

Petition P-05-1007 Merge Hope and Caergwrle into a two-member ward in the County of Flintshire – Correspondence from the petitioner to Committee, 17.09.20

Dear Chair,

Thank you for your email of 14th September informing me of the current situation with regard to consideration of this petition, for enclosing the response from the Minister and for your offer to send me the link to the live broadcast of the meeting via Senedd TV. This level of communication is really appreciated.

I note that the Minister has taken the time to explain the wider context of the petition including the June 2016 decision to require the review of all county council electoral boundaries so that arrangements could be in place in time for the next elections of May 2022.

I also note the Minister's concern that it is important that all reviews follow the same statutory process and that there would be issues if a parallel process of petitioning over boundary issues developed alongside the established legal process.

Whilst I fully respect the need to adhere to legally established processes I believe that the Petitions Committee should consider this petition and also the wider context of boundary reviews because of the unprecedented situation presented by the coronavirus pandemic.

The organisational challenges which local communities will face in adapting local political party structures to meet the requirements of new electoral boundaries will be considerable. Unlike any previous occasion, the new arrangements will have to be established by local groups working via virtual platforms (i.e. something akin to 'Zoom' meetings rather than physical meetings.) Whilst it may be argued that this process may engage people who are too busy to attend physical meetings, the chances are that it will not involve those, at grassroots level, of all political colours, who are not digitally proficient. In brief, the Iron Law 'Whoever says Organisation says Oligarchy' (Michels, 1911) will become "Whoever says Digital Organisation says Oligarchy, Disengagement and Apathy." It is likely to be the elderly community stalwarts who regularly make the tea or organise the raffle who are disenfranchised by this process. The Local Democracy and Boundary Commission would probably not welcome this as a desirable outcome.

In view of the above considerations it may be that the Petitions Committee will consider a recommendation for Welsh Government to pause further reviews of electoral boundaries during the current pandemic.

The key issue raised by the petition is that Hope and Caergwrle have very long-established historical links and numerous community links which make the two wards an obvious building block in any further review of electoral boundaries. These links have proved to be of great importance in enabling support to be given to vulnerable people during the lockdown and will be important in promoting community resilience during the recovery period. The Petitions Committee may, therefore, feel that it is appropriate to recommend that to Welsh Government that

the wards of Hope and Caergwrle should be merged into a two-member ward as a key building block in the process of boundary review.

The Local Democracy and Boundary Commission has been tasked with the job of reviewing electoral boundaries and naturally gives determining significance to the issue of electoral parity. The need to establish constituencies of equal size is a long-established cornerstone of British democracy and we must never return to the era of 'Pocket Boroughs'. However, the pandemic has now thrown up the issue of community resilience and it seems appropriate for Welsh Government to consider the need to balance electoral parity with provisions to safeguard this resilience.

The pandemic has given Wales the opportunity to consider a further development of the democratic process which builds up on the need for 'Equal Constituencies' to make them 'Equal Cohesive Constituencies'. The Petitions Committee may consider the recommendation to ask the Local Democracy and Boundaries Commission to give consideration to the type of service transformation which it needs to undertake to meet the requirements of the New Normal. I appreciate that this may have far-reaching and radical implication for the review of other electoral boundaries in pursuit of a more inclusive and participatory form of democracy.

In summary the three recommendations which are being suggested are:

Recommendation 1: Pause the current process of reviewing electoral boundaries during the period of the coronavirus pandemic;

Recommendation 2: Merge Hope and Caergwrle to become a two-member ward within the County of Flintshire;

Recommendation 3: Invite the LDBC to review its own Terms of Reference so that the process of boundary review gives weighting to the need to retain community cohesion in order to promote resilience during the recovery period and beyond.

Thank you for allowing me to respond to the letter from the Minister and for your consideration of the petition and the wider issues raised by the process of boundary review.