

To Yemi Fagun, Review Officer at the Local Government Boundary Commission, on behalf of Bassetlaw Labour Group based at Retford Labour Hall, New Street, Retford, DN22 6EG.

Friday 05 January 2024

Dear Yemi,

We write with reference to the initial stages of the Local Government Boundary Commission's review of the electoral and boundary arrangements of Bassetlaw District Council.

CONTEXT FOR OUR RESPONSE

This review is, in our view, overdue due to historic growth and changes in the District and the consequential impact on representation ratios and is, therefore, welcomed. The timing of this review coincides with the concluding stages of producing a Draft Local Plan for Bassetlaw which is awaiting the Inspector's response to the Main Modifications, meaning the evidence base for projected demographic changes in the District is high.

It should be noted at the outset that each Council is different and that the role of the 2024 Councillor is multi-faceted, meaning representation ratios alone do not reflect or explain the "on the ground" needs of residents and their interaction with Councillors and/or the Council as an organisation. We trust that Bassetlaw will be reviewed on its own merits as a geographically large, ageing and disparate District with significant potential to deliver on Levelling Up potential, provided appropriate strategic leadership is in place at all levels of the District Council.

THE RESPONSE OF THE COUNCIL'S WORKING GROUP

We have endeavoured not to repeat points already made by the Council's Working Group in this submission, having endorsed it as a political group at the Full Council meeting on 07/12/23. We believe the Working Group's submission is a fair and thorough statement about the current and anticipated activities of the Council over the coming years, other than one area of concern which is the electorate projection figures. We will deal with this item first before moving onto the three key areas of consideration for the Commission at this time.

ELECTORATE PROJECTION FIGURES

We are aware of concerns flagged by the Commission about the electorate projection figures for Bassetlaw and understand that these have been revised downwards vs. the original numbers supplied to the Commission. We understand that the current projected electorate is 97,023 which is less than the original Council-proposed figure of around 101,000.

While we recognise the risk of overestimating electorate growth, we are concerned by this recent adjustment. Bassetlaw has a very high number of Neighbourhood Plans compared to similar authorities nationally (35). Indeed, by Q3 2023, more than half of all parishes in the District - 52%, including a regeneration town - have an adopted Plan meaning local voices have had a meaningful say on the future shape of their community. This means we arguably have a sharper understanding of exactly what growth will take place in each ward and where this growth will be vs. other authorities without this fact base.

Unfortunately, some existing Neighbourhood Plans show projected growth which is now underestimated by the figures provided to the Commission as a result of the modelling revisions requested. Sturton Ward is a good example of this given its Neighbourhood Plan is at ward level. The figures provided to the Commission suggest that the electorate changed from 1,854 at the end of 2021 to 1,843 (-11) in December 2023 but will increase again to 1,872 in 2030 (+29). However, Sturton Ward Neighbourhood Plan Review shows in Table 1b that 66 new dwellings had already been granted planning permission between April 2018 and November 2021 when the Neighbourhood Plan Review was adopted, and the Plan itself provisioned for another 2 + 7 + 12 properties (Tables 8, 9 and 10) taking the total to 87 new properties from April 2018 onwards.

<https://www.bassetlaw.gov.uk/media/6585/sturton-ward-np-review-final.pdf>

As of November 2021 when the Neighbourhood Plan was adopted, in Table 1b, only five of these properties had completed. The table has been updated to reflect the true “on the ground” position at the end of December 2023:

Settlement/application reference	Net amount of houses*	Housing requirement	Known completions	Known under construction	Yet to start, December 2023
North and South Wheatley		13			
17/01660/FUL, Laburnum House Low Street	3		3		
18/00448/OUT, Whitegates Top Pasture Lane	6		5	1	
18/00651/FUL, Post Office Sturton Road Latest = 23/00506/VOC	3				3
18/01189/FUL, Sun Inn Low Street	1			1	
19/00145/FUL, Cotswold Top Street	1		1		
19/01540/FUL, The Manor Sturton Road Latest = 23/00461/VOC	1				1
Sub Total	15				
Sturton Le Steeple		11			
18/00627/RES, Land near Blacksmiths Arms Cottage	7		7		
20/00078/FUL, Fourpaws Cattery Station Road	2			2	
Sub Total	9				
North Leverton with Hablesthorpe		23			
17/01734/FUL, Land near East View Southgore Lane	1		1		
18/00690/RSB, The Cottage Main Street	8		8		
20/00004/FUL, Olinda Southgore Lane	8			8	
18/01369/FUL, The Old Plough (Plot 2) Main Street	1				1
19/00708/OUT, Orchard Lodge Southgore Lane	9			9	
19/00265/RES, Land SW of Orchard Lodge Latest = 21/01678/VOC	15		3	12	
Sub total	42				
Number of new dwellings	66		28	33	5

This means that 28 dwellings have been completed as of December 2023. Assuming they are all occupied and reflected in the December 2023 electorate figure, this leaves 38 dwellings from the pre-November 2021 Plan Review period still to be built, plus an additional 21 from the Neighbourhood Plan itself = 59 properties to build. This is double the projected population growth by 2030 (+29) under the current modelling. Indeed, there are 33 properties under construction today that are alone likely to bring more voters in the next 12 months than the projected population growth through to 2030, without considering the additional 21 dwellings supported through site allocations in the Neighbourhood Plan – most of which are already coming forward having been part of the 2021 Plan Review process.

This is just one example – similar patterns which can be seen elsewhere in the electorate forecast data resubmitted to the Council, where bottom-up data indicates greater electorate growth than the modelling indicates. We would, therefore, politely ask the Commission to work with the original data set provided and/or to allow for further clarification discussions about the electorate forecast during the next phase of the review. Given Bassetlaw's strong evidence base via Neighbourhood Plans, we believe the original modelling was an accurate projection of population growth in the District through to 2030, having asked all Councillors to review the planning permission and growth figures in their respective wards.

AREA OF CONSIDERATION 1: GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS

Focus: The Commission aims to ensure that councils have the right number of councillors to take decisions and manage the business of the council in an effective way now and in the future.

The specific governance arrangements of the Council have been described in detail as part of the Council's Working Group size submission response. As a political group, we believe that this submission is a fair and factual reflection of arrangements at the Council with the four main committees of Planning, Licensing, Audit & Governance and Overview & Scrutiny being the primary internal committees. Given the size and rurality of Bassetlaw, it is our view that these committees should each contain a healthy number of Councillors to ensure that the voices of different communities are heard. Indeed, the needs and concerns of Harworth & Bircotes to the north of the district are different to those of Tuxford in the south, Worksop to the west, Retford to the centre and the Trent Valley to the east. In having large core committees of 10-12 councillors, we believe there is sufficient representation for these different voices to be heard within formal Council debate and provides options for ensuring geographical as well as political balance. This is especially important with the number of Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects (NSIPs) coming forward which are all based in rural areas but will have urban consequences, meaning a mix of perspectives around Committee tables is extremely important for the Council moving forwards.

We would also like to note the importance of the other six committees in the day-to-day running of the Council which can often be forgotten. The Joint Employee Committee is only mentioned in the Council's Working Group's submission, for example, but the outputs of this Committee are significant to the cultural and working practices of the Council. In the past 12 months alone, this Committee has worked through the development of several new policies associated with employee and customer domestic abuse, fertility treatment, annual leave flexibility, sick pay and maternity leave. It has also developed and secured approval for an Accelerated Increments Policy to acknowledge and hold onto local government talent, and continues to work through the implementation of the Council's People Strategy and associated action plan which, in 2022/23, contained eight objectives underpinned by 35 actions. This work – and similar work by other committees including the Health & Safety Committee

– is fundamental to the ongoing evolution of the Council as a strategic leader and employer locally, and we would not want the important work of these committees to be diminished or forgotten when considering the size of the Council.

AREA OF CONSIDERATION 2: SCRUTINY FUNCTIONS

Focus: Every local authority has mechanisms to scrutinise the executive functions of the council and other local bodies. They also have significant discretion over the kind (and extent) of activities involved in that process. In considering council size, the Commission will want to satisfy itself that these responsibilities can be administered in a convenient and effective way.

The scrutiny functions of the Council have been described in detail as part of the Council's Working Group size submission response. As an authority, we are strengthening the scrutiny of our commercial, licensing and social housing functions internally, while also playing an increasingly active role in outside bodies. We believe the Council's relationship with partners locally is very positive today and that maintaining this via high levels of engagement will be important as the District transitions into a period of intense inward investment as outlined in the Council's Working Group submission.

We anticipate more external bodies requiring input over the next few years, such as the Midlands Nuclear Board which will meet for the first time in early 2024 and the Leader of the Council has been asked to join; and the STEP Strategic Collaboration Board which met for the first time in September 2023 and is, therefore, in its infancy and wasn't mentioned in the Council's Working Group submission. Chaired by Sir John Peace and attended by regional leaders, the second meeting of this Board will take place in early 2024. Nottinghamshire County Council has proposed a four-tier approach to implementing the STEP project, each of which will require different types of engagement from the Council and Councillors. While engagement structures will no doubt change over time, this alone demonstrates how one NSIP may require multiple levels of engagement from the Council and Councillors moving forwards.

With multiple NSIPs, an Investment Zone, a Town Board and various investment streams to consider and scrutinise simultaneously, we believe keeping the current number of Councillors maximises our chances of doing this well, to the benefit of Bassetlaw residents and businesses as a whole.

AREA OF CONSIDERATION 3: REPRESENTATIONAL ROLE OF COUNCILLORS

Focus: The Commission understands that there is no single approach to representation and members will represent and provide leadership to their communities in different ways. However, we are interested in hearing about the extent to which members routinely engage with communities and how this affects workload and responsibilities.

We believe that this is the key area where numbers and statistics alone only tell part of the story. Indeed, it is our view that the demand on the typical Bassetlaw Councillors' time is already high as evidenced by the Council's Working Group submission, and possibly higher than equivalent authorities because of the combination of unique factors which make Bassetlaw such an interesting place to live and represent. This combination can be summarised as follows:

1. We are the second largest district authority by land size in Nottinghamshire and provide services to a large area.
2. We are at the meeting point of the East Midlands and South Yorkshire regions, and need a larger voice by virtue of being on the periphery.

3. We are the median district authority in Nottinghamshire by population, with growth expected as reflected in the Draft Local Plan (which excludes any NSIP-related growth).
4. Our population is ageing, above the national average.
5. Our population has complex needs including areas of high deprivation and health inequality.
6. We are subject to frequent flooding episodes, including three events already in the winter of 2023/24 (October, December and January).
7. We have a disproportionately large number of NSIPs, both nearby and within the District itself.
8. We have a large number of complex investment projects via Levelling Up initiatives to be delivered at pace.
9. We have one of three sites included in the new East Midlands Investment Zone.
10. We will become part of the new East Midlands Mayoral Combined Authority in May 2024.
11. We have historic towns with traditional functions (e.g. markets) but ageing infrastructure requiring investment.
12. We are seeking to grow the commercial functions of the Council to deliver more revenue to invest in the District.

Put together, as Vision 2040 notes, this means the Council itself is changing. It is becoming more outward-focused and is required to become a strategic leader on a range of complex matters. Coupled with everyday casework, this means Councillors are busier than ever before and required to engage on a range of policy types most days.

On the topic of NSIPs, it should be noted that energy NSIPs are disproportionately impacting rural Districts like Bassetlaw as a result of the land required for large-scale energy generation. While the Council is not the decision-maker in such schemes, given the Council's and councillors' familiarity and expertise in planning matters, we believe it is important that it plays a lead role and assists residents by providing community-informed responses on a wide range of complex matters such as:

1. Landscape and visual amenity
2. Ecology and biodiversity
3. Hydrology, flood risk and drainage
4. Ground conditions and contamination
5. Minerals
6. Archaeology
7. Built heritage
8. Transport and access
9. Noise and vibration
10. Electromagnetic fields
11. Agricultural land quality
12. Telecommunications, utilities and television receptors

While Council officers provide much of the technical input, Bassetlaw residents expect Councillors to be engaged on and understand many of these complex matters and to ensure their views are represented. With four live NSIPs just outside the District in West Lindsey and four NSIPs inside the District (two live and two pending including the STEP fusion energy project) as of the end of December 2023, the ask of Councillors on these matters is significant. Note that this compares to just one NSIP over the past decade in Bassetlaw (a 299MW peaking plant at West Burton power station). This demonstrates the speed and scale of energy-led change in the area as a result of the three national grid connections at West Burton, Cottam and High Marnham which are in very high demand. Councillors are expected to be – and want to be – across each of these projects to ensure

the impacts are appropriately considered. We would be very concerned if Councillor representation is reduced at a time when the ask of Councillors and the Council as a whole is increasing in this way.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

We believe that the Council is currently “punching above its weight” in landing significant inward investment that will create positive, life-changing opportunities for its residents. For Bassetlaw as a whole, it is entering into a new and exciting world but flooding, commercialisation, NSIPs etc. bring a whole range of new strategic and operational challenges. To face these challenges head-on, we believe the Council’s current structures should be strengthened rather than weakened and, therefore, support maintaining the current number of Councillors (48). To ensure this number remains relevant in the future, we also support a much earlier review with the Commission after this one concludes to ensure Bassetlaw’s representation ratios remain proportional as the District develops.

We would like to thank the Local Government Boundary Commission for taking these thoughts into consideration.

Bassetlaw Labour Group