

Local Government Boundary Commission for  
England Electoral Review of Shropshire  
Unitary Authority

Comments by David Cooper on draft  
proposals May 2023

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## Comments by David Cooper on draft proposals May 2023

### My background

1. I am a Bridgnorth Town councillor and have served in that capacity for 10 years. I have contested Shropshire Council elections as a candidate for Bridgnorth West & Tasley on 2 occasions and have campaigned in elections at all levels. I am making this representation in an individual capacity and not on behalf of any organisation or grouping.

### Patterns of electorate growth

2. Shropshire's population as a whole would tend to natural shrinkage, with deaths exceeding births (see ONS sub-national population projections). However, the county has experienced population growth due to inward migration (mainly from neighbouring parts of the UK) and this is expected to continue, Development can thus be a key driver of population growth, as inward migration requires suitable housing to be available.
3. Shropshire's current local plan allocates sites for development to meet anticipated needs up to 2026. A revised local plan has been under development since 2016 and was submitted for examination in September 2021. This covers the period up to 2038. Examination of the draft revised Local Plan is still in progress and awaiting further information from Shropshire Council as at 5 July 2023.
4. Both the adopted Local Plan and the draft updated local plan focus future residential development on existing settlements, though the draft updated local plan does envisage a number of Strategic Sites being developed. Otherwise, much of the County is Green Belt, AONB, or designated as countryside where development is subject to restrictions.
5. It is thus to be expected that overall the County's population (and presumably its electorate) will grow and the growth will largely be focussed on existing towns and larger villages, with rural areas expected to see no growth or potentially a degree of natural decline.

6. The latest ONS Sub-national population projections available are the 2018 based ones, published in March 2020. These show a projected population for Shropshire in mid 2022 of 332,884 (of whom 271,694 would be aged 18 and over) and the mid 2028 figure is 349,609 (of whom 288,351 would be aged 18 or over). This indicates a projection of an increase of those potentially eligible to be voters (before considering qualification requirements other than age) of 6.1% over 6 years.
7. I note that the electorate projections supplied by Shropshire Council to the Commission give a 2022 electorate of 249,308 and a 2028 electorate of 265,997 – growth of 6.7% over 6 years
8. I am encouraged by the similarity in growth levels of the ONS population projections and Shropshire Council's electoral forecast. However, I would urge caution in considering any individual divisions where large growth is projected as a result of anticipated development.
9. The Commission operates to an electoral tolerance of 10% around a central average figure of electors per councillor. Once the Council size has been fixed, the average electorate per councillor can be expected to grow by around 1% a year. Rural divisions with little or no development can be expected to see their elector per councillor ratio failing to keep up with the growth in the average and will eventually pass out of tolerance. Growth areas will tend to be sharply focussed around key development sites and can see fairly rapid growth to electorate levels above tolerance. Further electoral reviews could ultimately be triggered by both growth areas and no growth areas passing out of tolerance.
10. I have examined the electorate forecasts for the existing divisions. 5 are projected to show a reduction in electors over 6 years, 24 to grow by 0 to 6%, 21 to grow by 6 to 10%, and 13 by more than 10%. Broadly, just under half of the existing divisions are on a trajectory towards being below tolerance, with the remainder heading towards eventually being above tolerance.
11. I am concerned that this pattern of growth will dictate that at subsequent reviews there will be a recurrent need to find ways of putting more electors into rural divisions to maintain their viability, and reducing the size of divisions in areas of high growth.

12. I note that in some areas the Commission has sought to address this problem for the moment by proposing to transfer voters from an existing built-up area into a proposed rural division adjacent to it. I do not consider that this is a satisfactory solution as it in effect breaks up the democratic representation of communities and would likely need to be repeated at future reviews. I have a particular concern about one such proposal in my local area and comment on this further below.

#### Proposed Bridgnorth Rural division

13. The Commission has proposed the creation of a Bridgnorth Rural division which would include Alveley, Romsley, and Quatt Malvern parishes and roughly 8% of the electorate of Bridgnorth Town.
14. With the exception of the parts of Bridgnorth Town which are proposed to be included, the component parts of the proposed Brignorth Rural division are all currently within the Shropshire Council Alveley and Claverley division. The Commission is proposing to remove Claverley parish from the current Alveley and Claverley Division and include in with parts of the current Worfield division to create a Claverley and Worfield division.
15. The current Alveley and Claverley division is forecast to have 3,851 electors by 2028, a 7.1% variance from the average electorate per councillor being sought for Shropshire. This is within a 10% tolerance so there is no need to split this division up on electoral equality grounds.
16. Appendix A of the Commission's Draft Recommendations report projects a 2028 electorate for the proposed Bridgnorth Rural division of 3,232 and states that this is a -10% variance.
17. The parts of Bridgnorth Town which are proposed to be included in the Bridgnorth Rural division are polling district LCF (Danesford and Quatford) and part of polling district LCE. The part of polling district LCE which is included is Hillside Avenue, Kidderminster Road S of the A458, College Court, Goodwood Avenue, Kings Court, and Stourbridge Road east of the junction with Lodge Lane. I estimate this area as having 417 electors and the LCF polling district has 384, so there would currently be 801 electors of Bridgnorth Town in the proposed Bridgnorth Rural division. I would not expect this number to change materially in 5 years' time; the Danesford and Quatford part is in the Green Belt and there are no obvious development sites available within the adjacent built up area of Bridgnorth Town.

18. I disagree with the Commission's estimate of the electorate for the Bridgnorth Rural division, based on the boundaries as described. I estimate that the proposed division would have 3,148 electors in 2028, a variance of -12%:

Parishes making up Bridgnorth

<u>Rural – Table 1</u>	<u>Electors 2022</u>	<u>Electors 2028</u>	<u>% of total</u>
Proposed Bridgnorth Town Morfe Ward	801	801	25.4
Quatt Malvern	190	191	6.1
Alveley	1763	2060	65.4
Romsley	96	96	3
Total	2,850	3,148	
Desired average division size		3594	
Difference		-446	
Difference %		-12.4	

19. It is proposed that the part of Bridgnorth Town which would be included within the Bridgnorth Rural division should become a separate ward of Bridgnorth Town Council (given the name Morfe ward in the Commission's proposals) and elect 2 Bridgnorth Town councillors out of 16. As indicated in Table 1, I estimate this ward would have roughly 800 electors and thus an elector per councillor figure of roughly 400. The overall average electorate per councillor for Bridgnorth Town Council is forecast to be 610, so as a Town Council ward this area would have very poor electoral equality at -34%.
20. Whilst the 2% difference (117 electors) between my estimate and the Commission's might be due to different ways of estimating the electorate of an area or interpreting the Commission's draft map in a way which was not intended, just adding some more electors to this proposed division would not fundamentally alter the issues I have with the proposal.
21. The rationale for breaking up the Alveley and Claverley division and including the Alveley portion in a proposed Bridgnorth Rural division appears to be a lack of linkage between the Alveley and Claverley portions. Whilst the distance between the settlements of Alveley and Claverley by road is about 7.5 miles, I would advise that Alveley is roughly 6 miles away from the A458 Kidderminster Road roundabout in Bridgnorth so I would not consider that shortening the distance between the population centres of the proposed division significantly improves accessibility in itself.

22. Whilst it may well be argued that Alveley electors may identify more strongly with Bridgnorth than with Claverley and may experience issues which have a greater similarity to those experienced by Bridgnorth residents, I am of the view that there is very strong commonality of interests between the parts of Bridgnorth Town which are proposed to be included in the Bridgnorth Rural division and the remainder of Bridgnorth Town (particularly the area on the East bank of the Severn, generally referred to locally as “Low Town”). There is no obvious benefit to the residents of the proposed Bridgnorth Town Morfe Ward in being included in a Bridgnorth Rural division as proposed. My experience in electoral campaigning is that “local” candidates attract support and should it transpire that voters in this area are faced with a choice of candidates they perceive as not being local that may act as a disincentive to voting in the election.
23. The strong identity of Low Town has been a particular feature of Bridgnorth for many years. In some respects it has a good degree of self containment with a reasonable shopping centre, primary school, Community halls, churches etc
24. I also note that electors within Bridgnorth Town would make up just 25% of the electorate of the Bridgnorth Rural division, and residents of Alveley and the adjacent parish of Romsley over 68%. Inevitably this would mean that issues local to Alveley would be predominant as considerations.
25. The relative sizes of Alveley and Claverley give a better balance, in my view. In 2028, the electorate of the current Alveley and Claverley division is projected to be 3,851, of which 2,156 (56%) would be in Alveley and Romsley parishes and 1,503 (39%) in Claverley parish.
26. I would thus consider that retention of the existing Alveley & Claverley division offers better electoral equality and more appropriate representation than creating a Bridgnorth Rural division based on Alveley with bits of Bridgnorth added in.

#### Alternative proposals for South Eastern Shropshire

27. I propose that 3 Shropshire council divisions cover the whole of the Bridgnorth Town and Tasley parish areas and present more detailed proposals below.

28. A consequence of retaining the Alveley and Claverley division as it is would be that the Worfield and Claverley division would not be appropriate. The current Worfield division is projected to have 3,004 electors by 2028, and would be 16% below average size. This deficiency could be remedied by including Astley Abbots parish in the Worfield division, rather than Brown Clee, contributing 390 electors. The resultant division would have 3,394 electors in 2028, a variance of - 5.6%. (Brown Clee as proposed is stated by LGBCE to have a variance of +8%, so reducing this by 390 electors would reduce it to -3%.).
29. The Commission's current proposal is that the northern part of the existing Worfield division (the parishes of Stockton, Beckbury, Sutton Maddock, Ryton and Kemberton) would be included in a new Shifnal Rural division. This means that part of the Shifnal Rural division would be within the South Shropshire Parliamentary Constituency and part within The Wrekin under the Boundary Commission for England's current proposals for parliamentary boundaries.
30. Retaining some or all of the parishes of Stockton, Beckbury, Sutton Maddock, Ryton and Kemberton within a division largely based on the current Worfield one would require reconsideration of the proposed Shifnal Rural division. I note that the Commission had some difficulty in identifying an appropriate pattern of divisions for the Shifnal and Albrighton areas, however I do not offer detailed proposals for this area.

#### Detailed Proposals for Bridgnorth

31. I propose that the area of Bridgnorth Town which LGBCE suggested should be included in Bridgnorth Rural division should remain within a Shropshire Council division with other parts of the town on the East side of the Severn. Ideally in view of the strong identity of Low Town I would like the boundary to be along the River Severn. This would comprise the current polling districts LCD, LCE and LCF which are forecast to have a combined electorate of 3279 by 2028 – 8.8% below the average size but within a viable tolerance.



32. However, I accept that the proposed Bridgnorth Castle division could be above tolerance and if it is necessary to have some areas West of the River Severn included in the East division I would suggest that an appropriate area would be bounded by Stoneway Steps, the N side of the upper section of Cartway and the N side of Friars Street, with a boundary which runs between Bramble Ridge and Love Lane to include the Brook Hollow area. This suggestion uses hillsides and open space to delineate the boundary. I estimate that this would include about 528 voters living on the West bank of the Severn in the Bridgnorth East division. This would have 3,807 electors in 2028 (6% above the target Shropshire Council division electorate). This area would support 6 Bridgnorth Town councillors and I suggest retaining the existing 4 member Morfe ward and having an additional new 2 member ward (working name Bridgnorth Riverside) which would straddle the River Severn.
33. Morfe Ward as current would have 2602 electors (651 electors per Bridgnorth Town councillor, +7%) and Bridgnorth Riverside 1205 electors (603 electors per Bridgnorth Town councillor, -1%)
34. My proposal for the Bridgnorth West and Tasley division is that it includes Tasley parish and the existing Bridgnorth Town West ward, minus Portmans Way, Three Ashes Road, Farmlands Road and Highfields Road (which anomalously are in West ward but on the opposite side of Wenlock Road to most of it). I would also include Cricket Meadow in this division. I estimate this division would have 3,775 electors in 2028 (5% above the target Shropshire Council division electorate). The revised Bridgnorth Town West ward would support the election of 4 Town councillors; I estimate it would have 2212 electors in 2028 (553 electors per Bridgnorth Town councillor, -9%).
35. My proposed Bridgnorth Castle division would comprise the existing Town Council Castle Ward plus the High Street, Love Lane, and Innage Lane areas. Portmans Way, Three Ashes Road, Farmlands Road and Highfields Road would be included in this division. This division would have around 3,748 electors in 2028 (4% above the target Shropshire Council division electorate). This area would support the election of 6 Bridgnorth Town councillors and I would suggest retaining the existing 4 member Bridgnorth Castle ward (with a modified boundary including the Portmans Way area) plus a new 2 member ward (Bridgnorth St Leonards).
36. The Bridgnorth Town Council Castle Ward with revised boundaries would have a 2028 electorate of about 2,411 (603 electors per Bridgnorth Town councillor, -1%) and the Bridgnorth St. Leonards Ward 1,337 (669 electors per Bridgnorth Town councillor, +10%)



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