

Buckinghamshire Council

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The future of Downley Ward – Buckinghamshire Unitary Authority Boundary Review.

The current Downley ward contains the Parish of Downley and part of the unparished area of High Wycombe. Prior to the creation of Buckinghamshire Council Unitary Authority the ward was represented by councillors in each of the separate parts (the unparished area was known as Disraeli ward). When conducting electoral reviews in areas that are parished the parishes should be regarded as the building blocks for new wards.

Using the data for the 2027 projected number of electors in 'Downley Ward':-

Downley Parish	3,895
Unparished Area	4,898
Total	8,793

Average per Councillor in Buckinghamshire (based on 98 Cllrs)

	4,521
+10%	4,973
-10%	4,069

Therefore if the Parish of Downley were to be represented by a single councillor it would fall slightly short of the 10% tolerance, and for a single councillor to represent 'Disraeli' (the unparished area of High Wycombe) this would be within the 10% tolerance. I will give the arguments for going back to different representation for these areas. Both Downley and 'Disraeli' could be within the tolerance levels if a small adjustment is made, although I would maintain that the current boundary of the Parish should represent the boundary of a single member ward and the arguments for doing so outweigh the small difference in number of electors (174) compared to the average less 10%.

If the commission were to agree to two one member wards, but would still prefer to adjust the elector numbers there is a solution which could be considered in further consultation, which would also follow a natural border of woodland and a tree belt.

The Commission accepts that mathematically exact electoral equality across a local authority is unlikely to be achieved. Reasons include consideration of wider community identities and interests, the need for strong, clear boundaries and parish boundaries as well as the need to secure effective and convenient local government. As a result, there will always be some variance of actual representation from the theoretical numerical average.

Schedule 2 to the 2009 Act sets out the statutory criteria which are required to have regard in conducting electoral reviews. In broad terms, in making recommendations, there is a requirement to have regard to:

- the need to secure equality of representation;
- the need to reflect the identities and interests of local communities; and
- the need to secure effective and convenient local government.

Included in the community identities and interests criterion is the desirability of fixing boundaries which are and will remain easily identifiable, and which will not break local ties. The Parish of Downley is easily identifiable, and the unparished area of the current ward is part of the town of High Wycombe, it always has been and it currently breaks that local tie of being part of the town. Downley Parish is in a different Community Board Area to the unparished area (North West Chilterns Community Board and High Wycombe Community Board respectively) and the unparished area has representation on the High Wycombe Town Committee (a committee of the Unitary Authority), the parished area of Downley does not. Councillors representing the current ward of Downley therefore represent a ward with a misalignment of electoral boundaries for Buckinghamshire Unitary Council and Downley parish elections and is both confusing for electors and an impediment to effective and convenient local government.

The name of the current ward itself –‘Downley’ is confusing. Downley is a village and Parish in its own right (historically formed from three hamlets), distinct and separate from the town. The unparished area has grown out of the town towards Downley, mainly in the 1960s and 1970s due to the expansion of High Wycombe, and therefore has always been part of the town and still identifies as High Wycombe.

Downley (the Parish) has a strong community identity, evidenced partly by ‘Downley Village News’ Community Magazine distributed quarterly to all parishioners by the Downley Communications Forum volunteers. A sample contents page below with news and articles from the many and varied local activity groups including the school and churches, the two Scout groups and the football clubs (the numbers refer to the page numbers and the magazine back copies are accessible on line) -

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Geographically, Downley is outside the urban area of High Wycombe, the majority of the land area of the ward is farmland, part of the Chilterns AONB, it is sparsely populated with the concentration of residents living in and around the village centre and Downley Common. The Parish area extends down to the main railway line to the south (a man-made barrier) and the main part of the village (despite its name) is at the top of a hill and feels and is quite cut off from High Wycombe (which is primarily located in the valley bottom). There is an excellent bus service which takes village residents into High Wycombe and back, but is not used to access the village by non-residents.

Each of the proposed single member wards has a school, The Downley School and Disraeli School which, in the main, serve the two distinct communities.

Many Downley Parish residents have lived in Downley for generations. Many families have stayed in the very local area, choosing to not move out of Downley village. Downley Parish really does have a village identity and atmosphere. The caring and neighbourly feel is important. During Covid, within days of the first lockdown, the whole of Downley Parish had appointed 'street reps' to co-ordinate the covid response, to co-ordinate help to those who needed it. The whole of the parish was covered. This is just one very recent example of residents coming together. Another couple of examples are 'Downley Day' (a village fete but much more than that), held on The Common every year and just about everyone turns out to support the local organisations and to have a good family time; The 'Downley Up! Festival', held over two or three weeks every Summer ending with a 'Concert on the Common'. This is a collaborative effort run by a dedicated committee and involving hundreds of people organising the events. There are a huge number of other examples happening week in week out, organised by volunteers for the benefit and enjoyment of Downley residents.

I have often been asked 'why can't other areas be the same as Downley?', the answer – a strong community doing it for themselves can achieve the same, but it is not easy. It is something built up over time, generations, a sense of belonging and hard work. It is not possible to expand a community from one area to another simply by moving council boundaries.

There is a clear and unique Downley community identity within the parished area and therefore a strong argument to have a one member representation at Buckinghamshire Council. The Unparished area is different. Different geography, different history, it is part of the town of High Wycombe and should be proud to be, it has its own assets and strengths and a one member ward for 'Disraeli' would serve the residents of 'Disraeli'. Single member wards would allow the members the time and to have the resources to effectively concentrate on the very different needs and issues for the two different areas. The present situation dilutes those resources, not least because representing the parished area and unparished area on different committees of the Council, different Community Boards and with different fellow councillors is time consuming, a duplication of effort and not as effective as two single member wards. The current arrangement is a factor which prevents councillors from effectively representing the people in the whole of the current ward.