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From: fenlandindependentsalliance [REDACTED]
Sent: 05 June 2022 13:43
To: reviews
Subject: Review submission
Attachments: Submission of Fenland Independents Alliance.docx

[REDACTED] [REDACTED]

FENLAND

I have tried a number of times to submit the response of Fenland Independents Alliance but the system appears not able to accept the document.

As it is now the jubilee weekend I have attached it to this email.

If you require it another way do please let me know as soon as you are open for business

I would appreciate an acknowledgement that the document has been safely received

Mike Cornwell

Leader, Fenland Independents Alliance

Submission of Fenland Independents Alliance (FIA), the sole official Opposition at Fenland District Council which represents the views of non-ruling party Members of the Council. Currently its Members hold 12 of 39 seats consisting of 9 Independents, 2 Liberal Democrats and 1 Green

The views of FIA members have been consistently ignored by the ruling party since local consultations have been underway and FIA members have consistently refused to be included in Council approved submissions because of non-consideration of their views (see “named” votes at Council meetings). Voting by the ruling party on a “whipped” basis has completely removed open consideration of all issues and the current submission does not represent the true position within the population of Fenland. Additionally, we have been verbally informed in confidence by friends in the ruling group that the proposals have been deliberately drawn up to target individual independents and other party representatives in an attempt to minimise their election success and clearly maximise those of the ruling group, another reason for applying the whip!

Proposals which combine villages in town wards effectively disenfranchises village populations where overall voting numbers will reflect town based issues rather than those of rural parishes. Simply, parish residents and their issues, which will not be the same as those of a town, will not be heard. Further, rural parish councils are mostly not politicised whilst town wards are; representation will therefore be politicised and will swamp the independent minded village candidate. Combining town wards with rural parishes is nothing more than gerrymandering to the benefit of the ruling party and will further isolate village residents from mainstream considerations. This position is already happening at county level where county councillors covering very large and disparate wards are rarely seen in or involved in small communities or attend parish council meetings, all to the disbenefit of those communities

In at least one case the Council’s submission relative to a rural village is incorrect, eg the proposal to combine Christchurch village with a March town ward (“residents of Christchurch look towards March for their shopping, health care, worship and recreational activity”). It is a proven fact (a recent transport survey) that most Christchurch residents travel to Wisbech and Downham Market (Norfolk) for their shopping. For Health Care most residents are registered with the Upwell Health and Dental Care Centre (Norfolk) for primary health and Queen Elizabeth Hospital King’s Lynn (Norfolk) for secondary care. [This is also the same for the neighbouring parish of Elm, indeed the similarities of both these parishes is the reason why they are currently a joint FDC ward]. In relation to the comment on worship, why would village residents travel to March for a church when even the village name indicates that it has a very long standing church? As for recreational activities, the village has its own well equipped facilities and club teams, Community Centre and sport club changing facilities. Frankly, the “justification” is rubbish

Referring now to the proposal to join the two disparate villages of Elm with Wisbech St Mary. The simple fact is that there is no real relationship between the settlements, mainly due to the simple fact that they are divided by a major trunk road (the A47) and a major tidal river (the River Nene). The only two crossing points of these are at least 6 miles apart and the main village settlements a minimum of 6 miles apart which includes a journey completely through Wisbech town. See also the above paragraph re primary care and Elm; most residents of Wisbech St Mary access primary care through Parson Drove or Wisbech whilst for Elm they use Upwell (Norfolk). There really is very little which combines the features and services of both locations

The proposed ward changes relative to Parson Drove and Wisbech St Mary severely adversely affect the village of Murrow and, for ease of detail, we would refer you to the response from Wisbech St Mary Parish Council which more than adequately explains the problems which will be encountered.

Moving now to the proposal to add Benwick village to one of the March wards. Benwick is a somewhat isolated village closer to Huntingdonshire District (only a few hundred metres) than to March, where access is around 10 miles using very poor roads, indeed one has to travel through two other villages (Doddington and Wimblington) to get to March. There is no public transport and very little relationship between March and Benwick. Benwick residents tend to shop in Ramsey (Huntingdonshire) or Chatteris or Whittlesey town, and traditionally Benwick has been better linked to Whittlesey which is closer than March and via better roads

The proposals to include Manea with a Chatteris ward are also unpopular in that feedback received from residents indicates that they should not be joined with a Chatteris ward as they are a rural village and do not share a community identity with any part of Chatteris. Manea is another somewhat isolated village sitting on a council border which is restricted by a major fen drainage feature (easily seen on a map of Fenland). Whilst its location is closer to Chatteris, again by a poor road, residents traditionally access most services via March town indeed it does enjoy a somewhat limited public transport (bus and rail) provision with March.

[In these notes we have deliberately ignored secondary schooling links; many villages have their own primary schools whilst at secondary level parental choice has a major impact on who goes where. It is another simple fact that many secondary students from Wisbech attend March and many from March attend Chatteris and vice versa. Residential location at secondary level seems to have little impact on decision making!]

It is wrong to propose continuation/growth in multi-member warding arrangements. Based on comments received by councillors during discussions with residents and on experience of those in use currently it is another form of gerrymandering. Such warding clearly works to the benefit of political parties and their supply of volunteers to support candidates. For example, in a 3 member ward covering around 6000 residents a single, say independent, candidate has a workload very much larger than 3 candidates for the same ward. This very

clearly puts an independent candidate at a serious disadvantage (and cost) and, if that candidate experiences a disability (which one of our current members has) then the situation is even worse, indeed we would challenge the Commission to ensure that all proposals do not disadvantage disabled candidates under disability legislation. It is also a fact that combining real rural areas with town structures adds considerably to the problem. Again, based on current experience, the election of multi-members does nothing to improve accessibility to representation indeed it tends to cause confusion to residents when they need assistance. It would certainly be much clearer and helpful if a single member ward covering a clearly defined small area giving better accessibility and member responsibility was wider implemented. Big is not always best, although it is certainly preferred by political parties as they are at less risk than in individual wards

In our view the Review has been rushed with little time and involvement from parish councils, local organisations, focus groups and interested parties and this has been indicated in conversations with a number of residents. The emphasis on a timetable to deliver in time for the 2023 elections has impacted on proper consideration of the true issues of a largely mixed rural and urban authority is producing an outcome which is unpopular with local communities but which is very clearly following a political party beneficial route, unfortunately it seems, with the connivance of the Commission. There clearly has not been an understanding of the particular differences between the various towns and communities or an understanding of rural issues, particularly those around rural deprivation and disabilities, an almost complete lack of public transport and the actual Fenland topography and history.

The whole review should be stopped and recommenced on a much improved and community involved basis as currently it leads to problems and unrest, indeed there are already strong rumours of raising finance for developing legal challenges if current proposals result in decisions and/or investigations into alleged gerrymandering.

To summarise the above submission, there is a clear feedback which indicates a very strong preference to keep existing rural wards as they are with any small warding adjustments based on development plans in town areas only giving a strong preference for a 41 member scheme

Cllr Mike Cornwell

Leader, FIA