

# Dorset

## Personal Details:

**Name:** Miss Nicola Gray

**Email:** [REDACTED]

**Postcode:** [REDACTED]

**Organisation Name:** Wareham Town Council (Representative of parish/town council)

## Comment text:

**Related subject:** Wareham

Please see attached letter for detailed response.

## Attached Documents:

- lgbce-submission-draft-final.pdf



## **Submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England**

### **Electoral Review of Dorset Council – Initial Consultation**

#### **Introduction**

Wareham Town Council welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England's initial consultation on the electoral review of Dorset Council. This submission sets out the Council's views on the current electoral arrangements as they affect Wareham and the wider Purbeck area, and presents evidence on community identity, electoral equality, and effective local governance. The Town Council respectfully urges the Commission to give careful consideration to the matters raised herein when drawing proposals for new ward boundaries.

#### **1. Community Identity and the Distinct Character of Wareham**

Wareham is one of the oldest market towns in Dorset, enclosed by its ancient Saxon earth walls and defined geographically by the confluence of the Rivers Frome and Piddle to the south and north. These natural boundaries are not merely topographical features; they are a fundamental expression of Wareham's historic identity and civic character. However, the Town Council recognises that the community of Wareham extends, in a practical and social sense, beyond those ancient walls. The settlements and areas that surround the town and look to it for services, employment, schools, retail, and community life are, in a meaningful sense, already part of the wider Wareham community, even where they fall outside the current administrative boundary.

The town has its own well-established civic, commercial, and cultural infrastructure, including schools, health services, retail provision, community groups, leisure facilities, and regular markets. It serves not only its resident population but also the wider catchment area around it. The Commission has stated that it seeks to understand where people go to meet, shop, attend school, and access sport and leisure and in all of these respects, Wareham functions as the natural and dominant centre for a community that is broader than its formal boundary suggests.

The Town Council therefore submits that the most accurate expression of Wareham's community identity is not a ward drawn tightly around the existing administrative town boundary, but one that reflects this wider functional catchment. A ward configured in this way would not dilute Wareham's identity; rather, it would give proper electoral expression to the community that already exists around the town. Wareham's identity as the historic, civic, and commercial heart of its area is robust enough to define a ward that encompasses its natural sphere of influence, and the Commission is invited to approach the boundary in that spirit.

#### **2. Electoral Equality and Representation**

The Town Council notes that the Commission has determined Dorset Council should retain 82 councillors. It is important, in applying the resulting average electorate per councillor to the Wareham area, that any proposed ward or wards reflect genuine community relationships rather than create arbitrary groupings of settlements based purely on administrative convenience or numerical expedience.

Wareham's electorate is of a size that warrants its own distinct representation at Dorset Council level. However, the Town Council does not seek a ward drawn narrowly around the existing town boundary alone. Rather, it invites the Commission to consider Wareham's functional sphere of influence, the wider area that already looks to the town for services, employment, schools, retail, and community facilities when determining the extent of a Wareham ward. Settlements and areas that are practically and socially connected to Wareham, even if not currently within its formal boundary, represent a more meaningful basis for a ward than configurations drawn purely for numerical tidiness.

The Town Council would be concerned by any configuration that subsumes Wareham within a large, disparate rural division in which the town's shared interests with its surrounding communities are not reflected, or in which Wareham's voice is diluted by grouping it with settlements that have little functional connection to the town. Equally, any ward boundary that cuts across the natural social and economic geography of the Wareham area, separating communities that share the same services and identify with the same town, would not serve the Commission's objective of reflecting community identities and interests.

The Town Council therefore invites the Commission to approach the Wareham ward boundary with a view to capturing the town's genuine catchment area, including communities immediately adjacent to and functionally connected with the town, rather than confining the ward to the existing administrative town boundary. This approach would better serve the principle of electoral equality by ensuring that all those who share a community identity with Wareham are represented through the same Dorset Council member or members.

### **3. Effective and Convenient Local Government — The Risk of Marginalisation**

Wareham Town Council is concerned about the longer-term risk of the town's interests becoming marginalised as the upper tier of local government grows in scale and complexity. The abolition of Purbeck District Council in 2019, whilst creating a streamlined unitary authority, reduced the tier of governance that had historically been most directly responsive to Wareham's needs. The Town Council plays a vital role in filling that gap, but its effectiveness depends in part on having robust and sympathetic representation at Dorset Council level through clearly drawn ward boundaries.

The Commission should be aware that, should future ward arrangements draw Wareham into an expansive rural division, the practical consequence may be that Dorset Council members find it more difficult to represent effectively the distinct needs of an urban settlement within a predominantly rural division. This would not serve the Commission's objective of facilitating effective and convenient local government.

### **4. Future Development and the Integrity of the Town Boundary**

The Town Council wishes to draw the Commission's attention to the potential for significant future residential development in areas immediately adjacent to, but falling just outside, the current Wareham town boundary. The Town Council notes that any such development, whilst within a neighbouring parish or ward for electoral purposes, is likely to generate a material increase in demand for services, facilities, and infrastructure that Wareham Town Council currently provides or contributes to. Residents of new developments in close proximity to the town will naturally look to Wareham for shops, schools, community facilities, and social connections.

This creates a structural inequity in the governance of the area. Wareham Town Council provides and maintains services, facilities, and infrastructure that benefit a wider population than those formally within its boundary. A growing residential community immediately adjacent to the town will inevitably draw upon those assets, parks, open spaces, car parks, community events, and the broader civic fabric of the town, without being subject to the same democratic accountability or contributing to the same local governance arrangements. The Commission is invited to take this into account when considering where ward boundaries should fall,

recognising that ward boundaries which reflect the functional extent of the Wareham community would better serve the principle of equitable and effective local governance than those drawn on the basis of existing administrative lines alone.

The Town Council would welcome any opportunity to provide further detailed evidence on this matter, including with reference to the Dorset Council Local Plan and any proposed development sites in the vicinity of the town.

## **5. Future Community Governance Considerations and the Importance of Remaining a Meaningful Tier of Local Democracy**

Wareham Town Council wishes to draw the Commission's attention to the relationship between the present electoral review and the longer-term landscape of community governance in the Wareham area, and to request that the Commission take a forward-looking approach when determining the configuration of any new Dorset Council ward.

It is well established that Dorset Council ward boundaries should, so far as practicable, be capable of alignment with the boundaries of parish and town councils within them. The Town Council recognises that any future changes to community governance arrangements in the area, including any alterations to parish or town council boundaries that might arise from demographic change or significant new development, would fall to be considered through a separate Community Governance Review process conducted by Dorset Council in due course. However, the ward boundaries determined through the present electoral review will provide the framework within which any such future considerations must operate. It is therefore important that those boundaries are drawn with sufficient flexibility to accommodate the evolving governance needs of the area, rather than in a manner that entrenches existing arrangements in a way that may prove difficult to adapt.

In this context, the Town Council draws attention to the area to the west/south-west of Wareham, where significant future residential development may be brought forward, as noted in Section 4 above. The Commission is invited to ensure that the ward boundary in this direction is drawn in a way that reflects the functional relationship between Wareham and its surrounding communities, and that does not inadvertently create a configuration that would make any future alignment between ward and community governance boundaries unnecessarily complex or impractical.

More broadly, the Town Council wishes to place on record its concern about the risk of town and parish councils becoming progressively less significant as the upper tier of local government grows in scale and organisational complexity. The creation of Dorset Council as a large unitary authority in 2019 was a significant structural change, and it is vital that the community governance tier, represented by town and parish councils such as Wareham, retains the capacity, credibility, and democratic legitimacy to act as a meaningful and effective voice for local communities. Ward boundaries that reflect and reinforce the identity and coherence of the Town Council's area are an important part of ensuring that this remains the case. The Commission is therefore urged to have regard not only to the immediate requirements of electoral equality, but to the longer-term health of local democracy in the Wareham area when drawing its proposals.

## **6. Ward Naming**

Whatever the precise configuration of the ward the Commission proposes to cover the Wareham area, the Town Council strongly advocates that it should carry the name "Wareham", without suffix or combination with other place names. Wareham is the historic, civic, and commercial centre of the area, and it is the name by which the community is known and identifies itself. A ward named after Wareham would accurately reflect the town's role as the defining centre of the wider community it serves, regardless of the precise boundaries drawn, and would ensure that the area's representation at Dorset Council level is clearly and recognisably connected to the town around which the community is organised. The name has

been in continuous use for over a millennium and carries a significance that the Town Council considers should be preserved in any new electoral arrangements.

## **Conclusion**

Wareham Town Council respectfully requests that the Commission:

- Draws ward boundaries that reflect Wareham's functional catchment area and community identity, rather than confining the ward to the existing administrative town boundary alone;
- Ensures that Wareham's electorate is represented by a dedicated ward rather than being subsumed into a large rural division;
- Has regard to the potential growth of communities immediately adjacent to and west of the town boundary when determining ward configurations, recognising the functional connections those communities share with Wareham;
- Draws ward boundaries in a manner that is sufficiently flexible to accommodate any future evolution of community governance arrangements in the area, and avoids configurations that would make any such future alignment unnecessarily complex;
- Considers the importance of maintaining effective and appropriately scaled representation for an historic market town, and the health of the community governance tier, in the context of a large unitary authority area; and
- Retains the name "Wareham" for any ward covering the town.