

Algorithm Democracy

The Boundary Committee of the Electoral Commission has recently published its draft recommendations for changes to the BathNES ward boundaries w.e.f. 2018.

These proposals and the process of their determination raise critical issues for local democratic representation and for participation in local elections.

Anyone who cares about local democracy should be concerned and campaign to stop the Local Government Boundary Commission (LGBC) proposals. The issues are, in descending order of generality, as follows.

1. On 18th May 2017 full council decided to back a review on dubious and potentially anti-democratic grounds. Specifically that the overall number of councillors should reduce from 65 to 59, for the following reasons.
 - (a) the council has shifted from delivering a comprehensive range of direct services to being a 'commissioning focussed organisation'.
 - (b) central government funding has been reduced
 - (c) social media and new technology make it easier to engage with constituents and more easily resolve queries with Council services.

<https://democracy.bathnes.gov.uk/documents/s46537/Review%20of%20Electoral%20Arrangements%20in%20BNES.pdf>

Comments

Relative to other major areas of expenditure, BANES is well able to afford the electoral and remuneration costs of eight councillors. Commissioned services do not necessarily generate less problems than in-house provision and may well create more issues for residents. Online technologies actually increase the amount of exchanges and communications between representatives and citizens.

Inadequate council minutes do not state if any members opposed these proposals and assumptions.
<https://democracy.bathnes.gov.uk/documents/s47127/Minutes%20of%20Previous%20Meeting.pdf>

2. The list of respondents to the invitation from the Local Government Boundary Commission (LGBC) to submit proposals includes the Conservative Party, Liberal Democrat Party and the Independents group of councillors.
http://www.lgbce.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0017/36521/Bath-and-North-East-Somerset-Draft-Recommendations-Report.pdf

Comment

Why are these groups apparently so keen on reducing democratic representation? Why are they ranking cost saving above democratic principles? Do they perceive some electoral advantage for themselves such a reduction and reorganisation? Why stop at a 9% reduction? A 50% reduction would save even more money. There does not seem to have been any cost-benefit analysis of the impacts yet some residents and probably individual councillors must lose out.

3. The present distribution of councillors has only 10 single-member wards. All of these are in NE Somerset. The LGBC proposes 14 such wards: 7 in NE Somerset and 7 in the city boundaries. Proposed single member city wards are: Abbey, Claverton Down, Lansdown, Larkhall, Lyncombe, Moorlands, Widcombe. These figures show it is disproportionately city wards being carved up to equalise the ratio of voters per ward across the authority. To justify the creation of single member wards some residential areas would be transferred from two-member wards in order to provide sufficient electors to meet the LGC preferred ratio of approximately 2,300 voters per councillor.

'Larkhall' is a case in point. This new electoral unit would constitute the core of the present Lambridge ward. Its voter population would be cut by transferring neighbourhoods to Walcot in the west, Lansdown in the north and Bathavon North in the east. These transfers would 'compensate' the latter wards for losses to neighbouring wards adjacent to them; e.g. the loss of the Bathwick estate from Walcot to Bathwick ward.

Comment

The committee claims to have 'visited the area in order to look at the various different proposals on the ground' and to 'have taken into account local evidence which provided evidence of community links and locally recognised boundaries.' This must have been a perfunctory exercise as the committee have failed to recognise the importance of one of their own criteria –that boundaries 'reflect community identity' – in some case. For example, in the Lambridge area the Larkhall community extends as far as Fairfield Park – witness the furore over the axing of the Larkhall-Fairfield bus service – parts of Walcot and Bailbrook. The LGBC proposes to hive off the latter to Bathavon South on the grounds that there is a natural contiguity with Batheaston village; despite the distance from Batheaston being much longer than that between Bailbrook and Larkhall centre.

4. Implications for smaller parties and some independents are significant. Chances of gaining seats in existing wards such as Lambridge or Lyncombe have diminished because in the new single member wards voters will no longer be able to 'split the ticket' and vote for, say, one Lib Dem and one Labour or Green candidate. In other wards their extension into the more rural areas, such as Newbridge's extension as far as North Stoke, will include more Conservative-inclined voters.

Conclusion

From a general democratic point of view, these proposals are regressive and unfair.

They are based on bureaucratic efficiency criteria and arithmetic population averages - which have little to do with effective democratic representation.

The rationale for a reduction in the total number of councillors is itself dubious. As recent protests over council decision-making for an eastern Park and Ride and the mooted relocation of the main Library have shown, there are increasing demands for accountability which a net loss of council representatives in the city would only frustrate rather than satisfy.

Councillors' workloads are unlikely to be diminishing, as the rationale claims.

It is also unhelpful to party democracy if this bureaucratic gerrymandering benefits areas where Conservatives and Lib Dems are strongest.

Action: in light of the main parties collaboration in this gerrymandering it is important that community and campaign groups and smaller parties, as well as individual residents, send objections to the anomalies and disadvantages described above.

At this stage it is probably pointless to protest the underlying rationale of reducing councillor numbers; but some of the more invidious proposals relating to reduced ward areas, particularly the number of single councillor wards should surely be opposed. Suggested grounds for objection are:

- * the disregard for the LGBC's own principle of community links, locally recognised boundaries and community identity as, for example, in the case of Larkhall/Lambridge;
- * the invidious loading of a disproportionate number of single-councillor units onto the city wards –that will probably benefit some political parties at the expense of others.

Send objections and comments to:

<https://consultation.lgbce.org.uk/have-your-say/9913?bbox=351518,152173.5,379993,171823.5>