

Objection to the proposed boundaries for the Banbury & Bicester and Henley & Thame constituencies

Launton Parish Council objects in the strongest terms to the proposed boundary changes, which would see Launton – a village only 200 metres from 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 some 35 miles away, in a different district, and difficult to reach by public transport. This would shatter strong local ties and do a grave electoral disservice to the inhabitants of Launton, 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 same is true for the village of Chesterton – only 700 m away from Bicester – and, most egregiously of all, the rapidly-growing Bicester housing development known as Kingsmere, which is split in two by the current proposal, with some Kingsmere residents coming under Bicester (as they should) while others come under Henley, which is preposterous.

Launton and Chesterton are by far the closest villages to Bicester (excepting Caversfield, which is almost coalesced with Bicester, but is not threatened with removal from the Bicester constituency). The villages' futures are completely shackled to that of Bicester, which is only one field away and is expanding rapidly, but under the current proposals our MP would almost certainly have no involvement with, or knowledge of, Bicester, because it's not in his constituency. Additionally, we are in Cherwell district, in the north of the county, but our MP's "home base" constituency would be 35 miles away (more than double the distance we are from Banbury) in South Oxfordshire district, which is a very different place from Cherwell; he will almost certainly have no real involvement with, or knowledge of, Cherwell DC, its issues, its emerging Local Plan, or anything.

We recognise that the Boundary Commission for England has been placed in an almost impossible position by the ridiculously small margins on constituency size imposed by the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011, and that as a result the BCE is no longer in a position where it can create sensible constituency boundaries in some areas of the country. However, we have an alternative proposal that, we believe, will minimise the damage to the local ties between the closest villages to Bicester and Banbury and their near-neighbour towns (allowing Launton, Chesterton and the Kingsmere housing development to remain part of the Banbury & Bicester constituency), while paving the way for a necessary and significant change in the way the BCE approaches setting constituency boundaries; the current approach, using local government wards as the smallest unit of electors and being very reluctant to cross county boundaries, will be completely unworkable at the next boundary review in five years' time.

It is extremely unfortunate that this review is being undertaken using old data that is now hopelessly out of date. 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 BCE 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 Kingsmere development in south-west Bicester is a prime example of this: some of the area being developed used to be part of the Bicester Town urban ward, while the rest of the area was part of the Ambrosden & Chesterton rural ward. This has now been addressed in the re-warding of Cherwell district: the whole southern part of Bicester, including the Kingsmere development, is now part of the much larger Bicester South & Ambrosden ward, while Chesterton itself is now part of the Fringford & Heyfords ward.

The BCE 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 emphatically the case here for both Launton and Chesterton, to say nothing of Bicester's Kingsmere development.

Note that this outdated whole-ward view of constituency boundaries will have to be abandoned – in North Oxfordshire at least – at the next boundary review:

- the district has planned growth that is 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 our 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 BCE's continued use of an outdated and inappropriate methodology.

Our proposal is this:

- Move the Cropredy and Wroxton wards north of Banbury (2,268 and 2,139 electors respectively) into the South Northamptonshire constituency, which at 73,443 electors is 5,064 below the upper limit and can easily accommodate these two wards. Note that strong links already exist between Cherwell and South Northamptonshire: the two district councils work jointly, with many of their operations and personnel merged.
- This would leave the Banbury & Bicester constituency with a margin of 4,664 electors before hitting the ceiling. This is nothing like enough to fit the three Bicester-area wards back in, but it should allow the rest of the Kingsmere estate, and the villages of Chesterton and Launton (by far the two closest villages to Bicester), to be split off from their wards and incorporated into the Banbury & Bicester constituency. (Note that we have been unable to find data matching the BCE's 2015 figures for the numbers of electors in anything smaller than complete district wards, so we cannot be certain of the exact numbers.)
- The villages in the Cropredy and Wroxton wards that are closest to Banbury would clearly also need to be split off from their wards and included in the Banbury & Bicester constituency: these are (in order of proximity) Drayton (300 m), Hanwell (800 m) and Little Bourton (1.2 km).
- If the 4,664 margin is insufficient to allow the towns' dependent villages into the constituency, more room could be created by moving Sibford ward (west of Banbury, 2,161 electors) into The Cotswolds constituency (74,694 electors, a margin of 3,813). If this were done, the village of North Newington (1.3 km from Banbury) should probably be split off and remain with Banbury.

As noted above, this proposal would avoid splitting the strong local ties between the villages closest to Banbury and Bicester and their towns, while preparing the way for the BCE to adopt a new strategy at the next boundary review.

We commend our proposal – or a similar solution – to the BCE, because if the Banbury & Bicester and Henley & Thame boundaries are left as they are currently proposed, it will actively harm democracy and parliamentary accountability for the electors in Bicester's Kingsmere development and the villages of Launton and Chesterton.