

# Sefton

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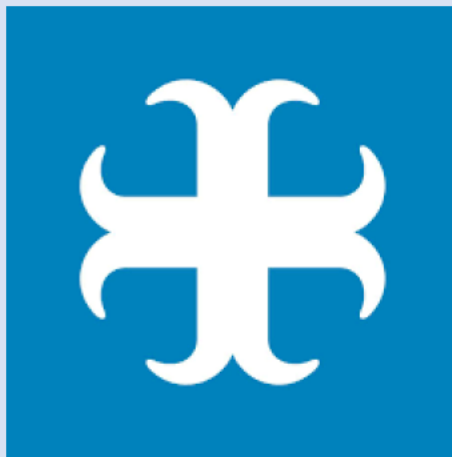
## Comment text:

Please see attached.

## Attached Documents:

- Boundary Commission Review - Final - 23-08-28.docx

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND**



**ELECTORAL COMMISSION**

**SUBMISSION BY SEFTON CONSERVATIVE GROUP**

**SEPTEMBER 2023**



## **CONTENTS**

<b>1.</b>	<b>List of Contents</b>	<b>Page 2</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>Formal Submission</b>	<b>Page 2</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b>Conservative Group Membership / History</b>	<b>Page 3</b>
<b>4.</b>	<b>Comments on Proposals</b>	<b>Page 4</b>
<b>5.</b>	<b>Governance Arrangements</b>	<b>Page 6</b>
<b>6.</b>	<b>Cabinet / Overview &amp; Scrutiny Committees</b>	<b>Page 7</b>
<b>7.</b>	<b>Summary of Conclusions</b>	<b>Page 10</b>

This document is a formal submission from the Sefton Conservative Group in response to the letter/email from Professor Colin Mellors OBE, the Chair of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England.



### **Details of the Conservative Group Membership / History**

The Sefton Conservative Group comprises of the following Members:-

**Cllr Mike Prendergast – Leader** - Dukes Ward – Central / Birkdale Southport

Cllr Tony Brough – Deputy Leader – Ainsdale Ward – South Southport

Cllr Mike Morris MBE - Whip – Cambridge Ward – North Southport

Cllr Joe Riley – Harington Ward - Formby

Cllr Sir Ron Watson CBE – Dukes Ward – Central / Birkdale Southport

Whilst we are small in number the experience that our Members can offer is considerable and includes those who have held major positions of responsibility on Sefton Council, including Leader of the Council.



## **Comments on Proposals**

In the document you provided for Councillors, you explain that you have undertaken your review on the basis that there has been no review for some 19 years and using this criteria a whole internal Council Boundary Review is justified.

Boundary issues have actually been quite a dominant feature within Sefton since the Borough was formed in 1974.

We also have to contend with a review undertaken by your colleagues in respect of the parliamentary boundaries and as they involve removing a significant part of the constituency that has been incorporated in the Town since its formation in 1885 and bring in other areas that the Town has no connection with any normal sense of the word.

We mention these issues because we think we can fairly state that the population of the Borough in overall terms is weary of constant references to boundary changes, none of which appear to have any degree of public support.

There are a significant range of cross cutting issues that relate to the Parliamentary and the Local Government situation.

These include issues such as transport links and geographical boundaries that are of significance to local communities. As a consequence, we are sending you a copy of a submission by the Sefton Conservative Group with the accompanying appendices, and we believe that you will find it helpful to integrate some of the points in this document when dealing with Sefton.

In your presentation you use the well-known phrase “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” but it is actually what we will describe as an anecdotal comment that does apply in this instance.

We would also mention that the statement to the effect that there will be change in any event causes some concern in the sense that it presupposes that decisions in principle have been made and in our view this undervalues the validity of a consultation process.

In terms of justification however for going forward you have produced as Appendix 1 the Electoral Data Summary on page 16.

This would seem to clearly indicate that with one exception there are no significant variations between Wards.



We do not know what criteria you set for determining whether or not a whole scale internal Ward Boundary Review is justified but we would have thought that most people would recognise that a tolerance figure that is 10% or below is perfectly reasonable.

The exception is St Oswald Ward where the figure is shown as 15% but we would submit that this in itself could be dealt with what are bound to be minor changes to one Ward in the whole Borough.

You seek views of the appropriateness or otherwise of a current number of Councillors elected for each Ward and it is fair to say that three Members per Ward is the norm in metropolitan boroughs in particular.

There have been accounts locally to seek to reduce this to two but these have been on the grounds that it would bring about minor financial savings to the Council in respect of the amount allocated for Councillors allowances.

The corollary however is that no account has been taken of increasing the workload for the two remaining Councillors by a significant degree and that this in turn would probably result in them receiving a higher allowance to compensate.

This would also alter the electoral cycle which we believe most of the population would find confusing at best.

We appreciate that in making these comments you could regard them as being anecdotal and in terms of what could be described as evidence would be difficult to provide in the accepted sense of the word but we hope that our experience alone would mean that they can be taken into account.



## **Governance Arrangements**

Your consultation document also asked for comment on the somewhat vexed question of governance arrangements. We can state without fear of contradiction that the arrangements under the Cabinet System within Sefton are regarded by all opposition parties as being highly undemocratic and clearly out of line with best practice in Local Government.

We believe this has been confirmed by comparisons with other Councils with information provided by the LGA.

We can share with you the fact that over the last 4 years there have been 31 separate attempts to improve the governance arrangements but these have all have been rejected.

By way of example, for which clear written evidence is available, there have been various attempts to reinstate the Southport Area Committee which had proved to be a very effective forum for Councillor and public engagement.

There has also been repeated requests in respect of the question time period at the Full Council Meeting in the event of the Leader of the Council being unable to attend the questions put by Members should be answered by the Deputy Leader which is standard practice in virtually every organisation that we have ever had any connection with over many years.

We are enclosing a copy of a report to the Audit & Governance Committee which illustrates the last issue but where the Committee decided to take no action.

This needs to be put into the context that the Council Constitution allows for 2.5 hours of questions over the course of a full municipal year. We could expand on this section quite considerably but we hope the information we have provided meets the criteria you are seeking in this area.



### **Cabinet / Overview & Scrutiny Committees**

We do want to deal in more specific terms with the Cabinet System. This was introduced in May 2011.

At the time Sefton was a 'hung' or 'balanced' Council depending on which terminology you prefer and this meant that all Political Parties were represented on a proportionate basis on the Cabinet and thus have access to all the information pertaining to any given issue even if this was classified as being exempt.

When the Labour Party obtained an overall majority of seats within the Borough on 17 May 2011 they decided that the Cabinet would be made up exclusively of their Members and as a consequence much information has subsequently been denied to the other Parties on a regular basis.

There is a provision within the Sefton Constitution which allows individual Councillors to request an Item to be placed on the Cabinet Agenda and the Member concerned can then present his or her own Report, attend the meeting and speak on the Item, although they have no voting rights.

There have been attempts to invoke this procedure as per the attached but despite having fulfilled the criteria the Leader of the Council has exercised the veto so that the matters have not been discussed by the Council as a fully Representative Body.

You might however find it of additional help to access the complete series of reports and requests and these can be found on the Sefton Council website [Sefton Home](#)

By way of further example, a proposal was brought forward to allow the Leaders of the other Political Parties to become ex-officio Members of the Cabinet with the right to attend and speak but not to vote. This request was refused.

There is also concern that whilst very detailed documents form the Cabinet Agenda the meetings themselves are perfunctory and it is unusual for them to last for more than 20 minutes and even part of that time – indeed the majority of it – is taken up with what can only be described as Party Political considerations.

This particular aspect was one of the issues raised by the LGA Peer Review that took place but no action was subsequently taken by the Majority Party.





We now turn to the system for the Overview & Scrutiny Committees.

These are not able to function in the manner that is envisaged on the basis that they are Chaired by the Majority Party but other Councillors in turn are not allowed to see any of the exempt information on which the Cabinet have come to its conclusion and as a consequence they are not in a position to come to a view on the validity or otherwise of any such decision as they are not allowed to have the information on which Cabinet came to its decision particularly in respect of what had proved to be significant financial considerations.

There is also a semi-independent role envisaged for the Audit & Governance Committee but again this cannot act in an effective manner as because with Overview & Scrutiny none of the exempt documents were made available to the Committee and the Chairmanship is again held by a Member of the Majority Party.

We should state that in respect of both the Chairman of Audit & Governance and of the Overview & Scrutiny Committee for Regeneration & Skills, they both act in a very fair and inclusive manner but the system does not allow both of these Committees to fulfil fully their role.

The question of confidentiality is recognised by all Members and the suggestion was put forward that if any of the amendments to the Constitution were agreed there would equally need to be some form of sanction against any Member who deliberately broke the conditions attached.

We now return to the running of the Full Council Meetings.

These allow for a 30 minute question time provision with Questions having to be submitted by no later than Tuesday prior to Council on Thursday.

This means in essence that Councillors have approximately two and half hours per year to ask Questions and there has been a move by the Majority Party for Backbench Members to submit to their Cabinet Members and Leader detailed Questions to which they already know the answer but the time taken means that other Members do not always get the opportunity to put their Questions, receive an answer but also ask a Supplementary Question if appropriate and they consider this to be necessary.

There is a further complication in that Questions addressed to the Leader of the Council are not answered if for whatever reason the Leader is not present at the meeting.

We know of no precedent for such an approach and in the context of anything else we have been involved in the responsibility for the Question and any Supplementary Question would automatically pass to the Deputy Leader.



This is acknowledged within Sefton and by way of anecdotal example the Deputy Leader has acted as Chairman of the Cabinet Meetings when the Leader has been indisposed.

The seriousness of the situation can be illustrated by the fact that 5 Labour Members resigned the Whip in protest and a further Member, who we can say is one of the most respected Councillors by all Parties, took the decision to resign his council seat and has now referred the matter to the Labour Party on a national basis for them to undertake a full internal inquiry.

We appreciate that the section on governance is in itself quite lengthy if you feel you need any more specific examples of the overall level of concern these could be supplied.

We now turn to the fact that we fully understand that you actually have a very limited criteria to work to but we need to make the point that restricting consideration only to the numbers of people on the electoral roll whilst being an important consideration is not in itself justification for the disruption that would be caused by a whole internal Ward Boundary Review where a great many community issues are involved.



## **Summary of Conclusions**

We also want to draw your attention to the fact that in considering the appropriateness of a review at the present time the figures produced will not be accurate in the sense that there is not insignificant housing development currently taking place and going well in to the future but it is not possible to quantify at this stage the direct impact this will have on the number of people on the electoral roll because whilst the properties are being built with certain categories and numbers of people in mind you could only make a rough estimate as to how this in turn would be reflected in the number of voters in any of the Wards that are affected.

We do hope that this submission will be carefully considered and we hope that both in terms of tone and content the views expressed will be considered constructive.

We fully appreciate that you are not in a position to take into account any potential party political advantage or disadvantage and we have been very careful to ensure that the contents of this document fully respect that situation and that the comments made are on an entirely factual and non-partisan basis.

You indicate in the documentation that it is not possible to meet with individuals to discuss whatever comments have been made but we are happy to continue to co-operate using any mechanism that suits your organisation.

We hope therefore that you will take these points into account on a pragmatic basis and I am sure you will wish to acknowledge that party political considerations have formed no part in respect of this submission.