

Stratton Audley parish Council response to Boundary Commission consultation

Stratton Audley Parish Council objects most strongly to the proposed boundary changes, which would see Stratton Audley – a village immediately adjacent to Bicester, and whose future is inextricably tied to that of the rapidly-growing town – being represented by an MP whose South Oxfordshire constituency base is the town of Henley - some 35 miles away, in a different district council area, and difficult to reach by public transport. This would shatter strong local ties and do a grave electoral disservice to the residents of Stratton Audley, who would effectively be robbed of proper local representation, because their MP would have little, if any, knowledge or understanding of the local problems that they face. The Parish is part of the Bicester hinterland. Bicester is a rapidly developing area, with a substantial amount of residential development planned, and is also likely to be significantly affected by the proposals to create a strategic road link between Oxford and Cambridge. The issues of Cherwell District, both strategic, and local planning will be alien to an MP whose constituency base is some 35 miles away.

The Parish Council has noted that this review is being undertaken using old and out of date data. By using the old Cherwell district wards, which have been completely replaced by new larger wards (approximately three times the size of the old ones), the Boundary Commission is – amongst other things – failing to take into account the existence of developments that are part of Bicester, but which are being built on fields that used to be part of rural wards that were distinct from Bicester. The Boundary Commission has a statutory remit to consider “local ties that would be broken by changes in constituencies” in its deliberations; and it acknowledges that it might propose splitting a district ward “where all the possible ‘whole ward’ options in an area would significantly cut across local ties”, which is the case for Stratton Audley and its relationship with Bicester where the residents have access to health facilities (Community hospital and doctors’ surgeries) leisure facilities and major shopping outlets.

The Parish Council would also observe that the district has planned growth much faster than the national average, meaning that the Banbury & Bicester constituency – currently only 257 electors below the absolute upper limit – will be too large at the next review (the same is true for Witney, which currently has a margin of only 52 electors); • the whole-ward view will be unable to cope with the new, much larger, Cherwell district wards now in place. The above-national-average planned growth of Oxfordshire also means that, at the next review, it will no longer be possible to have constituencies that fall entirely within county boundaries: Oxfordshire is almost certain to need a new constituency – most of the current ones are near bursting point even now – but the growth is probably not fast enough to allow a new constituency that lies entirely within Oxfordshire, so it will need to be combined with areas from another county. Since it is clear that both the whole-ward and county-boundary approaches are no longer viable even in the short term, it is the Parish Council’s view that they should be abandoned now, rather than forcing villages with strong local ties to their nearby towns – and residents of new developments within those towns – to be incorrectly represented for five years due solely to the Boundary Commission’s continued use of an outdated and inappropriate methodology.

Finally the parish Council would wish to point out that the current proposals will actively harm democracy and parliamentary accountability for the electors in Stratton Audley.