

Eleanor Gregory

From: William Morrison
Sent: 11 January 2010 15:25
To: Richard Buck
Subject: FW: Review of electoral boundaries in the Borough of Bedford

Importance: High

Attachments: PC electoral boundaries -BCE let 10.1.10 final.doc; PC electoral boundary let 18.12.09.doc; PC boundary review letter 14.9.09.doc



PC electoral



PC electoral



PC boundary

boundaries -BCE l...boundary let 18.1...review letter 14.9...

-----Original Message

From: peter sharpe [REDACTED]
Sent: 11 January 2010 15:10
To: Reviews@
Subject: Review of electoral boundaries in the Borough of Bedford
Importance: High

For the attention of:

The Review Officer (Bedford)
The Boundary Committee for England
Trevelyan House
Great Peter Street
LONDON
SW1P 2HW

Dear Sir

Please find attached letters from Pavenham Parish Council commenting on the proposed review of electoral boundaries within the borough of Bedford. Hard copies are being sent in the post.

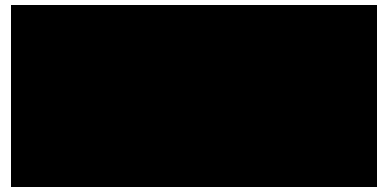
Yours faithfully

Dr P R Sharpe
Clerk, Pavenham Parish Council

[REDACTED]

PAVENHAM PARISH COUNCIL

Clerk: Dr. P. R. Sharpe



14th September 2009

The Review Officer (Bedford),
The Boundary Committee for England,
Trevelyan House,
Great Peter Street,
LONDON
SW1P 2HW.

Dear Sir

Unitary authority electoral review of Bedford – comments on Council Size

My Parish Council considers that the number of councillors should be increased by 4 or 5 from the present number of 36 to ensure that the rural villages are properly represented on the new Borough Council.

At a preliminary meeting held in Bedford on 24th July at which a presentation was given by a member of your committee it was made clear that the main criterion the committee would most probably work to during its review was to give each councillor an equal number of electors. Such a system would mean that there would probably have to be further amalgamation of rural parishes. That would not only result in parishes which might have little in common with each other being amalgamated but more importantly give each councillor more parishes to cover and more meetings to attend if he/she is to keep in close touch with their respective parish councils.

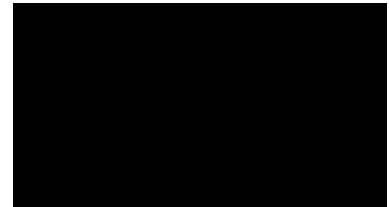
Even before the reduction in the number of borough councillors in April of this year, our councillor, who represents four parish councils, often said something like “he had to attend a council meeting every day next week and two on Thursday”. This indicates that councillors representing the rural parishes are already under great pressure. Not only should borough councillors attend parish council meetings within their wards but they also have to attend borough council committee meetings and meetings with officers on matters such as planning and education. If rural borough councillors are given too many parishes to represent then it places an intolerable burden on them. Whilst it might be reasonable to increase the number of electors per councillor in the urban area where the density of population is far greater than in the rural area and where individual parish meetings cover a larger number of electors, it is unreasonable to ask borough councillors to cover a larger number of parishes in the rural area than they currently do. If you take the view that there are too many electors per councillor in the urban area then you should increase the overall number of councillors so that there can be more councillors in the urban area and the representation in the rural parishes can remain the same as it currently is.

Yours faithfully

Dr P R Sharpe (Clerk)

PAVENHAM PARISH COUNCIL

Clerk: Dr. P. R. Sharpe



18th December 2009,

K R Simmons, Esq.,
Head of Registration & Records,
Bedford Borough Council,
Town Hall,
St Paul's Square,
Bedford,
MK40 1SJ.

Dear Mr Simmons,

Review of Electoral Boundaries

I write to express Pavenham Parish Council's extremely strong objection to the proposal to group Pavenham and Stevington with Oakley in the review of electoral boundaries within Bedford Borough.

Oakley is approximately four times larger than both Pavenham and Stevington and it is quite inappropriate to lump together such diverse villages. Although Oakley might like to consider itself a village it has become semi-urbanised over the years and is no longer a rural village like Stevington and Pavenham. The problems and requirements of Oakley are completely different to those of the smaller rural villages and an elected councillor for the proposed ward cannot properly represent such different villages.

Over the years Pavenham and Stevington have lost their schools and post offices and are poorly served by public transport. The pub has closed in Stevington and the one in Pavenham was shut for several months when the landlord gave his notice and it has operated on the borders of viability for many years. Oakley on the other hand has two schools, one of them a very large middle school which is planned to merge with the new Sharnbrook Upper School, a pub and social club, a post office, a number of other shops and businesses, and is well served by a regular and frequent bus service.

The respective villages' views on transport are also very different. For many years Oakley has campaigned to restrict the use of roads through its village. That policy has angered surrounding villages because their desired restrictions would divert traffic from Oakley onto less suitable roads in adjacent villages and also make it more difficult for commercial traffic leaving the A6 to travel into villages such as Pavenham, Stevington, Carlton and Felmersham. When the Clapham bypass was built Oakley campaigned to get weight restriction signs placed on the bypass which deterred heavy traffic for Pavenham leaving the A6 at Oakley and caused unnecessary congestion in villages like Felmersham as the large lorries tried to find an alternative route into Pavenham. Pavenham Parish Council had to lobby hard to get the Highways Agency to change the signs to make it clear that heavy traffic could travel through Oakley to get to Pavenham. More recently Oakley has tried to get restrictions placed upon Oakley river bridge which would have the effect of diverting traffic from Oakley through the adjacent villages. The policy of Pavenham Parish Council is that all villages should bear their fair share of traffic and no unnecessary restrictions should be placed in any one village which has a detrimental effect on adjacent

villages and deters commercial traffic. The views of Oakley and Pavenham are therefore almost exactly the opposite in terms of rural transport policy so how can the same councillor be expected to fairly and honestly represent such diverse views?

Historically Pavenham has had links with the smaller villages such as Carlton, Stevington, Felmersham, Odell, and Milton Ernest. For many years Pavenham shared a vicar with Odell. More recently it has shared one with Milton Ernest and Thurleigh. Following the closure of the village shop and post office many residents now use the shop and post office at Carlton. The hotly contested local derby cricket match used to be between Pavenham and Stevington. More recently Pavenham Cricket Club merged with Felmersham to form the Pavenham and Felmersham Cricket Club in a bid to ensure their survival.

The issues of concern to Pavenham are similar to those of the other small rural villages rather than those of a large village like Oakley or Bromham. The recent grouping of Pavenham, Stevington, Felmersham and Pavenham has brought together under one councillor a group of very similar villages with common concerns and the system has worked very well. It appears that the only reason why the boundaries are now being reviewed is to produce a grouping which gives the same number of electors per councillor even though it might group together parishes which have nothing in common. My Council considers that to be inappropriate when over half the electorate is in the densely populated urban area of un-parished Bedford and Kempston and the remainder spread over a large rural area with, in the main, small parish councils. Whilst there might be a need for re-organising the boundaries amongst the large villages close to Bedford such as Clapham, Oakley, Bromham and Biddenham Pavenham Parish Council strongly feels that the present boundaries for the rural wards in the north of the county should be retained with only minor changes. If that means that the size of the Council has to be increased beyond the proposed 40 councillors then so be it even if that does not fit with the criterion of having the same number of electors per councillor across the whole borough.

If a councillor is to truly represent his or her constituents at a local level they must be representative of like-minded parishes otherwise the rural voter who is already a minority group becomes more of a minnow in the sea of urbanised Bedford. For too long the rural parishes have played second fiddle to the town of Bedford and if we must have an electoral review let it at long last address this issue. It should not be about equalising numbers – it should be about having “true” representation.

Yours sincerely

Dr P R Sharpe (Clerk)

PAVENHAM PARISH COUNCIL

Clerk: Dr. P. R. Sharpe



10th January 2010,

Review Officer (Bedford),
The Boundary Committee for England,
Great Peter Street,
LONDON,
SW1P 2HW.

Dear Sir,

Review of Electoral Boundaries in the Borough of Bedford

I write to express Pavenham Parish Council's very strong objection to the warding arrangements proposed by Bedford Borough Council, especially in relation to the proposal to put the two small rural villages of Pavenham and Stevington with the very much larger urbanised village of Oakley. My Council is also very dissatisfied with the way Bedford Borough has handled this consultation. Although it has admitted that it had a difficult job to do and had to make many compromises my Parish Council considers that it has made a botch-up of the exercise which, if implemented, will result in extremely poor representation of the small rural parishes on the Borough Council.

I enclose copy of a letter dated 18th December 2009 which my Council sent to the Borough Council expressing extremely strong objections to the proposal it had published a few days earlier. Those objections (and similar ones made by Stevington Parish Council) fell on deaf ears and no alterations were made to the proposal to join Pavenham and Stevington with Oakley.

Three representatives of my Parish Council attended the meeting of the Borough Council's General Purposes Committee on the evening of 7th January 2010 when the proposals were due to be approved. The Committee was gracious enough to allow my chairman to speak on behalf of Pavenham and Stevington Parish Councils and his comments clearly roused concerns and differences of opinion among the committee members. There was obviously disquiet about many of the proposed re-alignments of the ward boundaries both within the urban area and the rural parishes. There were only six committee members present – some of whom had been on the Task Group which had made the proposals. Only one of the six members represents a rural parish. One of the committee members (who was a member of the Task Group and who represents a ward in Bedford town) spoke very belligerently against making any amendments giving the excuse that there was not time to consider any more changes and the only alternatives were for the committee to sit until midnight to rework the boundaries or not to make any proposal at all to the Boundary Committee for England. Concern was expressed by one member of the Committee that such an important issue should not be left to that committee to decide what proposals should be submitted to you but that the whole council should consider the matter. At the end of the day the committee voted by 4 votes to 2 to adopt the proposals. Only four borough councillors therefore supported the very major changes to ward boundaries which the Borough Council has submitted to you with the other two committee members expressing strong objections/reservations about them.

My Parish Council considers that the major reason for the disquiet is that the over-riding criterion during this review has been that all wards should have the same number of electors. With Bedford Borough being split approximately 60/40 between the urban areas of Bedford plus Kempston and the outlying villages there are very large differences between the needs of the urban area and the villages. In its proposal the Borough Council refers to 15 rural parishes. However there are very major differences between those 15 "rural wards". Elstow, Wootton, Bromham, Biddenham, Clapham, Oakley, and Eastcotts are all very large urbanised villages on the outskirts of Bedford/Kempston and are completely different to the smaller rural villages further away from Bedford. If those large urbanised villages are removed from the so-called "rural wards" that leaves only 8 wards representing truly rural villages – i.e. only one-fifth of the proposed total number of councillors.

In our letter to you dated 14th September 2009 (copy enclosed) commenting on council size we expressed concern that the rural parishes would not be properly represented if you persisted with the criterion of equalising the number of electors per ward and urged you to keep the ward boundaries in the rural areas the same as they currently are. The over-riding criterion of equalising the number of electors per ward has resulted in the compromise/botch-up in the Borough Council's proposed revision of the rural ward boundaries. My Parish Council considers that it was a mistake to separate out the decision on the size of the Borough Council from the review of ward boundaries. By doing that the Borough Council has been forced to make unacceptable compromises to "make the numbers fit".

In order to equalise numbers the Borough Council clearly had a problem with Oakley which in itself is large but not large enough to justify being a ward on its own under the proposed criterion. The Borough Council has tried to overcome the problem by tacking on the two small villages of Pavenham and Stevington to Oakley thereby creating a ward with one village approximately four times the size of the other two and double the size of the other two put together. If implemented that proposal would require one councillor to represent two small villages which are completely different to the larger village and – as highlighted in my letter of 18th December 2009 to the Borough Council – often have opposing opinions and requirements. If a single councillor is to represent such diverse villages he/she would have to be a hypocrite when putting those opposing views at Borough Council meetings. What is most likely to happen in practice is that the elected councillor would be a resident of the largest village – Oakley – and concentrate their efforts on that village with Pavenham and Stevington being the poor relations. Indeed the very idea of naming the proposed ward "Oakley" gives the impression of that being the dominant village. Why not call it the "Pavenham" ward or the "Stevington" ward. We understand that in the past the wards have been named after the largest village but we note that in the proposal to be sent to you by the Borough Council it has given four of its so called "rural wards" dual names. Why not the rest? Past experience has shown that where a large urbanised village on the outskirts of Bedford was grouped with a small rural village less than a fifth its size the councillor, who lived in the large village, concentrated almost all their efforts on that village and only attended the smaller village's parish council meetings just before an election was due to try to strum up some support for their re-election.

My Parish Council urges you to reject the Borough Council's proposal. There are various alternative schemes which could be considered. Why not put all the four large urbanised villages of Clapham, Oakley, Bromham and Biddenham together and allow them to have four councillors between them. The total number of electors would be 11,014 which averages out at 2753 per councillor – not much different from the overall average and more than is proposed for the Riseley ward. If more were needed to raise the total number then Great Denham – which is really part of Biddenham – could be added to the four villages. Another alternative is to put Oakley with Clapham and allow them to have two

councillors between them. They are similar villages and are virtually joined up already – there being no open countryside between them along Station Road. The combination would give a ward of 5294 electors which averages at 2647 per councillor – again not much different to that proposed for the Riseley ward.

Other alternatives which my Parish Council urges you to consider is a further increase in the size of the Borough Council to allow better representation of the rural villages. Of the 15 proposed so-called “rural wards” only four have a total number of electors below the average for the total borough whereas 11 have more than the average. That is not equality for the rural villages. It again shows a more favourable proposal for the urban wards.

As mentioned above, my Parish Council considers that it was wrong to separate the decisions on Council size and the revision of ward boundaries. The problems that have arisen during the second part of the exercise show that the first part should be re-visited. Council size should be increased by one or two more councillors to enable better grouping of the truly rural parishes even if that means the number of electors per rural ward is slightly less than the overall borough average. If for any reason that is not possible my Parish Council would prefer to be part of a ward containing more than the borough average if that enabled it to be grouped with similar parishes rather than being grouped with the very dissimilar parish of Oakley. It is felt that such a solution would enable it to be better represented on the Borough Council than if it was grouped with Oakley.

Prior to Bedford Borough becoming a unitary authority (which Pavenham Parish Council strongly supported) there were 54 councillors but even then many of the rural villages felt that they were not sufficiently represented and that they were generally the poor relation of the urban area. The current proposals by the Borough Council will further erode the representation of the rural villages. We urge you to reject them and to give better support to the truly rural parishes with a new scheme which groups together rural parishes of similar size and aspirations.

Yours faithfully

Dr P R Sharpe (Clerk)

cc Alistair Burt MP