

Northumberland

Personal Details:

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Organisation Name: The Lib Dem group on the council (District or county councillor)

Comment text:

Related subject: Alnwick and Blyth (New Delaval and Hartley Division)

I recognise the difficult task the Commission have had because of the unique nature of Northumberland's geography and population distribution. For the most part I consider the proposal acceptable.

A council of 69 gives the proposals the flexibility needed to keep communities together; keeping the electorate-per-councillor under 4000 means some of the less densely populated parts of the County can have boundaries that make them a more manageable size.

I have 2 main objections to the proposals.

1. The first is maintaining the 2 member division in Alnwick. I don't think it has ever worked and regardless of the idea of inter-party co-operation, each of the councillors, in practice, represents twice as many voters as other individual councillors. This could lead to someone having to do twice as much work as any other councillor. Two divisions in Alnwick instead of one would give voters equal access to their councillor and make it easier for each councillor to serve their residents.

The arguments for a two-member division do not stand up to scrutiny. All the towns have arbitrary lines drawn to get the correct balance and numbers. Most of the towns and villages in Northumberland function as a single community, regardless of how many councillors represent them. Residents are not aware of division boundaries in their day-to-day lives and this is as it should be. Stating that it is a good thing that all the services residents require are in one division, is a very simplistic view when there are no barriers to pass through and the council does not distribute resources on a council-division basis.

Boundaries are there for election purposes only. They do not impact on people's everyday life, so linking them to service delivery is a false premise. Alnwick should be two divisions in order to deliver representative equity. Ponteland is very similar, in that sense of place is important and it is surrounded by agricultural activity, yet it has been successfully divided into four, to provide the required number of voters for each division

and achieve democratic equity.

2. My other objection is the creation of the New Delaval and New Hartley seat. The two areas have no community links and are separated by open fields. Parts of New Delaval, east of the railway line, would say themselves that they live in Newsham. I also think this fails one of the commission's statutory criteria i.e. Reflecting Community Interests and Identities.

These two areas have very little in common - people in New Hartley look to Cramlington or even Whitley Bay for shopping and leisure opportunities. School catchment areas are different and there are no direct public transport connections. A better arrangement to secure the objectives of this criterion would be to link this part of New Hartley to East Cramlington, which is only a few minutes' drive away, and would very much help to provide effective and convenient local government.

Although it is not unusual in Northumberland for a division to straddle two parish councils, a New Delaval/New Hartley division will certainly not help the aim of achieving effective and convenient local government. There is also the matter of the new parliamentary seats which will split the division. This again does not accord with the Reflecting Communities criterion laid out by the commission or the aim of achieving effective and convenient local government.

In order to Reflect Community Interest and Identities, Blyth should be kept as a single entity, with 8 councillors, and the boundaries redrawn to even out the number of electors per councillor.

In this instance, community cohesion is more important than the councillors-to-voters ratio. Divisions could be drawn up in such a way as to be within acceptable tolerances.

Attached Documents:

None attached