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Sent: 05 June 2022 22:31
To: reviews
Subject: Fenland review

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

Response of objection to proposals affecting Rural areas and Villages of Whittlesey. Benwick, Coates and Eastrea Ward.

It is disappointing that the LGBC members have little knowledge of the topography of Fenland solely basing their opinions on the submission from a Political party that has only one aim to gerrymander. At no point has there been meaningful cross party engagement. The working parties that have taken place have been a fait accompli with any counter proposals rejected.

I am lead to believe the previous boundary review in 2012/13 a completely different approach was taken by the District Council. The review in 2012/13 had almost unanimous support from Cllrs of all groups and demonstrated a clear approach to get consensus agreement, with points taken on board from all groups. It should also be noted for that review the District Council sought to engage with the wider community, including obtaining Town and Parish Council input, prior to them putting forward a formal submission to the LGBCE. This process has not been followed for the current review and all input from opposition Cllrs at the District Council has been disregarded and ignored. Opposition Cllrs requested a recorded vote to demonstrate this was only supported by the whipped Cllrs of the Conservative group.

The latest submission is clearly driven by a political agenda to split up the wards of opposition Councillors, with the Conservative Group pushing through its proposals without any support from the opposition. The changes being made by the District Council and supported by the Conservative group on Whittlesey Town Council demonstrates the submission is driven by the same agenda and should be treated as such.

The current proposed ward changes do not comply with the LGBCE Criterion.

How Many Councillors are needed: While the population does indicate that 42 is the optimum number are needed? Is this what is actually required? Why could it not be a lower figure? Will the number of councillors properly represent their constituents? Surely local candidates will be more in tune with their constituents than party candidates in the main. The current proposal appears to be used to justify the changes to the detriment of the other criteria, which is at odds with the information provided that all three criteria were equal in relevance. While the LGBCE advocates a candidate should ideally represent 2000 residents surely these candidates should represent the local community which in the case of Benwick, Coates and Eastrea is a rural community, not an Urban one or a ward that is predominately an Urban one with a minority of Rural residents.

How many wards or Electoral Divisions there should be, where their boundaries are and what they should be called.

One has to ask why the number of wards is reduced in the current proposal, why have so many super wards been proposed (wards requiring 3 councillors)? Is it to make it more difficult for Independent and non aligned candidates to be elected? Given that the effort and expenses required for an individual will be far greater. Let us not forget the major parties have large election chests and numerous supporters and helpers, where as an Independent candidate covers their election expenses out of their own pocket and usually is the one pounding the streets canvassing.

How many councillors should represent each ward or division.

While in Urban areas there are valid reasons why 3 Councillor wards are required due to the density of the population and the compact nature of Urban towns and cities. However due to the sparse residency of rural areas and villages it is more usual for there to be either single or 2 Councillor wards. The rural areas need a Councillor with an empathy for the remoteness of the residence, the social and economic issues and the safety challenges of the constituents. They also accept the size of their wards which is compensated by a common set of unique issues. They react to the Constituents and have adapted communication method to ensure constituent are aware of how to contact them and not solely rely on surgeries to make contact, or raise issues.

The FIA suggested a 41-member warding arrangement that would keep the existing rural wards and communities largely as they are. This system has worked well for a significant number of years. FIA changes sought to concentrate the changes where the main areas of growth and development were expected, namely Chatteris and Whittlesey.

This criterion has been largely ignored for the rural wards and the proposals will have a major detrimental impact. To imply that the Villages of Benwick, Kings Delph, Kings Dyke, Pondersbridge, Ramsey Mereside, Coates, Eastrea, Eldenhall, Turves and the rural area of this ward have no community and are part of the Whittlesey community is wishful thinking. Benwick while remote from Whittlesey is a community in its own right and is a very much a rural community. The villages of the current Benwick, Coates and Eastrea ward are very much different with their own Character and social issues; which are totally different from any of the Fenland market towns. You only have to have a knowledge of the community activities that are occurring in these villages to realise they are totally different from the market towns of Fenland and do not rely on them for their community. These should not be discounted, merely to adhere to one other criterion namely electoral equality, driven by changes elsewhere in the district. Many residents are not aware of the proposed changes, due to lack of publicity, however those that I have spoken to are concerned with the changes being proposed and the impact it will have. My involvement within the villages of the ward is extensive and yes the ward is the second largest in Fenland but to slice and dice it in the manner of the proposal is criminal. I am involved in many local groups and activities in the villages, which are both supporting the local communities, district council initiatives and the growth of the Military Covenant both in Fenland and Cambridgeshire as well as Chair of the Cambridgeshire Regiment association in Whittlesey. I am also working to increase the social inclusion, combating isolation, ex service welfare and social gathering within Fenland and not only in my community.

The FIA made a proposal to keep the existing Benwick, Coates and Eastrea ward with some minor amendments. I note the LGBCE stated "*We also agree that there is strong evidence that Benwick parish lacks community ties to Whittlesey and is best placed in a ward with Doddington parish.*" However, this is a direct contradiction of the LGBCE review from 2012/13 where the only ward that you allowed to be above the recommended 10% elector variance was Benwick, Coates and Eastrea, which resulted in a projected variance of 12%. This recognised the need to protect communities of interest with the villages in the ward, with the consequent identity and challenges they shared. At the time it was noted residents in these villages did not associate themselves with the town of Whittlesey. The LGBCE accepted this fact at the time in 2012/13. There is very little to have changed this view over the last 10 years and the current proposal is therefore inconsistent with the results of the 2012 review.

In the 2012/2013 review the LGBCE used its power to flex the number of Cllrs from 40 to 39 to ensure the number of Cllrs reflected wards that had a coherent identity. I would therefore urge the LGBCE to use its powers again on the current review to change from the proposed 42 Cllrs to 41, to again ensure the pattern of wards reflect established identities within wards, particularly for the rural villages.

Proposals which combine villages in town wards effectively disenfranchises village populations where overall voting numbers will reflect town-based issues rather than those of rural parishes. Simply, parish residents and their issues, which will not be the same as those of a town, will not be heard. With the sorry state of Rural public transport access to the town and access to the Councillors will be made greatly more difficult. Further, rural parish councils are mostly not politicised whilst town wards are; representation will therefore be politicised and will swamp the independent minded village candidate. Combining town wards with rural parishes is nothing more than gerrymandering to the benefit of the ruling party and will further isolate village residents from mainstream considerations. This position is already happening at county level where county councillors covering very large and disparate wards are rarely seen in or involved in small communities or attend parish council meetings, all to the disbenefit of those communities. The current proposal is undemocratic and is an effort to introduce a single party system into local government. It also gives a green light for no funding for village activities aimed at benefiting the community and its activities.

Regards

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