

Local Government Boundary Commission Electoral Review: paper for Heaton with Oxcliffe Parish Council

Background to Local Government Boundary Commission

Between May 1 and June 11 the Commission is holding a consultation on the future size of the Lancaster City Council. It is doing this because of certain statistical indicators that show Lancaster has a marginally larger council than other comparable areas and one ward (Ellel) has an electorate significant in excess of the norm. The Commission is obliged by statute to investigate.

If the Commission decides to change the number of Lancaster City councillors, it then has to go on and decide any consequent changes in ward sizes, boundaries and number of councillors per ward. This would occur later in 2012 and there would be a consultation about these recommendations.

Background to Lancaster City Council

Lancaster City Council covers the towns of Lancaster and Morecambe as well as neighbouring towns and rural areas. It covers an area of 222 square miles and has an estimated population of 141,100. Its current electorate is 108,934. The City Council currently has 60 councillors. Lancaster's councillor-elect ratio ratio is currently 1,816 electors per councillor.

Lancaster has 38 parishes. The entire council area is parished apart from the Lancaster urban area and Heysham. Morecambe was previously unparished but has recently introduced a Town Council. A number of City Councillors also sit as members of parish councils or on Lancashire County Council.

The council has a system of governance known as "leader and cabinet" whereby a group of executive councillors make decisions within a policy framework agreed by the council. There are currently eight councillors in the cabinet, including the council leader.

City councillors receive a basic annual allowance of 3,300 pounds *per annum*. It is increased if they chair committees etc. They also receive travel expenses and a laptop with broadband connection. They each have ceremonial gown. This must represent an annual cost of over one quarter of a million pounds, without taking into account the staff and estate costs of maintaining and servicing the Council and its committees.

Meeting in Town Hall on May 23rd

I attended a meeting led by three representatives of the Commission on May 23. About 14 other people were present; I got the impression that all, or most, of them were representing parish councils from the district. There was a clear presentation, followed by questions and discussion. The Commission representatives wanted to make clear their independence of politicians; their concern for electoral equality and democracy; the limitations imposed on them by statute of what they could and could not do; the sequence of consultations which they would probably

undertake in the Lancaster district during 2012; their immediate concern to decide if the size of the Lancaster Council should be changed; and their wish to hear the views of parish councils which, they hoped, would be backed up by information and evidence.

Parish councillor questions and observations related to effects of a reduction in the size of the Lancaster Council and the effect on 'democracy' of the presence of a large temporarily resident student population which can register to vote in the district. I asked about the statutory criteria which the Commission uses to make its decisions (e.g. on ward patterns). The answer received was i) significant statistical variances from the norm; ii) 'community identity'; iii) convenience and effectiveness of any re-arrangements.

Consultation Questions

The Commission has published a list of 9 questions to which it would like answers at this stage of the consultation [by June 11 before the Parish Council meets again]. In my view the questions are over-burdensome and repetitive. Fortunately the Commission says that a respondent can answer only those questions which it wants to. If you want to see all 9 questions go to:

http://www.lqbce.org.uk/_documents/lqbce/data/council-size-questions/lancaster-cs-consultation-questions-2012-04-24.pdf

On behalf of the Parish Council, I have written two responses which seek to answer groupings of questions. See below. Please read them and let me know if you have any amendments or suggestions. If you agree with the responses, you need not bother to get in touch. I plan to send the responses off to the Commission on June 7. So if you want to propose amendments please do so as soon as possible.

Email responses preferred otherwise my address is 21, Lune Drive, Grosvenor Park, Morecambe, LA3 3RZ. Mobile phone 07767766068.

RESPONSE TO LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY COMMISSION re Lancaster Council size consultation

Respondent: Heaton-with-Oxcliffe Parish Council

Response 1

Questions: v) If the size of the council were to reduce, how do you consider the performance of the council might be affected? Please give details.

vi) How do you believe the interests of the diverse areas of Lancaster would be affected if the council size were to fall to 50 or 40? Please give details.

viii) What do you think is the right number of councillors? Please give reasons for your view.

The Parish Council does not believe that the performance of the City Council would necessarily be adversely affected by a reduction in councillor numbers.

The only indicator publicly available of the contributions of City councillors is attendance figures at meetings. This is not a definitive indicator. It seems possible that some re-thinking about how business is conducted and how councillors use their time would mean that a small reduction in

numbers of councillors would be acceptable without detriment to necessary business or democratic principles.

However, it is true that the particular nature of Lancaster and district needs to be taken into account. There is a significant rural hinterland in the district with consequent effects of increased travelling times and reduced possibility of face-to-face contact. Our own parish is mixed urban and rural. However, we take the view that there should be regular communication between relevant City councillors and ourselves and that this could be achieved by re-thinking priorities even with a reduction in the number of City councillors.

On balance, this Parish favours a reduction in the City Council to 50 councillors for reasons of i) comparability with other districts; ii) economy; iii) stimulus to re-think of conduct of Council business and City councillor roles.

Response 2

Questions: iv) If you have a problem with a council service, is your first point of contact your councillor or council department?

vii) For parish and town council respondents – do you expect your City councillor(s) to attend all of your meetings?

The Parish Council's normal first point of contact is a Council department.

The Parish Council has eleven meetings *per annum* and does not expect a City councillor to attend all of its meetings. However, it would appreciate, and could make use of, say quarterly attendance. It is prepared to consider, for example, participating in special quarterly meetings in which a groups of parish councils came together, party to facilitate the attendance of relevant City councillors.

In recent years there has been no attendance at our parish council meetings by any City councillor.

Dr. Keith Percy
Chairman of Heaton- with- Oxcliffe Parish Council
May 25 2012