

Stafford District

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Comment text:

My submission is a simple one, in that I believe less Cllrs will have a detrimental affect on local democracy in that people will have far less opportunities to engage with the electoral process and it will tighten the grip of the political parties over local government in Stafford. Nearly a third less representatives will make the workload of each Cllr greater, and make it even more difficult for those left to hold the Executive to account. These statements are explained in the attachment which compares similar Councils in the area to Stafford Borough. I would like to propose a change to the system by introducing Committees in place of the Cabinet structure so individual backbench Cllrs can have the opportunity to set the agenda and issues can be discussed as a matter of public record rather than in political group meetings behind closed doors. I am against reducing the number of Cllrs and the reasoned evidence is contained within the attachment. Cllr Robert W Stephens Member for Milford Ward

Review of the size of Stafford Borough Council The implications for ward and other boundaries

Summary

Any significant reduction in the number of borough councillors will trigger a general review of ward boundaries, at least in Stafford town.

Alterations to ward boundaries which cross the boundaries of the new parliamentary constituencies now being prepared will trigger further alterations to those parliamentary constituencies at the next parliamentary boundary review.

Some county electoral divisions may also be affected by ward boundary changes, although there is no automatic link between the two.

The substantial increase in housing provision envisaged in the local development framework now being prepared will require a substantial review of all political boundaries in the borough in a few years' time.

Analysis

The Council agreed to ask the Local Government Boundary Commission for England to consider reducing the number of borough councillors to around 40 at its meeting on November 29th, 2011.

Figures supplied by the elections office for the recent review of county electoral divisions predicted that the number of electors in Stafford Borough would rise from 99,618 on September 1st, 2010 to 102,010 by 2016. This analysis is based on these figures, which show an increase of 2.4 per cent.

The borough currently has 26 wards, of which 12 are in Stafford town, three in Stone town and 11 in the surrounding countryside. Three return a single member each, 13 two members each and ten three members each, making a total of 59. These arrangements were last reviewed in 2000 and took effect in 2003.

The average number of electors represented by each councillor in 2000 was 1,625. By 2010, this had risen to 1,688 and is forecast to rise to 1,729 by 2016 (an increase of 6.4%).

If the number of councillors were reduced to 40, the average number of electors per councillor would rise to 2,490 in 2010 and 2,550 by 2016 (51% more than in 2010 with 59 members).

The boundaries of the three-member wards would not need to change, if their representation were reduced to two members each (Eccleshall, Fulford, Gnosall & Woodseaves, Haywood & Hixon, Highfields & Western Downs, Holmcroft, Littleworth, Manor, Walton and Weeping Cross).

The three single-member wards could be added to adjoining two-member wards.

Thus Church Eaton could merge with Seighford, Chartley with Milford and Milwich with Barlaston & Oulton. Chartley ward might need to be divided between the revised Barlaston & Milwich and Milford & Weston wards.

Each of these wards would also be represented by two members. It should be noted, however, that the geographical areas covered by some of these wards would be very much larger than most wards are at present.

Problems would start to arise with the existing two-member wards. The LGBCE does not like electorates to vary from the average in any council by more than 10%. By 2016, therefore, the maximum number of electors to be represented by any councillor is 2,805 and the minimum 2,295.

Baswich ward, for instance, is forecast to have an electorate of 3,685 by 2016, theoretically entitling it to 1.4 councillors. If Baswich were combined with Weeping Cross (5,243 electors), their electorate would total 8,928, theoretically entitling them to 3.5 councillors.

If the new Baswich & Weeping Cross ward were to be allocated three councillors, they would represent 16.7% more electors than the borough average. If it were allocated four councillors, they would represent 12.5% fewer electors than average. Neither solution is likely to be acceptable to the LGBCE.

Similar problems would arise from combining Common and Coton wards, Rowley and Tillington or Forebridge and Penkside.

Swynnerton ward, with 3,762 electors forecast by 2016, would theoretically be entitled to 1.5 councillors. However, if the single-member wards were amalgamated with their neighbours and three-members wards reduced to two councillors as suggested above, Swynnerton would have no neighbouring ward with which to amalgamate. Again, allocating Swynnerton either one or two councillors is unlikely to be acceptable to the LGBCE.

In Stone town, St Michael's ward and Stonefield & Christchurch ward are forecast to have 7,980 electors, enough to return three councillors representing 2,660 electors each – 4.3% more than the borough average. Walton ward, with 4,584 electors forecast, would only just qualify for two councillors.

The LGBCE might try to balance out these two revised wards by proposing boundaries across the flood plain for the River Trent and the canal. A similar proposal during the last review proved unpopular and was eventually dropped. It cannot be guaranteed that the Commission would listen to public opinion again, as was demonstrated by its insistence on adding part of Walton ward to the Stone Rural county electoral division last year.

None of these problems is insuperable, provided members are prepared to accept a more wide-ranging review of existing ward boundaries.

Implications of ward boundary changes for parliamentary constituencies

The Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011 requires the parliamentary Boundary Committee for England to use district ward boundaries as the basic building blocks for the new, large constituencies. This has always been its practice in the past, but it is now enshrined in statute.

Exceptions are permitted but are expected to be rare. None of the constituencies in the Commission's initial proposals divides a district ward.

If Milwich ward were amalgamated with Barlaston & Oulton, as suggested above, the boundary of the proposed Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stone constituency would have to be redrawn in the next review. If Swynnerton were to be amalgamated with parts of Eccleshall, a further review would also be required.

Since parliamentary boundary reviews are likely to become more frequent in future, this need not be a problem. It should, however, be borne in mind that a review of borough wards may have unintended consequences.

County electoral division boundaries

The LGBCE is required to have regard to ward boundaries in drawing up county electoral divisions but can, and does, depart from them in order to achieve reasonable electoral equality. Alterations to ward boundaries may, therefore, lead to yet another review of these boundaries (on top of those completed in 2003 and 2011) but this does not necessarily follow.

The emerging local development framework for Stafford Borough

A substantial amount of new housing is proposed in the local development framework which would greatly enlarge the populations and electorates of Stafford and Stone and selected larger villages. The boundary between Stafford town and its surrounding countryside will be altered beyond recognition.

This is bound to require a further review of ward and other boundaries within the next 20 years and possibly within the next 10 years.

Appendix follows

Ward statistics using electorates from county council review

Ward	Electorate 2010	Electorate 2016
Baswich	3,546	3,685
Common	3,097	3,173
Coton	2,864	3,583
Forebridge	3,524	3,784
Highfields & Western Downs	4,735	4,626
Holmcroft	5,151	5,083
Littleworth	4,878	5,220
Manor	4,674	4,552
Penkside	3,088	3,091
Rowley	3,668	3,728
Tillington	3,171	3,333
Weeping Cross	5,263	5,243
Total Stafford town wards	47,659	49,101
Stonefield & Christchurch	4,214	4,387
St Michael's	3,660	3,593
Walton	4,654	4,584
Total Stone town wards	12,528	12,564
Barlaston & Oulton	3,288	3,392
Church Eaton	1,761	1,826
Chartley	1,554	1,595
Eccleshall	5,342	5,584
Fulford	4,943	4,975
Gnosall & Woodseaves	5,232	5,325
Haywood & Hixon	5,233	5,221
Milford	3,915	3,921
Milwich	1,575	1,636
Seighford	2,892	3,086
Swynnerton	3,718	3,762
Total countryside	39,453	40,323
Total Stafford Borough	99,618	102,010
Average electors per councillor	1,688	1,729

Wards and electorates highlighted in yellow vary from the average by more than 10%.

Coton	-15%	+4%
Highfields and Western Downs	-6%	-11%
Manor	-8%	-12%
Milford	+16%	+13%
Seighford	-13%	-11%
Swynnerton	+10%	+9%
Stonefield & Christchurch	+25%	+27%
Walton	-8%	-12%

From the above table it can be seen that the expected growth in Coton ward would bring it within 10% of the average electorate per councillor by 2016. Swynnerton ward is only just outside the 10% range at present and is expected to be within it by 2016.

The remaining six wards which vary by more than 10% by 2013 account for only 23% of all wards, which would not be enough to trigger a review if the number of councillors were to remain unchanged.

Stafford town has 29 councillors but only enough electors for 28. If the size of the council were reduced by one member in Stafford town, the other wards could remain unaltered. However, it is unlikely the LGBCE would entertain this.