

**From:** Friends of Brighton and Hove Citizens Action Group  
<friendsofbrightonandhoveactiongroup@outlook.com>  
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Comments from the Friends of Brighton and Hove Citizens Action Group on the Further Draft Recommendations of the Local Government Boundary Commission.

**Background and our interest**

The Friends of Brighton & Hove Citizens Action Group (The Friends) are an independent residents' group that formed to provide scrutiny of council decisions for residents across Brighton & Hove. If there is one word that sums up the mission of the Friends of Brighton and Hove Citizen Action Group it is **accountability!**

Our members come from all corners of the city and ask regular questions at full council meetings and at the council's committee meetings (as Brighton & Hove City Council is a Committee system). We also speak out strongly in the local press including the Argus Newspaper where you will find many of our articles if you search. We in general take a strong interest in Council affairs and of course push for the accountability of the council to residents.

We formed during the covid pandemic when the council shut its doors to residents and many decisions were being made by 'executive order' – i.e. without democratic votes. Our members felt there was a need to stand up for residents and shine a strong light on the council processes and also campaign for residents on council decisions impacting them. We are a mixture of longstanding Brighton & Hove residents (some of which have lived here for 50 years) with some new residents to the City as well.

Since forming the Friends have been particularly interested in and taken a public role in the following council matters:

Councillor expenses – Persistent questioning from members of our group has uncovered a major expenses scandal at the council, prompting an audit and remedial action including money being paid back. The Council had not published expense claims on its website for years. When the claims were uploaded we found that expenses had been incorrectly paid out to a councillor on 55 of 74 occasions. An official audit has now been carried out and the council was found to have failed in its processes. It is now changing its practices as a result of our raising this.

Madeira Drive, Kemptown – Much of our work has been taken up with a large number of issues along Madeira Drive which runs along the length of Kemptown. For example, first there was the closure of Madeira Drive during the pandemic for 'active travel' which caused great upset to many and turned into a big local council issue with many petitions. Closing Madeira Drive caused distress to disabled people who couldn't access the toilet facilities and the disabled community formed their own action group in response (BADGE – Brighton Access for Disabled Groups Everywhere) who we work closely with. Madeira Drive is also host to Brighton & Hove's historic motoring events – there are dozens of these a year including pilgrimages by the Mods and Rockers. All were impacted. The Friends were involved in coordinating petitions and deputations to the council. The Council has since reopened the road after pressure from a petition presented to council which the Friends were involved in. However, the council has now removed a

lane to install a cycle lane which has caused further controversy and means this will be a big issue for much time to come.

Then there was the issue with the 200 year old Green Wall being cut down (which was done as part of work to install this cycle lane). Madeira Drive is host to Europe's longest continuous green wall of vegetation that was planted in Victorian times. It includes ancient Japanese Spindle plants that were planted in the 1800s among the 90 species of plants growing there. When building the cycle lane, the council 'accidentally' cut through a section of it, severing the green wall for the first time in hundreds of years. The Friends held a mock funeral for the green wall to draw attention to this issue and demanded an inquiry by the council into how cutting down the green wall was allowed to occur. This inquiry has now concluded with lessons for the council and its communication with contractors. Our group was interviewed on BBC Radio Sussex about our campaign on this.

And while all this was going on, there is a continued issue of the required restoration of Madeira Terraces that run all the way along Madeira Drive. This is a big project that will be coming up soon and there are working groups at the council that will need to be filled with councillors to address this as it goes through the process of planning, financing etc. It will be a huge job for the next council of Brighton and Hove City Council. The money is there to do stage 1 of the restoration it is now time to design and deliver.

Old Shoreham Road – Our members then took a very active role in a substantial local debate over the temporary cycle lanes installed along Old Shoreham Road, Hove during the pandemic. These lanes were installed under executive order during the pandemic under active travel measures and took two lanes out of a four lane dual carriage way. It was immediately controversial as it caused a lot of congestion for residents living along the road, particularly around the Hove tip which is used by the western half of the city. No longer had it been installed that battle soon began over whether it would be made permanent. The Friends were active in petitions and organised protests held outside Hove Town Hall and at the Peace Statue. Residents and catchment communities across the length of Old Shoreham Road from Portslade, Hangleton, Hove Park and Westdene signed petitions against the lanes and attended these protests. There were rival petitions for and against and many heated council debates. The Friends were active in arranging protests and demanding accurate data from the council on congestion and pollution. You will see many Argus articles across this period showing how hot the debate was. Eventually the Council voted to remove the temporary cycle lanes and the road returned to normal. However, the council has included the road in its local walking and cycling plan showing that this will be an issue and a battle for many years to come.

Brighton & Hove's Regency quarter– Our members have also been at the forefront of raising concerns about the disgraceful state of Brighton and Hove's regency area which runs from the Old Steine across to Brunswick Town. We have been active on issues across this area, including in the Old Steine (and with the Old Steine Community Association), where the war memorial and gardens have been neglected and damaged by council events such as new Christmas festival initiated in 2021-2, which churned the pristine gardens into a quagmire with a sinkhole and shook residents windows. The gardens took months to recover and repair. We are questioning the council and asking for next year's event to be relocated. There is also major issues with crime which needs CCTV.

## **Observations on Brighton & Hove City Council**

From our work detailed above, the Friends of Brighton & Hove Citizens Action Group can offer the following observations to for the commission from the perspective of a local residents group navigating council processes.

### Observation 1: Madeira Drive must be fully contained within one ward.

From our experience, the issues along Madeira Drive were extremely hard to get addressed and represented by councillors for one main reason: a division of accountability between ward councillors representing this area. Madeira Drive had been split between 3 different wards and 9 different councillors and these wards

had boundaries that were random and very difficult to identify on maps. One of these wards had only a small portion of Madeira Drive in it and was mostly inland (the old East Brighton). Another contained a slither and then went east to the boundary of the City (Rottingdean Coastal). The events and issues that have occurred across Madeira Drive have largely applied to the entire road, so there was a mismatch between the boundaries and the issues making it hard to know where to turn for action. These issues will only continue into the future as new issues such as Madeira Terraces Restoration come up. Therefore we believe strongly that for the benefit of accountability and efficient local government the entirety of Madeira Drive must be contained within one ward.

Observation 2: Multi-member wards work better under Brighton and Hove's 'committee system' and 3x member wards are preferable if achievable.

Brighton and Hove City Council runs a committee system of local government and all of the major decisions are made by policy committees of 10 councillors each. This means that its councillors are divided into committees of 10. Full Council doesn't actually make that many decisions so to make a difference it is important to look at committee meetings. Sometimes councillors are stopped from engaging on an issue if they are on a regulatory committee such as a planning committee or licensing committee, taking them out of the picture for residents. This can be frustrating for residents in two councillor wards and it can put reliance on the single other member. Sometimes Cllrs may be away on holiday. There was an instance when the Friends were working on Regency issues where the two councillors representing the Regency ward (a husband and wife team) were away in France for 6 months and residents could not see them. We have found that 3 councillor wards provide a buffer against this and give better representation for residents in a Committee system of Government as there will always be 2 other councillors available if one is on a regulatory committee and their hands are tied. This therefore should be achieved where it is possible and communities allow and this is particularly the case in inner city Brighton and Hove.

## Proposals

Looking at the current proposals in the context of our experience as a resident's action group outlined above, we therefore feel qualified to offer the following comments relating to the areas of the further draft recommendations:

1. The Friends are extremely pleased that Madeira Drive, a source of many council issues, is to be incorporated within 1 whole ward. This is a major improvement and will lead to much clearer local government for residents and residents groups with better accountability when the issues are raised.
2. The Friends submit that the proposed improvement: that the Queen's Park and Kemptown wards should be merged into one single ward 'Queen's Park and Kemptown' to be represented by 4 councillors. This would provide for an efficiency gain (one less ward and set of boundaries) and it would also provide better and more efficient local government within Brighton & Hove's Committee system for the reasons outlined above (particularly with the volume of planning issues). It would provide the benefit of electing a cohort of four dedicated councillors to deal with the issues along Madeira Drive – such a significant part of the city where there are big council debates to come – which would be a fitting number of Councillors to deal with the issues. The areas of Queens' Park and Kemptown fit well together and adjoin each other naturally, sharing facilities along the Kemptown shopping strip and the seafront. The blend into each other. The four member ward would also equalise the electoral equality between the two areas which runs at +12% for Kemptown and -8% for Queen's Park according to the Commission's figures, improving electoral equality and meeting another requirement of the Boundary Commission.
3. The Friends submit that a further simplification of wards occur in northern Brighton & Hove, merging the 3x2 member wards proposed into a simpler 2x 3 member wards. We submit that

Hove Park be combined with Westdene wholly (Westdene goes to the railway line) to create a three member ward. This would make sense given they are in the same transport catchment (ie south facing to Old Shoreham Road/Hove tip area). Then Patcham be combined with Hollingbury for another 3 member ward. This would be an efficiency gain in terms of reducing and simplifying the amount of wards, while keeping every community intact and together with now splits. It would also generate three member wards which are better in the committee system that Brighton & Hove operates.

In summary, the benefits of our above 3 proposals would be streamlining the number of wards, reducing the total number of total wards by two, while keeping all communities intact. This would produce a result which had the same number of wards as there are presently – 21 and the same number of councillors (54). If the Friends’ proposal outlined above is adopted, all of the Commission’s criteria would have been satisfied and improved – every community would be kept together (there would be no splitting), local government would be more efficient, transparent and easier to understand, and electoral equality would be better.

The Friends of Brighton and Hove Citizens Action Group submit the above proposal for your consideration.