

Draft recommendations on the
future electoral arrangements for
South Northamptonshire in
Northamptonshire

Further electoral review

May 2005

Translations and other formats

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What is The Boundary Committee for England?

The Boundary Committee for England is a committee of The Electoral Commission, an independent body set up by Parliament under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. It is responsible for conducting electoral reviews as directed by The Electoral Commission or the Secretary of State.

Members of the Committee are:

Pamela Gordon (Chair)
Robin Gray
Joan Jones CBE
Ann M. Kelly CBE
Professor Colin Mellors

Archie Gall (Director)

When conducting reviews our aim is to ensure that the number of electors represented by each councillor in an area is as nearly as possible the same, taking into account local circumstances. We can recommend changes to ward boundaries, the number of councillors and ward names. We can also recommend changes to the electoral arrangements of parish and town councils.

Executive summary

The Boundary Committee for England is responsible for conducting electoral reviews as directed by The Electoral Commission or the Secretary of State. As a result of the poor levels of electoral equality in South Northamptonshire under the existing arrangements, The Electoral Commission directed the Boundary Committee to review the electoral arrangements of the district on 2 June 2004. The broad objective of this electoral review is to achieve, as far as possible, equal representation across the district as a whole.

Current electoral arrangements

Under the existing arrangements, 15 wards currently have electoral variances of more than 10% from the district average. The development that the District Council forecast during the last review for the five-year period that occurred between 1996 and 2001 was, in some areas, not realised, particularly in Cogenhoe ward. However, currently in Courteenhall ward, more development was undertaken than expected, which has resulted in it having a particularly poor variance, with 40% more electors than the district average.

The table below outlines the four stages of this review.

Stage	Stage starts	Description
One	3 August 2004	Submission of proposals to us
Two	16 November 2004	Our analysis and deliberation
Three	17 May 2005	Publication of draft recommendations and consultation on them
Four	9 August 2005	Final deliberation prior to our final recommendations to The Electoral Commission

Submissions received

We received 11 submissions at Stage One with the District Council providing the only district-wide proposals. Nine parish councils and one district councillor responded with submissions relating to individual areas.

Analysis and draft recommendations

Electorate figures

During Stage One Gayton Parish Council questioned whether the electorate projections for 2008 were too conservative. It considered that Bugbrooke village was subject to the possible development of 100 new properties over the next 10 years. We sought further clarification from the District Council in respect of this potential development. It reiterated that it was content with the projections it had provided and considered any potential development would not be in place by 2008. We are therefore content to continue using the electorate figures based on the information provided by the District Council in its submission to us.

Council size

The District Council proposed an increase in council size to 43 councillors from 42. However, we were not persuaded by the argumentation or evidence it provided for this proposal. Having considered all the information made available to us, we are of the view that a case, albeit limited, has been made by the council that there should not be a reduction in council size. However, we were not sufficiently persuaded by the evidence provided that an increase in council size to 43 would provide for the best balance of the statutory criteria. Having looked at the distribution of councillors across the district we consider that a council size of 42 members in a pattern of 27 wards would provide for better levels of electoral equality while reflecting local ties and providing for convenient and effective local government when compared to a council size of 43 members.

General analysis

We propose adopting 10 of the rural wards proposed by the District Council, predominantly situated towards the south of the district. However, in order to provide for significant improvements in the levels of electoral equality in the district we are either proposing amendments to the District Council's proposals or putting forward our own proposals across the remainder of the district, including amendments to its proposals in the towns of Towcester and Brackley.

What happens next?

There will now be a consultation period, during which everyone is invited to comment on the draft recommendations on future electoral arrangements for South Northamptonshire contained in this report. We will take fully into account all submissions received by 8 August 2005. Any received **after** this date may not be taken into account.

We have not finalised our conclusions on the electoral arrangements for South Northamptonshire and welcome comments from interested parties. We would particularly welcome local views, backed up by demonstrable evidence, during Stage Three. We will consider all the evidence submitted to us during the consultation period before preparing our final recommendations.

Express your views by writing directly to us:

**Review Manager
South Northamptonshire Review
The Boundary Committee for England
Trevelyan House
Great Peter Street
London SW1P 2HW**

Table 1: Draft recommendations : Summary

Ward name	Number of councillors	Constituent areas
1 Astwell	1	Unchanged (the parishes of Helmdon, Radstone, Syresham and Whitfield)
2 Blakesley & Cote	2	Blakesley ward; Cote ward
3 Blisworth & Roade	2	Blisworth ward; part of Courteenhall ward (the parish of Roade)
4 Brackley East	2	The proposed East parish ward of Brackley parish
5 Brackley South	2	The proposed South parish ward of Brackley parish
6 Brackley West	2	The proposed West parish ward of Brackley parish
7 Brafield & Yardley	2	Cogenhoe ward; Yardley ward; part of Chase ward (the parishes of Little Houghton and Brafield-on-the Green)
8 Cosgrove & Grafton	1	Part of Cosgrove ward (the parish of Cosgrove); part of Grafton ward (the parishes of Grafton Regis and Yardley Gobion)
9 Danvers & Wardoun	2	Wardoun ward
10 Deanshanger	2	Unchanged (the parishes of Deanshanger and Wicken)
11 Downs & Heyford	2	Part of Downs ward (the parish of Bugbrooke); Heyford ward
12 Grange Park	2	Part of Courteenhall ward (the parishes of Courteenhall, Grange Park and Milton Malsor)
13 Hackleton	1	Part of Chase ward (the parishes of Hackleton and Quinton)
14 Harpole & Grange	2	Grange ward; Harpole ward; part of Downs ward (the parish of Gayton)
15 Kings Sutton	1	Unchanged (the parish of Kings Sutton)
16 Kingthorn	1	Unchanged (the parishes of Bradden and Greens Norton)
17 Little Brook	1	Unchanged (the parishes of Aynho, Croughton and Evenley)
18 Middleton Cheney	2	Unchanged (the parishes of Middleton Cheney, Overthorpe and Warkworth)
19 Old Stratford	1	Part of Cosgrove ward (the parish of Old Stratford)
20 Salcey	1	Salcey ward; part of Grafton ward (the parish of Ashton)
21 Silverstone	1	Unchanged (the parish of Silverstone)
22 Steane	1	Unchanged (the parishes of Farthinghoe, Greatworth, Hinton-in-the Hedges and Newbottle)

Ward name	Number of councillors	Constituent areas
23 Tove	1	Tove ward; part of Grafton ward (the parish of Alderton)
24 Towcester Brook	3	the proposed Brook parish ward of Towcester parish
25 Towcester Mill	2	Easton Neston parish; the proposed Mill parish ward of Towcester parish
26 Washington	1	Unchanged (the parishes of Abthorpe, Moreton Pinkney, Sulgrave, Wappenham and Weston & Weedon)
27 Whittlewood	1	Unchanged (the parishes of Potterspury and Whittlebury)

Notes:

1. The whole district is parished.
2. The maps accompanying this report illustrate the proposed wards outlined above.
3. We have made a number of minor boundary amendments to ensure that existing ward boundaries adhere to ground detail. These changes do not affect any electors.

Table 2: Draft recommendations for South Northamptonshire district – 2003 electorate

Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2003)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
1 Astwell	1	1,523	1,523	3
2 Blakesley & Cote	2	2,724	1,362	-8
3 Blisworth & Roade	2	3,220	1,610	8
4 Brackley East	2	3,299	1,650	11
5 Brackley South	2	2,947	1,474	-1
6 Brackley West	2	3,135	1,568	6
7 Brafield & Yardley	2	3,311	1,656	12
8 Cosgrove & Grafton	1	1,533	1,533	3
9 Danvers & Wardoun	2	2,883	1,442	-3
10 Deanshanger	2	2,659	1,330	-10
11 Downs & Heyford	2	3,442	1,721	16
12 Grange Park	2	2,375	1,188	-20
13 Hackleton	1	1,721	1,721	16
14 Harpole & Grange	2	3,011	1,506	1
15 Kings Sutton	1	1,603	1,603	8
16 Kingthorn	1	1,344	1,344	-9
17 Little Brook	1	1,510	1,510	2
18 Middleton Cheney	2	3,003	1,502	1
19 Old Stratford	1	1,355	1,355	-9
20 Salcey	1	1,670	1,670	13
21 Silverstone	1	1,498	1,498	1
22 Steane	1	1,505	1,505	1
23 Tove	1	1,430	1,430	-4
24 Towcester Brook	3	4,371	1,457	-2
25 Towcester Mill	2	2,336	1,168	-21

Table 2 (continued) : Draft recommendations for South Northamptonshire district – 2008 electorate

Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2008)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
1 Astwell	1	1,639	1,639	4
2 Blakesley & Cote	2	2,834	1,417	-10
3 Blisworth & Roade	2	3,255	1,628	3
4 Brackley East	2	3,445	1,723	9
5 Brackley South	2	3,376	1,688	7
6 Brackley West	2	3,227	1,614	2
7 Brafield & Yardley	2	3,415	1,708	8
8 Cosgrove & Grafton	1	1,615	1,615	2
9 Danvers & Wardoun	2	2,966	1,483	-6
10 Deanshanger	2	3,060	1,530	-3
11 Downs & Heyford	2	3,457	1,729	9
12 Grange Park	2	3,352	1,676	6
13 Hackleton	1	1,751	1,751	11
14 Harpole & Grange	2	3,040	1,520	-4
15 Kings Sutton	1	1,682	1,682	6
16 Kingthorn	1	1,391	1,391	-12
17 Little Brook	1	1,608	1,608	2
18 Middleton Cheney	2	3,048	1,524	-4
19 Old Stratford	1	1,538	1,538	-3
20 Salcey	1	1,670	1,670	6
21 Silverstone	1	1,615	1,615	2
22 Steane	1	1,528	1,528	-3
23 Tove	1	1,451	1,451	-8
24 Towcester Brook	3	4,460	1,487	-6
25 Towcester Mill	2	2,950	1,475	-7

Table 2 (continued): Draft recommendations for South Northamptonshire district – 2003 electorate

Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2003)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
26 Washington	1	1,337	1,337	-10
27 Whittlewood	1	1,583	1,583	7
Totals	42	62,328	-	-
Averages	-	-	1,484	-

Table 2 (continued): Draft recommendations for South Northamptonshire district – 2008 electorate

Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2008)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
26 Washington	1	1,399	1,399	-12
27 Whittlewood	1	1,634	1,634	3
Totals	42	66,406	-	-
Averages	-	-	1,581	-

Source: Electorate figures are based on information provided by South Northamptonshire District Council.

Note: The 'variance from average' column shows by how far, in percentage terms, the number of electors per councillor in each ward varies from the average for the District. The minus symbol (-) denotes a lower than average number of electors. Figures have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

1 Introduction

1 This report contains our proposals for the electoral arrangements for the district of South Northamptonshire, on which we are now consulting.

2 At its meeting on 12 February 2004 The Electoral Commission agreed that the Boundary Committee should make on-going assessments of electoral variances in all local authorities where the five-year forecast period following a Periodic Electoral Review (PER) has elapsed. It was agreed that the criteria for deciding which authorities should be investigated were that either:

- 30% of wards in an authority had electoral variances of over 10% from the average; or
- any single ward had a variance of more than 30% from the average.

3 The intention of the research was to establish the reasons behind the continuing imbalances and assess what action, if any, was appropriate to rectify the situation.

4 This is our first review of the electoral arrangements of South Northamptonshire. South Northamptonshire's last review was carried out by the Local Government Commission for England, which reported to the Secretary of State in March 1997. An Order implementing the new electoral arrangements was made on 8 October 1998 and the first elections on the new arrangements took place in May 1999.

5 In carrying out these reviews we must have regard to:

- the statutory criteria contained in section 13(5) of the Local Government Act 1992 (as amended by SI 2001 No. 3962), i.e. the need to:
 - reflect the identities and interests of local communities;
 - secure effective and convenient local government; and
 - achieve equality of representation.
- Schedule 11 to the Local Government Act 1972.

6 Details of the legislation under which the review of South Northamptonshire is being conducted are set out in a document entitled *Guidance and procedural advice for periodic electoral reviews* (published by the EC in July 2002). This *Guidance* sets out the approach to the review.

7 Our task is to make recommendations to The Electoral Commission on the number of councillors who should serve on a council, and the number, boundaries and names of wards. We can also propose changes to the electoral arrangements for parish and town councils in the district.

8 The broad objective of an electoral review is to achieve, as far as possible, equal representation across the district as a whole. Schemes which would result in, or retain, an electoral imbalance of over 10% in any ward will have to be fully justified. Any imbalances of 20% or more should only arise in the most exceptional circumstances, and will require the strongest justification.

9 Electoral equality, in the sense of each elector in a local authority having a vote of equal weight when it comes to the election of councillors, is a fundamental democratic principle. When electoral imbalances arise across an area, or between individual wards, that principle can become eroded if the imbalances are left uncorrected. Accordingly, the objective of an electoral review is to ensure that the number of electors represented by each councillor is, as near as is possible, the same across a district. In practice, providing that each councillor represents exactly the same number of electors is unachievable given geographic and other constraints, including the make up and distribution of communities. However, our aim in any review is to recommend wards that are as close to the district average as possible in terms of the number of electors per councillor, while also taking account of evidence in relation to community identity and effective and convenient local government.

10 We are not prescriptive on council size. However, we believe that any proposals relating to council size, whether these are for an increase, a reduction or the retention of the existing size, should be supported by strong evidence and arguments. The Electoral Commission's *Guidance* to the Committee on this subject is quite clear. It is of paramount importance that any council size proposed to us has been developed and can be argued in the context of the authority's internal political management structures, put in place following the Local Government Act 2000. It should also reflect the changing role of councillors in the new structure. As intimated in its *Guidance*, The Electoral Commission does not allow for the decision on council size to be based purely on addressing any imbalances in small areas of the authority by simply adding or removing councillors from these areas. While we will consider the factor of achieving the correct allocation of councillors between, say, a number of towns in an authority or between rural and urban areas, our starting point must always be ensuring that the authority's political management arrangements are best employed under the recommended council size, and that this can be shown to be so.

11 In addition, we do not accept that an increase or decrease in the electorate of the authority should automatically result in a consequent increase or decrease in the number of councillors. Similarly, we do not accept that changes should be made to the size of a council simply to make it more consistent with the size of neighbouring or similarly sized authorities. We will seek to ensure that our recommended council size best allows the political management structures to be employed most effectively, achieves a good allocation of councillors across the district.

12 Where our recommendation is for multi-member wards, we believe that the number of councillors to be returned from each ward should not exceed three, other than in very exceptional circumstances. Numbers in excess of three could result in an unacceptable dilution of accountability to the electorate and we have not, to date, prescribed any wards with more than three councillors.

The review is in four stages (see Table 3).

Table 3: Stages of the review

Stage	Stage Starts	Description
One	3 August 2004	Submission of proposals to us
Two	16 November 2004	Our analysis and deliberation
Three	17 May 2005	Publication of draft recommendations and consultation on them
Four	9 August 2005	Final deliberation prior to our final recommendations to The Electoral Commission

13 Stage One began on 3 August 2004, when we wrote to South Northamptonshire Council inviting proposals for future electoral arrangements. We also notified Northamptonshire Police Authority, the Local Government Association, parish and town councils in the district, Members of Parliament with constituency interests in the district, Members of the European Parliament for the East Midlands Region and the headquarters of the main political parties. We placed a notice in the local press, issued a press release and invited South Northamptonshire Council to publicise the review further. The closing date for receipt of representations, the end of Stage One, was 15 November 2004.

14 During Stage Two we considered all the submissions received during Stage One and prepared our draft recommendations.

15 We are currently at Stage Three. This stage, which began on 17 May 2005 and will end on 8 August 2005, involves publishing the draft proposals in this report and public consultation on them. **We take this consultation very seriously and it is therefore important that all those interested in the review should let us have their views and evidence, whether or not they agree with these draft proposals.**

16 During Stage Four we will reconsider the draft recommendations in the light of the Stage Three consultation, decide whether to modify them, and submit final recommendations to The Electoral Commission. It will then be for the Commission to accept, modify or reject our final recommendations. If The Electoral Commission accepts the recommendations, with or without modification, it will make an Order. The Electoral Commission will determine when any changes come into effect.

Equal Opportunities

17 As detailed, in formulating its recommendations, the Boundary Committee has also had regard to:

- the general duty set out in section 71(1) of the Race Relations Act 1996 and the statutory Code of Practice on the Duty to Promote Race Equality (Commission for Racial Equality, May 2002), i.e. to have due regard to:
 - eliminate unlawful racial discrimination;
 - promote equality of opportunity; and
 - promote good relations between people of different racial groups.

National Parks, AONB and the Broads

18 The Boundary Committee has had regard to:

- Section 11A(2) of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 (as inserted by section 62 of the Environment Act 1995). This states that, in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in a National Park, any relevant authority shall have regard to the Park's purposes. If there is a conflict between those purposes, a relevant authority shall attach greater weight to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the Park.
- Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. This states that, in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in an AONB, a relevant authority shall have regard to the purpose of the AONB.
- Section 17A of the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads Act (as inserted by section 97 Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000). This states that, in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in the Broads, a relevant authority shall have regard to the purposes of the Broads.

2 Current electoral arrangements

19 The district of South Northamptonshire is bounded by the counties of Buckinghamshire, Warwickshire and Oxfordshire, by the unitary authority Milton Keynes and by the local authorities of Daventry and Northampton. It is a predominantly rural district with two small market towns, Brackley and Towcester. The district has excellent road links which help serve the expanding residential and high technology business sectors in the area.

20 As mentioned in paragraph 2 of this report, in early 2004 The Boundary Committee for England undertook initial research into electoral imbalances that have occurred in local authority areas where the five-year forecast period following a PER has elapsed. We noted that in December 2003 in South Northamptonshire, 15 of its 31 wards (48%) varied by more than 10% from the district average. This is compared to seven wards (23%) forecast by 2001 to vary by more than 10% under the previous electoral review. We also noted that Courteenhall ward varied by 40% from the district average. Further research into the levels of electoral inequality did not suggest that the imbalances were likely to rectify themselves and as a result The Electoral Commission directed The Boundary Committee for England to undertake a review of the electoral arrangements of South Northamptonshire Council on 2 June 2004.

21 The district is entirely parished and contains 79 parishes. The towns of Brackley and Towcester comprise 26% of the district's total electorate.

22 The electorate of the district is 62,328 (December 2003). The Council presently has 42 members who are elected from 31 wards, five of which are relatively urban in Brackley and Towcester and the remainder being predominantly rural.

23 At present, each councillor represents an average of 1,484 electors, which the Council forecasts will increase to 1,581 by the year 2008 if the present number of councillors is maintained. However, since the last electoral review, the number of electors per councillor in 15 of the 31 wards varies by more than 10% from the district average, two wards by more than 20% and one ward by more than 30%. The worst imbalance is in Courteenhall ward where the councillors represent 40% more electors than the district average.

24 To compare levels of electoral inequality between wards, we calculated the extent to which the number of electors per councillor in each ward (the councillor:elector ratio) varies from the district average in percentage terms. In the text which follows this calculation may also be described using the shorthand term 'electoral variance'. We may also refer to a ward having more electors than the district average or fewer electors than the district average.

Table 4: Existing electoral arrangements in South Northamptonshire district - 2003

Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2003)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
1 Astwell	1	1,523	1,523	3
2 Blakesley	1	1,249	1,249	-16
3 Blisworth	1	1,449	1,449	-2
4 Brackley East	2	3,304	1,652	11
5 Brackley South	2	2,759	1,380	-7
6 Brackley West	2	3,318	1,659	12
7 Chase	2	2,557	1,279	-14
8 Cogenhoe	1	1,163	1,163	-22
9 Cosgrove	1	1,752	1,752	18
10 Cote	1	1,475	1,475	-1
11 Courteenhall	2	4,146	2,073	40
12 Deanshanger	2	2,659	1,330	-10
13 Downs	2	2,551	1,276	-14
14 Grafton	1	1,533	1,533	3
15 Grange	1	1,316	1,316	-11
16 Harpole	1	1,260	1,260	-15
17 Heyford	1	1,326	1,326	-11
18 Kings Sutton	1	1,603	1,603	8
19 Kingthorn	1	1,344	1,344	-9
20 Little Brook	1	1,510	1,510	2
21 Middleton Cheney	2	3,003	1,502	1
22 Salcey	1	1,382	1,382	-7
23 Silverstone	1	1,498	1,498	1
24 Steane	1	1,505	1,505	1
25 Tove	1	1,321	1,321	-11

Table 4 (continued): Existing electoral arrangements in South Northamptonshire district - 2008

Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2008)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
1 Astwell	1	1,636	1,636	3
2 Blakesley	1	1,309	1,309	-17
3 Blisworth	1	1,444	1,444	-9
4 Brackley East	2	3,450	1,725	9
5 Brackley South	2	3,188	1,594	1
6 Brackley West	2	3,410	1,705	8
7 Chase	2	2,631	1,316	-17
8 Cogenhoe	1	1,167	1,167	-26
9 Cosgrove	1	2,015	2,015	27
10 Cote	1	1,525	1,525	-4
11 Courteenhall	2	5,163	2,582	63
12 Deanshanger	2	3,060	1,530	-3
13 Downs	2	2,567	1,284	-19
14 Grafton	1	1,536	1,536	-3
15 Grange	1	1,326	1,326	-16
16 Harpole	1	1,273	1,273	-19
17 Heyford	1	1,331	1,331	-16
18 Kings Sutton	1	1,682	1,682	6
19 Kingthorn	1	1,391	1,391	-12
20 Little Brook	1	1,608	1,608	2
21 Middleton Cheney	2	3,048	1,524	-4
22 Salcey	1	1,382	1,382	-13
23 Silverstone	1	1,615	1,615	2
24 Steane	1	1,528	1,528	-3
25 Tove	1	1,341	1,341	-15

Table 4 (continued): Existing electoral arrangements in South Northamptonshire district - 2003

Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2003)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
26 Towcester Brook	2	3,402	1,701	15
27 Towcester Mill	2	3,305	1,653	11
28 Wardoun	2	2,883	1,442	-3
29 Washington	1	1,337	1,337	-10
30 Whittlewood	1	1,583	1,583	7
31 Yardley	1	1,312	1,312	-12
Totals	42	62,328	-	-
Averages	-	-	1,484	-

Table 4 (continued): Existing electoral arrangements in South Northamptonshire district - 2008

Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2008)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
26 Towcester Brook	2	3,491	1,746	10
27 Towcester Mill	2	3,919	1,960	24
28 Wardoun	2	2,966	1,483	-6
29 Washington	1	1,399	1,399	-12
30 Whittlewood	1	1,634	1,634	3
31 Yardley	1	1,368	1,368	-13
Totals	42	66,403	-	-
Averages	-	-	1,581	-

Source: Electorate figures are based on information provided by South Northamptonshire Council.

Note: The 'variance from average' column shows by how far, in percentage terms, the number of electors per councillor varies from the average for the district. The minus symbol (-) denotes a lower than average number of electors. For example, in 2003, electors in Cogenhoe ward were relatively over-represented by 22%, while electors in Courteenhall ward were significantly under-represented by 40%. Figures have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

3 Submissions received

25 At the start of the review, members of the public and other interested parties were invited to write to us giving their views on the future electoral arrangements for South Northamptonshire Council and its constituent parish and town councils.

26 During this initial stage of the review, officers from the Boundary Committee visited the area and met officers and members from the District Council. We are grateful to all concerned for their co-operation and assistance. We received 11 representations during Stage One, including a district-wide scheme from the Council, all of which may be inspected at our offices and those of the District Council.

South Northamptonshire Council

27 The Council proposed a council of 43 members, one more than at present, serving 33 wards, compared to the existing 31, although it acknowledged that the submitted scheme resulted 'in a number of imbalances'. However, in providing this scheme, it argued that although the levels of electoral equality were poor it did not 'cause unacceptable damage to local ties, community identities and effective and convenient local government'. Under its proposals 16 out of 33 wards would vary by more than 10% per councillor from the district average.

Parish and town councils

28 Representations were received from nine parish and town councils. The parish councils of Abthorpe, Gayton, Harpole and Stoke Bruerne and the town council of Brackley all proposed that the current arrangements in their areas be maintained. Deanshanger Parish Council stated that South Northamptonshire is currently a 'fast-growing area' and also raised issues regarding the external boundaries of the district and European representation in the area, neither of which we can address as part of this review. Roade Parish Council argued that the electoral imbalance resulting from a single councillor representing Roade, in terms of quality of representation, would be insignificant when compared to the split loyalties that would be faced by a councillor in a larger ward. It also emphasised the importance of identity in rural areas. Milton Malsor Parish Council stated that the parish of Grange Park should form a ward on its own and that its parish has more in common with the parishes of Blisworth and Stoke Bruerne than with Roade. Yardley Gobion Parish Council proposed that it be combined with the parish of Potterspury to form a single-member Moor End ward.

Other representations

29 A further representation was received from a District Councillor Sergison-Brooke who proposed that the current ward of Wardoun be divided to form two single-member wards in order to reduce confusion and councillor workloads.

4 Analysis and draft recommendations

30 We have not finalised our conclusions on the electoral arrangements for South Northamptonshire and welcome comments from all those interested relating to the proposed ward boundaries, number of councillors, ward names, and parish and town council electoral arrangements. In particular, we found our decisions regarding much of the district to be a difficult judgement between our statutory criteria. This was due to the lack of evidence received from local interested parties during Stage One. In these cases we have sought to achieve the best levels of electoral equality in the absence of any evidence reflecting the other two criteria, and would particularly welcome local views, backed up by demonstrable evidence, during Stage Three. We will consider all the evidence submitted to us during the consultation period before preparing our final recommendations.

31 As described earlier, the prime aim in considering the most appropriate electoral arrangements for South Northamptonshire is to achieve electoral equality. In doing so we have regard to section 13(5) of the Local Government Act 1992 (as amended):

- the need to secure effective and convenient local government;
- reflect the identities and interests of local communities; and
- secure the matters referred to in paragraph 3(2)(a) of Schedule 11 to the Local Government Act 1972 (equality of representation).

32 Schedule 11 to the Local Government Act 1972 refers to the number of electors per councillor being 'as nearly as may be, the same in every ward of the district or borough'. In relation to Schedule 11, our recommendations are not intended to be based solely on existing electorate figures, but also on estimated changes in the number and distribution of local government electors likely to take place over the next five years. We must also have regard to the desirability of fixing identifiable boundaries and to maintaining local ties.

33 It is therefore impractical to design an electoral scheme which results in exactly the same number of electors per councillor in every ward of an authority. There must be a degree of flexibility. However, our approach, in the context of the statutory criteria, is that such flexibility must be kept to a minimum.

34 We accept that the achievement of absolute electoral equality for an authority as a whole is likely to be unattainable. However, we consider that, if electoral imbalances are to be minimised, the aim of electoral equality should be the starting point in any review. We therefore strongly recommend that, in formulating electoral schemes, local authorities and other interested parties should make electoral equality their starting point, and then make adjustments to reflect relevant factors such as community identity and interests. Five-year forecasts of changes in electorate must also be considered and we would aim to recommend a scheme which provides improved electoral equality over this five-year period.

35 The recommendations do not affect county, district or parish external boundaries, local taxes, or result in changes to postcodes. Nor is there any evidence that these recommendations will have an adverse effect on house prices, or car and house insurance premiums. Our proposals do not take account of parliamentary boundaries,

and we are not, therefore, able to take into account any representations which are based on these issues.

Electorate figures

36 Since the start of the previous electoral review of South Northamptonshire in 1996 there has been a 13% increase in the electorate of the district. The Council had expected growth in Brackley West, Deanshanger and Tove wards. However, between 1996 and 2003 there has been growth across the district. This has resulted in a knock-on effect across the district. The Council submitted electorate forecasts for the year 2008, projecting an increase in the electorate of approximately 7% from 62,328 to 66,406 over the five-year period from 2003 to 2008. It expects most of the growth to be in Grange Park ward, although further growth is also expected across the district. In order to prepare these forecasts, the Council estimated rates and locations of housing development with regard to development plans, the expected rate of building over the five-year period and assumed occupancy rates.

37 Gayton Parish Council questioned whether the electorate projections for 2008 were too conservative. It considered that Bugbrooke village was subject to the possible development of 100 new properties over the next 10 years. We sought further clarification from the District Council in respect of this potential development. It reiterated that it was content with the projections it had provided and considered any potential development would not be in place by 2008. We are therefore content to continue using the electorate figures based on the information provided by the District Council in its submission to us.

38 We know that forecasting electorates is difficult and, having considered the Council's figures, accept that they are the best estimates that can reasonably be made at this time.

Council size

39 South Northamptonshire District Council presently has 42 members. The District Council proposed an increase in council size of one member to 43. However, we did not consider that it had supplied us with enough detailed discussion about how the council would operate under its proposed 43 members. We therefore asked for further evidence in support of a council of size of 43 members. In its supplementary submission relating to council size it stated that 42 members 'worked fairly well and provided effective and convenient local government'. It further stated that the increase to 43 would 'perpetuate this effectiveness'. It also considered that any decrease in the number of councillors would result in a difficulty in maintaining the effective geographical coverage of parished areas by councillors. It also argued that a council size of 43 councillors would result in no more than four or five parishes within each ward and that the extra councillor would enable the growth in the Grange Park area to be covered by a two-member ward. Gayton Parish Council also stated it did not want a reduction in council size.

40 We were not satisfied that this response allowed us to assess whether the proposed increase provided the best council size, so we requested more information. Specifically we requested argumentation and evidence demonstrating clearly why such an increase would enable South Northamptonshire Council to function more effectively than under the existing council size of 42, and why the larger council would provide for more

effective and convenient local government. In a second supplementary submission the District Council acknowledged that while we were seeking evidence as to how the proposed council size impacted on matters relating to political management structures and the roles of councillors, its prime considerations were different. It looked at council size assessing the rural nature of the district and how it considered the effect of the geographical/transport linkages and representational role of members related to effectively covering parishes. It therefore repeated much of what had been submitted previously, the starting point being the number of councillors who can each properly cover the area allocated to them in a ward.

41 Having considered all the information made available to us we are of the view that a case, albeit limited, has been made by the council that there should not be a reduction in council size. Indeed, the District Council makes much more of a positive argument for the retention of 42 members, with only the negative assertion that there should be no less than 43 members, as this would make it difficult for the members 'to represent the electorate at [a] local level'. We have not been convinced that there is any evidence to show how an increase of one councillor will improve the representational role of councillors.

42 We also noted that under the proposed council size of 43 members it was not possible to provide for a good allocation of councillors to the towns of Towcester and Brackley and to the rural area. With the towns of Brackley and Towcester being quite discrete in relation to the rural hinterlands around them we did not consider that the statutory criteria would be well reflected by combining parts of the towns with the surrounding rural areas. Therefore we have looked at Brackley and Towcester in isolation from the rural areas of the district. However, we noted that the District Council's ward pattern under a council size of 43, which did not mix the urban and rural areas, was not viable if the correct allocation of councillors was to be achieved for Brackley, Towcester and the rural area. A council size of 42 would provide a good allocation of six, five and 31 members for the towns of Brackley, Towcester and the rural areas respectively. Based on the electorate totals and councillor:elector ratio, under a council size of 43, Brackley, Towcester and the rural areas would merit seven, five and 32 councillors respectively, a total of 44. Therefore, under a council size of 43 members it is not possible to provided for the correct allocation of councillors. The District Council allocated six, four and 33 councillors respectively. It is usually the case that electoral equality is difficult to achieve where areas are not allocated the right number of councillors. Based on the evidence available, we therefore propose retaining the present council size of 42 members.

43 Having looked at the size and distribution of the electorate, the geography and other characteristics of the area, together with the responses received, we conclude that the statutory criteria would best be met by a council of 42 members as at present.

Electoral equality

44 As stated in paragraph 8, electoral equality, in the sense of each elector in a local authority having a vote of equal weight when it comes to the election of councillors, is a fundamental democratic principle. The Electoral Commission expects the Boundary Committee's recommendations to provide for high levels of electoral equality, with variances normally well below 10%. However, when making recommendations we will not simply aim for electoral variances of under 10%. Where no justification is provided

for specific ward proposals we will look to improve electoral equality, seeking a number of electors per councillor as close to the district average as possible. It is the Committee's aim to reduce all levels of under or over-representation providing this can be achieved without compromising the reflection of the identities and interests of local communities and securing effective and convenient local government. We take the view that any proposals that would result in, or retain, an electoral imbalance of over 10% from the average in any ward will have to be fully justified, and evidence provided which would justify such imbalances in terms of community identity or effective and convenient local government. We will rarely recommend wards with electoral variances of 20% or more, and any proposed by local interested parties will require the strongest justification in terms of the other two statutory criteria.

General analysis

45 We propose adopting a combination of the District Council's proposals along with our own ward configurations in order to provide a pattern that attains good levels of electoral equality and strong boundaries. We are proposing our own ward pattern within the towns of Brackley and Towcester. Due to a lack of evidence regarding community identity in the district we have sought to achieve a greatly improved level of electoral equality compared to the council's proposals. Under our proposals only three wards would vary by more than 10% from the district average by 2008 compared to 16 under the District Council's proposals.

Warding arrangements

46 For district warding purposes, the following areas, based on existing wards, are considered in turn:

- a. Astwell, Kings Sutton, Little Brook, Middleton Cheney, Steane, Wardoun and Washington wards (page 32);
- b. Brackley East, Brackley West and Brackley South wards (page 34);
- c. Blakesley, Cote, Downs, Grange, Harpole, Heyford and Kingthorn wards (page 35);
- d. Cosgrove, Deanshanger, Grafton, Silverstone, Tove, and Whittlewood wards (page 37);
- e. Towcester Brook and Towcester Mills wards (page 38); and
- f. Blisworth, Chase, Cogenhoe, Courteenhall Salcey and Yardley wards (page 39).

47 Details of our draft recommendations are set out in Tables 1 and 2, and illustrated on the large maps accompanying this report.

Astwell, Kings Sutton, Little Brook, Middleton Cheney, Steane, Wardoun and Washington wards

48 Under the existing arrangements Astwell ward comprises the parishes of Helmdon, Radstone, Syresham and Whitfield. Kings Sutton ward comprises the parish of Kings Sutton. Little Brook ward comprises the parishes of Aynho, Croughton and Evenley. Middleton Cheney ward comprises the parishes of Middleton Cheney, Warkworth and Overthorpe. Steane ward comprises the parishes of Farthinghoe, Greatworth, Hinton-in-the Hedges and Newbottle parishes. Wardoun ward comprises the parishes of Aston Le

Walls, Boddington, Chacombe, Chipping Warden, Culworth, Edgcote, Eydon, Thenford, Marston St Lawrence and Thorpe Mandeville. Washington ward comprises the parishes of Abthorpe, Moreton Pinkney, Sulgrave, Wappenham and Weston & Weedon. Table 4 (page 22) outlines the existing electoral variances for 2003 and also the variances which the wards are forecast to have by 2008 if the existing arrangements remained in place.

49 At the western edge of the district the District Council proposed two new wards of Danvers and Wardoun. Its proposed Danvers ward comprised the parishes of Chacombe, Culworth, Edgcote, Thenford, Thorpe Mandeville and Marston St Lawrence. Its proposed Wardoun ward comprise the parishes of Aston le Walls, Boddington, Chipping Warden and Eydon. It argued that at the last Periodic Electoral Review all of these listed parishes were combined in one two-member ward against the 'wishes and recommendations of the Council at the time and the result was, as expected, that life was not made easy for the two ward members'. It stated that under the present arrangements the members each had 'to cover ten villages, attend numerous parish meetings (a very important part of a rural councillor's role)'. It therefore proposed that the existing Wardoun ward revert to being two separate single-member wards as proposed above. It stated that the split of the villages between these proposed wards was 'equitable' in geographical terms and the workload generated for the ward councillors.

50 Councillor Sergison-Brooke, member for Wardoun ward, also opposed the present arrangements and stated a preference for the previous arrangements whereby the ward is split into two single-member wards.

51 Having noted the arguments put to us we have not been persuaded to adopt these proposals. We note that under the District Council's proposals the Danvers and Wardoun wards would have variances of 14% and 6% by 2008 under a council size of 43 members. We did not consider that the arguments provided justified the high variance in Danvers ward given that there was an alternative option available to us. Retaining the existing Wardoun ward as a two-member ward would provide a variance of 6% by 2008. Although this proposed ward would contain 10 parishes we noted that there are continuous road links between the main settlements situated in each of the parishes. In the absence of sufficient evidence of community identity we must take the approach of securing as good a level of electoral equality as possible and the provision of strong ward boundaries. Therefore, given the improved levels of electoral equality we propose maintaining the current two-member Wardoun ward but that it be renamed Danvers & Wardoun ward.

52 The District Council also proposed that Astwell, Kings Sutton, Little Brook, Middleton Cheney, Steane and Washington wards remain the same as at present. Its proposed Astwell ward comprised Helmdon, Radstone, Syresham and Whitfield parishes. It stated that Kings Sutton should 'stand alone' as a single-member ward comprised solely of Kings Sutton parish in its own right. Its proposed Little Brook ward comprised Aynho, Croughton and Evenley parishes. Its proposed Middleton Cheney ward comprised Middleton Cheney, Overthorpe and Warkworth parishes. It further proposed that Steane ward comprise Farthinghoe, Greatworth, Hinton-in-the Hedges and Newbottle parishes. It also proposed a Washington ward comprising Abthorpe, Moreton Pinkney, Sulgrave, Wappenham and Weston & Weedon parishes. Abthorpe Parish Council stated that it preferred the status quo.

53 We note that little evidence or argument was provided in support of these proposals. The Council only commented on its proposed Kings Sutton ward which it argued stood alone. Therefore, given the lack of argument provided we have looked at alternative configurations of parishes in the area, particularly given the electoral imbalance of 12% for the Council's proposed Washington ward by 2008. However, having looked at alternatives and having considered the resultant levels of electoral equality we are of the view that the Council's proposals generally provide for a good overall level of electoral equality and group parishes that are generally well linked. Therefore, given that we cannot identify an alternative configuration in the area that provides for improved levels of electoral equality overall while having regard to the remainder of the statutory criteria we are content to adopt the Council's proposals in this area.

54 Tables 1 and 2 provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our draft recommendations for Astwell, Danvers & Wardoun, Kings Sutton, Little Brook, Middleton Cheney, Steane and Washington wards.

Brackley East, Brackley West and Brackley South wards

55 Under the existing arrangements Brackley East ward comprises East parish ward of Brackley town. Brackley West ward comprises West parish ward of Brackley town. Brackley South ward comprises South parish ward of Brackley town. Table 4 (page 22) outlines the existing electoral variances for 2003 and also the variances which the wards are forecast to have by 2008 if the existing arrangements remained in place.

56 We received two submissions in relation to this area during Stage One. The District Council proposed three unchanged wards of the same names in this area. It stated it supported Brackley Town Council's assertion that the status quo should be maintained for the town of Brackley, even though this would result in under-representation in two of the three Brackley wards. The District Council did not provide any evidence or argument in support of each of its proposed wards in this area.

57 Brackley Town Council stated that after considering the prospect for changes to representation in with the town it concluded that it preferred the status quo be maintained.

58 In Brackley Town we noted the Town Council's preference for retaining the status quo. We considered this as an option in light of the variances of 9%, 1% and 8% under present arrangements by 2008 being achieved. However, the Town Council provided no evidence or argument in support of this proposal.

59 Given the lack of evidence available to us we have sought to improve the levels of electoral equality while providing strong ward boundaries within the town. We have looked at alternatives but it has not been possible to improve electoral equality due to the slight under-representation (we have allocated the town six councillors while it merits 6.35 councillors) and the fairly arbitrary boundaries that would result. However, we have sought to provide for more identifiable boundaries in the town and therefore propose transferring that area east of Bridge Street up to Buckingham Road in the south of the town into Brackley South ward. In the centre of Brackley itself we propose moving all the properties along Halse Road into Brackley East ward from both Brackley South

and Brackley West wards. This would maintain variances of 9%, 7% and 2% in Brackley East, Brackley South and Brackley West wards respectively by 2008.

60 Tables 1 and 2 provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our draft recommendations for Brackley East, Brackley West, Brackley South and Little Brook wards.

Blakesley, Cote, Downs, Grange, Harpole, Heyford and Kingthorn wards

61 Under the current arrangements Blakesley ward comprises the parishes of Adstone, Blakesley, Cold Higham, Litchborough, Maidford, Slapton and Woodend. Cote ward comprises the parishes of Pattishall and Tiffield. Downs ward comprises the parishes of Bugbrooke and Gayton. Grange ward comprises the parishes of Kislingbury and Rothersthorpe. Harpole ward comprises Harpole parish. Heyford ward comprises the parishes of Nether Heyford and Upper Heyford. Kings Sutton ward comprises Kings Sutton parish. Kingthorn ward comprises the parishes of Bradden and Greens Norton. Table 4 (page 22) outlines the existing electoral variances for 2003 and also the variances which the wards are forecast to have by 2008 if the existing arrangements remained in place.

62 The District Council proposed the retention of the present pattern of wards in this area. It stated that settlements in the proposed Heyford ward stood alone and are separated from Harpole parish by the A5 road. It also stated that there were no community links with Bugbrooke parish further south. It stated that it did not consider it appropriate to link the proposed Downs ward with the Heyfords area despite the retention of high variances under its proposed pattern of four single-member wards. It also stated that within its proposed Grange ward the parishes of Kislingbury and Rothersthorpe were linked by Banbury Lane.

63 The Borough Council also proposed the retention of Blakesley ward. It argued that all the parishes within the ward were orientated towards Towcester and Northampton, and that moving some of the wards to the east would maintain links with Towcester and Northampton but would 'mean that the parish(es) were in a ward split by an arterial road (A5)'. It also stated that the movement of any of the parishes to the west would result in parishes being placed in a Brackley town orientated ward. It argued that 'there are distinct socio-economic differences and priorities between the two areas in terms of education, transport and social/medical requirements'. It further noted that the school catchment area for the existing ward at primary level is Blakesley, and at secondary level either Sponne in Towcester or Campion in Bugbrooke.

64 The District Council's proposed Blakesley, Cote, Downs, Grange, Harpole, Heyford and Kingthorn wards would have variances of 15%, 1%, 17%, 14%, 18%, 14% and 10% respectively by 2008.

65 Harpole Parish Council stated that it wanted to keep the status quo with one councillor representing the parish.

66 Gayton Parish Council stated that it 'would like to see no change to the present arrangement'. It stated that the present Downs ward which links Bugbrooke and Gayton parishes had worked well as a ward since the last electoral review. It also questioned

whether the projections for 2008 were too 'conservative' and noted the building of 10 new properties and the potential effect of the Milton Keynes South Midlands Study and the District Council's own Local Development Framework due in 2006. The Parish Council considered that Bugbrooke parish could grow by 100 properties within the next 10 years. However, after we requested further clarification on its electorate projections the District Council confirmed its view that the projections made at Stage One were based on the best available evidence.

67 We noted the argument put forward by the District Council regarding the retention of the present pattern of wards in the area and the community identity evidence put forward. However, while we note that some evidence was provided we must look to providing a balance of the statutory criteria. Given the high level of electoral inequality that would result under the Council's proposals we were not persuaded that a retention of the current ward pattern would provide for the best balance of the statutory criteria. Therefore, in this area, we looked at various combinations of parishes in order to secure an improved level of electoral equality. As a result we propose a different configuration of wards. We propose combining the District Council's proposed Heyford ward with Bugbrooke parish in a new two-member Downs & Heyford ward securing a variance of 9% by 2008. We further propose a new two-member Harpole & Grange ward combining the parishes of Harpole, Kislingbury, Rothersthorpe and Gayton. This new ward would secure a variance of 4% by 2008. We consider that this ward provides for a good level of electoral equality while combining areas with good access between their respective settlements.

68 We noted that the District Council's proposed Blakesley ward would have 15% fewer electors per councillor than the district average by 2008. While we note the District Council's argument, particularly regarding links across the A5 we did not consider that we had received sufficient evidence to justify such a large electoral imbalance and therefore looked at alternative configurations in the area. Having looked at alternatives we noted that combining the proposed Blakesley and Cote wards in a two-member Blakesley & Cote ward would secure a level of electoral equality of 10% by 2008. Therefore we are proposing our own Blakesley & Cote ward as part of our draft recommendations.

69 We considered carefully the Council's proposal to retain the existing single-member Kingthorn ward. Given that the proposed ward would have an electoral variance of 12% by 2008 (under a council size of 42) we considered a number of alternative options in the area. In particular we considered the transfer of Slapton parish from our proposed Blakesley & Cote ward. However, we noted that this transfer would result in the proposed Blakesley & Cote ward varying by 13%. Therefore we considered that the proposed Kingthorn ward provided for the best overall level of electoral equality available and we are therefore content to recommend it as part of our draft recommendations.

70 Tables 1 and 2 provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our draft recommendations for Blakesley & Cote, Downs & Heyford, Harpole & Grange and Kingthorn wards.

Cosgrove, Deanshanger, Grafton, Silverstone, Tove and Whittlewood wards

71 Under the current arrangements Cosgrove ward comprises the parishes of Cosgrove and Old Stratford. Deanshanger ward comprises the parishes of Deanshanger and Wicken. Grafton ward comprises the parishes of Alderton, Grafton Regis, Yardley Gobion and Ashton. Silverstone ward comprises Silverstone parish. Tove ward comprises the parishes of Paulerspury, Stoke Bruerne and Shutlanger. Whittlewood ward comprises the parishes of Potterspury and Whittlebury. Table 4 (page 22) outlines the existing electoral variances for 2003 and also the variances which the wards are forecast to have by 2008 if the existing arrangements remained in place.

72 The District Council proposed that Cosgrove, Deanshanger, Grafton, Silverstone, Tove and Whittlewood wards remain the same as at present with variances of 30%, 1%, 1%, 5%, 13% and 6% respectively by 2008 under a council size of 43 members.

73 Deanshanger Parish Council stated that the parish had grown in size by 50% over the last 5 years, and is one of the largest villages in South Northamptonshire. It further stated that the village is close to Milton Keynes but being a rural council it prefers to remain part of South Northamptonshire. It also commented on the lack of local awareness about MEP representation. However, as part of this review we do not take MEP representation or the boundaries between local authorities into account.

74 Stoke Bruerne Parish Council stated that it preferred the status quo for Tove ward in which it is presently situated. It further stated that the 'present composition of seven [parish] members is appropriate for a community of the size of Stoke Bruerne as little change is expected, [the parish council] is not of a mind to request any alteration'.

75 Yardley Gobion Parish Council proposed that 'Yardley Gobion and Potterspury should constitute one ward (suggested name – Moor End [ward] – as this is a landmark location that is almost halfway between the two villages).' It further stated that this proposal would meet the statutory criteria and not significantly affect ward sizes around surrounding villages. It proposed that the existing Deanshanger and Cosgrove wards be retained, Whittlebury and Silverstone parishes be included in a single ward and the parishes of Grafton Regis and Alderton be included in a ward with Ashton and Hartwell. However, under the proposed council size of 42 members the proposal to combine Yardley Gobion and Potterspury would mean an electoral variance for a new Moor End ward of -30% as a two-member ward, and 39% as a single-member ward by 2008.

76 We have carefully considered the representations made in this area. We note the District Council's proposals but note that its proposed Cosgrove ward would have an electoral imbalance of 27% by 2008 and its proposed Tove ward would have an electoral imbalance of 15% (under a council size of 42). We noted that the remainder of its proposals in this area did secure good levels of electoral equality and therefore propose to adopt its proposed Deanshanger, Silverstone and Whittlewood wards as part of our draft recommendations. However, in the remainder of the area it has been necessary to look at alternative options in order to provide for improved levels of electoral equality.

77 We noted the preference of Stoke Bruerne Parish Council to maintain the status quo; however, with a variance of 15% by 2008 under the current arrangements, we

sought alternatives. We therefore propose placing the parish in a single-member Tove ward along with Alderton, Shutlanger and Paulerspury parishes, securing a variance of -8% by 2008 and placing parishes with good transport links in the same ward.

78 Yardley Gobion Parish Council argued that it should be placed in a ward with Potterspury parish alone. However, within a 42-member scheme this would result in a variance of 30%. We therefore propose placing Yardley Gobion parish in a ward united by the A508 road with Cosgrove and Grafton Regis parishes. This proposed Cosgrove & Grafton ward would provide for a variance of 2% by 2008. In the south-eastern edge of the district we also propose Old Stratford parish be placed in a ward by itself providing a variance of -3% by 2008. We consider that this ward pattern provided for a good balance of the statutory criteria while providing wards with strong boundaries.

79 Tables 1 and 2 provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our draft recommendations for Cosgrove & Grafton, Deanshanger, Old Stratford, Silverstone and Tove wards.

Towcester Brook and Towcester Mill wards

80 Under the current arrangements Towcester Mill ward comprises Towcester Mill parish ward of Towcester town and Easton Neston parish. Towcester Brook ward comprises Towcester Brook parish ward of Towcester town. Table 4 (page 22) outlines the existing electoral variances for 2003 and also the variances which the wards are forecast to have by 2008 if the existing arrangements remained in place.

81 Within Towcester town the District Council proposed an amendment to the boundary between Towcester Brook and Towcester Mill wards along Bickerstaffes Road, Haresmoor Drive and Hesketh Crescent, with 109 electors being moved from the latter ward to the former. However, under these proposals these two wards would have electoral variances of 17% and 23% respectively by 2008.

82 In Towcester town we noted that the correct allocations for district councillors to the town of Towcester under the council size of 42 members is five. Under its proposed council size of 43 members the District Council proposed that Towcester be represented by four councillors. Given that the District Council's proposals do not provide for the correct allocation of councillors in the town we are making our own proposals based on the correct allocation of five councillors under a council size of 42.

83 In Towcester we considered a number of warding options. We looked at dividing the town between two wards along Silverstone Brook. However, we were not persuaded that this would best reflect community identity links in the town. We were not persuaded that community links would be best served by placing the residential area to the south of Brackley Road and west of and including Clare Crescent in a ward to the north of the brook. Similarly we were not convinced that dividing the town centre area between wards would provide for the best reflection of the statutory criteria. Therefore we propose that the residential area to the south of Brackley Road and north of the brook be placed in a predominantly residential Towcester Brook ward. We note that there are strong links across the brook in this area. We also propose that properties on both sides of Brackley Road be united in a proposed Towcester Mill ward. To the east of this area we propose that the town centre be united in the proposed Towcester Mill ward. We propose that properties on both sides of Watling Street East be placed in Towcester Mill

ward along with the area to the north of Silverstone Brook and east of Clare Crescent. While we consider that this would provide a good division of the town we would invite comments from interested parties as to the suitability of the proposed boundary. The new three-member Towcester Brook ward would secure a variance of -6% by 2008 while the new two-member Towcester Mill ward, which also includes the parish of Easton Neston would secure a variance of -7% by 2008.

84 Tables 1 and 2 provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our draft recommendations for Towcester Brook and Towcester Mill wards.

Blisworth, Chase, Cogenhoe, Courteenhall, Salcey and Yardley wards

85 Under the current arrangements Blisworth ward comprises Blisworth parish. Chase ward comprises the parishes of Brafield-on-the-Green, Hackleton, Little Houghton and Quinton. Cogenhoe ward comprises the parish of Cogenhoe & Whiston. Courteenhall ward comprises the parishes of Courteenhall, Milton Malsor and Roade. Salcey ward comprises Hartwell parish. Yardley ward comprises the parishes of Castle Ashby, Denton and Yardley Hastings. Table 4 (page 22) outlines the existing electoral variances for 2003 and also the variances which the wards are forecast to have by 2008 if the existing arrangements remained in place.

86 The District Council proposed the five new wards of Brafield, Courteenhall, Grange Park, Hackleton and Yardley and proposed the retention of the present Blisworth and Salcey wards with electoral variances of -1%, -20%, -13%, 13%, 22%, -6% and -11% respectively by 2008 (under a council size of 43). It proposed that Brafield ward be comprised of Brafield-on-the Green, Denton and Little Houghton parishes. It proposed that Courteenhall ward be comprised of Courteenhall, Milton Malsor and Roade parishes. It stated that the electoral variance for Courteenhall ward was 'not felt to be unreasonable in view of the nature of the proposed ward – the growing settlement of Roade and the adjoining small area of Courteenhall, primarily connected with the Courteenhall estate, with these being separated by the A509 from the village of Milton Malsor'.

87 It proposed that Grange Park ward be comprised of Grange Park parish and that the new Hackleton ward comprise Hackleton and Quinton parishes. It further proposed that Yardley ward comprise Castle Ashby, Cogenhoe & Whiston and Yardley Hastings parishes. It argued that Grange Park was 'a rapidly growing development' and that 'the nature and location of Grange Park makes it very much a stand alone parish and it would be incongruous to combine it with any of the neighbouring very rural parishes'.

88 Regarding its proposed Hackleton ward, it stated that 'Quinton [parish] is an essentially rural area that wishes to preserve its rural identity and the village organises and shares many events jointly with Preston Deanery, which lies in the parish of Hackleton. Properties in Preston Deanery are a very short distance from Quinton village.' It further stated that villages within the remainder of the ward are served by the B526 Northampton to Newport Pagnell Road and that 'these small communities have worshipped at the churches at Piddington and Horton and more recently the famous William Carey Baptist Chapel at Hackleton'.

89 With regard to its proposed Yardley ward the District Council stated that the 'villages in the proposed ward have, in recent years, worked closely together in an effort to reduce the number of casualties on the A428 which runs through all of them. They have shared the bus route for many years leading to friendships and, indeed, marriages.'

90 Milton Malsor Parish Council stated it wished to remain an individual parish in its own right, as part of South Northamptonshire Council, not part of Northampton Borough Council. It stated that the parish recognised that the Courteenhall ward is too large and that Grange Park parish should be a ward in its own right. It also stated it has more in common with Blisworth and Stoke Bruerne parishes than Roade parish.

91 Roade Parish Council stated that it strongly supported a ward comprising only Roade parish and represented by one councillor. It stated that the 'equalisation of ward numbers' is of secondary importance to sense of identity and community interests in rural areas.

92 Having noted the high variances proposed by the District Council's proposals we were not convinced that adopting its ward pattern would provide the best balance of the statutory criteria. While we note the community identity arguments put to us we must balance this against the need to secure electoral equality. We note that under the District Council's proposals five of its proposed seven wards would vary by more than 10%. We also note the arguments put forward by the parish councils of Milton Malsor and Roade. However, we cannot view any area in isolation and note that adopting their proposals would not enable us to secure a viable warding pattern for the area as a whole. A ward comprising only the parish of Roade would have 15% more electors per councillor than the district average by 2008. A single-member ward comprising the parishes of Milton Malsor, Blisworth and Stoke Bruerne would have 49% more electors while a two-member ward comprising the same parishes would have 25% fewer electors per councillor than the district average.

93 In the east of the district we propose adopting the Council's proposed Hackleton ward as we note that although it secures an electoral variance of 11% by 2008 the parishes are well linked and alternative options are limited. We also propose combining the District Council's Brafield and Yardley wards to form a two-member Brafield & Yardley ward. This would provide a variance of 8% by 2008 under a council size of 42 members whereas the District Council's proposals would provide electoral variances of -3% and 19% by 2008 under the same council size respectively. With this area being at the eastern edge of the district and with our adoption of the District Council's Hackleton ward, we consider that this two-member ward provides the best option available to us to secure acceptable levels of electoral equality.

94 We propose modifying the District Council's proposed two-member Grange Park ward by combining the parishes of Courteenhall, Grange Park and Milton Malsor into Grange Park ward. Milton Malsor parish has insufficient electors to warrant a single ward by itself. Although the road link between Milton Malsor and Grange Park does necessitate leaving the district, it is a slight deviation and this ward pattern provides a variance of 6% by 2008. We found that in providing a viable ward pattern for the east of the district it was not possible to contain Roade parish in a ward by itself, as mentioned above. We therefore propose that the parishes of Blisworth and Roade be combined to form a two-member Blisworth & Roade ward providing a variance of 3% by 2008. We

also propose combining the parishes of Ashton and Hartwell in a new single-member Salcey ward. This will provide a variance of 6% by 2008.

95 Tables 1 and 2 provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our draft recommendations for Blisworth & Roade, Brafield & Yardley, Grange Park, Hackleton and Salcey wards.

Conclusions

96 Table 5 shows how our draft recommendations will effect electoral equality, comparing them with the current arrangements (based on 2003 electorate figures) and with forecast electorates for the year 2008.

Table 5: Comparison of current and recommended electoral arrangements

	Current arrangements		Draft recommendations	
	2003	2008	2003	2008
Number of councillors	42	42	42	42
Number of wards	31	31	27	27
Average number of electors per councillor	1,484	1,581	1,484	1,581
Number of wards with a variance more than 10% from the average	15	15	8	3
Number of wards with a variance more than 20% from the average	2	4	1	0

97 As shown in Table 5, our draft recommendations for South Northamptonshire Council would result in a reduction in the number of wards with an electoral variance of more than 10% from 15 to eight. By 2008 three wards are forecast to have an electoral variance of more than 10%. We propose adopting a combination of the District Council's proposals along with our own ward configurations in order to provide a pattern that attains good level of electoral equality and strong ward boundaries. Having considered all the information made available to us we are of the view that a case, albeit limited, has been made by the council that there should not be a reduction in council size. We were not convinced that there should be an increase in council size.

Draft recommendation

South Northamptonshire Council should comprise 42 councillors serving 27 wards, as detailed and named in Tables 1 and 2, and illustrated on the large maps accompanying this report.

Parish electoral arrangements

98 As part of an FER the Committee can make recommendations for new electoral arrangements for parishes. Where there is no impact on the district council's electoral arrangements, the Committee will generally be content to put forward for consideration proposals from parish and town councils for changes to parish electoral arrangements in FERs. However, the Committee will usually wish to see a degree of consensus between the district council and the parish council concerned. Proposals should be supported by evidence, illustrating why changes to parish electoral arrangements are required. The Committee cannot recommend changes to the external boundaries of parishes as part of an FER.

99 Responsibility for reviewing and implementing changes to the electoral arrangements of existing parishes, outside of an electoral review conducted by the Committee, lies with district councils. Such reviews must be conducted in accordance with section 17 of the Local Government and Rating Act 1997. If a district council wishes to make an Order amending the electoral arrangements of a parish that has been subject to an electoral arrangements order made by either the Secretary of State or The Electoral Commission within the past five years, the consent of the Commission is required.

100 When reviewing electoral arrangements, we are required to comply as far as possible with the rules set out in Schedule 11 to the 1972 Act. The Schedule provides that if a parish is to be divided between different district wards it must also be divided into parish wards, so that each parish ward lies wholly within a single ward of the district. Accordingly, we propose consequential warding arrangements for the parishes of Brackley and Towcester to reflect the proposed district wards.

101 The parish of Brackley is currently served by 15 councillors representing three parish wards: East, South and West. In the light of our proposed amendments between these three district wards we propose the new parish wards of East, South and West should reflect these new boundaries. Each parish ward should return five parish councillors.

Draft recommendation

Brackley Town Council should comprise 15 councillors, as at present, representing three wards: East (returning five councillors), South (returning five councillors) and West (returning five councillors). The parish ward boundaries should reflect the proposed district ward boundaries in the area, as illustrated and named on the large maps accompanying this report.

102 The parish of Towcester is currently served by 16 councillors representing two parish wards: Brook and Mill. In light of our proposed amendments between these two district wards we propose the new parish wards of Brook and Mill should reflect these new boundaries. Each parish ward should return eight parish councillors. While we are recommending that the two parish wards in the town should be represented by eight councillors each our proposals for the town mean that the eight councillors in the proposed Brook parish ward will represent 4,371 electors while the eight in the proposed Mill parish ward will represent 2,336 electors by 2008. While we have no statutory duty to achieve electoral equality between parish wards we would be interested to hear the views of interested parties as to the appropriate allocation of parish councillors in the town.

Draft recommendation

Towcester Town Council should comprise 16 councillors, as at present, representing two wards: Brook (returning eight councillors) and Mill (returning eight councillors). The parish ward boundaries should reflect the proposed district ward boundaries in the area, as illustrated and named on the large maps accompanying this report.

5 What happens next?

103 There will now be a consultation period, during which everyone is invited to comment on the draft recommendations on future electoral arrangements for South Northamptonshire contained in this report. We will take fully into account all submissions received by 8 August 2005. Any received after this date may not be taken into account. All responses (including names and addresses of respondents unless specified otherwise) may be inspected at our offices and those of the District Council. A list of respondents will be available from us on request after the end of the consultation period.

104 We have not finalised our conclusions on the electoral arrangements for South Northamptonshire and welcome comments from interested parties relating to the proposed ward boundaries, number of councillors, ward names, and parish council electoral arrangements. We found our decisions regarding wards across the district to be a difficult judgement between our statutory criteria. This was due to the lack of evidence received from local interested parties during Stage One. In these cases we have sought to achieve the best levels of electoral equality in the absence of any evidence reflecting the other two criteria, and would particularly welcome local views, backed up by demonstrable evidence, during Stage Three. We will consider all the evidence submitted to us during the consultation period before preparing our final recommendations.

105 Express your views by writing directly to us:

**Review Manager
South Northamptonshire Review
The Boundary Committee for England
Trevelyan House
Great Peter Street
London SW1P 2HW**

106 Please note that the consultation stages of an electoral review are public consultations. In the interests of openness and transparency, the Committee now makes available for public inspection full copies of all representations it takes into account as part of a review. Accordingly, a copy of all Stage Three representations will be placed on deposit locally at the offices of South Northamptonshire Council, at the Committee's offices in Trevelyan House and on its website at www.boundarycommittee.org.uk. The facility to put submissions on our website was not available during Stage One.

107 In the light of representations received, we will review our draft recommendations to consider whether they should be altered. As indicated earlier, it is therefore important that all interested parties let us have their views and evidence, **whether or not** they agree with our draft recommendations. We will then submit our final recommendations to The Electoral Commission. After the publication of our final recommendations, all further correspondence should be sent to The Electoral Commission, which cannot make the Order giving effect to our recommendations until six weeks after it receives them.

6 Mapping

Draft recommendations for South Northamptonshire:

The following maps illustrate our proposed ward boundaries for the district of South Northamptonshire area.

Sheet 1, Map 1 illustrates in outline form the proposed wards for South Northamptonshire including constituent parishes.

Sheet 2, Map 2 illustrates the proposed boundaries for Towcester town.

Sheet 3, Map 3 illustrates the proposed boundaries for Brackley town.

Appendix A

Code of practice on written consultation

The Cabinet Office's November 2000 *Code of Practice on Written Consultation*, <http://www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/regulation/Consultation/Code.htm> requires all Government Departments and Agencies to adhere to certain criteria, set out below, on the conduct of public consultations. Public bodies, such as The Boundary Committee for England, are encouraged to follow the Code.

The Code of Practice applies to consultation documents published after 1 January 2001, which should reproduce the criteria, give explanations of any departures, and confirm that the criteria have otherwise been followed.

Table A1: Boundary Committee for England's compliance with Code criteria

Criteria	Compliance/departure
Timing of consultation should be built into the planning process for a policy (including legislation) or service from the start, so that it has the best prospect of improving the proposals concerned, and so that sufficient time is left for it at each stage.	We comply with this requirement.
It should be clear who is being consulted, about what questions, in what timescale and for what purpose.	We comply with this requirement.
A consultation document should be as simple and concise as possible. It should include a summary, in two pages at most, of the main questions it seeks views on. It should make it as easy as possible for readers to respond, make contact or complain.	We comply with this requirement.
Documents should be made widely available, with the fullest use of electronic means (though not to the exclusion of others), and effectively drawn to the attention of all interested groups and individuals.	We comply with this requirement.
Sufficient time should be allowed for considered responses from all groups with an interest. Twelve weeks should be the standard minimum period for a consultation.	We comply with this requirement.
Responses should be carefully and open-mindedly analysed, and the results made widely available, with an account of the views expressed, and reasons for decisions finally taken.	We comply with this requirement.
Departments should monitor and evaluate consultations, designating a consultation coordinator who will ensure the lessons are disseminated.	We comply with this requirement.

