

Local Government Boundary Commission Review County Durham

I have lived in the current Belmont Electoral Division since 1980 and view with concern the suggestion that the unitary authority should have a reduced number of councillors and that as a consequent there could be a redrawing of boundaries affecting this part of the county.

Whilst not opposed to change, I fully supported the creation of the unitary authority, I am concerned that these proposals would reduce opportunities for individuals to represent their area and be accountable for public services to their residents.

Sadly there is a growing mistrust of politicians at a national level, but in my experience this part of County Durham has been effectively represented by local politicians of different parties over the years. I do not necessarily agree with all the decisions taken by the local authority, but on the whole consider they are doing a reasonable job in difficult circumstances. Successive budget cuts imposed by central government over the last decade has had a disastrous effect on services, but I admire the fortitude and dedication of county councillors of all parties for wrestling with difficult decisions in the interests of local communities.

I should add that I am hugely disappointed the County Council appears to be supporting a reduction in county councillors. There has, to the best of my knowledge, been no consultation with local people. This is a matter I will be taking up with local councillors

These suggestions threaten the democratic architecture of County Durham

As far as the Belmont Division is concerned I want the Commission to take into account

1. I see the division currently has 10500 electors. A new estate being built with some 450 houses and with several planning applications in the pipeline, as well as a huge influx of students into purpose built accommodation and HMO's will increase the electorate to over 12000
2. At present we have three county councillors. I recall that when I moved to the area there must have been at least ten councillors for the same area spread between the City of Durham District Council and Durham County Council. As stated earlier I supported the creation of a unitary authority and resulting reduction in the number of councillors, but firmly believe any further loss of democratically elected representatives would be harmful and could lead to disillusionment with the democratic process
3. I note the level of work done by successive county councillors in this area since the unitary authority was established. As well as their work at County Hall I have been particularly impressed in the community leadership roles taken in this area. Irrespective of party allegiance they have established food banks, well being projects, most recently warm hub centres as well as working to raise money for youth provision, luncheon clubs for the elderly etc etc
4. Looking at election results since the creation of the unitary I note that invariably there are 10- 12 candidates putting themselves forward for the three places. I also see turnout at local elections regularly exceeds 35% and frequently 40%. I worry that a reduction in councillors would harm the reasonably healthy interest in local democracy.
5. The present Belmont electoral division is a cohesive area, notwithstanding variations in household income. Indeed those variations sadly contribute to a generally healthy and supportive

community. That is not to say the area faces major challenges, not least because of the effects of austerity on low income and working families

6. The area to my mind has a shared history. The economy, social life, places of worship, school catchment areas and sporting/recreational facilities are essentially local to the electoral division area. The Boundary Commission clearly knew what they were doing in recognising the reality of life on the streets when the division was established.

7. Interestingly the parish council and residents association again with the active support of current county councillors, are engaged in the preparation of Neighbourhood Plan. A well attended public meeting agreed that the area of the plan should be the same as the electoral division. I understand that has now been formally agreed following a consultation with local organisations and neighbouring parish councils.

8. For these reasons I firmly believe the Belmont Division should remain as it is and should continue to have three county councillors