

Final recommendations on the
future electoral arrangements
for South Bedfordshire

Report to the Secretary of State for
Transport, Local Government and the Regions

August 2001

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CONTENTS

page

WHAT IS THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND? *v*

SUMMARY *vii*

1 INTRODUCTION *1*

2 CURRENT ELECTORAL ARRANGEMENTS *3*

3 DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS *7*

4 RESPONSES TO CONSULTATION *9*

5 ANALYSIS AND FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS *11*

6 WHAT HAPPENS NEXT? *35*

APPENDIX

Final Recommendations for South Bedfordshire:
Detailed Mapping *37*

A large map illustrating the proposed ward boundaries for Dunstable, Houghton Regis and Leighton-Linslade is inserted inside the back cover of this report.

WHAT IS THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND?

The Local Government Commission for England is an independent body set up by Parliament. Our task is to review and make recommendations to the Government on whether there should be changes to local authorities' electoral arrangements.

Members of the Commission are:

Professor Malcolm Grant (Chairman)
Professor Michael Clarke CBE (Deputy Chairman)
Peter Brokenshire
Kru Desai
Pamela Gordon
Robin Gray
Robert Hughes CBE

Barbara Stephens (Chief Executive)

We are required by law to review the electoral arrangements of every principal local authority in England. 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, ward names and the frequency of elections. We can also recommend changes to the electoral arrangements of parish and town councils.

This report sets out the Commission's final recommendations on the electoral arrangements for the district of South Bedfordshire.

SUMMARY

We began a review of South Bedfordshire's electoral arrangements on 25 July 2000. We published our draft recommendations for electoral arrangements on 20 February 2001, after which we undertook an eight-week period of consultation.

- **This report summarises the representations we received during consultation on our draft recommendations, and contains our final recommendations to the Secretary of State.**

We found that the existing arrangements provide unequal representation of electors in South Bedfordshire:

- **in 17 of the 25 wards the number of electors represented by each councillor varies by more than 10 per cent from the average for the district and 11 wards vary by more than 20 per cent;**
- **by 2005 this situation is not expected to improve, with the number of electors per councillor forecast to vary by more than 10 per cent from the average in 18 wards and by more than 20 per cent in ten wards.**

Our main final recommendations for future electoral arrangements (see Tables 1 and 2 and paragraphs 120-121) are that:

- **South Bedfordshire District Council should have 50 councillors, three less than at present;**
- **there should be 23 wards, instead of 25 as at present;**
- **the boundaries of 21 of the existing wards should be modified, resulting in a net reduction of two, and four wards should retain their existing boundaries;**
- **elections should continue to take place by thirds.**

The purpose of these proposals is to ensure that, in future, each district councillor represents approximately the same number of electors, bearing in mind local circumstances.

- **In 20 of the proposed 23 wards the number of electors per councillor would vary by no more than 10 per cent from the district average.**
- **This improved level of electoral equality is forecast to continue, with the number of electors per councillor in only one ward, Eaton Bray, expected to vary by more than 10 per cent from the average for the district in 2005.**

Recommendations are also made for changes to parish and town council electoral arrangements which provide for:

- **revised warding arrangements and the re-distribution of councillors for the parish of Billington and for Dunstable, Houghton Regis and Leighton-Linslade town councils.**

All further correspondence on these final recommendations and the matters discussed in this report should be addressed to the Secretary of State for Transport, Local Government and the Regions, who will not make an Order implementing them before 18 September 2001.

**The Secretary of State
Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions
Local Government Sponsorship Division
Eland House
Bressenden Place
London SW1E 5DU**

Table 1: Final Recommendations: Summary

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Constituent areas	Map reference
1	All Saints (in Leighton-Linslade)	2	part of Leighton-Linslade parish (the proposed All Saints parish ward of Leighton-Linslade Town Council)	Large map
2	Barton-le-Clay	2	<i>Unchanged</i> - Barton-le-Clay parish	Map 2
3	Caddington & Slip End	3	the parishes of Caddington, Hyde and Slip End	Map 2
4	Chiltern (in Dunstable)	2	part of Dunstable parish (the proposed Chiltern parish ward of Dunstable Town Council)	Large map
5	Dunstable Central (in Dunstable)	2	part of Dunstable parish (the proposed Central parish ward of Dunstable Town Council)	Large map
6	Eaton Bray	1	<i>Unchanged</i> - Eaton Bray parish	Map 2
7	Grovebury (in Leighton-Linslade)	3	part of Leighton-Linslade parish (the proposed Grovebury parish ward of Leighton-Linslade Town Council); part of Billington parish (the proposed Billington Park parish ward)	Large map
8	Heath & Reach	1	the parishes of Heath & Reach and Hockliffe	Map 2
9	Houghton Hall (in Houghton Regis)	3	part of Houghton Regis parish (the proposed Houghton Hall parish ward of Houghton Regis Town Council)	Large map
10	Icknield (in Dunstable)	3	<i>Unchanged</i> - Icknield parish ward of Dunstable Town Council	Large map
11	Kensworth & Totternhoe	2	the parishes of Kensworth, Studham, Totternhoe and Whipsnade	Map 2
12	Linslade (in Leighton-Linslade)	2	part of Leighton-Linslade parish (the proposed Linslade parish ward of Leighton-Linslade Town Council)	Large map
13	Manshead (in Dunstable)	2	part of Dunstable parish (the proposed Manshead parish ward of Dunstable Town Council)	Large map
14	Northfields (in Dunstable)	3	<i>Unchanged</i> - Northfields parish ward of Dunstable Town Council	Large map
15	Parkside (in Houghton Regis)	2	part of Houghton Regis parish (the proposed Parkside parish ward of Houghton Regis Town Council)	Large map
16	Planets (in Leighton-Linslade)	2	part of Leighton-Linslade parish (the proposed Planets parish ward of Leighton-Linslade Town Council)	Large map
17	Plantation (in Leighton-Linslade)	3	part of Leighton-Linslade parish (the proposed Plantation parish ward of Leighton-Linslade Town Council)	Large map
18	Southcott (in Leighton-Linslade)	3	part of Leighton-Linslade parish (the proposed Southcott parish ward of Leighton-Linslade Town Council)	Large map

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Constituent areas	Map reference
19	Stanbridge	1	the parishes of Chalgrave, Eggington, Stanbridge, Tilsworth and the proposed Old Billington parish ward of Billington parish	Map 2
20	Streatley	1	the parishes of Streatley and Sundon	Map 2
21	Tithe Farm (in Houghton Regis)	2	part of Houghton Regis parish (the proposed Tithe Farm parish ward of Houghton Regis Town Council)	Large map
22	Toddington	2	the parishes of Chalton and Toddington	Map 2
23	Watling (in Dunstable)	3	part of Dunstable parish (the proposed Watling parish ward of Dunstable Town Council)	Large map

Notes: 1 The whole district is parished.

2 Map 2 and the large map in the back of this report illustrate the proposed wards outlined above.

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: Final Recommendations for South Bedfordshire

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2000)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %	Electorate (2005)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
1	All Saints (in Leighton-Linslade)	2	3,587	1,794	4	3,688	1,844	3
2	Barton-le-Clay	2	3,518	1,759	2	3,737	1,869	4
3	Caddington & Slip End	3	4,833	1,611	-6	5,177	1,726	-4
4	Chiltern (in Dunstable)	2	3,495	1,748	2	3,637	1,819	1
5	Dunstable Central (in Dunstable)	2	3,371	1,686	-2	3,474	1,737	-3
6	Eaton Bray	1	2,023	2,023	18	2,030	2,030	13
7	Grovebury (in Leighton-Linslade)	3	4,060	1,353	-21	5,670	1,890	5
8	Heath & Reach	1	1,642	1,642	-4	1,789	1,789	-0
9	Houghton Hall (in Houghton Regis)	3	4,815	1,605	-7	5,333	1,778	-1
10	Icknield (in Dunstable)	3	4,863	1,621	-6	4,889	1,630	-9
11	Kensworth & Totternhoe	2	3,584	1,792	4	3,592	1,796	0
12	Linslade (in Leighton-Linslade)	2	3,611	1,806	5	3,651	1,826	2
13	Manshead (in Dunstable)	2	3,719	1,860	8	3,765	1,883	5
14	Northfields (in Dunstable)	3	5,070	1,690	-2	5,349	1,783	0
15	Parkside (in Houghton Regis)	2	3,625	1,813	6	3,625	1,813	1
16	Planets (in Leighton-Linslade)	2	3,586	1,793	4	3,586	1,793	0
17	Plantation (in Leighton-Linslade)	3	4,869	1,623	-5	4,936	1,645	-8
18	Southcott (in Leighton-Linslade)	3	5,360	1,787	4	5,365	1,788	0
19	Stanbridge	1	1,814	1,814	6	1,819	1,819	2
20	Streatley	1	1,717	1,717	0	1,717	1,717	-4

Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2000)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %	Electorate (2005)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
21 Tithe Farm (in Houghton Regis)	2	3,553	1,777	3	3,555	1,778	-1
22 Toddington	2	3,905	1,953	14	3,920	1,960	9
23 Watling (in Dunstable)	3	5,252	1,751	2	5,292	1,811	-2
Totals	50	85,872	–	–	89,596	–	–
Averages	–	–	1,717	–	–	1,792	–

Source: *Electorate figures are based on information obtained from South Bedfordshire District Council.*

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

1 INTRODUCTION

1 This report contains our final recommendations on the electoral arrangements for the district of South Bedfordshire on which we are now consulting. We are reviewing the three districts in Bedfordshire and the unitary authority of Luton as part of our programme of periodic electoral reviews (PERs) of all 386 principal local authority areas in England. Our programme started in 1996 and is currently expected to be completed by 2004.

2 This is our first review of the electoral arrangements of South Bedfordshire. The last such review was undertaken by our predecessor, the Local Government Boundary Commission (LGBC), which reported to the Secretary of State in August 1975 (Report No. 57). The electoral arrangements of Bedfordshire County Council were last reviewed in January 1984 (Report No. 462). We intend reviewing the County Council's electoral arrangements in 2002.

3 In undertaking these reviews, we have had regard to:

- the statutory criteria contained in section 13(5) of the Local Government Act 1992, i.e. the need to:
 - (a) reflect the identities and interests of local communities; and
 - (b) secure effective and convenient local government;
- the *Rules to be Observed in Considering Electoral Arrangements* contained in Schedule 11 to the Local Government Act 1972.

4 Full details of the legislation under which we work are set out in a document entitled *Guidance and Procedural Advice for Local Authorities and Other Interested Parties* (fourth edition published in December 2000). This *Guidance* sets out our approach to the reviews.

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

6 In our *Guidance*, we state that we wish wherever possible to build on schemes which have been prepared locally on the basis of careful and effective consultation. Local interests are normally in a better position to judge what council size and ward configuration are most likely to secure effective and convenient local government in their areas, while also reflecting the identities and interests of local communities.

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

8 We are not prescriptive on council size. We start from the assumption that the size of the existing council already secures effective and convenient local government, but we are willing to look carefully at arguments why this might not be so. However, we have found it necessary to safeguard against upward drift in the number of councillors, and we believe that any proposal for an increase in council size will need to be fully justified. In particular, we do not accept that an increase in electorate should

automatically result in an increase in the number of councillors, nor that changes should be made to the size of a council simply to make it more consistent with the size of other similar councils.

9 In July 1998, the Government published a White Paper called *Modern Local Government – In Touch with the People*, which set out legislative proposals for local authority electoral arrangements. In two-tier areas, it proposed introducing a pattern in which both the district and county councils would hold elections every two years, i.e. in year one, half of the district council would be elected, in year two, half the county council would be elected, and so on. The Government stated that local accountability would be maximised where every elector has an opportunity to vote every year, thereby pointing to a pattern of two-member wards (and divisions) in two-tier areas. However, it stated that there was no intention to move towards very large electoral areas in sparsely populated rural areas, and that single-member wards (and electoral divisions) would continue in many authorities. The proposals were forward in the Local Government Act 2000 which, among other matters, provides that the Secretary of State may make Orders to change authorities' electoral cycles. However, until such time as the Secretary of State makes any Orders under the 2000 Act, we will continue to operate on the basis of existing legislation, which provides for elections by thirds or whole-council elections in the two-tier district areas, and our current *Guidance*.

10 This review was in four stages. Stage One began on 25 July 2000 when we wrote to South Bedfordshire District Council inviting proposals for future electoral arrangements. We also notified Bedfordshire County Council, Bedfordshire Police, the local authority associations, Bedfordshire Local Councils' Association, parish and town councils in the district, the Members of Parliament with constituency interests in the district, the Members of the European Parliament for the Eastern Region, and the headquarters of the main political parties. We placed a notice in the local press, issued a press release and invited the District Council to publicise the review further. The closing date for receipt of representations, the end of Stage One, was 16 October 2000.

11 Stage Three began on 20 February 2001 with the publication of our report, *Draft recommendations on the future electoral arrangements for South Bedfordshire* and ended on 23 April 2001. During this period we sought comments from the public and any other interested parties on our preliminary conclusions. Finally, during Stage Four we reconsidered our draft recommendations in the light of the Stage Three consultation and now publish our final recommendations.

2 CURRENT ELECTORAL ARRANGEMENTS

12 The district of South Bedfordshire covers some 21,000 hectares in the southern part of Bedfordshire county. It is bounded to the south and east by Luton Unitary Authority and the county of Hertfordshire, to the west by the county of Buckinghamshire and to the north by Mid Bedfordshire district. The district currently has an electorate of some 86,000 and comprises mainly rural countryside and farmland, but contains several significant population centres, the largest of which are Leighton-Linslade, Dunstable and Houghton Regis. The district is well served by road and rail links. The M1 and A5 make the district easily accessible from London and Birmingham.

13 The district is entirely parished, containing 23 civil parishes including the town councils of Dunstable, Houghton Regis and Leighton-Linslade. The electorate is projected to increase by 4 per cent over the next five years with Stanbridge ward forecast to be the main area of growth, with its electorate more than doubling by 2005 due to major housing development on the now disused RAF Stanbridge base in Billington parish. Houghton South ward will also have a significant rate of growth with its electorate projected to increase by 11 per cent by 2005.

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

15 The electorate of the district is 85,872 (February 2000). The District Council presently has 53 members who are elected from 25 wards, 13 of which cover the relatively urban areas of Dunstable, Houghton Regis and Leighton-Linslade, and the remainder being predominantly rural. Twelve of the wards are each represented by three councillors, four are each represented by two councillors and nine are single-member wards. The Council is elected by thirds.

16 Since the last electoral review there has been an increase in the electorate in South Bedfordshire district, with around 23 per cent more electors than two decades ago as a result of new housing developments. The most notable increases have been in Southcott and Streatley wards. At present, each councillor represents an average of 1,620 electors, which the District Council forecasts will increase to 1,690 by the year 2005 if the present number of councillors is maintained. However, due to demographic and other changes over the past two decades, the number of electors per councillor in 17 of the 25 wards varies by more than 10 per cent from the district average, 11 wards by more than 20 per cent and four wards by more than 30 per cent. The worst imbalance is in Southcott ward where the two councillors represent 46 per cent more electors than the district average.

Map 1: Existing Wards in South Bedfordshire

Table 3: Existing Electoral Arrangements

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2000)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %	Electorate (2005)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
1	Barton-le-Clay	2	3,518	1,759	9	3,737	1,869	11
2	Beauesert (in Leighton-Linslade)	3	5,931	1,977	22	6,264	2,088	24
3	Brooklands (in Leighton-Linslade)	3	5,171	1,724	6	5,171	1,724	2
4	Caddington	2	2,947	1,474	-9	3,252	1,626	-4
5	Dunstable Central (in Dunstable)	3	6,014	2,005	24	6,250	2,083	23
6	Eaton Bray	1	2,023	2,023	25	2,030	2,030	20
7	Heath and Reach	1	1,070	1,070	-34	1,079	1,079	-36
8	Hockliffe	1	1,205	1,205	-26	1,348	1,348	-20
9	Houghton Central (in Houghton Regis)	3	3,750	1,250	-23	3,752	1,251	-26
10	Houghton East (in Houghton Regis)	3	4,015	1,338	-17	4,015	1,338	-21
11	Houghton South (in Houghton Regis)	3	4,228	1,409	-13	4,746	1,582	-6
12	Icknield (in Dunstable)	3	4,863	1,621	0	4,889	1,630	-4
13	Kensworth	1	1,185	1,185	-27	1,185	1,185	-30
14	Linslade (in Leighton-Linslade)	3	4,352	1,451	-10	4,419	1,473	-13
15	Northfields (in Dunstable)	3	5,070	1,690	4	5,349	1,783	5
16	Plantation (in Leighton-Linslade)	3	4,884	1,628	0	4,951	1,650	-2
17	Priory (in Dunstable)	3	4,123	1,374	-15	4,175	1,392	-18
18	Slip End	1	1,886	1,886	16	1,925	1,925	14
19	Southcott (in Leighton-Linslade)	2	4,735	2,368	46	4,735	2,368	40
20	Stanbridge	1	1,181	1,181	-27	2,537	2,537	50
21	Streatley	1	2,134	2,134	32	2,134	2,134	26
22	Studham	1	1,374	1,374	-15	1,380	1,380	-18
23	Toddington	2	3,488	1,744	8	3,503	1,752	4

Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2000)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %	Electorate (2005)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
24 Totternhoe	1	1,025	1,025	-37	1,027	1,027	-39
25 Watling (in Dunstable)	3	5,700	1,900	17	5,743	1,914	13
Totals	53	85,872	–	–	89,596	–	–
Averages	–	–	1,620	–	–	1,690	–

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

Note: The 'variance from average' column shows by how far, in percentage terms, the number of electors per councillor varies from the average for the district. The minus symbol (-) denotes a lower than average number of electors. For example, in 2000, electors in Totternhoe ward were relatively over-represented by 37 per cent, while electors in Southcott ward were significantly under-represented by 46 per cent. Figures have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

3 DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS

17 During Stage One we received 22 representations, including district-wide schemes from Bedfordshire South Conservatives, South Bedfordshire District Labour Party, South Bedfordshire District Council Liberal Democrat Group and Leighton-Linslade Town Council. The District Council did not make an official submission at Stage One, but submitted all working papers relevant to the electoral review. These included 19 representations from interested parties which were received as part of the District Council's local consultation process. We received representations from Bedfordshire County Council, two further local branches of the Labour Party and seven parish and town councils. We also received representations from seven county, district and parish councillors and other interested parties. In the light of these representations and evidence available to us, we reached preliminary conclusions which were set out in our report, *Draft recommendations on the future electoral arrangements for South Bedfordshire*.

18 Our draft recommendations for the rural areas of the district were substantially based on the Conservatives' proposals. We proposed largely our own scheme for the urban areas of the district, together with options generated by all the district-wide schemes submitted at Stage One. Our draft recommendations achieved some improvement in electoral equality, and provided a mixed pattern of two-member and three-member wards in Dunstable, Houghton Regis and Leighton-Linslade, and of single and two-member wards in the rural area of the district. We proposed that:

- South Bedfordshire District Council should be served by 50 councillors, compared with the current 53, representing 23 wards, two less than at present;
- the boundaries of 21 of the existing wards should be modified, while four wards should retain their existing boundaries;
- there should be new warding arrangements for Billington Parish Council and Dunstable, Houghton Regis and Leighton-Linslade town councils.

Draft Recommendation

South Bedfordshire District Council should comprise 50 councillors, serving 23 wards. The Council should continue to hold elections by thirds.

19 Our proposals would have resulted in significant improvements in electoral equality, with the number of electors per councillor in 20 of the 23 wards varying by no more than 10 per cent from the district average. This level of electoral equality was forecast to improve further, with only one ward (Eaton Bray) varying by more than 10 per cent from the average in 2005.

4 RESPONSES TO CONSULTATION

20 During the consultation on our draft recommendations report, we received 16 representations. A list of all respondents is available from us on request. All representations may be inspected at our offices and those of South Bedfordshire District Council.

South Bedfordshire District Council

21 The District Council substantially endorsed our draft recommendations. However, it submitted alternative names for a number of our proposed wards in Dunstable and Houghton Regis. In particular, it proposed that Downside ward be named Manshead, Dunstable Downs ward be named Chiltern and that the existing ward names in Houghton Regis be retained. While the District Council broadly supported our draft recommendations for the rural area of the district, it put forward alternative arrangements for four of our proposed wards. It proposed the retention of the existing two-member Toddington and Caddington wards, and single-member Slip End ward. It also proposed that the existing Barton-le-Clay and Streatley wards be combined in a new three-member ward. The District Council argued that these alternative proposals would provide improved levels of electoral equality, while having no consequential effect upon our proposals for adjoining district wards.

Bedfordshire County Council

22 The County Council reiterated its Stage One submission. It considered that conterminous district and parliamentary boundaries should be maintained in the Caddington area and expressed concern at any potential mixing of rural and urban communities in the Leighton-Linslade area. It stressed the importance of rationalising the district boundary in the north-east of the district and looked forward to a parish and district boundary review for this area in the near future.

Bedfordshire South Conservatives

23 Bedfordshire South Conservatives (the Conservatives) broadly supported our draft recommendations and particularly welcomed our proposed council size of 50. They supported our proposed warding arrangements for Dunstable and Houghton Regis, but supported the District Council's alternative ward names for Dunstable. The Conservatives substantially endorsed our proposals for the rural area of the district, but objected to our proposed three-member Caddington & Slip End ward. They supported "in principal", our proposed ward structure for Leighton-Linslade but put forward a number of modifications to all of our proposed wards in the town. They argued that these alternative proposals would provide comparable levels of electoral equality to our draft recommendations and would "marry wards even more closely to readily distinguishable communities".

South Bedfordshire District Council Liberal Democrat Group

24 The Liberal Democrat Group on the District Council (the Liberal Democrats) concurred with the views of the District Council in respect of our proposals for Barton-le-Clay, Streatley and Toddington wards, and with regard to our proposed ward names in Houghton Regis. They expressed particular disappointment at our proposed Heath & Reach ward and reiterated their support for a new single-member Heath ward comprising Heath & Reach parish and the Sandy Lane, Heath Court and Shenley Hill areas of Plantation ward. While supporting our proposals for the Linslade area, they argued that

non-coterminous district ward and county divisions across the district would cause confusion “where it is already difficult to engage many residents in the electoral process”.

Parish and Town Councils

25 We received seven submissions from parish and town councils. Dunstable Town Council broadly endorsed our draft recommendations for warding arrangements in the town. However, it put forward alternative names for a number of our proposed wards. It suggested that our proposed Dunstable Downs ward be renamed Chiltern and that our proposed Downside ward retain the name of Priory. Leighton-Linslade Town Council broadly supported our proposed warding arrangements in its area.

26 Hockliffe and Tilsworth parish councils supported our draft recommendations in their respective areas. Hyde Parish Council objected to our proposed Caddington & Slip End ward. It argued that our draft recommendations had insufficient regard for the independence and identity of the parish and supported the retention of the existing single-member Slip End ward. Heath & Reach Parish Council reiterated its support for a revised single-member Heath ward comprising Heath & Reach parish and the northern part of the existing Plantation ward. It argued that as an independent parish council, our proposed warding arrangements would result in the politicisation of local government “at a modest parochial level”. Totternhoe Parish Council opposed our draft recommendations. It argued that the parish shares few links with other communities in our proposed Kensworth & Totternhoe ward. It expressed concern that the parish would be less effectively represented within a two-member ward that would encompass several distinct communities.

Other Representations

27 A further five representations were received from local political groups and district councillors. Plantation Branch Conservatives supported our revised Plantation ward. South West Bedfordshire Villages Labour Party argued that our proposals would have an adverse affect on community identities. It supported a change in the electoral cycle to whole-council elections every four years to combat what it perceived as growing apathy among local electors.

28 Councillor Reeve (Heath & Reach) reiterated his Stage One submission and objected to our proposed Heath & Reach ward. He argued that the communities of Heath & Reach and Hockliffe have little in common and that our proposals took insufficient account of local opinions. Councillor Ledster (Streatley), Councillor Northwood (Barton-le-Clay) and Councillor Shingler (Barton-le-Clay) made a joint representation opposing our draft recommendations for Barton-le-Clay, Streatley and Toddington wards. They proposed identical warding arrangements to the District Council for this area. They argued that their proposals would respect community interests and further improve levels of electoral equality. Councillor Harris (Studham) argued that our proposals would diminish the representation of rural views on the District Council. He stated that the existing warding arrangements should be retained for the rural area of the district in order to maintain the relatively high turnout at local elections. He also objected to our proposed Kensworth & Totternhoe ward and put forward alternative arrangements that would combine our proposed Kensworth & Totternhoe and Eaton Bray wards in a new three-member ward.

5 ANALYSIS AND FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

29 As described earlier, our prime objective in considering the most appropriate electoral arrangements for South Bedfordshire is, so far as reasonably practicable and consistent with the statutory criteria, to achieve electoral equality. In doing so we have regard to section 13(5) of the Local Government Act 1992 – the need to secure effective and convenient local government, and reflect the identities and interests of local communities – and Schedule 11 to the Local Government Act 1972, which refers to the number of electors per councillor being “as nearly as may be, the same in every ward of the district or borough”.

30 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 also must have regard to the desirability of fixing identifiable boundaries and to maintaining local ties.

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

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

Electorate Forecasts

33 Since 1975 there has been a 23 per cent increase in the electorate of South Bedfordshire district. At Stage One the District Council submitted electorate forecasts for the year 2005, projecting an increase in the electorate of approximately 4 per cent from 85,872 to 89,596 over the five-year period from 2000 to 2005. It expects most of the growth to be in Stanbridge ward, although a significant amount of growth is also expected in Hockliffe and Houghton South wards. In order to prepare these forecasts, the Council estimated rates and locations of housing development with regard to structure and local plans, the expected rate of building over the five-year period and assumed occupancy rates.

34 In our draft recommendations, following further analysis of the projected electorate figures and additional information on specific locations of future developments, we made modifications to the forecast electorates in all four of the district-wide schemes submitted. These changes did not affect the total electorate forecast for 2005. As a consequence of these changes, we welcomed further evidence and comment on electorate forecasts during Stage Three.

35 At Stage Three, the District Council supported the electorate forecasts for our proposed wards. We received no further comments with regard to electorate forecasts and remain satisfied that these projections represent the best estimates presently available. We therefore endorse them as final.

Council Size

36 As already explained, we start by assuming that the current council size facilitates effective and convenient local government, although we are willing to carefully look at arguments why this might not be the case. The Commission will not generally seek a substantial increase or decrease in council size but will be prepared to consider the case for change where there is persuasive evidence. South Bedfordshire District Council presently has 53 members. At Stage One, South Bedfordshire District Council Governance Overview & Scrutiny Committee considered a large number of differing warding options with council sizes ranging between 50 and 55 members. It resolved, however, not to submit a scheme or a preference on council size.

37 The Conservatives proposed a council of 50 members stating that this took into account the aim of improving levels of electoral equality while having regard to the decision of the District Council to adopt a cabinet model of government. Leighton-Linslade and Dunstable town councils endorsed a council size of 50. The Liberal Democrats proposed a council size of 51. Their proposals provided the same number of councillors for the rural area and for Leighton-Linslade as the Conservatives, but would provide an extra councillor for Houghton Regis. The Labour Party proposed reducing the number of councillors by one to 52. It allocated the same proportion of councillors as the Conservatives and Leighton-Linslade Town Council for rural areas of the district, and the towns of Dunstable and Houghton Regis. However, it proposed that Leighton-Linslade be represented by 17 councillors, three more than at present.

38 In our draft recommendations we noted the lack of consensus with regard to council size. However, we recognised that all four district-wide schemes proposed similar council sizes which reflected a broad consensus for retaining a similar council size to that which currently exists. We considered that the Liberal Democrats' and Labour Party's proposals would result in the over-representation of the Houghton Regis and Leighton-Linslade areas respectively and would therefore not provide as good electoral equality as the Conservatives' and Leighton-Linslade Town Council's proposed council size of 50. We concluded that a council size of 50 would achieve the most equitable distribution of councillors between the primary areas of the district, and ensure effective and convenient local government in South Bedfordshire.

39 At Stage Three, the Conservatives welcomed our proposed council size of 50. Councillor Harris (Studham) noted that under our proposals, while the rural area of the district would have proportionally less representation than under the existing arrangements, its financial contribution to the District Council would remain the same. As stated earlier, he expressed a preference for retaining the existing ward configuration in the rural area of the district to more accurately reflect community identities and interests. This proposal would necessitate a council size of 52.

40 Having considered the representations received at Stage Three, we remain of the view that a council size of 50 will provide the fairest allocation of councillor numbers between urban and rural areas of the district, while having regard for the statutory criteria. While our proposed warding arrangements met with some opposition at Stage Three, we note that a number of interested parties who originally proposed alternative council sizes did not raise this as an issue at Stage Three. Having considered the evidence received, we intend confirming our proposed council size of 50 as final.

Electoral Arrangements

41 At Stage One, a number of considerations emerged which assisted us in preparing our draft recommendations. We recognised that South Bedfordshire is a diverse district. It combines a significant rural area with larger settlements to the north-west and centre of the district, and has been subject to significant changes in the size and distribution of its electorate. We recognised that all of the four district-wide schemes submitted provided for much improved levels of electoral equality. For the rural area of the district, we considered that the Conservatives' proposals provided the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria, and adopted them as part of our draft recommendations, subject to some minor amendments.

42 While we noted a large degree of consensus with regard to warding arrangements in Dunstable we considered that these proposals had insufficient regard to the statutory criteria and did not utilise clear and logical ward boundaries. We also considered that the Liberal Democrats' proposals to create a district ward that would straddle the parish boundary between Dunstable and Houghton Regis would not be conducive to the effective and convenient representation of this area on the District Council. We therefore developed our own scheme for Dunstable, which would result in a mixed pattern of two-member and three-member wards. In Houghton Regis, we substantially endorsed the proposals of Leighton-Linslade Town Council, which we considered would provide for much improved levels of electoral equality and have regard for community identities and interests. This scheme was almost identical to the proposals of both the Conservatives and Labour Party.

43 In Leighton-Linslade, all of the proposals made provision for the transfer of the RAF Stanbridge development site into the urban wards of the town, which we considered to be a logical step. However, they proposed significantly different warding arrangements for the town itself. The Liberal Democrats and Leighton-Linslade Town Council proposed identical warding arrangements which included a proposal for a new single-member Heath ward containing the northern part of the existing Plantation ward with Heath & Reach parish. The Conservatives proposed a pattern of five three-member wards, including an enlarged Linslade ward that would straddle the river Ouzel and contain the western part of the existing Beaudesert ward. The Labour Party proposed the continuation of a three-member Beaudesert ward, subject to the transfer of the southern area of that ward into a new two-member Marley Park ward. While all the proposals for Leighton-Linslade had some merit, we did not consider that they provided an acceptable balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria. We therefore put forward our own proposals for the Leighton-Linslade area. Our draft recommendations provided for a mixed two and three-member ward pattern, containing elements of all four district-wide schemes.

44 At Stage Three, while our draft recommendations received a broad degree of local support, there was some opposition to our proposals, particularly in relation to the north-east of the district and for Caddington and Slip End wards. The Conservatives proposed some modifications to our proposed ward boundaries in the Leighton-Linslade area, and alternative names were put forward for a number of our proposed wards in the Dunstable and Houghton Regis areas.

45 In the light of these representations, we have given further consideration to our proposed warding arrangements. We remain of the view that our proposals reflect the identities and interests of local communities while providing for much improved levels of electoral equality. We therefore intend substantially confirming our draft recommendations for South Bedfordshire as final, subject to adopting

a number of alternative ward names for Dunstable. For district warding purposes, the following areas, based on existing wards, are considered in turn:

South Bedfordshire Rural

- (a) Barton-le-Clay, Streatley and Toddington wards;
- (b) Eaton Bray, Heath & Reach, Hockliffe and Stanbridge wards;
- (c) Caddington, Kensworth, Slip End, Studham and Totternhoe wards;

Dunstable and Houghton Regis

- (d) Dunstable Central, Priory and Watling wards;
- (e) Icknield and Northfields wards;
- (f) Houghton Central, Houghton East and Houghton South wards;

Leighton-Linslade

- (g) Beadesert, Brooklands and Plantation wards;
- (h) Linslade and Southcott wards.

46 Details of our final recommendations are set out in Tables 1 and 2, and illustrated on Map 2, in the Appendix and on the large map inserted at the back of this report.

Barton-le-Clay, Streatley and Toddington wards

47 The existing wards of Barton-le-Clay, Streatley and Toddington are situated in the north-eastern corner of the district. Barton-le-Clay and Toddington wards are each represented by two councillors and are coterminous with the parishes of Barton-le-Clay and Toddington respectively. Streatley ward contains the parishes of Chalton, Streatley and Sundon and is a single-member ward. Under existing arrangements, Barton-le-Clay, Streatley and Toddington wards have 9 per cent, 32 per cent and 8 per cent more electors per councillor than the district average respectively (11 per cent, 26 per cent and 4 per cent more than average by 2005).

48 In our draft recommendations, we proposed the retention of the existing two-member Barton-le-Clay ward, and a revised single-member Streatley ward comprising the parishes of Streatley and Sundon, as proposed by the Conservatives, the Labour Party and Leighton-Linslade Town Council. We considered that these proposals would provide for much improved levels of electoral equality while having sufficient regard for the statutory criteria. We were not persuaded to adopt the Liberal Democrats' proposals for a revised three-member Barton-le Clay ward that would combine the parishes of Barton-le-Clay, Streatley and Sundon. While we recognised that this proposal would also provide for significantly improved levels of electoral equality, we considered it had insufficient regard for the statutory criteria and united communities that are divided by the A6 Trunk Road. We also considered that Barton-le-Clay parish, which contains a relatively large and cohesive rural community, was of sufficient size to sustain the current two-member ward.

49 We also proposed a revised two-member Toddington ward comprising the parishes of Chalton and Toddington, as proposed by the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and Leighton-Linslade Town Council. We recognised that Chalton Parish Council favoured the retention of the existing Streatley ward. It argued that a review of the district boundary with Luton Unitary Authority would resolve the

issue of electoral equality in the current Streatley ward. However, as stated in our draft recommendations, we have no remit to review external district boundaries and cannot take into account the effect of any possible subsequent boundary alteration as part of this review. We noted that Chalton Parish Council expressed a preference for being combined in a district ward with Toddington parish should it not prove possible to maintain the existing Streatley ward. We considered that this proposal had sufficient regard for community identities and interests while providing an improved level of electoral equality. We also noted the large measure of support for this proposal at Stage One. We were not persuaded that the Labour Party's proposal to combine Chalton, Chalgrave, Hockliffe and Tilsforth parishes in a revised single-member Hockliffe ward reflected the independence of Chalton parish from communities to its west.

50 At Stage Three, the District Council opposed our draft recommendations for these wards. It proposed a revised three-member Barton-le-Clay ward comprising the existing Barton-le-Clay and Streatley wards, and the retention of the existing two-member Toddington ward. It argued that this proposal would provide further improvement in electoral equality for these wards, while having no consequential affect upon our proposals for adjoining areas. Under the District Council's proposals, Barton-le-Clay and Toddington wards would have 10 per cent more and 2 per cent more electors per councillor than the current district average (9 per cent more and 2 per cent fewer than average by 2005).

51 The Conservatives supported our draft recommendations for these wards. The Liberal Democrats concurred with the District Council's alternative proposals for this area, which were identical to their Stage One proposals. They argued that should a subsequent review of the district boundary recommend that the area adjacent to the Bushmead development be transferred from Streatley parish and ward to Luton Unitary Authority, then our proposed Streatley ward would contain significantly fewer electors per councillor than the district average. They argued that a revised three-member Barton-le-Clay ward would reduce the impact of a potential revision to the district boundary with Luton.

52 Councillor Northwood (Barton-le-Clay), Councillor Ledster (Streatley) and Councillor Shingler (Barton-le-Clay) made a joint submission reiterating these views. They argued that Barton-le-Clay shares many common interests with the parishes of Chalton, Streatley and Sundon, and that residents of these parishes use joint amenities and facilities. They also argued that these communities are subject to the same local issues, including potential new overspill housing developments from Luton Unitary Authority. They put forward alternative warding arrangements for this area that were identical to the District Councils proposals.

53 We have carefully considered the representations received at Stage Three. We have noted a degree of opposition towards our proposals for these wards. We recognise that the alternative proposals put forward by the District Council, the Liberal Democrats and the local councillors for this area would provide a comparable level of electoral equality to our draft recommendations. We also accept that a future revision to the district boundary with Luton in this area may affect the total electorate of our proposed Streatley ward. However, as stated above, this is not an issue that we can take into account as part of this review. We are not persuaded by the proposals for a revised three-member Barton-le-Clay ward and remain of the view that the retention of the existing two-member ward has more regard for the distinct identities and interests of this community without significant deterioration in electoral equality. We also consider that communities in Streatley and Sundon will not be as effectively represented in the proposed three-member ward as under our draft recommendations.

54 We acknowledge that the alternative proposals to retain the existing two-member Toddington ward that is coterminous with Toddington parish would ensure better electoral equality than our draft

recommendations. However, the electoral equality in our proposed Toddington ward is projected to improve notably over the course of the next five years, and we note that no objection had been raised by the communities affected. We remain of the view that our proposals provide the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria and therefore intend confirming our draft recommendations for Barton-le-Clay, Streatley and Toddington wards as final.

55 Under our final recommendations, Barton-le-Clay and Toddington wards would have 2 per cent more and 14 per cent more electors per councillor than the district average respectively (4 per cent and 9 per cent more than average by 2005). Streatley ward would have an equal ratio of electors per councillor to the district average and 4 per cent fewer electors than average by 2005. Our proposals for these wards are illustrated on Map 2 towards the back of this report.

Eaton Bray, Heath & Reach, Hockliffe and Stanbridge wards

56 The existing wards of Eaton Bray, Heath & Reach, Hockliffe and Stanbridge are located in the north and west of the district, and are all single-member wards. The wards of Eaton Bray and Heath & Reach are coterminous with the parishes of the same names. Hockliffe ward contains the parishes of Chalgrave, Eggington and Hockliffe, and Stanbridge ward contains the parishes of Billington, Stanbridge and Tilsworth. Under existing arrangements, Eaton Bray, Heath & Reach and Hockliffe wards have 25 per cent more, 34 per cent fewer and 26 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the district average respectively (20 per cent more, 36 per cent fewer and 20 per cent fewer than average by 2005). Stanbridge ward currently has 27 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the district average. Due to substantial housing development on the site of the now disused RAF Stanbridge base, it is projected to have 50 per cent more electors per councillor than the district average by 2005.

57 In our draft recommendations, we proposed retaining the existing single-member Eaton Bray ward that is coterminous with the parish of the same name, as proposed by the Conservatives and Labour Party. We considered that the existing Eaton Bray ward contains a cohesive community with a clear sense of identity and shared interests. We acknowledged that retaining the current Eaton Bray ward would result in an initially high level of electoral variance (18 per cent more electors per councillor than the current district average), but noted that electoral equality in this ward is forecast to improve over the next five years (to 13 per cent more than the average). We also considered that our proposals for Eaton Bray ward would command a degree of support locally.

58 We put forward the Conservatives' proposals for a revised single-member Stanbridge ward comprising the parishes of Chalgrave, Stanbridge and Tilsworth and our proposed Old Billington ward of Billington parish. We considered that the parishes of Stanbridge and Tilsworth have a mutual sense of identity and share many local amenities and facilities and noted that proposals of the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats and Leighton-Linslade Town Council were dependant upon these two parishes being located in two different district wards. We also noted the consensus with regard to the development site at RAF Stanbridge. We considered that the rate of projected growth in this area (1,356 electors by 2005), will result in an urban community that will share a greater sense of identity with Leighton-Linslade, as well as utilising shared facilities in that area. We considered it a logical step to combine this area with the district wards of Leighton-Linslade and adopted this proposal as part of our draft recommendations.

59 We were not persuaded to put forward the Liberal Democrats' and Leighton-Linslade Town Council's proposal to combine 618 electors from Plantation ward with Heath & Reach parish to form a new single-member Heath ward. We acknowledged both the relatively isolated location of Heath &

Reach parish in relation to other rural communities, and a degree of local support for this proposal. However, these proposals would require the establishment of a district ward that straddles an urban and rural area and we were not persuaded that this would enhance the effective and convenient representation of these communities.

60 While we recognised that Heath & Reach parish shares a number of links with Leighton-Linslade, we were not persuaded that the area of the proposed ward shares significant common interests. The proposal would combine two distinctive parts of Plantation ward with Heath & Reach parish. As these areas are not connected, they would need to form two separate Town Council wards. While the proposed boundary to the south of the Heath Court area is distinct, we considered that the proposed boundary of Sandy Lane and the rear of Chiltern Gardens would divide communities in this part of Leighton-Linslade. Furthermore, by effectively removing 1000 electors from the rural area, this proposal would also have a detrimental effect on neighbouring rural wards.

61 We considered that the Conservatives' proposal for a revised single-member Heath & Reach ward, comprising the parishes of Heath & Reach and Hockliffe, would provide for a significantly improved level of electoral equality and would not entail further Town Council warding. We recognised the lack of consensus with regard to the existing Heath & Reach ward but, in the absence of alternative proposals that would provide for a similar improvement in levels of electoral equality, we adopted the Conservatives' scheme for Eaton Bray, Heath & Reach and Stanbridge wards as part of our draft recommendations.

62 At Stage Three, the District Council and the Conservatives supported our draft recommendations for these wards. Our proposals were also supported by Hockliffe and Tilsworth parish councils in their respective areas. However, the South West Bedfordshire Villages Labour Party argued that our proposed warding arrangements in this part of the district would result in a loss of village identity, which would exacerbate the issues of apathy and low turnout among the electorate during local elections.

63 The Liberal Democrats strongly objected to our proposed Heath & Reach ward. They argued that we had chosen to "ignore" the wishes of the Parish Council and the local district councillor that Heath & Reach parish be linked with part of Leighton-Linslade for district warding purposes. They asserted that our proposals were at odds with our "statutory duty to reflect the interests of local communities". Heath & Reach Parish Council concurred with these views and expressed disappointment at our draft recommendations. It argued that as an independent parish council, our draft recommendation to adopt the Conservatives' proposed warding arrangements for this area would result in the "politicisation of local government at a modest parochial level". Councillor Reeve (Heath & Reach) also opposed our draft recommendations for this area. He considered that our draft recommendations were based more on party-political considerations than the views of the local community, and argued that Heath & Reach and Hockliffe parishes share no community ties. He argued that our proposals would hinder the effective representation of this area on the District Council. As stated in detail later, Plantation Branch Conservatives opposed the creation of a ward that would straddle the parish boundary between Leighton-Linslade and Heath & Reach and supported our draft recommendations.

64 We have carefully considered the representations received at Stage Three. Having noted a broad degree of consensus in support of our proposals for Stanbridge ward, we remain of the view that our proposals provide the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria. We therefore intend confirming our draft recommendations for Stanbridge ward as final. As detailed later, Councillor Harris (Studham) proposed a new three-member ward comprising our proposed Eaton Bray and

Kensworth & Totternhoe wards, arguing that this would have more regard to the community identities and interests of Totternhoe parish in particular. We are not persuaded that this proposal would command local support and remain of the view that Eaton Bray is a distinct community of sufficient size to maintain the current two-member ward. We consider that our proposed single-member Eaton Bray ward provides the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria. We therefore intend confirming our draft recommendations for Eaton Bray ward as final.

65 We note that our proposed warding arrangements in the Heath & Reach area have met with some local opposition. We are not persuaded by the argument that our draft recommendations were motivated by party political considerations or that they will result in the politicisation of local government at parish council level. Our draft recommendations for this area were informed by considerations of community identities and interests, within the context of achieving good electoral equality across the district. As stated in our Guidance, while we must have regard for the identities and interests of local communities, we must also make recommendations that secure effective and convenient local government. We acknowledge the relative isolation of Heath & Reach parish from other rural communities in the area, but note that the proposals to incorporate the Sandy Lane, Shenley Hill and Heath Court areas of Leighton-Linslade in a district ward with Heath & Reach parish would require the creation of two new town council wards for Leighton-Linslade. While we accept that the proposed Heath ward would reflect the independence of Heath & Reach parish from other rural communities in the vicinity, it would utilise a somewhat arbitrary ward boundary in the south of the proposed ward and therefore divide communities in the north of Leighton-Linslade. We remain of the view that the establishment of a district ward that straddles an urban and rural parish boundary would not be conducive to effective and convenient local government.

66 We therefore remain of the view that our proposed single-member Heath & Reach ward would provide the best balance between considerations of electoral equality and the statutory criteria and will ensure the most effective and convenient representation of this area on the District Council. We therefore intend confirming our draft recommendations for a revised Heath & Reach ward comprising the parishes of Heath & Reach and Hockliffe as final. Under our final recommendations, Eaton Bray and Heath & Reach wards would have 18 per cent more and 4 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the district average respectively (13 per cent more and equal to the district average by 2005). Stanbridge ward would have 6 per cent more electors per councillor than average, improving to 2 per cent more than average by 2005. Our proposals for these wards are illustrated on Map 2 towards the back of this report.

Caddington, Kensworth, Slip End, Studham and Totternhoe wards

67 The existing wards of Caddington, Kensworth, Slip End, Studham and Totternhoe are situated in the south and west of the district. Kensworth ward is coterminous with Kensworth parish, Slip End ward contains the parishes of Hyde and Slip End, Studham ward contains the parishes of Studham and Whipsnade, and Totternhoe ward is coterminous with Totternhoe parish. All four wards are each currently represented by a single councillor. Caddington ward is coterminous with Caddington parish and is currently represented by two councillors. Under existing arrangements, Caddington, Kensworth and Slip End wards have 9 per cent fewer, 27 per cent fewer and 16 per cent more electors per councillor than the current district average respectively (4 per cent fewer, 30 per cent fewer and 14 per cent more than the district average by 2005). Studham and Totternhoe wards have 15 per cent fewer and 37 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the district average respectively (18 per cent fewer and 39 per cent fewer than average by 2005).

68 In our draft recommendations, we considered that the Conservatives' proposals to retain the current two-member Caddington and single-member Slip End ward had some merit. However, in order to further improve levels of electoral equality, we proposed adopting the Labour Party's proposal for a three-member Cadslip ward comprising the parishes of Caddington, Hyde and Slip End. We noted that a number of respondents considered this option the one viable alternative to the existing arrangements. However, in view of the conflicting preferences expressed at Stage One, we particularly welcomed further evidence on the most appropriate warding arrangements for this area. We proposed that this ward be named Caddington & Slip End, in order to more accurately reflect the constituent communities of the proposed ward.

69 We noted that the existing single-member wards of Kensworth and Totternhoe are conterminous with the parishes of Kensworth and Totternhoe and contain distinct and cohesive local communities. However, we also noted that the existing wards of Kensworth, Studham and Totternhoe provide some of the poorest levels of electoral equality in the district, and considered that a change to ward boundaries in this area was necessary. We considered that the proposals of the Conservatives and Labour Party to combine the parishes of Kensworth, Studham, Totternhoe and Whipsnade to form a new two-member ward would provide for much improved levels of electoral equality, while avoiding the need to combine any of these communities with Caddington parish on the other side of the A5 trunk road. We noted that there was no agreement as to the most appropriate name for this new ward. We therefore proposed that it be named Kensworth & Totternhoe, reflecting the names of the two largest communities in the proposed ward.

70 At Stage Three, the District Council objected to our proposed Caddington & Slip End ward. It stated that informal consultations with the local community indicated strong support for the retention of existing warding arrangements in this area to reflect the separate identities of Slip End and Hyde parishes from Caddington. It also argued that our proposals had failed to acknowledge Slip End's recent attainment of parish status. The District Council noted that our justification against combining Caddington in a district ward with communities to its west had been that they were divided by the A5 trunk road. It considered this argument to be even more pertinent in the case of Hyde which is separated from the remainder of the district by the M1 motorway. The District Council considered that retaining the existing single-member Slip End and two-member Caddington ward would ensure the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria. It raised no objection in respect of our proposed two-member Kensworth & Totternhoe ward.

71 The Conservatives supported our proposed Kensworth & Totternhoe ward but objected to our proposed Caddington & Slip End ward. They argued that our proposals failed to take account of the recent division of Caddington parish and the creation of the new Slip End parish and argued that a three-member ward would not reflect the interests of rural communities. They noted that we had proposed two-member wards in the urban areas of the district in order to reflect community identities and argued that the justification for this approach was even stronger in respect of rural areas. The Conservatives therefore supported the retention of the existing warding arrangements in this area. As stated earlier, the South West Bedfordshire Villages Labour Party argued that our proposed warding arrangements in this part of the district would result in a loss of village identity, which would exacerbate the issues of apathy and low turnout among the electorate during local elections.

72 Hyde Parish Council was strongly opposed to our draft recommendations. It argued that our proposed three-member Caddington & Slip End ward would not reflect the independence and individual community identity of the parish. It also argued that our proposals would hinder the effective representation of communities in the parish and asserted that the M1 motorway provides a significant

geographical barrier between itself and the rest of the district to warrant the retention of the existing single-member Slip End ward.

73 Totternhoe Parish Council objected to our proposed two-member Kensworth & Totternhoe ward. It argued that the parish is geographically separated from other communities of the proposed ward and therefore shares few links with them. It also expressed concern that the four main communities of the proposed ward would be represented by two councillors and argued that this arrangement could cause confusion and have an adverse affect upon the effective and convenient representation of the parish. It questioned whether the parish could expect to receive “the same level of commitment and representation” that it enjoys under the existing ward structure.

74 Councillor Harris (Studham) argued that our proposals would reduce the representation of rural communities while they would continue to contribute the same proportion in local taxation to the District Council. He argued that retaining the existing ward structure, particularly in the south-west of the district, would maintain the relatively high turnout in rural wards during local elections. He objected to our proposed Kensworth & Totternhoe ward, arguing that Totternhoe has few links with the other communities of the proposed ward, and put forward an alternative proposal to combine our proposed ward with Eaton Bray parish to form a new three-member ward. He argued that this would provide a greater community focus for Totternhoe parish and would ensure a measure of continuity as the proposed ward would be coterminous with the existing county division.

75 We have carefully considered the representations received at Stage Three and have noted the broad support among respondents for retaining the existing two-member Caddington and single-member Slip End wards. While we acknowledge that electors in this area are familiar with the existing ward structure, we note that this would not provide as good electoral equality as our draft recommendations. We have noted that a number of representations argued that the M1 motorway provides a sufficient geographical barrier between Hyde and Caddington parishes to justify the retention of the existing single-member Slip End ward. However, we note that under the existing warding arrangements, the communities of Hyde and Slip End also lie either side of the motorway but are located in the same district ward. We acknowledge that our ability to consider alternative warding arrangements in this area is somewhat limited due to the relatively isolated nature of these communities, that abut the south-east boundary of the district. However, we consider that the communities of the proposed ward share good communication links, despite the presence of the M1 motorway, and have not been persuaded that we have received sufficient evidence at Stage Three to move away from our draft recommendations. We consider that our proposed three-member Caddington & Slip End ward would provide the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria and therefore intend confirming our draft recommendations for this ward as final.

76 We have noted a greater degree of consensus in support of our proposed two-member Kensworth & Totternhoe ward. While we recognise the concerns of Totternhoe Parish Council and Councillor Harris, we do not consider that retention of the existing ward structure is a viable option. As stated above, the existing single-member Totternhoe, Kensworth and Studham wards contain some of the highest electoral variances in the district and we remain of the view that modification to the existing ward structure in this area is necessary to rectify this. The only viable alternative would be to divide certain parishes between district wards. However, we are not persuaded that this approach would have sufficient regard to community identities and interests in this particular area. Furthermore, the financial contribution of rural areas in the form of local taxation is not an factor that we can consider as part of this review. Our proposed allocation of councillors between the rural and urban areas of the district has been informed by considerations of electoral equality and proportionality.

77 We have not been persuaded by the proposal for a new three-member ward comprising our proposed Kensworth & Totternhoe and Eaton Bray wards. As previously stated, we consider Eaton Bray to be a distinct community of sufficient size to maintain the current two-member ward. We acknowledge that our options for change in this area are somewhat limited but we remain of the view that our proposed two-member Kensworth & Totternhoe ward provides the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria. We therefore intend confirming our draft recommendations for this area as final. Under our final recommendations, Caddington & Slip End and Kensworth & Totternhoe wards would have 6 per cent fewer and 4 per cent more electors per councillor than the current district average respectively (4 per cent fewer and equal to the district average by 2005). Our proposals for these wards are illustrated on Map 2 towards the back of this report.

Dunstable Central, Priory and Watling wards

78 The existing three-member wards of Dunstable Central, Priory and Watling are located in the central and southern part of Dunstable, a town of some 26,000 electors adjacent to the western boundary of Luton. Dunstable Central and Watling wards have 24 per cent and 17 per cent more electors per councillor than the district average respectively (23 per cent and 13 per cent more than average by 2005). Priory ward has 15 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the district average and is forecast to have 18 per cent fewer than average by 2005.

79 In our draft recommendations, we acknowledged a broad degree of consensus with regard to warding arrangements in this area and noted that all of the proposed schemes provided for much improved levels of electoral equality. However, we considered that in attempting to maintain a three-member ward structure in Dunstable, all four of the Stage One proposals for the town had failed to reflect community identities and interests and had utilised incoherent and arbitrary ward boundaries. We noted the strong opinion that the pattern of three-member district wards should be maintained in Dunstable. However, we do not necessarily consider this essential to the maintenance of effective and convenient local government in urban areas. Moreover, we considered that a mixed pattern of two-member and three-member wards can have greater regard to local community interests and identities.

80 We therefore put forward our own warding arrangements for Dunstable Central, Watling and Priory wards. We took a number of factors into account in formulating an appropriate scheme for these wards. We considered that the A5 Trunk Road (High Street South) provides a clear and logical ward boundary between the existing Watling and Priory wards, and should be retained. We considered that the current Dunstable Central ward has a comparatively large electorate and covers a relatively large geographical area, stretching from the fringes of Totternhoe parish in the west to the former railway line in the east. Furthermore, it contains a number of distinct areas, separated from each other by a number of major roads. We considered that these parts of the town do not have a common sense of identity and proposed that the part of the current Dunstable Central ward, to the east of Chiltern Road and up to and including properties on the north side of West Street, be combined with that part of Priory ward to the north of Britain Street and Englands Lane (and including properties on the north side of these roads) to form a revised two-member Dunstable Central ward. We noted that our proposals would result in the transfer of the site of the old Augustinian Priory and the Priory Church of St Peter into our proposed Dunstable Central ward. We therefore proposed that the remainder of the current Priory ward be renamed Downside ward in order to reflect our proposed changes, and that it be served by two councillors.

81 We proposed that the remainder of the existing Dunstable Central ward be combined with the Penrith Avenue area, and the whole of Friars Walk and Bowland Crescent from the existing Watling ward, to form a new two-member Dunstable Downs ward. We proposed that the remainder of Watling

ward continue to be represented by three councillors. We recognised that we had significantly departed from all the proposals put to us at Stage One for Dunstable Central, Priory and Watling wards, and therefore welcomed further views on our draft recommendations for this area at Stage Three.

82 At Stage Three the District Council broadly supported our draft recommendations for warding arrangements in Dunstable. However, it expressed concern at two of our proposed ward names and argued that more appropriate and locally related names should be adopted. It proposed that Downside ward be renamed Manshead and that Dunstable Downs ward be renamed Chiltern. It argued that the name of Manshead is historically linked with the area contained within our proposed Downside ward. It also argued that the name of Chiltern was more appropriate than our proposed ward name of Dunstable Downs because it reflects the area's affinity with the Chiltern Hills.

83 The Conservatives stated that while they had originally proposed a three-member ward structure for Dunstable, they recognised "the strength of the proposals for new two-member wards in reflecting community identity". However, they considered that our proposed ward names of Downside and Dunstable Downs may lead to confusion and put forward alternative ward names that were identical to those of the District Council. They noted that Chiltern was an old ward name that was familiar to local electors and that Manshead was the old Chiltern Hundred for the Downside area. Dunstable Town Council broadly supported our proposed district and town council warding arrangements and endorsed the alternative ward name of Chiltern for our proposed Dunstable Downs ward. However, it argued that the ward name of Priory should be retained for our proposed Downside ward. While acknowledging that Dunstable Priory itself would no longer lie in the proposed ward it argued that this was "a time-honoured local name which is understood and accepted in the locality".

84 We have carefully considered the representations received and note a broad degree of consensus in favour of our proposed ward structure for Dunstable. We recognise that our proposed ward names of Downside and Dunstable Downs have met with some opposition. We have not been persuaded that our proposed Downside ward should retain the existing ward name of Priory. While this may be a locally recognised name, we consider that because the Priory site itself will no longer be located in the proposed ward, this name is inappropriate and may lead to confusion. We acknowledge that the proposed ward names of Manshead and Chiltern have a degree of support and are recognised locally. We therefore intend confirming our draft recommendations for these wards as final, subject to the adoption of the ward name of Chiltern for our proposed Dunstable Downs ward and Manshead for our proposed Downside ward.

85 Under our final recommendations, Dunstable Central and Chiltern wards would have 2 per cent fewer and 2 per cent more electors per councillor than the district average respectively (3 per cent fewer and 1 per cent more electors than average by 2005). Manshead and Watling wards would have 8 per cent more and 2 per cent more electors per councillor than the district average respectively (5 per cent more and 2 per cent fewer than average by 2005). Our proposals for these wards are illustrated on the large map at the back of this report.

Icknield and Northfields wards

86 The existing three-member wards of Icknield and Northfields are located in the north of Dunstable town and to the south of Houghton Regis. Under existing arrangements, Icknield ward contains equal to the average number of electors per councillor, and is projected to have 4 per cent fewer than average by 2005. Northfields ward has 4 per cent more electors per councillor than the district average, and will have 5 per cent more by 2005.

87 In our draft recommendations, we proposed retaining the existing three-member wards of Icknield and Northfields, as proposed by the Conservatives, Labour Party and Leighton-Linslade Town Council. While the forecast level of electoral equality in Icknield ward would be somewhat larger than we would usually expect in an urban area, we considered this area to be a self-contained community with its own distinct identity. We noted that the current ward has clear and distinct boundaries that are formed by the former railway line to the south and west, Luton Unitary Authority to the east and the town of Houghton Regis to the north. Furthermore, we noted that a route has been safeguarded for the construction of a new eastern by-pass for Dunstable which would traverse the south-west of the ward, resulting in a further barrier between the communities of Icknield ward and the rest of Dunstable. We considered that combining all or part of the existing Icknield ward with parts of other wards in the town would not have sufficient regard to the statutory criteria. We noted a large measure of agreement with regard to the existing Northfields ward. We considered that the current ward has clear and distinct boundaries, and provides a reasonable level of electoral equality both now and in five years' time.

88 At Stage Three, the District Council, the Conservatives and Dunstable Town Council supported our draft recommendations for these wards. Having received no further submissions in relation to this area, we intend confirming our draft recommendations for Icknield and Northfields wards as final. Under our final recommendations Icknield and Northfields wards would have 6 per cent fewer and 2 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the district average respectively (9 per cent fewer and equal to the district average by 2005). Our proposals for these wards are illustrated on the large map at the back of this report.

Houghton Central, Houghton East and Houghton South wards

89 The existing three-member wards of Houghton Central, Houghton East and Houghton South cover the area of Houghton Regis, a town of some 12,000 electors located to the north of Dunstable and to the west of Luton. Under existing arrangements, Houghton Central ward and Houghton East ward have 23 per cent fewer and 17 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the district average respectively (26 per cent fewer and 21 per cent fewer than average by 2005). Houghton South ward currently has 13 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the district average. Due to substantial housing development over the next five years, it is projected to have 6 per cent fewer electors per councillor than average by 2005.

90 In our draft recommendations, we proposed that the Painters Estate be transferred from Houghton East ward to Houghton South ward, as proposed by the Conservatives, the Labour Party and Leighton-Linslade Town Council. We also proposed that a further 198 electors to the south of Delmont Road and west of Tithe Farm Road be transferred from Houghton Central ward to a revised three-member Houghton South ward. This area includes the odd numbered properties (15-49) on Tithe Farm Road, and Churchfield Road, up to and including Vicarage Road, as proposed by Leighton-Linslade Town Council. It would also include four electors from Bedford Road. We have noted a minor textual inconsistency in our draft recommendations with regard to the boundary between our proposed Houghton Hall and Tithe Farm wards. It should be noted that we also propose that a further 18 electors (even numbered properties 30 - 46) on Bedford Road be transferred from Houghton Central ward to our proposed Houghton Hall ward. This amendment has only a minimal effect on current and projected levels of electoral equality in our proposed wards.

91 We considered that our proposals would provide for significantly improved levels of electoral equality and have regard for the statutory criteria. We considered that the Liberal Democrats' proposed Houghton South ward that would straddle the parish boundary between Houghton Regis and Dunstable would not be conducive to the effective and convenient representation of this area on the District

Council. In our draft recommendations, we proposed that Houghton Central ward be renamed Tithe Farm and be represented by two councillors. We also proposed that Houghton East ward be renamed Parkside and be represented by two councillors, and Houghton South ward be renamed Houghton Hall and continue to be represented by three councillors.

92 At Stage Three, the District Council accepted our proposed warding arrangements for Houghton Regis, although it proposed that the existing ward names be retained. The Conservatives supported our draft recommendations for this area. The Liberal Democrats accepted our revised ward boundaries in this area but supported the retention of the existing ward names, arguing that they were more familiar to local electors.

93 Having considered the representations received at Stage Three, we note a large measure of support for our draft recommendations. We remain of the view that our proposed warding arrangements provide the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria. Having re-examined our proposed ward names for this area we do not consider that we have received sufficient evidence to move away from our draft recommendations. We remain of the view that our proposed names accurately reflect the constituent communities and geographical extent of our proposed wards and note that they received a large degree of support at Stage One. We therefore intend confirming our draft recommendations for Houghton Hall, Parkside and Tithe Farm wards as final, without amendment.

94 Under our final recommendations, Houghton Hall ward has 7 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the district average, improving to 1 per cent fewer than average by 2005. Parkside and Tithe Farm wards have 6 per cent more and 3 per cent more electors per councillor than the district average (1 per cent more and 1 per cent fewer than average by 2005). Our proposals for these wards are illustrated on the large map at the back of this report.

Beaudesert, Brooklands and Plantation wards

95 The existing three-member wards of Beaudesert, Brooklands and Plantation cover the Leighton Buzzard area, which is situated in the north-west of the district to the east of the River Ouzel. Under existing arrangements, Beaudesert and Brooklands wards have 22 per cent more and 6 per cent more electors per councillor than the district average respectively (24 per cent more and 2 per cent more than average by 2005). Plantation ward has an equal number of electors per councillor to the district average and is forecast to have 2 per cent fewer than average by 2005.

96 Arising from a misinterpretation of a 1985 Parish Ward Order, the District Council had incorrectly assumed that modifications to Beaudesert, Brooklands and Plantation town council wards also made consequential changes to the district wards of the same name. Therefore, subsequent to 1985, incorrect boundaries have been utilised for these district wards. In the following analysis, an existing ward, when mentioned, should be taken to refer to the assumed district ward and existing town council ward. We intend that our recommendations will result in proposed district wards being coterminous with town council wards. Consequently proposed wards, when mentioned, should be taken to refer to our recommendations for both town council and district wards. As detailed earlier, for district warding purposes, we propose transferring the housing development at the RAF Stanbridge site from Stanbridge ward to Leighton-Linslade. Therefore our proposed Grovebury ward, when mentioned in the following text, should be taken to refer to the proposed district ward only.

97 In our draft recommendations, we substantially proposed our own warding arrangements for this area. We acknowledged that the transfer of the development site at RAF Stanbridge, which currently

contains few electors, may initially result in substantial levels of electoral variation in whichever district ward of Leighton-Linslade it is incorporated with. However, we noted that development is under way on the site and is forecast to contain 1,356 electors in five years' time. Furthermore, we considered that this area will share many of the characteristics with urban district wards to its north, as well as relying on shared local amenities and facilities. Therefore, we proposed the transfer of the RAF Stanbridge development site into the district wards of Leighton-Linslade as part of our draft recommendations. As stated in our draft recommendations, we are unable, as part of this periodic electoral review, to modify external parish boundaries and as a result, this area would remain part of Billington parish. Modifications to parish boundaries can, however, be made as part of a future parish boundary review by the District Council.

98 We considered that the Liberal Democrats' and Leighton-Linslade Town Council's proposal to create a new two-member All Saints ward and three-member Grove ward would utilise clear boundaries and reflect community ties. In particular, it would utilise Clipstone Brook as a boundary and provide separate representation for the communities around the commercial centre of Leighton Buzzard. As outlined above, we were not persuaded to combine parts of Plantation ward with Heath & Reach parish in a new single-member Heath ward which would require the formation of two additional Town Council wards and would, in our view, divide communities in the north of Leighton Buzzard.

99 We therefore based our proposals on retaining the current northern boundary of Plantation ward but also endorsed the Liberal Democrats and Leighton-Linslade Town Council's proposals for All Saints ward, subject to a number of amendments to ward boundaries. We considered that Clipstone Brook provides a clear and natural barrier on which to base the southern boundary of the proposed ward. We therefore proposed that the area of the existing Beaudesert ward to the north of Clipstone Brook and up to and including the whole of Regent Street also be transferred to the new All Saints ward. We considered that this area shares similar characteristics with the rest of the town centre. We also endorsed the transfer of the Vimy Road area from Linslade ward to All Saints ward. Although this will result in a breach of the river Ouzel, our proposed ward boundary would follow the Grand Union Canal, which provides a clear and natural boundary in this area. We proposed that the northern boundary of our proposed All Saints ward should follow the existing boundary between Beaudesert and Plantation wards, subject to the inclusion of King Street in All Saints ward. We considered that our proposed All Saints ward would combine areas with shared identities and interests and would have the clear geographical focus of the older Victorian centre of the town. We proposed amending the western boundary of the existing Plantation ward to follow the Grand Union Canal rather than the river Ouzel which we considered would provide a clear and consistent boundary throughout the area. This change would affect no electors.

100 With regard to the southern part of the town, we based our draft recommendations on the Liberal Democrats' and Leighton-Linslade Town Council's proposed three-member Grove ward. However, in order to improve electoral equality and provide clearer ward boundaries, we proposed that this ward be expanded eastwards to include the Brooklands Drive area from the current Brooklands ward. We proposed that this new ward be named Grovebury after the name of a major road in this area, and that it include the housing development currently under construction at the RAF Stanbridge site. We proposed that the remainder of the current Brooklands ward form a revised two-member ward and that it be named Planets after a major housing estate located in the centre of the proposed ward.

101 Our proposals would result in a mixed pattern of two-member and three-member wards which we considered would provide a good balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria. We recognised that this area has been the subject of some contention in the initial stages of the review.

Moreover, as we proposed significantly departing from all of the proposed warding arrangements received at Stage One, we welcomed further comment on our draft recommendations for this area at Stage Three.

102 At Stage Three, the District Council noted our proposed warding arrangements were a radical departure from both the existing three-member ward pattern in the town and the proposals put forward at Stage One. However, it considered our draft recommendations for these wards to be “acceptable”.

103 The Conservatives noted that while they had proposed a three-member ward pattern for Leighton-Linslade, they accepted that our proposals reflected the identities of established communities. However, while they accepted our draft recommendations “in principal”, they put forward a number of amendments to all of our proposed ward boundaries in this area in order to “marry wards even more closely to readily distinguishable communities”. They put forward amendments to our proposed Planets ward that would extend its south-west boundary to include that part of our proposed All Saints ward to the north of Clipstone Brook and east of South Street and Vandyke Road. They also proposed that the Meadow Way estate be transferred from our proposed Planets ward to Grovebury ward. The Conservatives argued that this estate “is more closely related” to the communities of our proposed Grovebury ward and argued that is separated from other communities in the proposed Planets ward by the A4012 Hockliffe Road at a point where the distance between houses on either side of the road is at its widest.

104 The Conservatives also proposed that the part of our proposed All Saints ward broadly to the north of Beaudesert and Vandyke Road be transferred to a revised three-member Plantation ward. They argued that this would reinstate the “more obvious” pre-1985 district ward boundary. The Conservatives also proposed that the southern boundary of the proposed All Saints ward be extended south to encompass that area of our proposed Grovebury ward broadly to the west of Richmond Road and South Street and including the industrial estate to the south of Clipstone Brook. They consequently proposed that the remainder of Grovebury ward be renamed Brooklands to reflect the fact that Grovebury Road would no longer lie in the proposed ward. Under the Conservatives’ proposals, All Saints and Planets wards would have 9 per cent more and 1 per cent more electors per councillor than the district average respectively (7 per cent more and 3 per cent fewer than average by 2005). Brooklands and Plantation wards would have 27 per cent fewer and 1 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the district average respectively (equal to and 4 per cent fewer than the district average by 2005).

105 As stated in detail earlier, the Liberal Democrats, Heath & Reach Parish Council and Councillor Reeve (Heath & Reach) strongly objected to our proposed Heath & Reach ward that would comprise the parishes of Heath & Reach and Hockliffe. They reiterated their preference for a new single-member Heath ward that would contain Heath & Reach parish and approximately 600 electors from the north of the existing Plantation ward of Leighton-Linslade.

106 Leighton-Linslade Town Council expressed broad support for our proposed district warding arrangements for the town. Plantation Branch Conservatives strongly supported our proposed Plantation ward and argued that the alternative proposals to combine the Sandy Lane, Heath Court and Shenley Hill areas of the ward with Heath & Reach parish would divide established communities “to the advantage of neither”.

107 We have carefully considered the representations received at Stage Three. As stated earlier, we have not been persuaded to adopt the proposed Heath ward as supported by the Liberal Democrats, Heath & Reach Parish Council and Councillor Reeve. We remain of the view that the northern

boundary of our proposed Plantation ward will ensure the most effective and convenient representation of the Sandy Lane, Heath Court and Shenley Hill areas of Leighton-Linslade on the District Council. While we acknowledge that the proposed Heath ward would have good electoral equality, we consider that this proposal would divide communities in the north of Leighton-Linslade and would require the establishment of two further town council wards containing relatively few electors. We remain of the view that our proposals for this area provide the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria.

108 We have given consideration to the Conservatives' Stage Three proposals for these wards. We acknowledge that they have some merit and would provide comparable levels of electoral equality to our draft recommendations. However, we consider that their proposed boundary between All Saints and Brooklands wards would divide established communities to the south of Clipstone Brook. Furthermore, we are not persuaded that the Meadow Way estate should remain in a revised Brooklands ward. While we acknowledge that this area is separated from the majority of our proposed Planets ward by the A4012 Hockliffe Road, we note that it shares no direct communication links with neighbouring communities to the south of Hockliffe Road and is separated from the Brooklands Drive estate by the Leighton Buzzard Light Railway. We consider the A4012 more likely to provide a focus, rather than a barrier between the communities of our proposed Planets ward and note that the existing Brooklands ward also contains communities that straddle this road.

109 We are not persuaded that the area of our proposed All Saints ward to the east of Vandyke Road and South Street should be transferred to Planets ward, as proposed by the Conservatives. We remain of the view that this area shares many of the characteristics and has a greater affinity with communities towards the centre of Leighton-Linslade. We remain of the view that our proposed All Saints ward combines areas with shared identities and interests and has the clear geographical focus of the town centre.

110 Therefore, we have not been persuaded that we have received sufficient evidence to depart from our draft recommendations and have concluded that our proposed warding arrangements provide the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria. We therefore intend confirming our draft recommendations for new two-member All Saints and Planets wards, a new three-member Grovebury ward and revised three-member Plantation ward as final. Under our final recommendations All Saints and Planets wards would both have 4 per cent more electors per councillor than the district average (3 per cent more and equal to the district average by 2005). Grovebury and Plantation wards would have 21 per cent fewer and 5 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the district average respectively (5 per cent more and 8 per cent fewer by 2005). Our proposals for these wards are illustrated on the large map at the back of this report.

Linslade and Southcott wards

111 The existing wards of Linslade and Southcott are located to the west of the river Ouzel and cover the area of Linslade, a town of some 9,000 electors that was located in the county of Buckinghamshire until relatively recently. Linslade ward is currently represented by three councillors, while Southcott ward is represented by two councillors. Under existing arrangements, Linslade ward has 10 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the current district average, and is projected to have 13 per cent fewer than average by 2005. Due to a substantial level of housing development since the last review, Southcott ward has 46 per cent more electors per councillor than the current district average and is projected to have 40 per cent more than average by 2005.

112 In our draft recommendations, we proposed a revised two-member Linslade ward. We proposed that the eastern boundary of Linslade ward be broadly retained, subject to the transfer of Vimy Road to our proposed All Saints ward, as proposed by the Liberal Democrats and Leighton-Linslade Town Council. We considered that the Grand Union Canal would provide a strong, well defined ward boundary between our proposed Linslade and All Saints wards. We considered that Vimy Road, which is separated from the majority of Linslade by the Grand Union Canal, is not an integral part of the town, being located on its eastern perimeter. We proposed that the entire eastern boundary of our proposed Linslade ward be amended to follow the route of the Grand Union Canal, and therefore be more closely tied to ground detail. This proposal would affect no electors other than those in Vimy Road.

113 We also proposed that the part of Linslade ward broadly to the west of numbers 10 and 37 Knaves Hill and including Rowley Furrows be transferred to a revised three-member Southcott ward, as proposed by the Conservatives. We considered that while the proposed ward boundary would be somewhat arbitrary, this proposal would significantly improve electoral equality for both wards. We also recognised that our ability to consider alternative warding arrangements in this area is severely limited due to the location of the London to Birmingham railway line. We also proposed a further amendment to the ward boundary to the north of Knaves Hill to follow field boundaries and Stoke Road in order that the boundary is tied to ground detail. These changes would affect no electors.

114 At Stage Three the District Council, the Liberal Democrats and Leighton-Linslade Town Council supported our proposed warding arrangements in this area. The Conservatives broadly supported our draft recommendations for Leighton-Linslade as a whole. However, while accepting our proposed ward structure “as a base”, they argued that further improvements could be made to ensure more clearly identifiable ward boundaries. They proposed that the entire area to the north of Soulbury Road and west of the London to Birmingham railway line be incorporated in a revised three-member Southcott ward. They also proposed that the area broadly to the east of Bunkers Lane, Southcourt Road and Springfield Road and including a number of properties in Southcott Village that currently lies in Southcott ward, be transferred to a revised two-member Linslade ward. The Conservatives argued that their proposals would utilise less arbitrary ward boundaries than our draft recommendations. Under the Conservatives’ proposals, Linslade and Southcott wards would have 6 per cent more and 4 per cent more electors per councillor than the district average respectively (2 per cent more and 1 per cent fewer than average by 2005).

115 We have carefully considered the representations received at Stage Three and note that our proposals have met with broad support. Having given consideration to the Conservatives’ Stage Three proposals we recognise that they would provide comparable levels of electoral equality to our draft recommendations. However, we are not persuaded that we have received sufficient evidence to depart from our draft recommendations for these wards. As stated earlier, our ability to consider alternative arrangements in the Linslade area is somewhat limited due to a number of physical barriers including the London to Birmingham railway line, the Grand Union Canal and the district boundary. We note in particular that the Conservatives argued that our proposed boundary between Linslade and Southcott wards is arbitrary and not clearly defined. However, we note that our proposed boundary between these two wards was based on the Conservatives’ Stage One proposals.

116 We consider that our proposed warding arrangements for this area provide the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria. Having noted a broad degree of support for our proposals, we intend confirming our draft recommendations for Linslade and Southcott wards as final. Under our final recommendations Linslade and Southcott wards would have 5 per cent more and 4 per cent more electors per councillor than the district average respectively (2 per cent more and equal to

the district average by 2005). Our proposals for these wards are illustrated on the large map at the back of this report.

Electoral Cycle

117 At Stage One we received five representations regarding the District Council's electoral cycle. The Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats and Leighton-Linslade Town Council proposed no change to the existing cycle of elections by thirds. As part of the Labour Party's submission, Houghton Regis Branch Labour Party also favoured the retention of elections by thirds. We noted that South Bedfordshire District Council's Local Governance Overview & Scrutiny Committee had also resolved to retain elections by thirds. Councillor Reeve (Heath & Reach) supported a change to whole-council elections every four years and argued that in areas where three-member wards predominate, a growing sense of apathy had resulted in the steady decline in turnout for district council elections. He stated that frequent elections diminished the electorate's interest in the affairs of local government. In our draft recommendations, we considered that there was a majority view in favour of retaining the present electoral cycle. We therefore proposed no change to the current electoral cycle of elections by thirds for the District Council.

118 At Stage Three the Conservatives reiterated their support for the retention of elections by thirds. The South West Bedfordshire Villages Labour Party stated that apathy among the local electorate was the result of "too many elections" at both local and national level, and argued that our proposed warding arrangements for the district would exacerbate this problem. It therefore favoured a move to whole council elections every four years. Councillor Harris (Studham) supported a move to whole-council elections, arguing that the current electoral cycle causes frequent change in the political composition of the District Council and therefore hinders effective and convenient local government in South Bedfordshire.

119 Having considered the representations received at Stage Three, we have noted some support for change in the electoral cycle of the council. However, over the course of this electoral review, there appears to be a clear majority view that the present cycle of elections by thirds be retained. We therefore intend confirming our draft recommendation for the retention of elections by thirds as final.

Conclusions

120 Having considered carefully all the representations and evidence received in response to our consultation report, we have decided substantially to endorse our draft recommendations, subject to the following amendments:

- in Dunstable town, we intend that our proposed Dunstable Downs ward be renamed Chiltern and that our proposed Downside ward be renamed Manshead.

121 We conclude that, in South Bedfordshire:

- there should be a reduction in council size from 53 to 50;
- there should be 23 wards, two fewer than at present;
- the boundaries of 21 of the existing wards should be modified;

- the Council should continue to hold elections by thirds.

122 Table 4 shows the impact of our final recommendations on electoral equality, comparing them with the current arrangements, based on 2000 and 2005 electorate figures.

Table 4: Comparison of Current and Recommended Electoral Arrangements

	2000 electorate		2005 forecast electorate	
	Current arrangements	Final recommendations	Current arrangements	Final recommendations
Number of councillors	53	50	53	50
Number of wards	25	23	25	23
Average number of electors per councillor	1,620	1,717	1,690	1,792
Number of wards with a variance more than 10 per cent from the average	17	3	18	1
Number of wards with a variance more than 20 per cent from the average	11	1	10	0

123 As Table 4 shows, our recommendations would result in a reduction in the number of wards with an electoral variance of more than 10 per cent from 17 to three, with one ward varying by more than 20 per cent from the district average. This level of electoral equality would improve further in 2005, with only one ward, Eaton Bray, varying by more than 10 per cent from the average, at 13 per cent. We conclude that our recommendations would best meet the need for electoral equality, having regard to the statutory criteria.

Final Recommendation

South Bedfordshire District Council should comprise 50 councillors serving 23 wards, as detailed and named in Tables 1 and 2, and illustrated on Map 2 and the large map inside the back cover of this report. The Council should continue to hold elections by thirds.

Parish and Town Council Electoral Arrangements

124 When reviewing electoral arrangements, we are required to comply as far as is reasonably practicable with the rules set out in Schedule 11 to the 1972 Act. The Schedule states that if a parish is to be divided between different district wards, it must also be divided into parish wards, so that each parish ward lies wholly within a single ward of the district. Accordingly, in our draft recommendations report we proposed consequential changes to the warding arrangements for Billington Parish Council, and Dunstable, Houghton Regis and Leighton-Linslade town councils to reflect the proposed district wards.

125 Billington Parish Council is currently represented by seven councillors and is not warded. In our draft recommendations, we proposed that Billington parish be divided into two parish wards. We proposed a new Billington Park parish ward consisting of the development of the same name, which would be represented by five councillors. We considered that this development, located on the now disused RAF Stanbridge site would, in effect, be overspill from Leighton-Linslade and would therefore share identities and interests with other communities of the town. We proposed that the remaining rural part of the parish should form a new Old Billington parish ward represented by five parish councillors. In our draft recommendations, we noted that these arrangements had been proposed in all four of the district-wide schemes submitted. We also noted a consensus in favour of modifying the parish boundary but, as stated in our draft recommendations, we are unable to make such amendments as part of this review. Any revision to external parish boundaries would be a matter for the District Council to consider in a subsequent parish review. Any parish warding arrangements are therefore likely to be of a transitional nature and may be subject to change in the future.

126 At Stage Three of the review no further comments were received specifically relating to our proposed electoral arrangements for Billington parish. In the light of the confirmation of our proposed district warding arrangements in this area, we confirm our draft recommendation for warding Billington parish as final.

Final Recommendation

Billington Parish Council should comprise 10 councillors, three more than at present, representing two wards: Billington Park parish ward (returning five councillors) and Old Billington parish ward (returning five councillors). The parish ward boundary of Billington Park ward should reflect the proposed district ward boundary in the area, as illustrated and named on the large map at the back of this report.

127 Dunstable Town Council is currently represented by 20 town councillors and is divided into five parish wards whose boundaries are coterminous with the district wards of the town. All five wards are currently represented by four town councillors each. In our draft recommendations, we proposed substantial amendments to Dunstable Central, Priory and Watling district wards. We proposed the creation of three new two-member wards: Dunstable Downs, Dunstable Central and Downside wards, and three-member Watling, Icknield and Northfields district wards. We proposed that town council ward boundaries be revised to reflect our draft recommendations for the town and that Dunstable Central, Dunstable Downs and Downside town council wards be represented by three councillors each and that Watling, Icknield and Northfields town council wards be represented by four councillors each.

128 At Stage Three Dunstable Town Council supported our proposed town council electoral arrangements. As stated earlier, we moved away from our draft recommendations in respect of two ward names and have proposed that Dunstable Downs and Downside district wards be renamed Chiltern and Manshead respectively. Having examined the representations received, we intend confirming our draft recommendations for town council electoral arrangements in Dunstable as final, subject to the adoption of the alternative ward names outlined above.

Final Recommendation

Dunstable Town Council should comprise 21 councillors, one more than at present, representing six wards: Dunstable Central, Chiltern and Manshead town council wards, each returning three councillors, and Watling, Icknield and Northfields town council wards, each returning four councillors. The boundaries between the six town council wards should reflect the proposed district ward boundaries, as illustrated and named on the large map at the back of this report.

129 Houghton Regis Town Council is currently represented by 15 town councillors and is divided into three parish wards whose boundaries are coterminous with the district wards of the town. All three wards are currently represented by five town councillors each. In our draft recommendations, we proposed amendments to all three district wards. We proposed the creation of a new three-member Houghton Hall ward, a new two-member Tithe Farm ward and a new two-member Parkside ward. We proposed that the town council ward boundaries should be coterminous with district ward boundaries so as to reflect our draft recommendations for Houghton Regis. In the absence of any other proposal, we proposed that Parkside and Tithe Farm town council wards be represented by four councillors each and Houghton Hall town council ward be represented by six town councillors.

130 At Stage Three of the review no further comments were received specifically relating to our proposed electoral arrangements for Houghton Regis Town Council. In the light of the confirmation of our proposed district warding arrangements in this area, we confirm our draft recommendations for town council warding arrangements in Houghton Regis as final.

Final Recommendation

Houghton Regis Town Council should comprise 14 councillors, one fewer than at present, representing three wards: Parkside and Tithe Farm town council wards, each returning four councillors, and Houghton Hall town council ward, returning six councillors. The boundaries between the three town council wards should reflect the proposed district ward boundaries, as illustrated and named on the large map at the back of this report.

131 Leighton-Linslade Town Council is currently represented by 20 town councillors and is divided into five town council wards whose boundaries are coterminous with the district wards that have been utilised subsequent to the 1985 Parish Order. All five wards are currently represented by four councillors each.

132 In our draft recommendations, we proposed amendments to all five district wards. We proposed the creation of new two-member All Saints and Planets wards and a new three-member Grovebury ward which would also include part of Billington parish. We also proposed a revised three-member Plantation ward and Southcott ward, and a revised two-member Linslade ward. Town council wards would be coterminous with the proposed district wards except Grovebury town council ward which would reflect only that part of Grovebury district ward in Leighton-Linslade town itself. In the absence of any locally generated proposals, we proposed that All Saints, Linslade, Grovebury and Planets town council wards be served by three councillors each, and that Plantation and Southcott town council wards be represented by four councillors each.

133 At Stage Three of the review, notwithstanding a measure of opposition to our district warding proposals for this area, no further comments were received specifically relating to our proposed electoral arrangements for Leighton-Linslade Town Council. In the light of the confirmation of our proposed district warding arrangements in this area, we intend confirming our draft recommendations for town council warding arrangements in Leighton-Linslade as final.

Final Recommendation

Leighton-Linslade Town Council should comprise 20 councillors, as at present, representing six wards: All Saints, Grovebury, Linslade and Planets town council wards, each returning three councillors, and Plantation and Southcott town council wards, each returning four councillors. The boundaries between the six town council wards should reflect the proposed district ward boundaries, as illustrated and named on the large map at the back of this report.

134 We are not proposing any change to the electoral cycle of parish and town councils in the district.

Final Recommendation

Parish and town council elections should continue to take place every four years, at the same time as elections for the district ward of which they are part.

Map 2: Final Recommendations for South Bedfordshire

6 WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

135 Having completed our review of electoral arrangements in South Bedfordshire and submitted our final recommendations to the Secretary of State, we have fulfilled our statutory obligation under the Local Government Act 1992.

136 It is now up to the Secretary of State to decide whether to endorse our recommendations, with or without modification, and to implement them by means of an Order. Such an Order will not be made before 18 September 2001.

137 All further correspondence concerning our recommendations and the matters discussed in this report should be addressed to:

The Secretary of State
Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions
Local Government Sponsorship Division
Eland House
Bressenden Place
London SW1E 5DU

APPENDIX

Final Recommendations for South Bedfordshire: Detailed Mapping

The following map illustrates the proposed ward boundaries for South Bedfordshire district.

The **large map** inserted in the back of the report illustrates the existing and proposed warding arrangements for the towns of Dunstable, Houghton Regis and Leighton Linlade.

Map A1: Final Recommendations for South Bedfordshire: Key Map