Wokingham Borough Council Community Governance Review: response to the consultation document issued

I write concerning the warding arrangements for Shinfield parish. I should stress that I write in a personal capacity and that the opinions expressed here are not necessarily those of Shinfield Parish Council of which I am a member and which has submitted its own response to the consultation (a response which I support). The comments which follow should be treated as a supplement to the parish's statement and refer substantially to one area within the parish, the southern part of Spencers Wood.

Firstly, I deeply regret that the opportunity has not been taken to regularise the boundary between Spencers Wood and Swallowfield Civil Parishes by the adoption of the River Lodden as the boundary.[1] This would be logical. The area from the corner of Back Lane and Basingstoke Road to the Mill House, including the Lambs Farm Business Park, is regarded locally as part of Spencers Wood and so Shinfield and this should be reflected in the boundaries. This may have implications when the next review of parliamentary constituencies takes place and it would be advantageous to get this right now.

My proposal is that the boundary between Shinfield (Spencers Wood) and Swallowfield should be moved south. It would follow the River Lodden from the point to the east of Sheepbridge Farm where it currently turns north and leaves the river in a south-westerly direction to the point where it meets the borough boundary. This is a largely rural area: the only substantial residential population is found at the Lodden Farm Mobile Home park.

Second, the proposed scheme for Shinfield in the document out for concultation consists of three wards, or rather 2.1 wards: a large multi-member (10 member) ward for Shinfield, a second but smaller ward for Grazeley, Three Mile Cross and Spencers Wood (7 members) and a small single member ward for the southern part of Spencers Wood. I write from this ward so this arrangement concerns me personally.

This scheme gives two extremely large wards of 7243 residents (which will grow with anticipated development) and 5302 residents. Both of these wards are substantially larger than the wards proposed for Earley Town Council.

A 10:7:1 split between three wards looks mighty odd and cannot be recommended. The single-member ward is justified by the fact that this area is included in the Wokingham Parliamentary Constituency. I have not heard of any justification for making it a single ward which holds water. I have heard justifications in which hypotheticals are heaped on other hypotheticals (a parliamentary election coinciding with an all-out parish council election, which happens to be contested, coinciding with a meteor strike and so on). I have been told that the arrangement is to avoid a voter placing a parish council ballot in the parliamentary ballot box and vice versa as though this eventuality presented insuperable problems.

Third, I would assume that the polling station for parish council elections in this ward (should they ever occur) as well as parliamentary elections will be at the parish hall in Swallowfield so out of the area of Shinfield parish council. In the heaped hypothetical situation of a parliamentary election coinciding with a contested parish council election, it will have to be. This cannot be acceptable. If there really has to be a single member ward (for reasons which

[1] This issue is referred to on pp. 65-6 of the consultation document where a poorly-expressed suggestion was misconstrued by the working party.

Private: Information that contains a small amount of sensitive data which is essential to communicate with an individual but doesn't require to be sent via secure methods.

in my opinion do not stack up), then there should be a polling station in the ward, which means Lambs Lane school as the only 'public' building within its bounds.

I do think that Spencers Wood is deeply disadvantaged by the parliamentary arrangements, and this proposal exacerbates the situation. Electoral Services should be working to mitigate a regrettable state of affairs and not to perpetuate it and, indeed, exacerbate it. It is a reasonable expectation that residents of Spencers Wood should be able to vote in Spencers Wood without having to travel to a neighbouring village (which might be acceptable for individuals with cars, but the distance would be regarded as too far to walk by many, and the public transport to Swallowfield is pretty lamentable). Current arrangements are a substantial disincentive against voting.

Fourth, if there has to be a sole single-member parish ward for *legal* reasons rather than administrative convenience, then this should set the tone for the whole of Shinfield parish which should be warded with two or three member wards in line with either the existing arrangements or the conclusions of the LGBCE review. This is now the opinion of Shinfield parish council and I commend their response to this consultation to you. Large wards might allow for maximum freedom to co-opt. They bring multiple disadvantages including areas being left unrepresented. Moreover large wards are impossible to manage if by-elections are to be contested. This has cost implications for both the parish council and competing parties. It serves to exclude independents. It is not hard to envisage a situation where the multi-member wards cannot find enough candidates but the single-member ward is contested. Ultimately this is a question of uniformity of practice over the parish area and simple equity. The implementation of a system of system of smaller wards is therefore an imperative and I trust that this will be done.

Fifth, I might add that Shinfield north of the M4 is very different to Shinfield south of the M4 and requires its own representation on the parish council rather than being crowded out by councillors from the southern (majority) area of the parish. Neither of the two councillors for Shinfield North whose positions are currently vacant lived in North Shinfield. This alone is a justification for **not** proceeding with the 10:7:1 arrangement proposed by WBC. Whilst I don't think that any part of the proposal is acceptable, Shinfield north of the M4 should, at the very least, form a two member ward.

[Redacted]

10 November 2025

Private: Information that contains a small amount of sensitive data which is essential to communicate with an individual but doesn't require to be sent via secure methods.