Electoral and Polling District Review Sub Committee – 15 November 2024

Written responses to questions raised by Committee Members

Question 1:

Councillor C O'Leary stated that at a previous meeting of the predecessor committee to this one [Electoral Review Sub Committee], Mr Godden provided proposals, and at that meeting, the then Chair of the sub-committee, who was also the leader of the Labour Group and the Leader of the Council, asked that Officers support Mr Godden in preparing some alternative proposals.

Councillor C O'Leary requested information regarding if the support happened, if any support was provided to any other members of the public, and if Councillor Corcoran at any time made it clear to officers that Mister Godden was representing the Tatton Labour Party?

Response 1:

Provided by Nick Billington, Strategic Planning Research & Intelligence Analyst

Shortly before the 31 January 2024 Electoral Review Sub-Committee meetings, its then Chair, Cllr Corcoran, alerted me to Mr Godden's emerging ideas about Knutsford's warding and sought my initial views. I advised him that Mr Godden's initial proposal was unlikely to receive support from the Boundary Commission, due to its inadequate electoral equality. This explains why I had this advice to hand for the Sub-Committee meeting itself (see 'Public speaking/ open session' minute extract quoted further below). My recollection is that this one-to-one discussion with Cllr Corcoran was purely verbal and occurred too close to the Sub-Committee meeting itself for any written (email) feedback to be produced and saved for the record. However, I am certain that no mention of Mr Godden's party political ties was made.

The published minutes of the 31 January 2024 Electoral Review Sub-Committee (at which Cllr O'Leary was present) explain how it came to be proposed that officers should provide support to Mr Godden in (further) developing his proposals for Knutsford's warding. Under the 'Public speaking/ open session' item, the minutes note that:

"Joe Godden commented that some people in the Cross Town and St John's Wood areas of Knutsford did not feel appropriately represented under the present single, three-member ward arrangement. He suggested that Knutsford be divided into a single member ward for Cross Town and St John's Wood and a two member ward for the rest of the town, although he recognised that this would result in the former ward being under-represented and the latter over-represented in terms of the Boundary Commission's electoral equality criterion. At the Chair's request, Mr

Billington advised that the extent of the resulting variances made it unlikely that they would be accepted by the Boundary Commission."

Then, under the 'Cheshire East Electoral Review – warding proposals' item, the minutes state:

"With regard to Knutsford, which was raised under public speaking, the Chair [Cllr Corcoran] suggested that Mr Godden, who was still present, might wish to work with Mr Billington to see if an appropriate arrangement could be brought forward in time for consideration by the Corporate Policy Committee."

The suggestion of officer support for Mr Godden was consequently adopted at (or at least not blocked by) the Sub-Committee.

In response, I liaised with Mr Godden, mainly by email (but also via a brief phone call or two), between 1 and 6 February 2024, to work out an alternative warding arrangement that created a separate North East ward that appeared to potentially satisfy the Commission's electoral equality (and other) criteria. I provided no further support or advice to Mr Godden after 6 February 2024. The phone calls simply sought feedback from Mr Godden on analysis I had emailed to him earlier and so that verbal input from me did not include any additional advice or support beyond that documented in emails (which have been saved for the record).

It was not until the Corporate Policy Committee Member briefing meeting that took place (via Teams, as I recall) on 8 February, that anyone stated that Mr Godden had any past or present ties to a specific political party. As I recall, it was Cllr O'Leary who did so.

Following the comments at the Corporate Policy Committee Member briefing meeting about Mr Godden's political ties, I checked out (also on 8 February) online evidence (including a local media article), which confirmed Mr Godden had previously stood as a Labour Party election candidate. I shared this information with other officers involved in the Review, Mr Reed included. The officer team agreed that it would be prudent for me to avoid providing Mr Godden with any extra support and I indicated this in a very brief 9 February response to him, citing officer capacity constraints as reasonable justification for being unable to assist him further.

The Electoral Review officer team has provided information to other external individuals or organisations in relation to the current Review and understands that some of this may have been used to help inform those individuals' or organisations' responses to the Review's public consultation stages.