

Somerset

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Comment text:

Related subject: Minehead

Ward Boundary Review Consultation - Minehead & Alcombe Ward

I am writing as a Somerset Councillor with my formal response to the ongoing consultation process for the ward boundary review for Somerset Council regarding the Minehead & Alcombe ward.

First, I welcome this review and greatly appreciate the opportunity to provide meaningful feedback through the consultation process. I value the guidance documentation that underpins such reviews and understand the complexities involved in considering multiple factors.

The current Somerset Council ward member boundaries divide the town, with residents of areas such as Alcombe and Ellicombe falling under the stewardship of Somerset Councillors who serve the Dunster ward. I believe this boundary review presents an ideal opportunity to unify the town of Minehead so that Somerset Council ward boundaries more accurately reflect the parish boundaries. Such alignment would provide residents with a clear and easy-to-follow local government structure with well-defined ward boundaries. Moreover, this would ensure that ward members for Somerset Council can represent the sole interests of the town without confusion, maximising the efficiency and accountability of public office, which is of particular importance in a large unitary council area like Somerset.

The current two councillors of the Minehead Ward give their Support for a Two Member Ward for Minehead - Detailed as Seats 65 & 66 in Somerset Council report to Constitution and Governance – as submitted to the Commission by the Conservative Group.

This would give a two-member ward within the percentage differential of number of electors as required in the electoral wards of W-DCA, W-DCC, W-DCD, W-DCB, W-DBY and W-DBZ

The original business case for Somerset Council outlined that one member per ward will establish clarity for the public about who to contact, compared with confusing multi-member wards and two tiers. We no longer have two upper tiers of local government so the public have been very clear since the creation of Somerset Council who to contact since unitarisation.

Included within the rationale for the One Somerset business case is:-

- maintaining the sense of place and ensures co-terminosity
- allowing space for parish and town councils to build from coherent local identity.

Dividing Minehead and Alcombe in half making it be part of two separate wards would not achieve these aims. One Minehead and Alcombe ward with two members is far better than dividing it into two. A finding from the FoLGiS work was that Somerset people identify strongly with their town or village - this is certainly true for Minehead and Alcombe. The advantages of co-terminosity are very similar whether referring to One Somerset or the proposed one ward encompassing Minehead and Alcombe.

Much of our time when we were two tier consisted of directing people to the right councillor, with the new authority there is now no wrong door for residents of Minehead and they contact either of the two ward councillors.

This has improved clarity for residents. If we split the area in two most will have no idea which electoral ward they sit within which would be a retrograde step.

We are also in a position whereby a two-member ward can be coterminous with the Minehead Town Council boundaries and fit within the guidance laid down by the Boundary Commission. This proposal for a two-member ward for Minehead is also supported by Minehead Town Council.

If dividing into two, both will lose their identity as an area, and it will make no sense to the public.

Taking guidance from the Local Government boundary Commission: -

Ward patterns should – as far as possible – reflect community interests and identities and boundaries should be identifiable.

There is no possible way that the identities and boundaries are identifiable if split into two divisions, in contrast one two-member division has very clear boundaries and would reflect community interests.

Issues considered by the Boundary Commission:-

1. Community Groups - Two divisions would not reflect Community interest - all those amenities that Minehead & Alcombe residents use serve the whole of the town, for example: -

The Regal Theatre

Newly built Minehead Community Centre (Minehead Town Council built and owned)

The West Somerset Railway

The Harbour & Seafront

Minehead Eye

Several denominations of Churches serve the whole town

The shopping areas - The High Street and one area on the outskirts of town - used by all

Local community groups - and there are many - mainly cover those that live in Minehead and Alcombe. How on earth would you decide who should work with each group - or who should give a talk to a group that has members across both proposed divisions.

2. Transport Links -

Bus Routes out of town, main bus stops in town centre used by all.

Town bus - goes around the whole of the town - again across both proposed areas linking its residents to each other and the town centre and its amenities

3. Facilities -

One Doctors Surgery

The Library

Minehead Hospital

First Schools - children may access either

Middle School - only one that is attended by all local children

Upper School/Sixth Form - only one attend by all (unless travelling for private provision or being educated from home)

All used by residents across all within the proposed two member division.

If we then look at the outside bodies, these are again providing services and support to residents of the whole of the town.

As Minehead and Alcombe there is a clear identity and sense of belonging. In terms of services given the next main towns are an hour away i.e. Bridgwater or Taunton, as such Minehead provides all local services whether it's for retail, hospitality, DIY, health, church, library etc. the service providers give a focal point within the town for the community of Minehead and Alcombe. If split in 2 there is no identifiable focal point or division for either area.

4. Parishes -

The boundary of the Minehead Town Council clearly represents the clear extent of the community and should be used as the building block for one electoral division and not two.

In short, the two proposed divisions are so intertwined in terms of identity as an area, services, provision, groups, transport, schools, health etc it's almost impossible to separate them when considering responsibilities and case work, much of which is centred around the central area of the town, its amenities, services and harbour.

Attached Documents:

None attached