

Draft recommendations on the future electoral arrangements for Castle Morpeth in Northumberland

Further electoral review

January 2006

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 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

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 the body responsible for conducting electoral reviews of local authorities. A Further Electoral Review of Castle Morpeth is being undertaken to provide improved levels of electoral equality across the borough. It aims to ensure that the number of voters represented by each borough councillor is approximately the same. The Electoral Commission directed The Boundary Committee to undertake this review on 12 May 2005.

Current electoral arrangements

Under the existing arrangements, eight wards currently have electoral variances of more than 10% from the borough average and Hebron, Hepscoot & Mitford ward contains 32% more electors than the borough average. Development across the borough has been intermittent.

Every review is conducted in four stages:

Stage	Stage starts	Description
One	21 June 2005	Submission of proposals to us
Two	13 September 2005	Our analysis and deliberation
Three	17 January 2006	Publication of draft recommendations and consultation on them
Four	11 April 2006	Analysis of submissions received and formulation of final recommendations

Submissions received

During Stage One we received eight submissions, all of which may be inspected at our offices and those of the Borough Council, as well as on our website. Five separate borough-wide schemes were submitted by the Borough Council's Conservative Group, Liberal Democrat Group and Green Party plus East Chevington, Longhorsley and Thirston parish councils and a submission from the Council officers supported by the Independent Group. We also received submissions from four parish councils, one local political party and two local councillors.

Analysis and draft recommendations

Electorate figures

The Borough Council originally predicted the electorate would grow by approximately 7% by 2009. It subsequently revised its projections to 16% as it had neglected to include 13 to 17-year-old future voters (attainers). We had concerns about this projection, particularly as the borough has seen a slight decline in electorate since the last review. We therefore requested additional information from the Borough Council, and it adjusted its figures to include the death rate. However, this still meant an increase of 14%. We revisited the Borough Council's electorate projections to just include those areas actually granted planning permission, as well as the attainers. This gives a projected growth of 12% by 2009.

Council size

The Green Party, officers/Independents and East Chevington, Longhorsley and Thirston parish councils proposed retaining the existing council size of 33 members while the Conservative and Liberal Democrat Groups proposed to increase the council size by one, to 34. We noted that both council sizes would provide the correct allocation. However, we do not consider that we have received sufficient supporting evidence to justify altering the council size. We are therefore proposing the Borough Council should retain 33 members.

General analysis

In view of the lack of evidence in support of all of the proposals submitted, we are putting forward our own proposals which provide good electoral equality and, where possible, reflect any community identity argument received. We propose retaining just one existing ward and are putting forward new warding arrangements for the parishes of Hepscott, Morpeth and Ponteland. We are proposing six single-member, six two-member and five three-member wards.

What happens next?

There will now be a consultation period, during which we encourage comment on our draft recommendations on future electoral arrangements for Castle Morpeth contained in the report. We welcome views from all parts of the community and believe that the more feedback we receive, based on clear evidence, the better informed we will be in forming our final recommendations. We will take into account all submissions received by 10 April 2006. Any received **after** this date may not be taken into account.

We have not finalised our conclusions on the electoral arrangements for Castle Morpeth and welcome comments from interested parties. In particular, we found our decisions regarding the electorate forecasts, Morpeth and Ponteland parishes and Pegswood & Hebron ward to be a difficult judgement between our statutory criteria. 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:

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The full report is available to download at www.boundarycommittee.org.uk.

Table 1: Draft recommendations: Summary

Ward name	Number of councillors	Constituent areas
1 Chevington	2	East Chevington parish; Widdrington Village parish; West Chevington parish ward of Tritlington & West Chevington parish
2 Hartburn	1	Belsay parish; Hartburn parish; Netherwitton parish; Wallington Demesne parish
3 Heddon-on-the-Wall	1	(Unchanged) Heddon-on-the-Wall parish
4 Longhorsley	1	Longhorsley parish; Thirston parish
5 Lynemouth & Ellington	3	Cresswell parish; Ellington & Linton parish; Lynemouth parish
6 Morpeth Kirkhill	2	Proposed Morpeth Kirkhill parish ward of Morpeth parish
7 Morpeth North Central	3	Proposed Morpeth North Central parish ward of Morpeth parish
8 Morpeth South	2	Proposed Morpeth South parish ward of Morpeth parish
9 Morpeth Stobhill	2	Proposed Morpeth Stobhill parish ward of Morpeth parish; proposed Hepscott Stobhill Manor parish ward of Hepscott parish
10 Pegswood & Hebron	3	Longhirst parish; Pegswood parish; Hebron parish; Meldon parish; Tritlington parish ward of Tritlington & West Chevington parish
11 Ponteland North	1	Proposed Ponteland North parish ward of Ponteland parish
12 Ponteland North East	3	Proposed Ponteland North East parish ward of Ponteland parish
13 Ponteland South	3	Proposed Ponteland South parish ward of Ponteland parish
14 Ponteland West	1	Proposed Ponteland West ward of Ponteland parish
15 Stamfordham	1	Capheaton parish; Matfen parish; Stamfordham parish

Ward name	Number of councillors	Constituent areas
16 Stannington & Mitford	2	Mitford parish; Stannington parish; Whalton parish; proposed Hepscoth parish ward of Hepscoth parish
17 Ulgham	2	Ulgham parish; Widdrington Station & Stobswood parish

Notes:

1. The whole borough is parished and comprises 28 parishes.
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 Castle Morpeth borough

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2004)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %	Electorate (2009)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
1	Chevington	2	1,951	976	-17	2,417	1,209	-8
2	Hartburn	1	1,083	1,083	-8	1,299	1,299	-1
3	Heddon-on-the-Wall	1	1,273	1,273	8	1,402	1,402	6
4	Longhorsley	1	1,134	1,134	-4	1,316	1,316	0
5	Lynemouth & Ellington	3	3,644	1,215	3	3,993	1,331	1
6	Morpeth Kirkhill	2	2,585	1,293	10	2,764	1,378	5
7	Morpeth North Central	3	3,993	1,331	13	4,216	1,405	7
8	Morpeth South	2	2,345	1,173	0	2,782	1,391	6
9	Morpeth Stobhill	2	2,507	1,254	6	2,700	1,350	3
10	Pegswood & Hebron	3	3,475	1,158	-2	3,911	1,304	-1
11	Ponteland North	1	1,276	1,276	8	1,284	1,284	-2
12	Ponteland North East	3	3,381	1,127	-4	3,820	1,273	-3

Table 2 (continued): Draft recommendations for Castle Morpeth borough

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2004)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %	Electorate (2009)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
13	Ponteland South	3	3,191	1,064	-10	3,649	1,216	-8
14	Ponteland West	1	1,260	1,260	7	1,260	1,260	-4
15	Stamfordham	1	1,230	1,230	4	1,334	1,334	1
16	Stannington & Mitford	2	2,324	1,162	-1	2,540	1,270	-4
17	Ulgham	2	2,218	1,109	-6	2,764	1,382	5
	Totals	33	38,870	-	-	43,451	-	-
	Averages	-	-	1,178	-	-	1,317	-

Source: Electorate figures are based on information provided by Castle Morpeth Borough 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 borough. 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 draft proposals for the electoral arrangements for the borough of Castle Morpeth 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. More specifically, it was agreed that there should be a closer scrutiny where 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 such scrutiny was to establish the reasons behind the continuing imbalances, to consider likely future trends, and to assess what action, if any, was appropriate to rectify the situation.

4 This is our first review of the electoral arrangements of Castle Morpeth. Castle Morpeth's last review was carried out by the Local Government Commission for England (LGCE), which reported to the Secretary of State in March 1997. An electoral change Order implementing the new electoral arrangements was made on 21 September 1998 and the first elections on the new arrangements took place in May 1999.

5 In carrying out our work, The Boundary Committee has to work within a statutory framework¹. This refers to the need to:

- reflect the identities and interests of local communities;
- secure effective and convenient local government; and
- achieve equality of representation.

In addition we are required to work within Schedule 11 to the Local Government Act 1972.

6 Details of the legislation under which the review of Castle Morpeth is being conducted are set out in a document entitled *Guidance and procedural advice for periodic electoral reviews* (published by The Electoral Commission in July 2002). This *Guidance* sets out the approach to the review and will be helpful in both understanding the approach taken by The Boundary Committee for England and in informing comments interested groups and individuals may wish to make about our recommendations.

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 any parish and town councils in the borough. We do not in these reviews consider changes to the external boundaries of areas.

¹ As set out in section 13(5) of the Local Government Act 1992 (as amended by SI 2001 No. 3962).

8 The broad objective of an electoral review is to achieve, as far as possible, equal representation across the borough as a whole, i.e. that all councillors in the local authority represent similar numbers of electors. 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. 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, each councillor cannot represent exactly the same number of electors 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 about council size and acknowledge that there are valid reasons for variations between local authorities. 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. Indeed, we believe that consideration of the appropriate council size is the starting point for our reviews and whatever size of council is proposed to us should be developed and 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.

11 As indicated in its *Guidance*, The Electoral Commission requires the decision on council size to be based on an overall view about what is right for the particular authority and not just by addressing any imbalances in small areas of the authority by simply adding or removing councillors from these areas. While we will consider ways 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 that the recommended council size reflects the authority's optimum political management arrangements and best provides for convenient and effective local government and that there is evidence for this.

12 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; the circumstances of one authority may be very different from that of another. We will seek to ensure that our recommended council size recognises all the factors and achieves a good allocation of councillors across the district.

13 Where multi-member wards are proposed, 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.

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

Table 3: Stages of the review

Stage	Stage starts	Description
One	21 June 2005	Submission of proposals to us
Two	13 September 2005	Our analysis and deliberation
Three	17 January 2006	Publication of draft recommendations and consultation on them
Four	11 April 2006	Analysis of submissions received and formulation of final recommendations

15 Stage One began on 21 June 2005, when we wrote to Castle Morpeth Borough Council inviting proposals for future electoral arrangements. We also notified Northumberland Police Authority, Northumberland Local Councils' Association, parish and town councils in the borough, Members of Parliament with constituency interests in the borough, Members of the European Parliament for the North East Region and the headquarters of the main political parties. We placed a notice in the local press, issued a press release and invited Castle Morpeth Borough Council to publicise the review further. The closing date for receipt of representations, the end of Stage One, was 12 September 2005.

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

17 We are currently at Stage Three. This stage, which began on 17 January 2006 and will end on 10 April 2006, involves publishing the draft proposals in this report and public consultation about 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.**

18 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 electoral changes Order. The Electoral Commission will determine when any changes come into effect.

Equal opportunities

19 In preparing this report The Boundary Committee has had regard to:

- The general duty set out in section 71(1) of the Race Relations Act 1976 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, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the Broads

20 The Boundary Committee has also 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

21 The borough of Castle Morpeth comprises the town of Morpeth located in the Wansbeck Valley, the large village of Ponteland as well as a substantial rural area. The borough is by the coast and has industry such as engineering and offshore supplies. The total electorate projected during the last review has largely been met however, development has been more variable than expected, resulting in a number of wards with poor electoral equality.

22 Using December 2004 electorate figures, over 30% of wards in Castle Morpeth borough had variances of more than 10% and Hebron, Hepscott & Mitford ward had a variance of over 30%. This fell within the parameters agreed by The Electoral Commission to warrant closer scrutiny. Therefore an investigation was undertaken to establish why these imbalances had occurred and whether they were likely to right themselves or if a review would be required to ensure electoral equality. Our research found that in view of the expected housing developments and demolitions in the proceeding five years, 30% of wards would still have variances of more than 10%. As a result of the further research undertaken into the continuing levels of electoral inequality, The Electoral Commission directed The Boundary Committee to undertake a review of the electoral arrangements of Castle Morpeth Borough Council on 12 May 2005.

23 The borough contains 28 parishes, and the whole borough is parished. Morpeth town comprises 29% of the borough's total electorate.

24 The electorate of the borough is 38,870 (December 2004). The Borough Council presently has 33 members who are elected from 20 wards, nine of which are relatively urban and the remainder being predominantly rural. Thirteen wards are two-member wards and the remainder are single-member.

25 At present, each councillor represents an average of 1,178 electors, which is forecast to increase to 1,317 by the year 2009 if the present number of councillors is maintained. However, due to the fact that either more or less development was undertaken than was expected, the number of electors per councillor in eight of the 20 wards varies by more than 10% from the borough average; one ward by more than 20% and one ward by more than 30%. The worst imbalance is in Hebron, Hepscott & Mitford ward where the councillor represents 32% more electors than the borough average.

26 To compare levels of electoral inequality between wards, we calculated the extent to which the number of electors per councillor in each ward varies from the borough average in percentage terms. The borough average is calculated by dividing the total electorate of the borough, 38,870, by the total number of councillors representing them on the council, currently 33. Therefore, the average number of electors per councillor is currently 1,178. In Morpeth Kirkhill ward, currently represented by two councillors, there are currently 2,139 electors, therefore, each councillor represents, on average, 1,070 electors, 9% fewer than the current borough average.

Table 4: Existing electoral arrangements in Castle Morpeth borough

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2004)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %	Electorate (2009)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
1	Chevington	2	1,799	900	-24	2,254	1,127	-14
2	Ellington	2	2,327	1,164	-1	2,552	1,276	-3
3	Hartburn	1	1,353	1,353	15	1,620	1,620	23
4	Hebron, Hepscott & Mitford	1	1,550	1,550	32	1,699	1,699	29
5	Heddon-on-the-Wall	1	1,273	1,273	8	1,402	1,402	6
6	Longhorsley	1	1,318	1,318	12	1,515	1,515	15
7	Lynemouth	1	1,317	1,317	12	1,441	1,441	9
8	Morpeth Central	2	2,378	1,189	1	2,607	1,304	-1
9	Morpeth Kirkhill	2	2,139	1,070	-9	2,318	1,159	-12
10	Morpeth North	2	2,218	1,109	-6	2,441	1,221	-7
11	Morpeth South	2	2,046	1,023	-13	2,262	1,131	-14
12	Morpeth Stobhill	2	2,386	1,193	1	2,579	1,290	-2
13	Pegswood	2	2,801	1,401	19	3,139	1,570	19

Table 4 (continued): Existing electoral arrangements in Castle Morpeth borough

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2004)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %	Electorate (2009)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
14	Ponteland East	2	2,415	1,208	3	2,639	1,320	0
15	Ponteland North	2	2,150	1,075	-9	2,396	1,198	-9
16	Ponteland South	2	2,290	1,145	-3	2,462	1,231	-7
17	Ponteland West	2	2,261	1,131	-4	2,516	1,258	-4
18	Stamfordham	1	1,116	1,116	-5	1,212	1,212	-8
19	Stannington	1	1,363	1,363	16	1,470	1,470	12
20	Ulgham	2	2,370	1,185	1	2,927	1,464	11
	Totals	33	38,870	-	-	43,451	-	-
	Averages	-	-	1,178	-	-	1,317	-

Source: Electorate figures are based on information provided by Castle Morpeth Borough 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 borough. The minus symbol (-) denotes a lower than average number of electors. For example, in 2004, electors in Chevington ward were relatively over-represented by 24%, while electors in Hebron, Hepscott & Mitford ward were significantly under-represented by 32%. Figures have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

3 Submissions received

27 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 Castle Morpeth Borough Council and its constituent parish and town councils.

28 During this initial stage of the review, officers from the Committee visited the area and met with officers and members from the Borough Council. We are grateful to all concerned for their co-operation and assistance. We received eight representations during Stage One, including five borough-wide schemes, all of which may be inspected at both our offices and those of Borough Council. Representations may also be viewed on our website at www.boundarycommittee.org.uk.

Castle Morpeth Borough Council

29 Castle Morpeth Borough Council carried out consultation on an initial scheme during Stage One of the review, but did not put forward its own proposals. However, it submitted minutes of its meetings and responses to its consultation, along with five different proposals on behalf of four political groups and three parish councils, as detailed below.

Political groups

30 Borough-wide schemes were submitted by the Borough Council on behalf of the Borough Council's Conservative Group (Conservatives), Liberal Democrat Group (Liberal Democrats) and Green Party. It also forwarded a submission from the Council officers supported by the Independent Group (hereafter the officers/Independents) based on the Council's scheme.

31 The Green Party and officers/Independents proposed retaining a 33-member council. The Liberal Democrats and Conservatives proposed to increase the council size by one to 34. The Green Party proposed a multi-member ward approach. As an example, it put forward just six multi-member wards, arguing that this would result in less chance of unopposed candidates, a broader political representation on the Borough Council and better community representation. No evidence was provided to explain or justify any of the proposals. Morpeth Liberal Democrat Branch supported the Liberal Democrat's proposals.

Parish councils

32 The Borough Council submitted a joint proposal from East Chevington, Longhorsley and Thirston parish councils (parish councils). They proposed 20 wards based on a council size of 33 but did not provide any evidence in support of their proposals.

33 Representations were also received from four more parish councils. Thirston Parish Council opposed the Borough Council's original proposals for Tritlington & West Chevington parish. Ulgham Parish Council objected to the Borough Council's original proposal for Ulgham parish and stated that it would like to retain its links with Widdrington Village parish.

34 Wallington Demesne Parish Council highlighted the poor equality of representation between its two current parish wards and requested that these parish wards be abolished. Ponteland Parish Council stated that it was content with the current electoral arrangements.

Other representations

35 A further two representations were received from Borough Councillors. Councillor Baker (representing Ellington ward) expressed concerns in relation to multi-member wards and proposed to divide his ward into two single-member wards.

36 Councillor Taylor (representing Hebron, Hepscott & Mitford ward) argued that wards should ideally be represented by one councillor and large rural multi-member wards should be avoided. He supported the officers/Independents' proposals, stating that these were relatively non-political.

4 Analysis and draft recommendations

37 Before finalising our recommendations on the electoral arrangements for Castle Morpeth we invite views on our initial thoughts as expressed in these draft recommendations. We welcome comments from all those interested relating to the number of councillors, proposed ward boundaries, ward names, and parish and town council electoral arrangements.

38 In particular, we found our decisions regarding Morpeth and Ponteland parishes and Pegswood & Hebron ward 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 electorate forecasts and levels of electoral equality in the absence of any evidence reflecting the other two criteria. We also found our decisions regarding electorate forecasts to be difficult. We would particularly welcome local views, backed up by demonstrable evidence, during Stage Three on all these issues. We will consider all the evidence submitted to us during the consultation period before preparing our final recommendations.

39 As described earlier, the prime aim in considering the most appropriate electoral arrangements for Castle Morpeth 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 in respect of equality of representation referred to in paragraph 3(2)(a) of Schedule 11 to the Local Government Act 1972.

40 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 clearly identifiable boundaries and to maintaining local ties.

41 In reality, the achievement of absolute electoral equality is unlikely to be attainable. There must be a degree of flexibility. However, our approach, in the context of the statutory criteria, is to keep variances to a minimum.

42 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 should also be taken into account and we aim to recommend a scheme which provides improved electoral equality over this period.

43 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

44 As part of the previous review of Castle Morpeth borough, the Borough Council forecast an increase in the electorate of 3% between 1996 and 2001. However, between 1996 and the start of this review the electorate slightly decreased by 0.2%. During this time there has only been significant growth in Hebron, Hepscott & Mitford (19% increase) and Longhorsley (25% increase) wards and no substantial growth overall in the majority of the remaining wards. In fact, the electorate in Chevington and Lynemouth wards has decreased by 14% and 15% respectively. This has resulted in a knock-on effect across the borough with many wards having substantially fewer electors per councillor than the borough average. The Borough Council initially submitted electorate forecasts for the year 2009, projecting an increase in the electorate of approximately 7% from 38,870 to 41,650 over the five-year period from 2004 to 2009. Although this was somewhat high, we considered that this was based on reasonable evidence of demolitions, housing development and identified development sites.

45 However, in its submission during Stage One the Borough Council revisited its projections and noted that it had neglected to count 13 to 17-year-old future voters (attainers) in its projections. This represents an additional 3,329 electors by 2009 to the Borough Council's original projections. As a result, its proposals were based on its original 7% growth, plus another 8% for the attainers. This gave an overall growth of almost 16% (6,109 electors).

46 In our experience, this level of growth is almost unprecedented, particularly given that the borough has in fact seen a slight decline in electorate since the last review. We therefore requested additional information from the Borough Council, seeking firm evidence for this level of growth. The Borough Council confirmed that the electorate had declined in the last five years. It stated that it was 'confident that the developments ... will be granted planning permission within the next five years' and listed a number of developments either recently given approval or likely to get approval soon. It was unable to provide any further evidence to justify its substantial electorate forecast, although it did acknowledge that it had not taken account of the death rate. The Borough Council subsequently adjusted its figures to reflect the death rate. However, this still meant that it predicted the borough's electorate would grow by 14%.

47 We therefore revisited the Borough Council's electorate projections. We noted that during its original formulation of electorate projections, the Borough Council had produced two scenarios. Scenario One included those sites with planning development (resulting in 4.5% electorate growth) and Scenario Two, which included all developments, including those yet to gain planning permission (resulting in 7% electorate growth). The Borough Council favoured Scenario Two, although it did not detail its reasons for this decision (neither of Scenario One or Two contained the attainers that the Borough Council added on later).

48 In light of the evidence received we have not been convinced that the Borough Council's electorate projections under Scenario Two are realistic. We consider that insufficient evidence has been provided to show that these construction projects will

be completed by 2009. We think it more prudent to base our figures on Scenario One and those areas actually granted planning permission. We consider that these represent the most reasonable figures for development currently available. In addition to this, we have included the attainers and adjusted the total forecast electorate to include deaths. This gives a projected growth of 12%, which we are still concerned is unrealistically high, despite the fact that the Borough Council remains confident that such growth in the electorate will occur.

49 We believe that this still represents exceptionally high growth which may well not be attained. We have therefore tried to have consideration for electoral variances under the 2004 figures.

50 Most of the growth is expected to be in the existing Chevington and Ulgham wards and Morpeth parish, although a significant amount is also expected in Hartburn ward and Ponteland parish.

51 We recognise that forecasting electorates is difficult and in view of the lack of information and evidence provided, we have adapted the Borough Council's forecast figures for the purposes of this report. However, it should be noted that having considered the forecast figures, we have some strong reservations about their reliability. In view of these concerns and the adjustments we have made, we welcome further evidence and comments during Stage Three from local organisations or individuals in relation to how accurate they judge the forecast figures to be.

Council size

52 Castle Morpeth Borough Council presently has 33 members. In its initial proposals (detailed in its meeting minutes submitted to us), the Borough Council proposed retaining the existing council size of 33. It conducted research to attain evidence of councillor workload, arguing that the existing council size enables members to successfully fulfil their role. The Liberal Democrats rejected the Borough Council's argument, stating that the additional electors would mean additional work for members. It added that the current workload deters people from becoming councillors. Therefore it argued that a small increase in the number of councillors to 34 could be justified financially and would provide more equal representation.

53 The Green Party, officers/Independents and parish councils proposed retaining the existing council size of 33 members while the Conservatives proposed to increase the council size by one to 34. None provided any evidence in support of their proposals.

54 We did not consider that any of the respondents had given us sufficient evidence to justify their proposals, so we requested additional evidence, particularly in terms of the impact of their proposed council size on the Borough Council's political management structure.

55 We received responses from the Borough Council (commenting on the officer/Independents' proposals) as well as the Conservatives and Castle Morpeth Liberal Democrats. The Borough Council provided lists of outside bodies on which the Borough Council has representation, Committee membership, Committee meetings and Executive members. The officer who responded stated that they were

unable to comment on the impact of council size on the political management of the Borough Council.

56 The Liberal Democrats contended that the distribution of the population across the Borough, which is all parished, 'suggests that the current figure of 33 councillors is approximately correct'. They stated that their proposals for 34 councillors and amendments to ward boundaries were a result of their objective to retain local identities and existing links. The Liberal Democrats argued that that the 'mean average is determined by the population distribution in the rural areas' and not the urban areas. They concluded that this means that 34 provides the correct allocation but acknowledged that in theory the urban Morpeth town 'could probably be represented by 1 or 2 less councillors'.

57 The Liberal Democrats went on to consider the workload of the six Liberal Democrat members on the Borough Council. They detailed the responsibilities of each member and their workload for one particular month. Four out of the six members estimated that they work more than 30 hours a week on Council activities. They suggested that this was not unusual among other councillors and such strong commitment 'has obvious implications for the numbers of councillors required to effectively carry through the democratic function'. The Liberal Democrats argued that these long hours offer some reasons for retaining the existing numbers or increasing them and certainly not for reducing the council size. They also noted that small district councils have fewer staff and a smaller budgets, compared to county councils or unitary authorities. Therefore district and borough councillor caseloads are larger.

58 The Liberal Democrats concluded that it is important to ensure there are sufficient councillors to adequately resource all of the Borough Council's activities and for the role of Mayor to continue. They raised the issue of the geographical spread and predominantly rural nature of the borough and suggested that any 'significant increase in councillors would have financial implications for travel costs'. Finally, the Liberal Democrats suggested that 34 councillors would provide the right level of representation in view of the introduction of new technology. They argued that e-mail for example, has impacted on councillors' workloads, providing easier access to councillors and bringing the expectation of a quick response.

59 The Conservatives argued that the current council size of 33 'is about right'. However, in view of councillors' heavy workload and the expected increase in the size of the electorate, they considered that an additional councillor would provide a good allocation in terms of electoral equality. In the light of this, the Conservatives argued that a council size of 34 could be 'fully justified'.

60 We consider that we did not receive any convincing evidence in relation to council size, despite our request for additional evidence. While it was argued that councillor workloads have increased, we do not consider there was clear evidence of how this had impacted on management structures. In addition to this, there was no clear evidence of how an additional councillor would in itself improve the effectiveness of the Borough Council. Finally, much of the evidence including allocation was based on electorate figures that we have subsequently rejected.

61 We examined the allocation for the two towns and surrounding rural area under both 33 and 34 members. It is possible to achieve the correct allocation of councillors for all areas under both council sizes. However, the arguments for an increase are

based solely on the concern that councillor workload would increase given an increase in electorate. We cannot propose an increase in council size purely on the basis of an increase in electorate. Consequently we have not been persuaded to move away from the existing council size as we consider that we received insufficient supporting evidence for an increase in council size.

62 We are therefore proposing Castle Morpeth Borough Council should retain 33 members, as part of our draft recommendations.

Electoral equality

63 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%. Therefore, when making recommendations we will not simply aim for electoral variances of under 10%. Where inadequate justification is provided for specific ward proposals we will look to improve electoral equality seeking to ensure that each councillor represents as close to the same number of electors as is possible, 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, electoral imbalances 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 such variances proposed by local interested parties will require the strongest justification in terms of the other two statutory criteria.

64 Given our ongoing concerns over the accuracy of the electorate forecasts during the formulation of draft our recommendations, we have tried to have consideration for electoral variances under the 2004 figures as we consider that these may reflect the most accurate figures available. No ward will have a variance of greater than 17% based on 2004 figures and only two would have a variance greater than 10%.

65 As a result of the lack of evidence in support of the proposals received for wards with variances of over 10%, we are not adopting these and instead proposing wards which secure good electoral equality. Our draft recommendations will secure a good level of electoral equality throughout the borough, as no ward would vary by more than 8% by 2009.

General analysis

66 In view of the limited evidence in support of all of the proposals received, we have investigated alternative options and produced our own proposals which provide good electoral equality and, where possible, reflect any community identity argument received. The five borough-wide schemes submitted put forward conflicting proposals backed up by limited or no evidence. We therefore did not feel well placed to decide between these contradictory wards and so have based our recommendations on electoral equality. We have noted where there appears to be broad agreement among respondents that a number of particular parishes should form wards and have attempted to adopt similar wards. We have also endeavoured to avoid combining

rural and urban areas where possible. We have been able to consider proposals based on both council sizes since the two councillor:elector ratios did not differ significantly. We are not adopting any of the Green Party's four- to seven-member proposed wards, as we consider it did not provide sufficient supporting evidence to justify wards with more than three members.

67 We propose retaining just one existing ward, and are putting forward our own new warding arrangements for the parishes of Morpeth and Ponteland. We consider that these new borough and parish wards use strong boundaries as well as improving electoral equality and take account of the Labour Group's suggestion that the ward boundaries for both towns be completely revised in order to secure better electoral equality.

68 We are proposing 17 wards, of these, six would be single-member, six would be two-member and five would be three-member wards.

Warding arrangements

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

- a Hartburn, Hebron, Hepscoth & Mitford, Heddon-on-the-Wall, Stamfordham and Stannington wards (page 30)
- b Chevington, Ellington, Longhorsley, Lynemouth, Pegswood and Ulgham wards (page 36)
- c Morpeth Central, Morpeth Kirkhill, Morpeth North, Morpeth South and Morpeth Stobhill wards (page 44)
- d Ponteland East, Ponteland North, Ponteland South and Ponteland West wards (page 47)

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

Hartburn, Hebron, Hepscoth & Mitford, Heddon-on-the-Wall, Stamfordham and Stannington wards

71 The above five wards are located in the south and middle of the borough and the whole area is parished. Table 5 (below) outlines the constituent areas of each ward. Table 4 (on page 20) outlines the existing electoral variances for 2004 and also the variances that the wards are forecast to have by 2009 if the existing arrangements remained in place.

Table 5: Existing arrangements

Ward name	Constituent areas	Number of councillors
Hartburn	Capheaton parish; Belsay parish; Hartburn parish; Meldon parish; Netherwitton parish; Wallington Demesne parish	1
Hebron, Hepscott & Mitford	Hebron parish; Hepscott parish; Mitford parish	1
Heddon-on-the-Wall	Heddon-on-the-Wall parish	1
Stamfordham	Matfen parish; Stamfordham parish	1
Stannington	Stannington parish; Whalton parish	1

72 During Stage One we received four representations in relation to this area. The Borough Council submitted five sets of proposals on behalf of the Borough Council's Conservative and Liberal Democrat Groups and the Green Party. It also submitted a proposal from the officers supported by the Independent Group (officers/Independents), and another from East Chevington, Longhorsley and Thirston parish councils (parish councils). With the exception of the Green Party, all the above groups proposed to retain the existing Heddon-on-the Wall ward, based on the parish of the same name. There was also agreement between the officers/Independents, Conservative Group and three parish councils who all proposed the same single-member Stamfordham and Stannington wards. The Green Party proposed two multi-member wards detailed in Table 8 below. We did not receive any substantial evidence to support these proposed wards.

73 The proposals received are detailed in Tables 6 to 9 below. The percentages quoted for each set of proposals are all based on a council size of 33 and a projected electorate growth rate of 12%.

Table 6: Conservative Group's proposals

Ward name	Constituent areas	Number of councillors	Variance from average % (2009)
Hartburn	Belsay parish; Hartburn parish; Wallington Demesne parish; Whalton parish	1	8
Hepscott & Mitford	Hepscott parish; Mitford parish	1	1
Heddon-on-the-Wall	Heddon-on-the-Wall parish	1	6
Stamfordham	Capheaton parish; Matfen parish; Stamfordham parish	1	1
Stannington	Stannington parish	1	-16

Table 7: East Chevington, Longhorsley and Thirston parish councils' and Officer/Independent Group's proposals

Ward name	Constituent areas	Number of councillors	Variance from average % (2009)
Hartburn	Belsay parish; Hartburn parish; Meldon parish; Netherwitton parish; Wallington Demesne parish	1	14
Hebron, Hepscott & Mitford	Hebron parish; Mitford parish; part of Hepscott parish (less Stobhill Manor estate)	1	10
Heddon-on-the-Wall	Heddon-on-the-Wall parish	1	6
Ponteland North	Ponteland North parish ward of Ponteland parish; Whalton parish	2	5
Stamfordham	Capheaton parish; Matfen parish; Stamfordham parish	1	1
Stannington	Stannington parish	1	-16

Table 8: Green Party's proposals

Ward name	Constituent areas	Number of councillors	Variance from average % (2009)
South & West	Belsay parish; Capheaton parish; Heddon-on-the-Wall parish; Matfen parish; Stamfordham parish; Stannington parish; Whalton parish	4	-11
North West	Hartburn parish; Hebron parish; Longhorsley parish; Meldon parish; Mitford parish; Netherwitton parish; Thirston parish; Wallington Demesne parish; Tritlington parish ward of Tritlington & West Chevington parish	3	-16

Table 9: Liberal Democrat Group's proposals

Ward name	Constituent areas	Number of councillors	Variance from average % (2009)
Hartburn	Belsay parish; Capheaton parish; Hartburn parish; Wallington Demesne parish	1	-10
Hebron, Mitford, Meldon & Netherwitton	Hebron parish; Mitford parish; Meldon parish; Netherwitton parish	1	-8
Heddon-on-the-Wall	Heddon-on-the-Wall parish	1	6
Stamfordham	Matfen parish; Stamfordham parish	1	-8
Stannington with Hepscoth & Whalton	Stannington parish; Whalton parish; part of Hepscoth parish (less Stobhill Manor housing development)	2	-19

74 Morpeth Liberal Democrat Branch supported the Liberal Democrat's proposals, particularly its proposal to replace the existing Hebron, Hepscoth & Mitford ward. Morpeth Liberal Democrat Branch argued that this ward was 'an artificial arrangement' to achieve electoral equality and Mitford and Hebron parishes have no strong links other than to Morpeth town. It maintained that Hepscoth, Stannington and Whalton parishes 'have much in common' and it is logical that they should form a ward.

75 The Liberal Democrats opposed the Borough Council's original proposals to transfer Capheaton parish into Stamfordham ward and Whalton parish into the existing Ponteland North ward and put forward alternative proposals as detailed above in Table 9. They contended that 'Ponteland is a complete entity and should not be extended into the surrounding areas more than absolutely necessary'. This issue is discussed in more detail in paragraphs 82 and 141 in relation to Ponteland parish. The Liberal Democrats argued that it is possible to retain Whalton parish in a rural two-member ward with Stannington parish and Hepscoth parish (less Stobhill Manor housing development). The officers/Independents and parish councils also proposed to transfer part of Stobhill Manor housing development out of this rural area and into a Morpeth Stobhill ward (as detailed in paragraphs 85 and 121) in order to better reflect community identity.

76 The Liberal Democrats also maintained that the existing Hartburn ward could be amended since Meldon and Netherwitton parishes 'are as easily linked with Mitford [parish], and indeed Hebron [parish]. They argued that this would provide better electoral equality and create a ward 'which seems to be more geographically logical' and takes account of issues facing rural members.

77 Borough Councillor Taylor stated that his ward of Hebron, Hepscoth & Mitford is a 'buffer between urban and rural' and the officer's proposals are the 'most appropriate' since they are relatively non-politically motivated.

78 Wallington Demesne Parish Council argued that its current parish warding arrangements provide poor equality of representation and therefore put forward a proposal detailed in the Parish and town council electoral arrangements section at the end of the report (page 50).

79 We carefully considered all representations received. We note that none of the submissions received provided strong evidence. We note that the Green Party's two proposed wards would both contain over 10% fewer electors than the borough average by 2009 and no evidence was provided to justify these variances. We also note that its South & West ward would be represented by four councillors. It should be noted that we generally try to avoid recommending four-member borough wards. We consider that wards with four or more members could dilute the accountability of members to their electorate and provide ineffective local government. In view of this and the lack of justification for the wards' relatively poor electoral equality, we are not adopting the Green Party's proposals for this area.

80 We are not adopting the Conservative's, parish councils' and officer/Independents' proposed Stannington ward or the Liberal Democrat's Stannington with Hepscoth & Whalton ward. We are also not adopting the Liberal Democrats' proposal for Hartburn ward or the officer/Independents and the parish councils' proposed Hartburn ward. We consider all these wards inappropriate in view of the lack of evidence to justify them, our proposals elsewhere and the fact that it is possible to create wards in this area which secure better electoral equality.

81 Similarly, we note the Liberal Democrats' proposed Hebron, Mitford, Meldon & Netherwitton ward and its argument that these parishes share links. However, they did not provide any substantive evidence of these links. In view of this lack of evidence and our conclusion that the electoral equality of this ward (8% below the borough average by 2009) could be improved, we are not adopting this proposed ward.

82 We consider that where possible, urban and rural areas should not be placed within the same ward. The officers/Independents' and parish councils' proposed Ponteland North ward would combine the existing relatively urban Ponteland North ward with the rural Whalton parish. We note the concerns of the Liberal Democrats who stated that they could see 'no rational argument for including Whalton [parish] with Ponteland North [ward]. Ponteland is a complete entity and should not be extended into the surrounding areas more than absolutely necessary'. In addition, no supporting evidence was received for this ward. We consider this Ponteland North ward would not reflect community identity or provide effective and convenient local government and therefore are not adopting this ward.

83 We note the consensus between the Conservatives, parish councils, Liberal Democrats and officer/Independents to retain the existing Heddon-on-the-Wall ward, which would have an electoral variance of 6% from the borough average by 2009. We note its isolated location on the edge of the borough and its limited road links with the rest of the borough. We investigated linking this ward in a two-member ward with neighbouring parishes, and found this would be possible. However, in view of all of the factors outlined above - its location, good electoral equality and relatively strong local support - we are retaining the existing Heddon-on-the-Wall ward as part of our draft recommendations.

84 We are also adopting the Conservatives', parish councils' and officer/Independents' proposed single-member Stamfordham ward comprising Capheaton, Matfen and Stamfordham parishes. In view of its good electoral equality (1% more than the borough average by 2009) and local support, we consider it would provide the best option.

85 Currently, the Stobhill Manor housing development is divided between Hepscoth parish (in Hebron, Hepscoth & Mitford ward) and Morpeth parish (in Morpeth Stobhill ward). We are adopting the parish councils', Liberal Democrats' and officers/Independents' proposal to transfer part of Hepscoth parish, Stobhill Manor housing development, into Morpeth Stobhill ward. Having visited the parish, we note that the parish boundary arbitrarily divides the housing development and so consider this a logical proposal to avoid dividing this housing estate which forms a clear cohesive area. It also only has road access from Morpeth parish. Consequently, we are unable to adopt the Conservative's Hepscoth & Mitford ward, as it is based on the whole of Hepscoth parish plus Mitford parish.

86 The parish councils and officer/Independents proposed broadly retaining the existing Hebron, Hepscoth & Mitford ward less the Stobhill Manor housing development in Hepscoth parish. We note the Morpeth Liberal Democrat Branch's comments on the lack of links between Hebron and Mitford parishes. Having visited the area we also note the physical barrier which the town of Morpeth forms between Hepscoth and Hebron parishes. In the light of these concerns and our proposals elsewhere, we are not adopting this ward. While we note it would provide reasonable electoral equality (10% more than the borough average by 2009), we have not received any evidence to convince us that this ward would allow effective and convenient local government or reflect community identity.

87 Due to the lack of supporting evidence, we examined alternative options to try to provide better electoral equality in the area to the north of Ponteland parish. Options we considered included a two-member ward comprising Meldon, Whalton and Stannington parishes and part of Hepscoth parish which would have a variance of 12% below the borough average by 2009. We looked at a two-member ward based on Meldon, Mitford, Stannington parishes and part of Hepscoth parish which would have a variance of 10% below the borough average by 2009. We also considered a single-member ward comprising Hebron, Meldon, Mitford and Whalton parishes which would vary by 2% more than the borough average by 2009. However, due to the location of the neighbouring Hepscoth and Stannington parishes on the edge of the borough and the consequent lack of other options, this would have a negative knock-on effect. It would create a single-member ward comprising Stannington parish and Hepscoth parish (less Stobhill Manor housing development) with a variance of 35% more than the borough average by 2009. We cannot consider an area in isolation to the rest of the borough. Combining the latter two wards into a three-member ward would result in a variance of 21% below the borough average by 2009. We consider this variance to be unacceptably high.

88 We identified a two-member ward comprising Mitford, Stannington and Whalton parishes and Hepscoth parish (less Stobhill Manor housing development), which would have an electoral variance of just 4% from the borough average by 2009. We are therefore adopting this ward in view of its good electoral equality. The ward would also take account of the parish councils', Liberal Democrats' and officers/Independents' proposal, referred to above (paragraph 85), to transfer that

part of Stobhill Manor housing development in Hepscott parish, into a ward with the remainder of the development. We consider this change would reflect community identity and would provide a logical boundary. We propose to name this ward Stannington & Mitford after the most populous parish in the ward (Stannington) and the ward's most northerly settlement (Mitford). This proposal would also create two new parish wards of the parish of Hepscott, as detailed in the Parish and town council electoral arrangements section (page 50).

89 We investigated different options in the area to the north of Stamfordham ward. We concluded that in view of our proposals elsewhere and the sparsely populated nature of the area, there are few viable alternatives to the proposals received, without creating a very extensive multi-member ward. We found that transferring Meldon parish out of the remainder of Hartburn ward (in view of our proposal to transfer Capheaton into Stamfordham ward) considerably improved the electoral equality from 14% above the borough average to 1% below the borough average by 2009. Having visited the area we do have some concerns, detailed in the next section (paragraph 116), regarding Meldon parish's road links with our proposed Pegswood & Hebron ward. However, at this stage we are seeking electoral equality due to the lack of community identity evidence provided. We are therefore proposing an amended single-member Hartburn ward comprising Belsay, Hartburn, Netherwitton and Wallington Demesne parishes. Subsequently we are unable to adopt the Conservative's proposals for this area.

90 In view of the lack of evidence received during Stage One, we would welcome evidence of community identity from local groups and individuals during Stage Three regarding our draft recommendations, particularly our proposed Hartburn and Stannington & Mitford wards.

91 Tables 1 and 2 (on pages 9 and 12, respectively) provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our draft recommendations for Hartburn, Heddon-on-the-Wall, Stamfordham and Stannington & Mitford wards. Our draft recommendations are shown on Map 1 accompanying this report.

Chevington, Ellington, Longhorsley, Lynemouth, Pegswood and Ulgham wards

92 The above six wards are located in the north of the borough and the whole area is parished. Table 10 (below) outlines the constituent areas of each ward. Table 4 (on page 20) outlines the existing electoral variances for 2004 and also the variances that the wards are forecast to have by 2009 if the existing arrangements remained in place.

Table 10: Existing arrangements

Ward name	Constituent areas	Number of councillors
Chevington	East Chevington parish; West Chevington parish ward of Tritlington & West Chevington parish	2
Ellington	Creswell parish; Ellington & Linton parish	2
Longhorsley	Longhorsley parish; Thirston parish; Tritlington parish ward of Tritlington & West Chevington parish	1
Lynemouth	Lynemouth parish	1
Pegswood	Longhirst parish; Pegswood parish	2
Ulgham	Ulgham parish; Widdrington Station & Stobswood parish; Widdrington Village parish	2

93 During Stage One we received five representations in relation to this area. The Borough Council submitted five sets of proposals on behalf of the Borough Council's Conservative Group, Liberal Democrat Group and the Green Party, a joint proposal from the officers and Independent Group, and another from East Chevington, Longhorsley and Thirston parish councils. The Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, officers/Independents and parish councils all proposed identical Pegswood and Lynemouth wards, each based on parishes of the same name. No significant evidence was received to justify or explain any of the proposed wards.

94 The proposals received are detailed in Tables 11 to 15 below. The percentages quoted for each set of proposals are all based on a council size of 33 and a projected electorate growth rate of 12%. It should be noted that a number of the proposed wards for this area overlap with wards described in the above section, and therefore are referred to again here.

Table 11: Conservative Group's proposals

Ward name	Constituent areas	Number of councillors	Variance from average % (2009)
Chevington	East Chevington parish; West Chevington parish ward of Tritlington & West Chevington parish	2	-14
Ellington	Cresswell parish; Ellington & Linton parish; Widdrington Village parish	2	3
Longhorsley	Longhorsley parish; Thirston parish	1	0
Lynemouth	Lynemouth parish	1	9
Netherwitton, Hebron, Meldon, Tritlington & Longhirst	Hebron parish; Longhirst parish; Meldon parish; Netherwitton parish; Tritlington parish	1	0
Pegswood	Pegswood parish	2	7
Ulgham	Ulgham parish; Widdrington Station & Stobswood parish	2	5

Table 12: East Chevington, Longhorsley and Thirston parish councils' proposals

Ward name	Constituent areas	Number of councillors	Variance from average % (2009)
Chevington	East Chevington parish; West Chevington parish ward of Tritlington & West Chevington parish	2	-14
Ellington	Cresswell parish; Ellington & Linton parish; Widdrington Village parish	2	3
Longhorsley	Longhorsley parish; Thirston parish; Tritlington parish ward of Tritlington & West Chevington parish	1	15
Lynemouth	Lynemouth parish	1	9
Pegswood	Pegswood parish	2	7
Ulgham	Longhirst parish; Ulgham parish; Widdrington Station & Stobswood parish	2	17

Table 13: Green Party's proposals

Ward name	Constituent areas	Number of councillors	Variance from average % (2009)
Coast	Cresswell parish; East Chevington parish; Ellington & Linton parish; Lynemouth parish; Ulgham parish; Widdrington Station & Stobswood parish; Widdrington Village parish; West Chevington parish ward of Tritlington & West Chevington parish	7	0
North Morpeth	Central and North parish wards of Morpeth parish; Longhirst parish; Pegswood parish	6	4
North West	Hartburn parish; Hebron parish; Longhorsley parish; Meldon parish; Mitford parish; Netherwitton parish; Thirston parish; Wallington Demesne parish; Tritlington parish ward of Tritlington & West Chevington parish	3	-16

Table 14: Liberal Democrat Group's proposals

Ward name	Constituent areas	Number of councillors	Variance from average % (2009)
Chevington	East Chevington parish; Tritlington & West Chevington parish	2	-7
Ellington with Longhirst	Cresswell parish; Ellington & Linton parish; Longhirst parish	2	9
Hebron, Mitford, Meldon & Netherwitton	Hebron parish; Mitford parish; Meldon parish; Netherwitton parish	1	-8
Longhorsley	Longhorsley parish; Thirston parish	1	0
Lynemouth	Lynemouth parish	1	9
Pegswood	Pegswood parish	2	7
Ulgham	Ulgham parish; Widdrington Station & Stobswood parish; Widdrington Village parish	2	11

Table 15: Officer and Independent Group’s proposals

Ward name	Constituent areas	Number of councillors	Variance from average % (2009)
Chevington	East Chevington parish; Tritlington & West Chevington parish	2	-7
Ellington	Cresswell parish; Ellington & Linton parish; Widdrington Village parish	2	3
Longhorsley	Longhorsley parish; Thirston parish	1	0
Lynemouth	Lynemouth parish	1	9
Pegswood	Pegswood parish	2	7
Ulgham	Longhirst parish; Ulgham parish; Widdrington Station & Stobswood parish	2	17

95 Morpeth Liberal Democrat Branch supported the Liberal Democrats’ proposed Ellington with Longhirst and Ulgham wards. It stated that it was aware of local support to retain the current Pegswood ward and Longhirst parish’s links with Pegswood parish. However, Morpeth Liberal Democrat Branch recognised that in order to achieve electoral equality, ‘there seems no alternative but to remove Longhirst [parish], which is at least a distinct community’. It opposed the officer/Independents’ proposal to link Longhirst parish with Ulgham parish and Widdrington Village parish with Ellington & Linton parish, arguing that this would ‘disrupt the existing natural linkages within Ulgham and Widdrington’. It therefore maintained that its proposed Ellington with Longhirst ward provides the ‘best plan’ but acknowledged that it may be possible to place Longhirst parish in a ward with Hebron and Mitford parishes.

96 The Liberal Democrats opposed a number of the Borough Council’s original proposals in this area and its alternative proposals for this area are detailed in Table 15 above. It argued that Widdrington Village, Widdrington Station & Stobswood and Ulgham parishes should remain in the same ward as they have ‘well-established’ links including the Blue Sky Forest proposals and Widdrington Regeneration partnership. The Liberal Democrat Group argued that Ellington ward is ‘geographically linked to Longhirst [parish]’ and Longhirst parish has ‘significant links’ with Pegswood parish. However, although it recognised the latter link it could not identify how to retain the existing Pegswood ward and it acknowledged that Longhirst parish has many different links.

97 In response to the Borough Council’s original scheme, Ulgham Parish Council stated that it would prefer the borough warding arrangements for Ulgham, Ellington & Linton, Longhirst and Widdrington Village parishes to remain the same. Ulgham Parish Council argued that it would like to retain its ‘links with Widdrington Village [parish] as they have worked well together for several years on various projects’.

98 Borough Councillor Baker outlined his concerns in relation to the difficulties arising from two-member wards in terms of councillor workloads and political conflicts. He therefore proposed that the current two-member Ellington ward could be 'evenly split into two equal parts' so that Cresswell parish and Ellington east form a single-member ward and Ellington west and Linton form another single-member ward (he did not specify the boundaries these two wards are based on).

99 Thirston Parish Council opposed the Borough Council's original proposal for its area, arguing that the proposed changes were 'unjustified', particularly its proposal to 'align Tritlington [parish ward] with Chevington [ward] when Longhorsley is a more natural alignment'.

100 Lynemouth Parish Council made a representation to the Borough Council (not formally submitted to us), arguing that the existing Lynemouth and Ellington wards should be retained. It maintained that the current partnerships between the parishes concerned should be allowed to continue and argued that Widdrington Village parish should not be transferred into Ellington ward. East Chevington Parish Council also made a submission to the Borough Council, arguing that community identities would be better reflected if the existing arrangements remained in place for Chevington and Longhorsley wards.

101 We carefully considered all representations. The Green Party proposed a seven-member Coast ward and a six-member North Morpeth ward that would both have good electoral equality. However, as stated earlier, we try to avoid recommending wards with more than three councillors as we believe such wards would not provide effective local representation. We are therefore not adopting these two proposed wards. As stated earlier, we are not adopting the Green Party's proposed North West ward in view of its uncorroborated variance of 16% below the borough average by 2009. Having decided to propose our own Hartburn ward, we are unable to adopt the Conservative's single-member Netherwitton, Hebron, Meldon, Tritlington & Longhirst ward.

102 We note that the Liberal Democrats proposed to retain the existing Ulgham ward comprising Ulgham, Widdrington Station & Stobswood and Widdrington Village parishes, which it and the Morpeth Liberal Democrat Branch and Ulgham Parish Council argued would reflect the natural links between these parishes. We note that the Liberal Democrats and Ulgham Parish Council referred to links between the three parishes, however neither group elaborated on these links. Ulgham ward would have a variance of 11% more than the borough average by 2009. In view of the lack of persuasive evidence and the fact that we have found it is possible to improve on this ward's electoral equality, we are not adopting it as part of our draft recommendations.

103 We also note that the officers/Independents and parish councils both proposed the same Ulgham ward which would have a variance of 17% more than the borough average by 2009. This ward would comprise Longhirst, Ulgham and Widdrington Station & Stobswood parishes. We did not receive any evidence of community identity to account for this poor level of electoral equality. In addition, we note the Morpeth Liberal Democrat Branch's, Liberal Democrat's and Ulgham Parish Council's comments in relation to links between Ulgham parish and the two Widdrington parishes. We are therefore not adopting this proposed ward in view of these concerns and the ward's electoral inequality.

104 We investigated alternative options such as placing Ulgham parish in a three-member ward with Longhirst, Pegswood, Hebron and Meldon parishes. This ward would have a variance of 3% more than the borough average by 2009. However, we are not convinced that such a ward would reflect community identity in view of the Liberal Democrat Group's and Ulgham Parish Council's arguments regarding Ulgham parish's links with the Widdrington area. We note that the Conservatives put forward an alternative two-member Ulgham ward comprising Ulgham and Widdrington Station & Stobswood parishes which would have a variance of 5% by 2009. We consider that this would reflect the road links between these two parishes and, to a certain degree, reflect the indicated links between Ulgham parish and the Widdrington area. It would also provide good electoral equality. We are therefore adopting the Conservative's Ulgham ward as part of our draft recommendations.

105 We note that all the groups who submitted borough-wide schemes, with the exception of the Green Party, proposed to retain the existing single-member Lynemouth ward based on the parish of the same name. This ward would have a variance of 9% more than the borough average by 2009. However, they did not provide any evidence in support of this proposal. Similarly no evidence was provided for the Conservative's, officers/Independents' and parish councils' proposed neighbouring two-member Ellington ward, based on the existing ward, with the addition of Widdrington Village parish. We also note Lynemouth Parish Council's representation to the Borough Council (not formally submitted to us) arguing that the existing Lynemouth and Ellington wards should be retained. Since none of the respondents put forward evidence as to why Lynemouth ward should be retained as a single-member ward, and there are viable alternatives with better electoral equality, we are not adopting this proposal.

106 The Liberal Democrats proposed an alternative Ellington with Longhirst ward which would have a variance of 9% above the borough average by 2009 and comprise the current Ellington ward plus Longhirst parish. We noted that although Morpeth Liberal Democrat Branch stated that this proposal was the most suitable, along with the Liberal Democrats, it also acknowledged that Longhirst parish has links with Pegswood parish. We are not adopting this proposal in view of the opportunity to provide improved electoral equality.

107 We note Councillor Baker's proposal to divide Ellington ward into two single-member wards. However, he did not provide any detail of the boundary between these two wards or community identity argument. Therefore we are not adopting this proposal to divide Ellington village.

108 We decided to investigate alternative options for this area.

109 We note that a three-member ward can be created by combining the existing Ellington and Lynemouth wards, which would have a variance of 1% more than the borough average by 2009. Given that an improved level of electoral equality is possible and the absence of any persuasive community evidence to justify the proposals received for this area, we are adopting this Lynemouth & Ellington ward as part of our draft recommendations as it would provide excellent electoral equality. In addition to this, we visited this area and noted that Ellington & Linton parish and Lynemouth parish share good road links. We would welcome persuasive and detailed evidence of community identities in relation to this recommendation at Stage Three.

110 The group of parish councils proposed to retain the existing Longhorsley ward and along with the Conservatives, the existing Chevington ward, which would have variances of 15% above and 14% below the borough average respectively by 2009. We note that these proposals were not supported by any evidence of community identities. Therefore, given this and the high variances of the existing wards, we are not proposing to include these wards as part of our draft recommendations

111 We note that the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and officers/Independents proposed a single-member Longhorsley ward comprising Longhorsley and Thirston parishes. This ward would have a variance equal to the borough average by 2009. In view of this excellent electoral equality, we are adopting it as part of our draft recommendations.

112 The Liberal Democrats and officers/Independents proposed a two-member Chevington ward consisting of East Chevington and Tritlington & West Chevington parishes which would have a variance of 7% below the borough average by 2009. However, we noted Thirston Parish Council's objections to this proposal as well as comments submitted by East Chevington Parish Council to the Borough Council. Both parish councils expressed concerns regarding this proposal and argued that the existing Chevington and Longhorsley wards should be retained.

113 The existing Chevington ward is predicted to have a variance of 14% below the borough average by 2009. Having looked into different options for this area in the light of our proposals elsewhere for Ulgham and Ellington & Lynemouth wards, we are proposing a two-member Chevington ward comprising East Chevington and Widdrington Village parishes and West Chevington parish ward of Tritlington & West Chevington parish. We note that there are good road links between these three areas and that the ward secures reasonable electoral equality (8% below the borough average by 2009). We are not including Tritlington parish ward of Tritlington & West Chevington parish in this ward in view of comments received from Thirston Parish Council outlined above and the distance of the settlement of Tritlington from East Chevington parish.

114 Our draft recommendations for Ulgham and Longhorsley wards limit the options available for the area around Longhirst, Pegswood and Hebron parishes. We note that the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, officers/Independents and parish councils all proposed the same Pegswood ward based on the parish of the same name. We acknowledge that this ward would have acceptable electoral equality (7% more than the borough average by 2009). However, we cannot consider particular areas in isolation as our recommended wards have knock-on affects across the borough. Consequently, in view of our proposals elsewhere, we note that when the remaining parishes are combined there are insufficient numbers of electors (18% fewer than the borough average by 2009) to create a viable single-member ward with good electoral equality.

115 We therefore investigated alternative options which would provide better electoral equality. We are proposing a three-member Pegswood & Hebron ward which would have a variance of 1% below the borough average by 2009. This ward would comprise Hebron, Longhirst, Meldon and Pegswood parishes and Tritlington parish ward of Tritlington & West Chevington parish. We note the Liberal Democrats' comment that Meldon parish could feasibly be linked with Hebron parish. However, having visited the area, we have some concerns in relation to the inclusion of Meldon

parish within this ward, in view of the limited road links between this parish and the remainder of the ward. We consider that Meldon parish may have stronger links with our proposed Hartburn ward (which would then have a variance of 14% more than the borough average by 2009). However, in view of the lack of detailed evidence provided, at this stage we have decided to attain electoral equality and would welcome additional evidence during Stage Three.

116 Tables 1 and 2 (on pages 9 and 12, respectively) provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our draft recommendations for Chevington, Ellington & Lynemouth, Longhorsley, Pegswood & Hebron and Ulgham wards. Our draft recommendations are shown on Map 1 accompanying this report.

Morpeth Central, Morpeth Kirkhill, Morpeth North, Morpeth South and Morpeth Stobhill wards

117 Morpeth parish is located in the east of the borough and is divided into five parish wards based on the borough wards. The parish comprises the two-member borough wards of Morpeth Central, Morpeth Kirkhill, Morpeth North, Morpeth South and Morpeth Stobhill. Table 4 (on page 20) outlines the existing electoral variances for 2004 and also the variances that the wards are forecast to have by 2009 if the existing arrangements remained in place.

118 During Stage One we received two representations in relation to Morpeth parish. The Borough Council submitted five sets of proposals. These were on behalf of the Borough Council's Conservative Group, Liberal Democrat Group and the Green Party. a joint proposal from the officers and Independent Group (officers/Independents), and another from East Chevington, Longhorsley and Thirston parish councils.

119 The Green Party proposed a six-member South Morpeth ward comprising Morpeth Kirkhill, Morpeth South and Morpeth Stobhill wards and Hepscoth parish, which would have a variance of 2% above the borough average by 2009. It also proposed a six-member North Morpeth ward comprising Morpeth Central and Morpeth North wards, and Longhirst and Pegswood parishes which would have a variance of 4% above the borough average by 2009. No evidence was provided in support of these wards.

120 The four other groups who submitted borough-wide schemes all proposed broadly retaining the existing Morpeth borough wards with some minor amendments to improve electoral equality or the reflection of community identities. They proposed to retain Morpeth North and Morpeth South wards. Morpeth South ward would have a variance of 14% below the borough average by 2009. The officers/Independents, Liberal Democrats and parish councils proposed to transfer that part of Stobhill Manor housing development in Hepscoth parish and Hebron, Hepscoth & Mitford ward, into Morpeth Stobhill ward. All four groups proposed to transfer the High Stanners area from Morpeth Central ward into Morpeth Kirkhill ward. Under this proposal, Morpeth Central ward would have a variance of 12% below the borough average by 2009. The Conservatives proposed to retain the current Morpeth Stobhill ward.

121 Morpeth Liberal Democrat Branch supported the Liberal Democrat's proposals to transfer the High Stanners area into Morpeth Kirkhill ward and Stobhill Manor

housing development into Morpeth Stobhill ward. It argued that the residents of that part of Stobhill Manor housing development currently in Hepscott parish 'have little or no affinity with the village of Hepscott, and are in reality Morpeth residents ... [with] identical community links to the remaining houses in Stobhill Manor'. In relation to the High Stanners area of Morpeth Central ward it accepted such changes may be necessary in order to provide better electoral equality. It also noted that this area is based on a 'discrete group of houses, separated from the rest of Morpeth Central ward by the river'.

122 Comments from the Liberal Democrat Group were included as an attachment to the Morpeth Liberal Democrat Branch's submission. The Liberal Democrat Group argued that it is 'logical and sensible' as residents of Stobhill Manor 'relate to the rest of Stobhill Manor and Morpeth far more than Hepscott'.

123 Although not an official submission to us, we note that in its response to the Borough Council's original scheme, Castle Morpeth Labour Group objected to the proposal to transfer the High Stanners area into Morpeth Kirkhill ward. The Borough Council formally submitted the Labour Group's recommendation that a complete review of all borough wards within Morpeth parish be undertaken to ensure electoral equality and the wards should simply be named in relation to relevant compass-points. However, it did not submit any detailed proposals.

124 We carefully considered all representations received. We note the Green Party's six-member North Morpeth and South Morpeth wards. However, as stated earlier, we try to avoid recommending wards with more than three councillors as we believe such wards would not provide effective local representation. We are therefore not adopting these two proposed wards.

125 We note the lack of supporting evidence supplied for any of the proposed wards for Morpeth parish and the relatively poor electoral equality of all the proposed Morpeth Central and Morpeth South wards. We also note the Labour Group's statement that the boundaries of wards in Morpeth parish should be completely reviewed. We consider the existing ward boundaries could be improved so that they are tied to clear ground features and better reflect distinct areas of the town. We therefore investigated alternative warding options for Morpeth parish to try to improve electoral equality.

126 As stated earlier (paragraph 85), we are adopting the Liberal Democrats', officers/Independents' and parish councils' proposal to transfer the part of Stobhill Manor housing development in Hepscott parish into Morpeth Stobhill ward. We note the Morpeth Liberal Democrat Branch and Liberal Democrats' support for this proposal, and their argument that it would reflect community links. We visited the area and noted that the estate forms a coherent area with no road access from Hepscott parish. The parish boundary arbitrarily divides the estate and we concur that this is a sensible proposal to join these to areas to better reflect community identity. We are therefore incorporating this proposal into our draft recommendations.

127 We looked into using the railway line surrounding the Stobhill area as a ward boundary. However, having decided to adopt the above proposal for Morpeth Stobhill ward, the area within the railway line contains too many electors for a two-member ward (16% more than the borough average by 2009). We investigated the possibility of creating single-member wards and found that using Shields Road as a boundary

would create east and west Stobhill wards with variances of 15% and 6% more than the borough average by 2009. We concluded that we could achieve better electoral equality with a two-member ward in this area, by transferring part of the Stobhill area into another ward.

128 During our visit to Morpeth parish we noted that Shields Road provides easy access under the railway line towards the town centre and the south of the town. We also note that under the existing arrangements, the area to the south of the railway line is part of Morpeth Central ward. Therefore we are proposing to retain this boundary and continue it westwards across Shields Road, transferring Low Stobhill into our proposed Morpeth South ward. This would create a two-member Morpeth Stobhill ward with a variance of 2% more than the borough average by 2009. We acknowledge that ideally Low Stobhill should be in the same ward as the remainder of the Stobhill area. However, in view of the lack of evidence received and the poor electoral equality that would result from the proposals submitted, we are putting forward our own proposal for a two-member Morpeth Stobhill ward. This would secure good electoral equality, and therefore we are adopting it as part of our draft recommendations.

129 We note the officers/Independents', Conservative's, Liberal Democrats' and parish councils' proposal to transfer the High Stanners area from Morpeth Central ward into Morpeth Kirkhill ward but the Labour Group expressed concerns about this proposal. We visited the area and noted that although this area is on the other side of the River Wansbeck from the town centre, it has a good road link across the river. We also noted that the High Stanners area is separated from Morpeth Kirkhill ward by a very steep hill and green space. We consider that this represents a substantial barrier. Therefore, despite the good electoral equality this proposal would provide (1% below the borough average by 2009), we are not adopting it as we do not consider it would reflect community identity. Consequently, we are putting forward our own proposals for the remainder of Morpeth parish, providing what we consider to be good boundaries and electoral equality.

130 We initially investigated whether the River Wansbeck to the south of the town centre could be used as a boundary. However, we could not identify a viable ward with good electoral equality, using this as a boundary. We also looked into whether it were possible to create a single-member ward based on the Fulbeck area of Morpeth parish, however we concluded that this area contains insufficient numbers of electors to form a ward (14% below the borough average by 2009). Having visited the area, we consider that the Allery Banks and Carlisle Park form a clear boundary between the north and south of the town and this would allow for good electoral equality. We are therefore using these as a boundary for our proposed three-member Morpeth North Central ward. This ward comprises the existing Morpeth North ward, the town centre area north of Allery Banks and Carlisle Park, plus the High Stanners area. The existing boundary along the River Wansbeck is retained on either side of the town centre. We consider that these areas all share very good road links with the town centre. Our proposed Morpeth North Central ward would have a variance of 7% more electors than the borough average by 2009. We consider that this variance could only be improved if natural boundaries were breached, which we are reluctant to do.

131 We are adjusting the boundary between Morpeth Kirkhill and Morpeth South wards in order to achieve electoral equality. We are transferring the Westfield area to the west of the football ground and cemetery, plus Castle Close from Morpeth South

ward into Morpeth Kirkhill ward. Our proposed two-member Morpeth South ward comprises of the remainder of Morpeth South and Morpeth Central wards, plus part of Morpeth Stobhill ward as described earlier (in paragraph 128). The southern boundary of our proposed Morpeth Stobhill ward will follow the mineral railway which runs behind Green Lane, until it meets the other mineral railway that runs to the east of Coopies Lane Industrial Estate. The boundary then follows field boundaries across to the A192, which it runs along briefly before skirting the back of the houses of the Stobhill Manor housing development and meeting the existing boundary along Catch Burn. We consider that these wards would provide good electoral equality (5% and 6% above the borough average respectively by 2009).

132 As a result of our proposed new Morpeth borough wards, we are adjusting the parish ward boundaries to match the new borough wards, as detailed in the Parish and town council electoral arrangements section (page 50).

133 Since we are putting forward our own proposals for Morpeth parish, if they are not considered to reflect community identities, we would welcome demonstrable evidence from local organisations or individuals in relation to these draft recommendations during Stage Three.

134 Tables 1 and 2 (on pages 9 and 12, respectively) provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our draft recommendations for Morpeth Kirkhill, Morpeth North Central, Morpeth South and Morpeth Stobhill wards. Our draft recommendations are shown on Map 1 (please refer to the notes in relation to this map on page 57) and Map 2 accompanying this report.

Ponteland East, Ponteland North, Ponteland South and Ponteland West wards

135 Ponteland parish is located in the south of the borough and is divided into four parish wards based on borough wards. The parish comprises the two-member borough wards of Ponteland East, Ponteland North, Ponteland South and Ponteland West. Table 4 (on page 20) outlines the existing electoral variances for 2004 and also the variances that the wards are forecast to have by 2009 if the existing arrangements remained in place.

136 During Stage One we received one representation in relation to Ponteland parish. The Borough Council submitted five sets of proposals. These were on behalf of the Borough Council's Conservative Group, Liberal Democrat Group's and the Green Party, a joint proposal from the officers and Independent Group and another from East Chevington, Longhorsley and Thirston parish councils.

137 The Green Party proposed a seven-member Ponteland ward comprising Ponteland parish. The remaining four groups all proposed to retain the existing two-member Ponteland East, Ponteland South and Ponteland West wards. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats both proposed to retain the existing Ponteland North ward. While the officers/Independents and parish councils proposed a new Ponteland North ward comprising Ponteland North ward and Whalton parish. Under all four schemes, no ward would vary by more than 9% from the borough average by 2009.

138 The Liberal Democrats stated that it could see 'no rational argument for including Whalton [parish] with Ponteland North [ward]. Ponteland is a complete entity and should not be extended into the surrounding areas more than absolutely necessary'.

139 We note that Castle Morpeth Labour Group (submitted by the Borough Council) maintained that the borough wards of Ponteland should be completely reviewed but did not submit any detailed proposals.

140 We carefully considered all representations received. We note the Green Party's proposed seven-member Ponteland ward. However, we try to avoid recommending wards with more than three councillors as we believe such wards would not provide effective local representation. We are therefore not adopting this proposed ward.

141 As stated earlier (paragraph 82), we are not adopting the officers/Independents' and parish councils' Ponteland North ward comprising Ponteland North ward and Whalton parish. We note the opposition of the Liberal Democrat Group to this ward and we concur with its views. Where possible, we try to avoid combining rural and urban areas in the same wards as we consider such wards are unlikely to reflect community identities. We judge that it is not necessary to include the relatively urban Ponteland parish with other neighbouring more rural parishes in order provide good electoral equality.

142 We note that all the proposals received for Ponteland parish attained broad consensus and would have variances less than 10% from the borough average by 2009. However, in view of the lack of evidence received for any of the proposed wards in Ponteland parish, we investigated alternative options to achieve good electoral equality and boundaries. This is consistent with our approach taken in relation to a similar circumstance regarding proposals for Morpeth parish. We also considered that the existing boundaries could be linked to clearer ground features to provide more logical boundaries.

143 Having visited the area, we found that four wards with good electoral equality could be formed based on what we consider are distinct areas of the parish. We are proposing a three-member Ponteland North East ward based on part of Ponteland East and part of Ponteland North wards; less the area of Ponteland North ward south of the River Pont and the area of Ponteland East ward between Eastern Way and the borough boundary. The proposed boundary would run along the existing boundary of Limestone Lane then the River Pont from the north of Moor Lane, before running along the backs of the houses of Dunsgreen. It would then follow Rotary Way and skirt the north of Prestwick to the borough boundary. During our visit to the area, we noted that the character of this area differs from the large estate to its south. This ward would have a variance of 3% below the borough average by 2009. We consider this ward takes account of access points and following logical boundaries. We judge that that the electoral equality of this ward cannot be improved without breaching boundaries between these areas.

144 We are proposing a three-member Ponteland South ward based on the existing Ponteland South ward and parts of the existing Ponteland East and Ponteland West wards. This ward would include the southern half of the more rural area of the parish, south of the proposed Ponteland North East ward as described above. The more urban boundary of this proposed ward within the village, from the existing boundary

of Limestone Lane, would run along the backs of the houses off Western Way in the far north-west of the village. It then would run between Avondale Road and Meadowvale and follow the whole of Middle Drive and continue east along Rotary Way. We note that Middle Drive is currently used as a boundary and when we visited the area we also noted that it provides a clear boundary. We consider that our proposal for a new Ponteland South ward would use strong boundaries. It would have a variance of 8% below the borough average by 2009, which could only really be improved by crossing Middle Drive. We are reluctant to do so as we consider this road forms a good boundary.

145 Our proposed single-member Ponteland West ward would be based on part of Ponteland West ward and a small part of Ponteland North ward. This ward's western boundary follows the back of the houses off Western Way to the south of Avondale Road. Its southern boundary runs along Middle Drive as far as Broadway and then follows the backs of the houses of Sandringham Way, before joining the existing boundary. This Ponteland West ward would provide good electoral equality, with a projected variance of 4% below the borough average by 2009.

146 Finally, we are proposing a single-member Ponteland North ward based on parts of Ponteland East, Ponteland North and Ponteland West wards. Its northern boundary would follow the River Pont, then the backs of the houses of Dunsgreen to Middle Drive. The boundary would then run west along Middle Drive to Broadway and the backs of the houses of Sandringham Way. We consider that this ward would provide strong boundaries and good electoral equality, with a variance of 2% below the borough average by 2009.

147 As a result of our proposed new Ponteland borough wards, we are adjusting the parish ward boundaries to match the new borough wards, as detailed in the Parish and town council electoral arrangements section (page 50). Since we are putting forward our own proposals for Ponteland parish, we would welcome detailed evidence during Stage Three from local organisations or individuals in relation to these draft recommendations, whether or not they support them.

148 Tables 1 and 2 (on pages 9 and 12, respectively) provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our draft recommendations for Ponteland North East, Ponteland North, Ponteland South and Ponteland West wards. Our draft recommendations are shown on Maps 1, 3 and 4 accompanying this report.

Conclusions

149 Table 16 shows how our draft recommendations will affect electoral equality, comparing them with the current arrangements (based on 2004 electorate figures) and with forecast electorates for the year 2009.

Table 16: Comparison of current and recommended electoral arrangements

	Current arrangements		Draft recommendations	
	2004	2009	2004	2009
Number of councillors	33	33	33	33
Number of wards	20	20	17	17
Average number of electors per councillor	1,178	1,317	1,178	1,317
Number of wards with a variance more than 10% from the average	8	9	2	0
Number of wards with a variance more than 20% from the average	2	2	0	0

150 As shown in Table 16, our draft recommendations for Castle Morpeth Borough Council would result in a reduction in the number of wards with an electoral variance of more than 10% from eight to two. By 2009 no wards are forecast to have an electoral variance of more than 10%. We are proposing to retain the existing council size and are recommending a council size of 33 members. We would appreciate views on the forecast electorate figures used and our own proposals for warding arrangements, particularly for Morpeth and Ponteland parishes.

Draft recommendation:

Castle Morpeth Borough Council should comprise 33 councillors serving 17 wards, as detailed and named in Tables 1 and 2, and illustrated on the large maps accompanying this report.

Parish and town council electoral arrangements

151 As part of a FER the Committee can make recommendations for new electoral arrangements for parishes. Where there is no impact on the Borough 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 Boundary Committee will usually wish to see a degree of consensus between the Borough Council and the parish council concerned. Proposals should be supported by evidence, illustrating why changes to parish electoral arrangements are required. The Boundary Committee cannot recommend changes to the external boundaries of parishes as part of a FER.

152 Responsibility for reviewing and implementing changes to the electoral arrangements of existing parishes, outside of an electoral review conducted by The

Boundary Committee, lies with borough councils.² If a borough 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.

153 During Stage One we received proposals for revised parish council electoral arrangements from Wallington Demesne Parish Council. It stated that its parish is currently divided into two parish wards of Middleton and Wallington Demesne. The Parish Council noted that Middleton parish ward contains just 73 electors electing six parish councillors while Wallington Demesne parish ward contains 240 electors, electing three parish councillors. Therefore it argued that the number of electors per councillor was 'distorted'. The Parish Council indicated that these imbalances are partly a result of housing development and argued that ideally, each parish councillor should represent as near as possible, the same number of electors.

154 The Parish Council stated that it would like to retain its current nine councillors and outlined two possible solutions to the current inequality of representation between its parish wards. It considered allocating two parish councillors to Middleton parish ward and seven parish councillors to Wallington Demesne parish ward. However, it concluded that future housing developments could result in further inequality of representation. The Parish Council therefore concluded that the best option would be to abolish its parish wards so that the nine councillors represent the whole parish of Wallington Demesne.

155 We consider this proposal to be acceptable as it would take account of recent changes to the parish's electorate and should ensure broad equality of representation across the parish. We consider it would provide effective and convenient local government. We are therefore content to put forward the Parish Council's proposal for consultation.

Draft recommendation:

Wallington Demesne Parish Council should comprise nine parish councillors, as at present. Its parish wards of Middleton (returning six parish councillors) and Wallington Demesne (returning three parish councillors) should be abolished.

156 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 borough wards it must also be divided into parish wards, so that each parish ward lies wholly within a single ward of the borough. Accordingly, we propose consequential warding arrangements for the parishes of Hepscoth, Morpeth and Ponteland to reflect the proposed borough wards.

157 The parish of Hepscoth is currently served by seven parish councillors. During Stage One, three of the groups who submitted borough-wide schemes (the Liberal Democrats, officers/Independents and parish councils) proposed to include part of Hepscoth parish (part of Stobhill Manor housing development) with the remainder of the development in Morpeth Stobhill ward. Morpeth Liberal Democrat Branch and the Liberal Democrat Group argued that as this part of Hepscoth parish looks to Morpeth

² Such reviews must be conducted in accordance with section 17 of the Local Government and Rating Act 1997.

parish, this proposal would reflect community links. No specific boundaries or electoral arrangements were put forward for Hepscoth parish.

158 As detailed earlier in the section covering warding arrangements for Morpeth borough (page 44), having visited the area, we consider that this proposal would reflect community identity. Consequently, we are incorporating it as part of our draft recommendations. As a result of our proposed Stannington & Mitford and Morpeth Stobhill wards, two new Hepscoth parish wards of Hepscoth parish will be created. We are proposing a Hepscoth parish ward based on Hepscoth village and a Hepscoth Stobhill Manor parish ward based on that part of Stobhill Manor housing estate within Hepscoth parish. The boundary between the parish wards will follow the borough ward boundary. We have allocated parish councillors to each parish ward based on the number of electors in each ward.

Draft recommendation:

Hepscoth Parish Council should comprise seven parish councillors, as at present, representing two wards: Hepscoth (returning five councillors) and Hepscoth Stobhill Manor (returning two councillors). The parish ward boundaries should reflect the proposed borough wards in the area, as illustrated and named on Maps 1 and 2.

159 The parish of Morpeth is currently served by 15 councillors representing five parish wards of Central, Kirkhill, North, South and Stobhill, each represented by three town councillors.

160 During Stage One we did not receive any proposals to amend the number or distribution of town councillors or any specific parish warding proposals for Morpeth parish. However, as a result of our draft recommendations for four new borough wards within Morpeth parish (outlined in paragraphs 128 to 132), we are amending the town wards in Morpeth parish to reflect our proposals. We have allocated town councillors to each town ward based on the number of electors in each ward. We welcome any comments on these proposals during Stage Three.

Draft recommendation:

Morpeth Town Council should comprise 15 councillors, as at present, representing four wards: Morpeth North Central (returning five councillors), Morpeth Kirkhill (returning three councillors), Morpeth South (returning four councillors) and Morpeth Stobhill (returning three councillors). The parish ward boundaries should reflect the proposed borough ward boundaries in the area, as illustrated and named on Maps 1 (as per the note on page 57) and 2.

161 The parish of Ponteland is currently served by 12 councillors representing four parish wards of East, North, South and West, each represented by three parish councillors.

162 During Stage One we did not receive any proposals to amend the number or distribution of parish councillors or any specific parish warding proposals. In view of our recommendations for four new borough wards within Ponteland parish (outlined in paragraphs 143 to 147), we are amending the parish wards to reflect our proposed borough ward boundaries. We have allocated parish councillors to each parish ward based on the number of electors in each ward. We welcome any comments on these proposals during Stage Three.

Draft recommendation:

Ponteland Parish Council should comprise 12 councillors, as at present, representing four wards: Ponteland North (returning two councillors), Ponteland North East (returning four councillors), Ponteland South (returning four councillors) and Ponteland West (returning two councillors). The parish ward boundaries should reflect the proposed borough ward boundaries in the area, as illustrated and named on Maps 1, 3 and 4.

5 What happens next?

163 There will now be a consultation period of 12 weeks, during which everyone is invited to comment on the draft recommendations on future electoral arrangements for Castle Morpeth contained in this report. We will take into account fully all submissions received by 10 April 2006. Any received after this date may not be taken into account.

164 We have not finalised our conclusions on the electoral arrangements for Castle Morpeth and welcome comments from interested parties relating to the proposed ward boundaries, number of councillors, ward names, and parish council electoral arrangements. In particular, we found our decisions regarding electorate forecasts to be especially problematical. In addition, formulating our recommendations for Morpeth parish and Pegswood & Hebron ward was a difficult judgement between the 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.

165 Express your views by writing directly to:

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

reviews@boundarycommittee.org.uk

Submissions can also be made online at
www.boundarycommittee.org.uk/our-work/ferfeedback.cfm

166 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, copies of all Stage Three representations will be placed on deposit locally at the offices of Castle Morpeth Borough Council, at the Committee's offices in Trevelyan House and on its website at www.boundarycommittee.org.uk. A list of respondents will be available from us on request after the end of the consultation period.

167 In the light of representations received, we will review our draft recommendations and 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 electoral change Order giving effect to our recommendations until six weeks after it receives them.

6 Mapping

Draft recommendations:

The following maps illustrate our proposed ward boundaries for Castle Morpeth borough.

Sheet 1, Map 1 illustrates in outline form the proposed wards for Castle Morpeth borough, including constituent parishes.

Note: On Map 1 the existing ward boundary within Morpeth Stobhill ward, running along the parish boundary, should be black (denoting that it is no longer to be utilised as a ward boundary) and not red. The name of the proposed Morpeth North Central ward should be in italics to indicate that it is a proposed ward name. These errors were noted after the maps were printed.

Sheet 2, Map 2 illustrates the proposed boundaries in Morpeth and Hepscoth parishes.

Sheet 3, Map 3 illustrates the proposed boundaries in Ponteland parish.

Sheet 4, Map 4 illustrates the proposed boundaries in Ponteland parish.

Appendix A

Glossary and abbreviations

AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty)	A landscape whose distinctive character and natural beauty are so outstanding that it is in the nation's interest to safeguard it
Attainers	Attainers are 18 year olds eligible to vote for the first time.
Boundary Committee	The Boundary Committee for England is a committee of The Electoral Commission, responsible for undertaking electoral reviews
Constituent areas	The geographical areas that make up any one ward, expressed in parishes or existing wards, or parts of either
Consultation	An opportunity for interested parties to comment and make proposals at key stages during the review
Council size	The number of councillors elected to serve a council
Order (or electoral change Order)	A legal document which implements changes to the electoral arrangements of a local authority
The Electoral Commission	An independent body that was set up by the UK Parliament. Its mission is to foster public confidence and participation by promoting integrity, involvement and effectiveness in the democratic process
Electoral equality	A measure of ensuring that every persons vote is of equal worth
Electoral imbalance	Where there is a large difference between the number of electors represented by a councillor and the average for the borough
Electorate	People in the authority who are registered to vote in local government elections
FER (or Further Electoral Review)	A further review of the electoral arrangements of a local authority following significant shifts in the electorate since the last Periodic Electoral Review conducted between 1996 and 2004
Multi-member ward	A ward represented by more than one councillor and usually not more than three councillors

National Park	<p>The National Parks in England and Wales were designated under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949 and will soon be joined by the new designation of the South Downs. The definition of a National Park is:</p> <p>'an extensive area of beautiful and relatively wild country in which, for the nation's benefit and by appropriate national decision and action:</p> <p>the characteristic landscape beauty is strictly preserved;</p> <p>access and facilities for open-air enjoyment are amply provided;</p> <p>wildlife and buildings and places of architectural and historic interest are suitably protected;</p> <p>established farming use is effectively maintained'</p>
Number of electors per councillor	The total number of electors in a local authority divided by the number of councillors
Over-represented	Where there are fewer electors per councillor in a ward than the average the electors can be described as being over-represented
Parish	A specific and defined the area of land within a single borough enclosed within a parish boundary. There are over 10,000 parishes in England, which provide the first tier of representation to their local residents
Parish council	A body elected by residents of the parish who are on the electoral register, which serves and represents the area defined by the parish boundaries
Parish electoral arrangements	The total number of parish councillors; the number, names and boundaries of parish wards; and the number of councillors for each ward
Parish ward	A particular area of a parish, defined for electoral, administrative and representational purposes. Eligible electors vote in whichever parish ward they live for candidate or candidates they wish to represent them on the parish council

PER (or Periodic Electoral Review)	A review of the electoral arrangements of all local authorities in England, undertaken periodically. The last programme of PERs was undertaken between 1996 and 2004 by The Boundary Committee for England and its predecessor, the now-defunct Local Government Commission for England
Political management arrangements	The Local Government Act 2000 enabled local authorities to modernise their decision-making process. Councils could choose from three broad categories; a directly elected mayor and cabinet; a cabinet with a leader; or a directly elected mayor and council manager. Whichever of the categories it adopted became the new political management structure for the council
Under-represented	Where there are more electors per councillor in a ward than the average the electors can be described as being under-represented
Variance (or electoral variance)	How far the number of electors per councillor in a ward varies in percentage terms from the borough average
Ward	A specific area of a district or borough, defined for electoral, administrative and representational purposes. Eligible electors vote in whichever ward they are registered for the candidate or candidates they wish to represent them on the borough council

Appendix B

Code of practice on written consultation

The Cabinet Office's November 2000 *Code of Practice on Written Consultation* (available at 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 B1: The 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.