for this proposed ward. However it believes that community ties would be better maintained by including in this ward the whole of Upper Arley parish. The Council appreciates that the parish straddles the River Severn but it believes there are strong arguments for its proposal:
 - 1) it is consistent with the Commission's policy stance of using parishes as the building blocks for wards;

- 2) it would result in a ward that matched the county council division, making it easier for the electorate to understand. The whole of Upper Arley parish is also linked with Bewdley in the present district council ward;
 - 3) it would avoid adding a further significant area to the Wyre Forest Rural ward, which in the Council's proposals covers a wide geographical area. The Commission's proposals would make the largest ward geographically even larger.
11. If the whole of Upper Arley parish was in the Bewdley & Rock ward, it would produce a ward of 7547 electors, 1% above electoral equality, and a Wyre Forest Rural ward of 7209 electors, 3% below electoral equality. In both cases, the wards would remain well within the 10% variance accepted by the Commission.

Severn Valley

12. The Council feels that the name of this proposed ward (if it features in the Commission's final proposals) should reflect the communities which would be included in it, for example "Wribbenhall & Lickhill", as this would retain in particular the historical name of Wribbenhall.

Stourport-on-Severn Town Council

13. The Council has no comments to make on the proposals to alter the town council wards within Stourport-on-Severn.

June 2014