

Electoral review of North Norfolk District Council

Summary	Officers recommend a submission that respects the integrity of all the parish boundaries, re-positions ward boundaries within the four largest towns, and which achieves a balance between the statutory criteria which the Local Government Boundary Commission for England are required to observe. The resulting package comprises 33 wards.
Options considered	Options considered in the development of the package recommended included a wider mix of multi- and single-member wards, including at least one three-member ward, and a variety of permutations of parish combinations.
Conclusions	The package of proposals recommended meets the spirit of the Commission’s statutory criteria or, where there is internal conflict between those criteria, achieves a satisfactory balance between them without detriment to the interests of the electorate to be represented.
Recommendation	That the Council approves a submission to the Commission comprising 33 wards, including 26 single-member wards and seven two-member wards.

Cabinet Member(s): Judy Oliver	Ward(s) affected: All
Contact Officer, phone number and email: John Bennett, 01263 516052, john.bennett@north-norfolk.gov.uk	

1. Introduction – background to draft Council submission on warding arrangements

- 1.1 The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) began its review in February and closed its first stage of consultation - relating to the size of the Council in terms of the number of Councillors – in late May. At the end of June, the LGBCE announced the conclusion of that first stage with the indication that it was minded to propose a reduction from 48 to 40 in the number of Councillors.
- 1.2 The LGBCE then commenced the second stage of public consultation, relating to the warding arrangements that would apply for a 40-member Council, and set a deadline of 5 September for the receipt of submissions. Recognising that, for the Council, the next meeting of the Council is not until 21 September and that there was no formal mechanism to secure formal approval of a submission prior to that date, the LGBCE accepted that the Council would share with

Commission staff a draft submission on the date that the Council agenda was published.

- 1.3 The LGBCE considers all responses received to the second stage consultation and uses them to draw up draft recommendations for new boundaries. The Commission then holds a further phase of consultation on those proposals (8 November 2016 through to 9 January 2017) during which time all concerned will be able to comment on them and propose alternatives. Final recommendations are planned to be published on 14 March 2017, with Parliamentary scrutiny in Spring 2017, ready for implementation at the 2019 Council elections.

2. LGBCE's statutory criteria

- 2.1 The Commission undertakes to draw up new electoral arrangements that provide the best balance of their statutory criteria, which include three main elements:
 - ***“Delivering electoral equality for local voters – this means ensuring that each councillor represents roughly the same number of voters so that the value of your vote is the same regardless of where you live in the local authority area.***
 - ***“Interests and identities of local communities – this means establishing electoral arrangements which, as far as possible, avoid splitting local ties and where boundaries are easily identifiable.***
 - ***“Effective and convenient local government – this means ensuring that the electoral wards can be represented effectively by their elected representative(s) and that the new electoral arrangements as a whole, including both the council size decision and electoral ward arrangements, allow the local authority to conduct its business effectively.”***
- 2.2 The review of North Norfolk has been triggered by the fact that 47% of the wards in the District had an electoral variance of greater than 10%. The trigger for review is 30% of the wards having such variance, or a single ward having a variance of more than 30%.

3. The principles followed by officers in preparing the draft submission

- 3.1 There is no requirement on the part of the LGBCE for uniformity in terms of a pattern of single-member or multi-member wards. Nor has there been any indication from the Council that uniformity is required. Accordingly, the opportunity has been taken to look at all options and to offer a package of single- and two-member wards. Officers have seen no merit in reintroducing three-member wards, such as once existed in North Walsham. The contrast between single member representation and the diffusion of responsibilities that would arise from three-member representation would be too great, and there is no imperative for three members as might arise in authorities which have annual elections “by thirds”.
- 3.2 From the LGBCE's statement in paragraph 2.1 above, it is evident that electoral equality is a significant factor in the Commission's approach to its work. All the

proposals in the draft submission relate the suggested wards to the electoral quota of 2,188, this being the projected electorate of 87,525 divided by the number of councillors proposed (40).

- 3.3 Similarly, the second criterion aims to “avoid splitting local ties” and the officers’ considerations have therefore focused on commonality of interests (e.g. shared interests of coastal parishes), and preserving the integrity of parishes, so maintaining or revising the division of administrative units only in the towns of Cromer, Fakenham, North Walsham and Sheringham where warding already applies. In these instances, the suggested boundaries are considered to offer coherence and regard to the communities that exist within those towns as well as physical determinants such as railways and main roads (“*effective barriers between communities*”, as the Commission describes them). The LGBCE may revise parish warding but not parishes’ external boundaries, as these are matters for a separate procedure – a Community Governance Review. It continues – “*parish boundaries often represent the extent of a community. In fact, the Commission often uses parishes as the building blocks of electoral wards.*”
- 3.4 The third criterion has a number of aspects but, as the Council is subject to quadrennial whole Council elections, issues relating to electoral cycles have no relevance. Accordingly, the draft submission majors on aspects of intra-ward transport and physical size. For example, in the rural areas, the distance and time required to travel by road from one part of a ward to another may be similar, regardless of the distance the proverbial crow might fly, simply because of the topography of the area, unbridged watercourses and the like.
- 3.5 The Commission states:
“Although we strive for perfect electoral equality for all wards, we recognise that this is unlikely to be exactly achieved. If you propose a boundary that would lead to an electoral variance for the ward, the Commission will need to see evidence that such electoral inequality is justified on the grounds of the Commission’s other statutory criteria. The higher the level of electoral variance you are proposing for a ward, the more persuasive your evidence will need to be.”

4. Draft submission

- 4.1 The draft submission (attached) proposes 33 wards, none of which has a variance in excess of $\pm 10\%$, and officers believe that the variances that are proposed are justifiable and sustainable in the terms of the Commission’s methodology which looks at projected electorates for just five years ahead, and without regard for longer term trends. Nine proposed wards vary by less than 2% and 20 vary by less than 5%. Only three wards (North Walsham Market Cross, North Walsham East, and Mundesley) have a variance greater than 8%.
- 4.2 Adjoining parishes may sometimes be capable of combination with a number of alternative parishes for warding purposes, but the uneven distribution of electorate across the District as a whole – and the need therefore to take account of the concentrations of electors in towns as well as the topography of

those parts of the District where physical barriers disallow certain combinations – requires some level of compromise from either a purely arithmetic model, or one where only absolute commonality of interests dominates.

- 4.3 The proposals presented may accordingly seem imperfect in some regards, and officers have attempted to apply the balancing of interests that the Commission is seen (from other reviews across the country) to apply.
- 4.4 A number of individual Councillors have contributed to the drafting of these proposals and officers extend their thanks to them for their time and insight into local issues. Not all these contributions will be seen within the package presented as some were in conflict with each other, and some appeared to fall short of the LGBCE's statutory criteria. Only those suggestions that most closely fit the criteria and which can be justified in terms of at least two of the elements have been incorporated.

5. Conclusion

- 5.1 The proposed wards achieve a good level of balance between electoral equality and local communities of interest. Only some 18% of the proposed wards exceed a variance of $\pm 7\%$, with North Walsham Market Cross the highest variance at some $+9\%$. Just over one-quarter of the proposed wards vary from the electoral quota by less than 2% and almost two-thirds vary by less than 5%.
- 5.2 Variances in the elector ratio at all levels, but particularly those at the upper range, are justified in the attached draft submission.

6. Implications and risks

- 6.1 The combination of criteria makes the exercise more art than science and, undoubtedly, some of the proposed wards are large, both geographically and in terms of the composition of up to ten parishes (area 14: Gresham), with two further wards comprising 9 parishes (area 5: Priory, and area 15: Erpingham).
- 6.2 Such rural areas are sparsely populated, with parishes as small as 36 electors (projected for the year 2022), and the approach to combination takes full account of geographical barriers that would inhibit movement within each ward, whilst recognising some degree of common interest, whether in the form of, for example, shared agricultural environment, a prospect of development, or the challenge of heavy through-traffic.

7. Financial implications and risks

- 7.1 There is no further financial implication beyond that reported in regard to Council size.

8. Sustainability

- 8.1 Not applicable.

9. Equality and diversity

- 9.1 The proposals present a basis for election to the Council and, under statute, those elections will remain open to all electors that qualify to be nominated.