

Gateshead

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Comment text:

Hello,

I am writing in relation to the draft recommendations report released by the LGBCE relating to their review for Gateshead Borough Council.

I am writing as a resident who lives in the High Fell Ward, but also someone who has a keen interest in local government having studied politics at university.

Firstly, I would like it to be noted that I am in favour of keeping the 22 wards, with 3 councillors each. While, as a local resident, I would struggle to know who to contact when it comes to local issues (do I write to one councillor, do I write to all 3), having more councillors does allow for the responsibilities of councillors to be distributed more widely, and allows for committees etc to function more effectively. Allowing a third of the council to be elected every year, with one off year in a 4 year cycle, also allows for the electorate to have their say more regularly, makes individuals feel more connected to the council, means that local activists/councillors are seen more often as they are looking for votes every year rather than every 4, and allows the make up of the council to change gradually with changes in polling, demographic etc, rather than substantial change every 4 years.

My next point however relates directly to High Fell, and its surrounding wards, in which I reside. Firstly, I agree mostly with the areas which are contained in the wards. From a local perspective, the areas of Sheriff Hill, Beacon Lough and Wrekenton are closely related and people living in these areas, will go out and about in these areas. For example, I would go to the coop on Beacon Lough Road, I go to the post office in Beacon

Lough, I will go for a takeaway or a drink in Sheriff Hill, and would go to the library or bigger supermarkets up at Wrekenton. My major concern with the ward is the name. None of these local areas would refer to itself as part of 'High Fell', in the same way that people in low fell would refer to low fell. People would say they live in Beacon Lough, Sheriff Hill or Wrekenton. There is no shared or united identity under the banner of High Fell. Naming the ward 'Sheriff Hill, Beacon Lough & Wrekenton', while it is a longer name, encompasses all local and smaller identities under one ward. However, this is not substantially longer than the already recommended 'Pelaw, Heworth and Bill Quay' ward which joins together 3 separate communities in one ward, while containing the names of the community. There is no 'High Fell' community or identity, but there is a shared community and locality between Sheriff Hill, Beacon Lough and Wrekenton.

I do appreciate that in reply it could be argued that this isn't feasible due to the fact that not all of what could be identified as Wrekenton falls within the proposed High Fell boundary. In response to this, my recommendation would be to move the remainder of Wrekenton, the part that verges on but isn't Eighton Banks, into the High Fell ward; this could be done by using the Lamsley CP boundary as the boundary between High Fell ward and Birtley North and Lamsley ward. In my opinion doing this would bring both wards towards the goal of equality of representation; as it would increase the population of High Fell Ward up from -1% and decrease the population of Birtley North and Lamsley from 3%. From the point of view of wanting to reflect the community interests and identities, those people that reside in the area of Wrekenton that is currently in the Birtley North and Lamsley boundary, but not in the Lamsley CP boundary, have a much stronger local affinity and identity with wider wrekeenton and beacon lough community that is in the High Fell ward, than they do with the Birtley North and Lamsley community. This is evident from the fact that once you get past Eighton Banks, there is so open green space and you have to travel under the a1, before you get to the area that is identifiable as Birtley North and Lamsley. Moving that area into the high fell ward also bring in key public services and facilities, such as the Wrekenton bus terminal, the shops, the schools, the library, etc. into the same ward. As it stands Aldi and Farm Foods would be in a different ward to Lidl, even though to the locals it is one area. The amenities of Wrekenton are most likely to be served by the people of Beacon Lough, Wrekenton, as well as to an extent Harlow Green and Eighton Banks, so there is no common sense in having that small area in the Birtley North and Lamsley ward.

I appreciate that at present the ward boundary has been drawn using Easedale Gardens/Springwell Road/the B1296 as the boundary, but local people don't see this as a major road that separates two individual areas with individual identities in the same way an A road or train line does (as identified with other wards elsewhere in the report) it is merely a road you have to cross to get from one set of shops to another, all part of the same local area.

In summary my recommendations are: to rename High Fell as 'Sheriff Hill, Beacon Lough and Wrekenton' and to move the boundary between the proposed High Fell ward and the proposed Birtley North and Lamsley ward in line with the Lamsley parish council ward. I believe my recommendations meet the three statutory criteria of Equality of representation, Reflecting community interests and identities and Providing for effective and convenient local government, arguably to a greater extent than the current proposals do.

Please do consider these proposals carefully and I look forward to reading the final report.