

Final recommendations on the
future electoral arrangements
for Gravesham in Kent

Report to the Secretary of State for the
Environment, Transport and the Regions

May 2001

LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND

This report sets out the Commission's final recommendations on the electoral arrangements for the borough of Gravesham in Kent.

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Local Government Commission for England

8 May 2001

Dear Secretary of State

On 9 May 2000 the Commission began a periodic electoral review of Gravesham under the Local Government Act 1992. We published our draft recommendations in October 2000 and undertook an eight-week period of consultation.

We have now prepared our final recommendations in the light of the consultation. We have substantially confirmed our draft recommendations, although some modifications have been made (see paragraphs 167–168) in the light of further evidence. This report sets out our final recommendations for changes to electoral arrangements in Gravesham.

We recommend that Gravesham Borough Council should be served by 44 councillors representing 18 wards, and that changes should be made to ward boundaries in order to improve electoral equality, having regard to the statutory criteria. We recommend that the Council should continue to hold whole council elections every four years.

The Local Government Act 2000, contains provisions relating to changes to local authority electoral arrangements. However, until such time as Orders are made implementing those arrangements we are obliged to conduct our work in accordance with current legislation, and to continue our current approach to periodic electoral reviews.

I would like to thank members and officers of the Borough Council and other local people who have contributed to the review. Their co-operation and assistance have been very much appreciated by Commissioners and staff.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Malcolm Grant'.

PROFESSOR MALCOLM GRANT
Chairman

SUMMARY

The Commission began a review of Gravesham on 9 May 2000. We published our draft recommendations for electoral arrangements on 17 October 2000, 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 electoral arrangements provide unequal representation of electors in Gravesham:

- **in 10 of the 19 wards the number of electors represented by each councillor varies by more than 10 per cent from the average for the borough and four wards vary by more than 20 per cent from the average;**
- **by 2005 electoral equality 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 10 wards and by more than 20 per cent in four wards.**

Our main final recommendations for future electoral arrangements (Figures 1 and 2 and paragraphs 167–168) are that:

- **Gravesham Borough Council should have 44 councillors, the same as at present;**
- **there should be 18 wards, instead of 19 as at present;**
- **the boundaries of 17 of the existing wards should be modified and two wards should retain their existing boundaries;**
- **elections of the whole council should continue to take place every four years.**

These recommendations seek to ensure that the number of electors represented by each borough councillor is as nearly as possible the same, having regard to local circumstances.

- **In 15 of the proposed 18 wards the number of electors per councillor would vary by no more than 10 per cent from the borough average.**
- **This improved level of electoral equality is forecast to continue, with the number of electors per councillor in only one ward, Istead Rise, expected to vary by more than 10 per cent from the average for the borough in 2005.**

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

- **modified warding arrangements for Meopham Parish Council;**

All further correspondence on these recommendations and the matters discussed in this report should be addressed to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, who will not make an Order implementing the Commission's recommendations before 19 June 2001:

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

Figure 1: The Commission's Final Recommendations: Summary

Ward name	Number of councillors	Constituent areas	Map reference
1 Central	3	Central ward; Riverside ward (part); Whitehill ward (part)	Map 2 and large map
2 Chalk	1	Chalk ward (part)	Map 2 and large map
3 Coldharbour	2	Coldharbour ward (part); Northfleet East ward (part); Woodlands ward (part)	Map 2 and large map
4 Higham	2	<i>Unchanged</i> (Higham ward – the parish of Higham)	Map 2
5 Istead Rise	2	Istead ward	Map 2 and large map
6 Meopham North	2	Meopham North ward (part of the proposed parish ward of Camer & Meopham Green and the proposed parish ward of Nurstead & Hook Green of Meopham parish); Meopham South ward (part – part of the proposed Camer & Meopham Green parish ward of Meopham parish)	Maps 2 and A2
7 Meopham South & Vigo	2	Meopham South ward (part – the proposed parish ward of Culverstone & Harvel of Meopham parish and the parish of Vigo)	Maps 2 and A2
8 Northfleet North	3	Northfleet East ward (part); Northfleet West ward (part)	Map 2 and large map
9 Northfleet South	3	Coldharbour ward (part); Northfleet East ward (part); Northfleet West ward (part); Pelham ward (part); Woodlands ward (part)	Map 2 and large map
10 Painters Ash	3	Coldharbour ward (part); Painters Ash ward	Map 2 and large map
11 Pelham	3	Northfleet East ward (part); Pelham ward (part)	Map 2 and large map
12 Riverside	3	Chalk ward (part); Riverside ward (part)	Map 2 and large map
13 Riverview	2	Riverview ward (part); Westcourt ward (part)	Map 2 and large map
14 Shorne, Cobham & Luddesdown	2	Cobham & Luddesdown ward (the parishes of Cobham and Luddesdown); Shorne ward (the parish of Shorne)	Map 2 and large map
15 Singlewell	2	Riverview ward (part); Singlewell ward; Whitehill ward (part)	Map 2 and large map
16 Westcourt	3	Riverview ward (part); Westcourt ward (part)	Map 2 and large map

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Constituent areas	Map reference
17	Whitehill	3	Whitehill ward (part)	Map 2 and large map
18	Woodlands	3	Coldharbour ward (part); Woodlands ward (part)	Map 2 and large map

Notes: 1 Gravesend, Northfleet and Istead Rise in the northern and western parts of the borough are unparished.

2 Map 2 and Appendix A, including the large map in the back of the report, illustrate the proposed wards outlined above.

3 We have made a number of minor boundary amendments to ensure that existing ward boundaries adhere to ground detail. These changes do not affect any electors.

Figure 2: The Commission's Final Recommendations for Gravesham

	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	Central	3	4,552	1,517	-5	4,807	1,602	-1
2	Chalk	1	1,786	1,786	12	1,649	1,649	2
3	Coldharbour	2	3,455	1,728	8	3,302	1,651	2
4	Higham	2	3,212	1,606	1	3,233	1,617	0
5	Istead Rise	2	2,925	1,463	-8	2,856	1,428	-12
6	Meopham North	2	3,565	1,783	12	3,555	1,778	10
7	Meopham South & Vigo	2	3,303	1,652	3	3,453	1,727	7
8	Northfleet North	3	4,381	1,460	-9	4,856	1,619	0
9	Northfleet South	3	4,647	1,549	-3	5,003	1,668	3
10	Painters Ash	3	4,645	1,548	-3	4,612	1,537	-5
11	Pelham	3	4,639	1,546	-3	4,979	1,660	2
12	Riverside	3	4,314	1,438	-10	4,996	1,665	3
13	Riverview	2	3,414	1,707	7	3,241	1,621	0
14	Shorne, Cobham & Luddesdown	2	3,247	1,624	2	3,250	1,625	0
15	Singlewell	3	5,313	1,771	11	4,889	1,630	1
16	Westcourt	3	5,000	1,667	4	4,696	1,565	-3
17	Whitehill	2	3,310	1,655	4	3,182	1,591	-2
18	Woodlands	3	4,604	1,535	-4	4,706	1,569	-3
	Totals	44	70,312	-	-	71,256	-	-
	Averages	-	-	1,598	-	-	1,620	-

Source: Electorate figures are based on information provided by Gravesham Borough Council.

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

1 INTRODUCTION

1 This report contains our final recommendations on the electoral arrangements for the borough of Gravesham in Kent. We have now reviewed the 12 two-tier districts in Kent 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 was our first review of the electoral arrangements of Gravesham. The last such review was undertaken by our predecessor, the Local Government Boundary Commission (LGBC), which reported to the Secretary of State in March 1977 (Report No. 221). The electoral arrangements of Kent County Council were last reviewed in November 1980 (Report No. 402). We commenced a periodic electoral review of Medway in November 2000, and expect to commence a review of 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, ie 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 We are required to make recommendations to the Secretary of State on the number of councillors who should serve on the Borough Council, and the number, boundaries and names of wards. We can also make recommendations on the electoral arrangements for parish councils in the borough.

5 We have also had regard to our *Guidance and Procedural Advice for Local Authorities and Other Interested Parties* (fourth edition published in December 2000), which sets out our approach to the reviews.

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 allowing proper reflection of the identities and interests of local communities.

7 The broad objective of PERs is to achieve, so far as practicable, equality of representation across the district as a whole. Having regard to the statutory criteria, our aim is to achieve as low a level of electoral imbalance as is practicable. We will require particular justification for schemes which would result in, or retain, an electoral imbalance of over 10 per cent in any ward. 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 general assumption that the existing council size already secures effective and convenient local government in that district 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 a district's electorate should automatically result in an increase in the number of councillors, nor that changes should be made to the size of a district council simply to make it more consistent with the size of other districts.

9 In July 1998, the Government published a White Paper, *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 have been taken 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 9 May 2000, when we wrote to Gravesham Borough Council inviting proposals for future electoral arrangements. We also notified Kent County Council, Kent Police Authority, the local authority associations, Kent Association of Parish Councils, parish councils in the borough, the Member of Parliament with constituency interests in the district, the Members of the European Parliament for the South East region, and the headquarters of the main political parties. We placed a notice in the local press, issued a press release and invited the Borough Council to publicise the review further. The closing date for receipt of representations, the end of Stage One, was 31 July 2000. At Stage Two we considered all the representations received during Stage One and prepared our draft recommendations.

11 Stage Three began on 17 October 2000 with the publication of our report, *Draft recommendations on the future electoral arrangements for Gravesham in Kent*, and ended on 11 December 2000. Comments were sought 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 borough of Gravesham is situated in north-west Kent on the south bank of the River Thames and is bounded by the districts of Dartford, Sevenoaks and Tonbridge & Malling to the west, south-west and south respectively, and by Medway unitary authority to the east. Gravesham is quite diverse in character, extending from the industrial and commercial areas in the more urban areas of Northfleet and Gravesend in the north of the borough, through to the quiet countryside of the more rural area in the south, including a designated Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

13 The borough contains six parishes, although the principal residential settlements of Gravesend and Northfleet are unparished and comprise around 80 per cent of the borough's electorate. The remainder is dispersed amongst a number of smaller, more rural settlements in the southern and eastern parts of the borough, including Meopham, Cobham, Istead, Shorne and Higham. Gravesham's transport links include the main London to Dover trunk road (the A2) and the North Kent railway. The Channel Tunnel Rail Link is currently being built through the borough, parallel to the A2, with a new international and domestic passenger station proposed for Ebbsfleet, on the western edge of the borough.

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

15 The electorate of the borough is 70,312 (February 2000). The Council presently has 44 members who are elected from 19 wards, 13 of which are relatively urban in Gravesend and Northfleet and the remainder of which are predominantly rural. Nine of the wards are each represented by three councillors, seven are each represented by two councillors and three are single-member wards. The Council is elected as a whole every four years.

16 Since the last electoral review there has been an increase in the electorate in Gravesham borough, with around 2 per cent more electors than two decades ago as a result of new housing developments. The most notable increase has been in Painters Ash ward.

17 At present, each councillor represents an average of 1,598 electors, which the Borough Council forecasts will increase to 1,620 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 10 of the 19 wards varies by more than 10 per cent from the borough average and in four wards by more than 20 per cent. The worst imbalance is in Shorne ward where the councillor represents 28 per cent more electors than the borough average.

Map 1: Existing Wards in Gravesham

Figure 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 Central	2	3,539	1,770	11	3,838	1,919	18
2 Chalk	1	2,035	2,035	27	2,180	2,180	35
3 Cobham & Luddesdown	1	1,209	1,209	-24	1,231	1,231	-24
4 Coldharbour	2	3,066	1,533	-4	2,884	1,442	-11
5 Higham	2	3,212	1,606	1	3,233	1,617	0
6 Istead	2	2,925	1,463	-8	2,856	1,428	-12
7 Meopham North	2	3,539	1,770	11	3,528	1,764	9
8 Meopham South	2	3,329	1,665	4	3,480	1,740	7
9 Northfleet East	3	4,538	1,513	-5	5,130	1,710	6
10 Northfleet West	3	4,499	1,500	-6	4,643	1,548	-4
11 Painters Ash	2	4,045	2,023	27	4,048	2,024	25
12 Pelham	3	4,798	1,599	0	5,192	1,731	7
13 Riverside	3	4,065	1,355	-15	4,465	1,488	-8
14 Riverview	3	4,829	1,610	1	4,585	1,528	-6
15 Shorne	1	2,038	2,038	28	2,019	2,019	25
16 Singlewell	3	4,250	1,417	-11	3,867	1,289	-20
17 Westcourt	3	4,146	1,382	-14	3,884	1,295	-20
18 Whitehill	3	4,825	1,608	1	4,641	1,547	-4
19 Woodlands	3	5,425	1,808	13	5,561	1,854	14
Totals	44	70,312	–	–	71,265	–	–
Averages	–	–	1,598	–	–	1,620	–

Source: Electorate figures are based on information provided by Gravesham Borough Council

Note: The 'variance from average' column shows by how far, in percentage terms, the number of electors per councillor varies from the average for the borough. The minus symbol (-) denotes a lower than average number of electors. For example, in 2000, electors in Cobham & Luddesdown ward are relatively over-represented by 24 per cent, while electors in Shorne ward are relatively under-represented by 28 per cent. Figures have been rounded to the nearest whole number

3 DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS

18 During Stage One we received 19 representations, including four borough-wide schemes from the Officers of Gravesham Borough Council, the Conservative Group on the Council, Gravesham Constituency Labour Party and the Gravesham Liberal Democrats, and representations from the Kent Association of Parish Councils (Gravesham Area Committee), four parish councils, Kent County Council, a county councillor, a borough councillor, a residents' association, the deputy-chairperson of the residents' association and five local residents. 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 Gravesham in Kent*.

19 In view of the degree of consensus behind large elements of the Council Officers' proposals, which provided for a mix of single and multi-member wards, we concluded that we should generally base our draft recommendations on their scheme. We considered that this scheme provided a better balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria than the current arrangements or other schemes submitted at Stage One. However, in order to secure slightly more identifiable boundaries (therefore providing for more effective and convenient local government) and a better reflection of community identities, while securing electoral equality, we decided to move away from the Council Officers' proposals in five areas, incorporating aspects of the borough-wide schemes submitted by the Conservative Group, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats, together with some of our own proposals. We proposed that:

- Gravesham Borough Council should be served by 44 councillors, the same as at present, representing 17 wards, two less than at present;
- the boundaries of 18 of the existing wards should be modified, while one ward should retain its existing boundaries;
- there should be revised warding arrangements and the redistribution of councillors for Meopham Parish Council.

Draft Recommendation

Gravesham Borough Council should comprise 44 councillors, serving 17 wards. The whole council should continue to be elected every four years.

20 Our proposals would have resulted in significant improvements in electoral equality, with the number of electors per councillor in 16 of the 17 wards varying by no more than 10 per cent from the borough average. This level of electoral equality was forecast to improve further, with no ward varying by more than 10 per cent from the average in 2005.

4 RESPONSES TO CONSULTATION

21 During the consultation on our draft recommendations report, 73 representations were received. A list of all respondents is available on request from the Commission. All representations may be inspected at the offices of Gravesham Borough Council and the Commission.

Gravesham Borough Council

22 The Borough Council stated that “it welcomed the Commission’s proposals to retain the present number of councillors and to continue with elections for the whole council every four years”. However, with regard to the specific proposals for changes to ward boundaries and representations contained in our draft recommendations report, it stated that it was “content to leave representations on these matters to the political parties and the people of Gravesham”. It also confirmed that, under the Gravesham Parishes Order (1999), Meopham Parish Council is due to be represented by an additional (12th) parish councillor from 2003.

The Conservative Group on the Council

23 The Conservative Group on the Council (the Conservative Group) expressed concern that our proposals had not given sufficient weight to the reflection of the identities and interests of local communities in three areas: Chalk, the area covering the Kings Farm, Christianfields and Livingstone Road estates and the area comprising the parishes of Meopham and Vigo and the Istead Rise community. However, it stated that it “otherwise agrees with the recommendations ... in respect of the eastern rural and Northfleet parts of the borough, and those parts of Gravesend not referred to above”.

24 It opposed our proposed single-member Chalk ward, noting that there is local opposition to the transferring of the Hoplands Estate into a revised Riverside ward. It submitted an alternative two-member Chalk ward, with consequential boundary modifications to the wards of Riverside, Pelham and Northfleet South. It also proposed alternative Singlewell and Whitehill wards, contending that this would unite the King’s Farm, Christianfields and Livingstone Road estates within the same ward. It opposed our proposal affecting Meopham parish and Istead Rise, arguing that it would link “separate communities” and split the village of Meopham “into two”.

Gravesham Constituency Labour Party

25 Gravesham Constituency Labour Party (the Labour Party) stated that it was “disappointed that the Commission decided to base [the] recommendations on the Council Officers’ proposals”. It requested that the proposals contained its original Stage One submission be reconsidered but also submitted comments on a number of our draft recommendations.

26 The Labour Party supported our proposed Higham and Shorne, Cobham & Luddesdown wards. It acknowledged the electoral equality secured under our draft proposals for the Istead Rise/Meopham area, but noted that Istead Rise is a “recognisable community” stating that it

would not object if that area wished to retain a two-member ward. It commented on our proposals for the Gravesend area, reiterating its preference for its own Stage One proposals. In Northfleet, it reaffirmed its opposition to the proposed boundary between the wards of Pelham, Northfleet North and Northfleet South wards, contending that it would include parts of Northfleet in a Gravesend ward (and vice versa), further arguing that these two areas have “strongly held separate [identities]” and that “less upheaval would be caused by continuing to use Northfleet East and West instead of North and South”. The Labour Party also stated that it did “accept the logic applied to the recommendation for Painters Ash ward and as a consequence Coldharbour ward”.

Parish Councils

27 The Kent Association of Parish Councils (Gravesend Area Committee) opposed the proposal to include the northern part of Meopham parish in a ward with Istead Rise, arguing that the two areas “have nothing in common”. It noted that Meopham Parish Council should be represented by 12 councillors from 2003, and proposed a modification to the boundary between the proposed parish wards of Camer & Meopham Green and Culverstone & Harvel. It also opposed the proposed Shorne, Cobham & Luddesdown ward as it believed that the large geographic area which the ward covered would be “too much for councillors ... to deal with”, proposing that the current arrangements be retained, albeit with a high electoral imbalance.

28 Luddesdown Parish Council supported our draft recommendations for a 44-member council, representing 17 wards, “with Parish Council elections continuing to take place every four years on the same cycle as that of the Borough Council”. It acknowledged that in order to secure electoral equality in its area changes needed to be made to the current arrangements, expressing support for our two-member Shorne, Cobham & Luddesdown ward. It opposed the proposed three-member Istead & Meopham North ward, suggesting that Istead Rise could be linked with part of Northfleet.

29 Meopham Parish Council opposed our proposal to link the northern part of Meopham parish with Istead Rise in a three-member ward, contending that our recommendations “do not reflect the identities and interests of local communities” as the two areas “have little in common”. It proposed retaining three two-member wards for this area. It supported our proposed parish ward names, although it suggested that they should reflect the current parish ward boundaries. It also noted that Meopham parish should be represented by 12 councillors from 2003 and submitted a petition signed by 215 local residents opposing our proposals for Meopham parish and supporting the allocation of the 12th councillor for Meopham Parish Council.

Other Representations

30 A further 67 representations were received in response to our draft recommendations from Kent County Council, a county councillor, a borough councillor, residents’ associations, local associations and residents.

31 Kent County Council stated that it “broadly supports the Commission’s recommendations”, but expressed “reservations” about our proposal to divide Meopham parish between two three-

member wards which it believed would disrupt community ties. County Councillor Gibson expressed concern at the proposal to divide Meopham into two parts with the northern part being joined with Istead Rise, arguing that this was not acceptable as it “would divide communities”.

32 Borough Councillor Jones also opposed the proposal to link Istead Rise with the northern part of Meopham. He argued that the current two-member Istead ward should be retained, contending that “residents feel that the small [electoral] imbalance is less important to Istead Rise than maintaining their ‘island status’”.

33 Meopham Green Residents Association, Istead Rise Community Association, Meopham & Nurstead Womens’ Institute and 35 local residents opposed our proposals to include the northern part of Meopham parish in a ward with Istead Rise. These respondents argued that our proposal would not reflect the identities and interests of local communities as the two areas have little in common and share few community links.

34 Chalk Parish Residents Association, Chalk Parish History Group, the Vice-Chair of Chalk Parish Residents Association and 22 local residents opposed our proposal to include the Hoplands Estate in Riverside ward. Chalk Parish Residents Association supported the proposal to include an area to the south of the A226 (Rochester Road) in a revised two-member Chalk ward and also submitted two petitions: one containing 155 signatures opposing the transfer of the Hoplands estate from Chalk ward to Riverside ward, and another with 79 signatures (from residents in an area to the south of the A226 in Westcourt ward) supporting the modified two-member Chalk ward. The Vice-Chair of Chalk Parish Residents Association and 10 local residents also supported this revised two-member ward.

35 Jacques Arnold (the former MP for Gravesham) stated that he commended our proposals for Northfleet and Gravesend, except in two areas. He opposed our proposal to include the Hoplands Estate in our proposed Riverside ward and our proposed Chalk ward, expressing support for a modified two-member Chalk ward. He also suggested a revised three-member Singlewell ward and revised two-member Whitehill ward which would unite the three estates of King’s Farm, Christianfields and Livingstone Road within the same ward. In the rural area, he opposed our proposals for Meopham parish and Istead Rise, arguing that this would divide the Meopham community. He broadly supported the retention of the existing arrangements in this area, suggesting a minor modification to the boundary between the Meopham North and Meopham South wards.

5 ANALYSIS AND FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

36 As described earlier, our prime objective in considering the most appropriate electoral arrangements for Gravesham 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”.

37 In relation to Schedule 11, our recommendations are not intended to be based solely on existing electorate figures, but also on assumptions as to changes in the number and distribution of local government electors likely to take place within the ensuing five years. We also must have regard to the desirability of fixing identifiable boundaries and to maintaining local ties which might otherwise be broken.

38 It is therefore impractical to design an electoral scheme which provides for 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.

39 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 kept to the minimum, such an objective should be the starting point in any review. We therefore strongly recommend that, in formulating electoral schemes, local authorities and other interested parties should start from the standpoint of absolute electoral equality and only then make adjustments to reflect relevant factors, such as community identity and interests. Regard must also be had to five-year forecasts of change in electorates.

Electorate Forecasts

40 At Stage One the Borough Council submitted electorate forecasts for the year 2005, projecting an increase in the electorate of around 1 per cent from 70,312 to 71,265 over the five-year period from 2000 to 2005. It expects most of the growth to be in Northfleet East ward, although a significant amount is also expected in the wards of Riverside, Central and Pelham in the northern part of the urban area of the borough. However, these increases in electorate, mainly as a consequence of new housing development, will be largely offset by static or declining electorate elsewhere in the borough, most notably in the wards of Singlewell and Westcourt in the southern and eastern parts of the urban area. The Council estimated rates and locations of housing development with regard to structure and local plans, and the expected rate of building over the five-year period and assumed occupancy rates. In our draft recommendations report we accepted that this is an inexact science and, having given consideration to the forecast electorates, we were satisfied that they represented the best estimates that could reasonably be made at the time.

41 We received one comment on the Council’s electorate forecasts during Stage Three. The Labour Party reiterated its concern over the forecast reduction in the number of electors in the Singlewell area, contending that this was “unproven and very unlikely”. We have considered these comments, the Council’s methodology for preparing its electorate projections and its electorate projections, and remain satisfied that they represent the best estimates presently available.

Council Size

42 As already explained, the Commission’s starting point is to assume 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.

43 Gravesham Borough Council is at present served by 44 councillors. At Stage One, the Council Officers’ submission stated that in the formulation of their proposals one of the main principles was to retain the current council size. They therefore proposed a council of 44 members, based on a mix of single, two and three-member wards, the same as at present. The Conservative Group, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats all submitted proposed electoral schemes based on a council size of 44 members.

44 In our draft recommendations report we stated that having considered the representations received, the size and distribution of the electorate, the geography and other characteristics of the area, we concluded that the achievement of electoral equality and the statutory criteria would best be met by a council of 44 members.

45 During Stage Three, the Council stated that it “welcomed the Commission’s proposals to retain the present number of councillors”. The Conservative Group, the Labour Party and Luddesdown Parish Council also supported the retention of a council size of 44 members. Therefore, we remain of the view that, having considered the size and distribution of the electorate, the geography and other characteristics of the area, together with the representations received, the achievement of electoral equality and the statutory criteria would best be met by a council of 44 members.

Electoral Arrangements

46 As set out in our draft recommendations report, we carefully considered all the representations received at Stage One, including the borough-wide schemes from the Borough Council Officers, the Conservative Group, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats. From these representations, some considerations emerged which helped to inform us when preparing our draft recommendations.

47 We noted that there was consensus between all four schemes regarding the retention of a 44 member council, as outlined earlier, and that there was broad agreement regarding the retention of a mixed pattern of single, two and three-member wards across the borough.

48 We noted the general agreement between the Council Officers, the Conservative Group and the Labour Party that the more rural area of the borough should not be combined in wards with the more urban area, and the specific agreement that the western part of Shorne parish (known locally as Shorne West) should not be included in the Riverview or Singlewell wards. However, we also considered the alternative proposal, as put forward by the Liberal Democrats, that the majority of Shorne West should be included within Riverview ward and that Marling Way and Davy's Place should be included in Singlewell ward (with the remainder of Shorne parish being combined with Chalk ward).

49 However, we noted that if the Shorne West area were included in revised Riverview and Singlewell wards, the urban area (ie the unparished area to the north of the A2 trunk road and to the west of Shorne parish) would be entitled to 34.3 councillors overall initially (34.4 councillors by 2005) and the rural area would be entitled 9.7 councillors (9.6 councillors by 2005). However, if the current Shorne ward's western boundary were retained, a much better balance of representation between the urban and rural areas of the borough would be secured. Under a 44 member council the urban area would be entitled to 33.8 councillors initially (33.9 councillors by 2005) and the rural area would be entitled 10.2 councillors initially (10.1 councillors by 2005). Therefore in view of the improvement to the balance of representation between the urban and rural areas of the borough, and in order to facilitate a good electoral scheme across the borough as a whole, we proposed endorsing the proposal put forward by the Council Officers, the Conservative Group and the Labour Party that Shorne parish should not be divided and that Shorne West should not be included in wards in the urban area.

50 We considered the overall level of electoral equality secured under all the borough-wide schemes submitted. While we acknowledged the good level of electoral equality that would be secured under the Conservative Group's and the Labour Party's schemes, we noted that the best overall level of electoral equality would be secured under the Council Officers' scheme. Furthermore, we noted that the Council Officers' scheme had similarities with, and incorporated different aspects of, all three of the other borough-wide schemes that had been submitted.

51 In view of the degree of consensus behind large elements of the Council Officers' proposals we concluded that we should generally base our recommendations on their scheme. We considered that this scheme would provide a better balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria than the current arrangements or other schemes submitted at Stage One. However, we sought to build on these proposals in order to secure slightly more identifiable boundaries (therefore providing for more effective and convenient local government) and a better reflection of community identities, while securing good electoral equality. We moved away from the Council Officers' proposals in five areas, putting forward our own proposals, some of which incorporated aspects of the other three borough-wide schemes submitted at Stage One.

52 At Stage Three the Borough Council stated that "it welcomed the Commission's proposals to retain the present number of councillors and to continue with elections for the whole council every four years" but that "with regard to the specific proposals ... the Council is content to leave representations on these matters to the political parties and the people of Gravesham". The Conservative Group was of the view that our draft proposals had not given sufficient weight to the reflection of the identities and interests of local communities in three areas: Chalk ward, Whitehill/Singlewell wards and Meopham parish/Istead Rise area, but stated that it "otherwise

agrees with the recommendations ... in respect of the eastern rural and Northfleet parts of the borough, and those parts of Gravesend not referred to". These views were broadly supported by Jacques Arnold (the former MP for Gravesham). Kent County Council stated that it "broadly supports the Commission's recommendations", but had reservations about our proposals for Meopham parish.

53 The Labour Party stated that it was "disappointed that the Commission decided to base [the] recommendations on the Council Officers' proposals". It commented on our draft recommendations but reiterated its preference for its own Stage One scheme for Gravesend and Northfleet. The majority of respondents opposed our proposals in the Meopham/Istead Rise area, proposing that the existing arrangements be retained. A number of respondents also opposed our proposed Chalk ward.

54 We have reviewed our draft recommendations in the light of the further evidence and the representations received during Stage Three. We have noted that the Labour Party submitted some comments on our draft recommendations but that it reiterated its preference for its own Stage One scheme in Gravesend and Northfleet. In the light of its comments we have reconsidered its scheme, however, while certain aspects of its proposals have merit (in that in some areas secured good boundaries, whereas other areas secured good electoral equality), we are unable to consider any area in isolation and must secure a good electoral scheme across the borough as a whole. Therefore, we have not been persuaded that the Labour Party's scheme would secure a better balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria than our draft recommendations.

55 However, in the light of the further evidence received, we have been persuaded to modify our draft recommendations in the Meopham/Istead Rise area in the south-western part of the rural area and in the Whitehill/Singlewell wards area in Gravesend. For borough warding purposes, the following areas, based on existing wards, are considered in turn:

- (a) Higham, Shorne and Cobham & Luddesdown wards;
- (b) Istead, Meopham North and Meopham South wards;
- (c) Chalk, Riverside and Central wards;
- (d) Westcourt, Riverview, Singlewell and Whitehill wards;
- (e) Pelham and Woodlands wards;
- (f) Northfleet East, Northfleet West, Painters Ash and Coldharbour wards.

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

Higham, Shorne and Cobham & Luddesdown wards

57 These three wards cover the north-eastern and eastern parts of the rural area in the east of the borough. The number of electors per councillor in the two-member Higham ward (comprising the parish of Higham) is 1 per cent above the borough average (equal to the average by 2005). The single-member Shorne ward (comprising the parish of Shorne) is currently the most under-represented ward in the borough with an electoral variance of 28 per cent (25 per cent by 2005). The single-member Cobham & Luddesdown ward (comprising the parishes of the same name)

is currently the most over-represented ward in the borough with an electoral variance of 24 per cent both currently and in 2005.

58 At Stage One the Council Officers proposed retaining the existing two-member Higham ward unchanged, given the good level of electoral equality that would be secured under a council of 44 members, both initially and in 2005. However, in order to address the under-representation in Shorne ward and the over-representation in Cobham & Luddesdown ward, the Council Officers proposed combining the two wards to create a new two-member Shorne, Cobham & Luddesdown ward. They argued that the “two existing wards have similar characteristics and communities being rural in nature with small villages”. The number of electors per councillor in the Council Officers’ proposed Higham and Shorne, Cobham & Luddesdown wards would be 1 per cent above and 2 per cent above the borough average initially (both equal to the average by 2005).

59 The Labour Party supported the retention of the existing two-member Higham ward, arguing that Higham “is an easily identified community”. It also acknowledged the electoral imbalances that currently exist in the Shorne and Cobham & Luddesdown wards, also proposing that the two wards be merged to create a new two-member ward. The Labour Party argued that its proposal was based on the “clear joint rural nature of [the two wards]”. It stated that it had considered including the area referred to locally as Shorne West (ie the western part of Shorne parish) in a ward with Riverview Park but had concluded that the consequent electoral imbalance between the parished/rural area and the urban area would be “unacceptable”. Furthermore, it contended that the residents of Shorne West are “very attached to being in Shorne ward”.

60 The Conservative Group also proposed retaining the two-member Higham ward and supported the Council Officers’ proposal for the creation a new two-member Shorne, Cobham & Luddesdown ward.

61 The Liberal Democrats supported the retention of the current two-member Higham ward, but proposed that Shorne West should be split and transferred into Riverview and Singlewell ward, as “these houses would be better suited geographically”, with the remainder of Shorne ward being joined with Chalk ward to create a new two-member ward. They further proposed that Cobham & Luddesdown ward should be joined with Meopham North ward to create a new three-member ward in order to “give a balance of representation whilst maintaining the local community identities”. The number of electors per councillor in the Liberal Democrats’ proposed Riverview, Chalk & Shorne and Cobham, Luddesdown & Meopham North wards would be 13 per cent above, 3 per cent above and 1 per cent below the borough average respectively (7 per cent above, 5 per cent above and 2 per cent below by 2005).

62 The Kent Association of Parish Councils (Gravesham Area Committee) opposed any grouping of rural and urban areas, contending that each have different physical characteristics and amenities. Luddesdown Parish Council supported the Council Officers’ proposal to combine the current Cobham & Luddesdown and Shorne wards into a new two-member ward, contending that the parishes concerned “have similar interests”. However, Cobham Parish Council stated that it would prefer to retain the current arrangements unchanged as it believed that they “operate very effectively”. Vigo Parish Council stated that it had noted the proposal to group Luddesdown parish with Cobham parish, but suggested that “on the principle of similar areas being grouped

together”, Luddesdown parish could be linked with the southern part of Meopham parish (Harvel and Culverstone) and Vigo parish.

63 County Councillor Gibson commented that any proposal to include the western part of Shorne parish in a ward with part of Riverview Park would be “met with substantial opposition”. He also noted that the existing Cobham & Luddesdown ward is over-represented but was of the view that it could not be sensibly joined with neighbouring villages “to make up the numbers”, arguing that the current ward “consists of the largest geographical area of any ward in the Borough”. A local resident contended that Shorne ward is currently divided from Cobham & Luddesdown ward by the A2 trunk road and the Channel Tunnel Rail Link (currently under construction), and that a ward “with such a significant division through it seems difficult to justify”.

64 We carefully considered all the representations received during Stage One. In view of the local support for the retention of the current two-member Higham ward, and given the excellent electoral equality and identifiable boundaries that would be secured, we proposed retaining unchanged, the existing two-member Higham ward.

65 We considered the Council Officers’ proposed Shorne, Cobham & Luddesdown ward and noted the support it received from the Labour Party, the Conservative Group and Luddesdown Parish Council. We also considered the alternative proposals put forward by the Liberal Democrats. However, as discussed earlier, we were not persuaded that the inclusion of Shorne West within the Riverview/Singlewell wards, as proposed by the Liberal Democrats, would facilitate a good electoral scheme across the borough as a whole. We were of the view that we cannot consider any area in isolation and must have a view to the electoral arrangements for the whole borough. We therefore agreed that the retention of Shorne West within a ward with the remainder of the parish would secure the best balance of representation between the urban and rural areas of the borough and facilitate a good electoral scheme across the borough as a whole.

66 We also noted the comments made regarding the A2 trunk road dividing the proposed Shorne, Cobham & Luddesdown ward and the fact that the proposed ward would cover a fairly large geographical area. However, we noted that access between the parishes of Shorne and Cobham can be gained via Thong Lane and Brewers Road, both of which cross the A2, and we were of the view that given the very good electoral equality, identifiable boundaries and better reflection of community identities that would be secured, and in view of the support from the majority of local interested parties, we should adopt the Council Officers’ proposed Shorne, Cobham & Luddesdown ward as part of our draft recommendations. The number of electors per councillor in our proposed Higham and Shorne, Cobham & Luddesdown wards would be 1 per cent above and 2 per cent above the borough average initially (both equal to the average by 2005).

67 At Stage Three the Labour Party and the Conservative Group supported our proposed Higham and Shorne, Cobham & Luddesdown wards. Luddesdown Parish Council stated that it would have preferred to retain the current Cobham & Luddesdown ward but “reluctantly” accepted that the “numerical electoral imbalance of the two parishes necessitates some change”. It further stated that “a Shorne, Cobham & Luddesdown ward represented by two councillors appears to be an equitable solution which we support”. It noted that the A2 and the Channel Tunnel Rail Link “do present a physical barrier” between the two areas in the proposed ward, but

further stated that they “will be crossed via Thong Lane and Brewers Road so this should not be a big problem”.

68 The Kent Association of Parish Councils (Gravesham Area Committee) opposed the proposed Shorne, Cobham & Luddesdown ward as it believed that the geographic area which the ward cover would be “too much for councillors ... to deal with”, and that it would be divided by the “natural break” of A2/Channel Tunnel Rail Link. It proposed that the current arrangements be retained, albeit with a high electoral imbalance.

69 We have carefully considered the representations received and have noted the opposition of the Kent Association of Parish Councils (Gravesham Area Committee) to our proposed Shorne, Cobham & Luddesdown ward. While we acknowledge that this ward would cover a large area, we remain of the view that the high electoral imbalance that would exist if the current arrangements were retained would be unacceptable. Furthermore, we have noted that our proposal has been accepted by Luddesdown Parish Council, which does not view the “natural break” of the A2 and the Channel Tunnel Rail link as a problem, and that it has received a majority of support locally.

70 In view of this local support and the excellent level of electoral equality achieved we propose confirming our two-member Shorne, Cobham & Luddesdown ward as final. We have also noted that there is local support in favour of our proposal to retain the current two-member Higham ward, therefore we also propose confirming our proposed Higham ward as final. Under our final recommendations, the number of electors per councillor in our proposed Shorne, Cobham & Luddesdown and Higham wards, as shown on Map 2, would be 2 per cent above and 1 per cent above the borough average initially (both equal to the borough average by 2005).

Istead, Meopham North and Meopham South wards

71 These three wards cover the western part of the rural area in the south-western part of the borough. The number of electors per councillor in the two-member Meopham South ward (comprising the Priesthood parish ward of Meopham parish and the parish of Vigo) is currently 4 per cent above the borough average (7 per cent above by 2005). The number of electors per councillor in the two-member Meopham North ward (comprising the parish wards of Church and Nurstead from Meopham parish) is 11 per cent above the borough average (9 per cent above by 2005). The number of electors per councillor in the two-member Istead ward (which covers the area to the north of Meopham parish, to the west of Cobham parish and to the south of the A2 trunk road) is 8 per cent below the borough average (12 per cent below by 2005).

72 At Stage One, in order to address the over-representation that currently exists in Istead ward, which is forecast to worsen by 2005, the Council Officers proposed a new three-member Istead & Meopham North ward. This ward would comprise the existing Istead ward and the northern part of Meopham North ward. The proposed ward’s southern boundary would follow the centre of Camer Road, Green Lane, Wrotham Road and Huntingfield Road, then follow the southern boundaries of the properties on the south-western corner of Strand Close, the northern and western boundaries of properties on the western side of Evenden Road before following the centre of Longfield Road to the borough boundary.

73 In order to address the under-representation in the existing Meopham North and Meopham South wards, the Council Officers proposed combining the remainder of Meopham North ward with the existing Meopham South ward to form a new three-member Meopham South & Vigo ward. The number of electors per councillor in the Council Officers' proposed three-member Istead & Meopham North and Meopham South & Vigo wards would be 3 per cent above and 1 per cent above the borough average initially (equal to the average and 3 per cent above by 2005). As a consequence of its proposed borough warding arrangements, the Council Officers proposed new names for the parish wards in Meopham parish: Nurstead & Hook Green, Camer & Meopham Green and Culverstone & Harvel.

74 The Labour Party argued that Istead Rise is a "recognisable community", but acknowledged that the current Istead ward is over-represented. It was of the view that the A2 trunk road formed a significant barrier between Istead and Northfleet, arguing that "it would not make sense to combine Istead with the rest of Northfleet". It therefore supported the Council Officers' proposals for two three-member wards in this area.

75 The Conservative Group proposed retaining unchanged the existing two-member wards of Istead, Meopham North and Meopham South on the grounds of community identity, arguing that Istead Rise "is a very separate community" sharing few community ties with Meopham and having "no affinity with urban Northfleet". However, it acknowledged that maintaining the status quo in this area would retain a significant level of electoral imbalance, and therefore proposed an alternative scheme for this area which would secure better electoral equality. It proposed that the existing Istead ward should be combined with an area in the north of Meopham parish (as suggested by the Council Officers and the Labour Party), but under its proposals fewer electors from Meopham parish would be transferred into the revised ward, which would be represented by two councillors rather than three. Its proposed two-member Istead & Nurstead ward would comprise the existing Istead ward together with an area around Meopham railway station to the north of New Road from Meopham North ward.

76 As a consequence of its proposed Istead & Nurstead ward, the Conservative Group proposed a new two-member Meopham ward, comprising the remainder of the existing Meopham North ward and an area to the north of South Street and around Wrotham Road from Meopham South ward. It also proposed a new two-member Culverstone, Harvel & Vigo ward, comprising the remainder of Meopham South ward. Under the Conservative Group's alternative proposals, the number of electors per councillor in its two-member Istead & Nurstead, Meopham and Culverstone, Harvel & Vigo wards would be 4 per cent above, 3 per cent above and equal to the borough average initially (equal to, 1 per cent above and 3 per cent above the borough average by 2005).

77 The Liberal Democrats supported the Conservative Group's original proposal that the two existing two-member wards of Istead and Meopham South remain unchanged. They also suggested combining the existing Meopham North and Cobham & Luddesdown wards to form a new three-member ward, as detailed earlier.

78 The Kent Association of Parish Councils (Gravesham Area Committee) opposed any grouping of rural and urban areas. Meopham Parish Council opposed "the attachment of any part of [its] electorate to Istead Rise". It proposed that the parishes of Meopham and Vigo continue

to be represented by four councillors overall, suggesting that Meopham parish form a three-member ward and that Vigo parish form a single-member ward. It argued that the significant over-representation in the existing Istead ward could be addressed by linking Istead Rise with a part of Northfleet. It argued that “the physical barrier of the A2 is less significant than the swathe of Green Belt between Istead Rise and Nurstead [the northern part of Meopham]”. It also proposed that the three parish wards in Meopham parish be renamed Nurstead & Hook Green, Camer & Meopham Green and Culverstone & Harvel.

79 Vigo Parish Council also opposed any proposals to join part of Meopham with the unparished Istead Rise. It argued that the current warding pattern in Meopham and Vigo accurately reflected local communities. It noted that Vigo parish was large enough to become a single-member ward in its own right, but argued that it would rather be placed in a two or three-member ward. As detailed earlier, it also stated that Luddesdown parish could be combined with the existing Meopham South ward.

80 Jacques Arnold (the former MP for Gravesham) noted that this area was entitled to six councillors overall, but suggested that the local communities would prefer to retain the status quo. A local resident argued that Istead Rise and parts of Meopham North should not be placed in the same ward because they are “separated by open countryside and are two disparate settlements with little in common”.

81 Having carefully considered all the representations received regarding this part of the rural area, we noted that there was significant local support in favour of retaining the status quo and notable opposition to the proposal to merge Istead Rise with part of Meopham parish. However, we were of the view that the level of electoral imbalance that would result if the current arrangements were retained unchanged would be incompatible with the aim of electoral equality. We were therefore of the view that the current ward boundaries would need to be modified in order to secure improved electoral equality.

82 We noted that a number of respondents proposed that, if the current arrangements had to change, Istead Rise should be linked to the northern part of Meopham parish rather than be joined with part of Northfleet. Officers from the Commission having visited the area, we agreed that this would be the most appropriate solution, as we were of the view that Istead Rise is more rural in outlook than Northfleet and is linked to Meopham parish by the A227 main road.

83 With regard to the specific proposals for this area, we noted that there was consensus between the Council Officers and the Labour Party that it should be represented by two three-member wards and that a larger part of the northern part of Meopham parish should be included in a borough ward with Istead Rise. However, we also noted that the Conservative Group put forward proposals for three two-member wards in this area which would secure a similar level of electoral equality. In view of the similar levels of electoral equality that would be secured under each of the proposals we further considered which proposals, in our opinion, would secure the best balance between achieving good electoral equality, reflecting the identities and interests of local communities and providing effective and convenient local government.

84 We noted that both proposals would result in consequential parish warding of Meopham parish. Having considered the proposed boundaries of each of the proposed wards, and having

considered the consequent distribution of parish councillors that would result, we were of the view that the Council Officers' proposals would provide for more effective and convenient local government, in that they would secure slightly more identifiable boundaries than the Conservative Group's proposals, and the parish councillor:elector ratio in the consequent parish wards would be more equally balanced. We therefore proposed adopting the Council Officers' three-member Istead & Meopham North and Meopham South & Vigo wards as part of our draft recommendations. The number of electors per councillor in our proposed Istead & Meopham North and Meopham South & Vigo wards would be 3 per cent above and 1 per cent above the borough average initially (equal to and 3 per cent above the borough average by 2005).

85 At Stage Three the Conservative Group opposed our proposals for Meopham parish and the unparished Istead Rise area contending that they would link "separate communities" while also "splitting the village of Meopham into two". It argued that Meopham is parished and Istead Rise is unparished which would result in "a financial differential" between the two parts of the same ward. The Labour Party acknowledged the good electoral equality secured in the Istead Rise/Meopham parish area, but noted that Istead Rise is a "recognisable community" stating that it "would not object" if that area wished to retain a two-member ward.

86 Kent County Council stated that it had reservations about our proposals to divide Meopham parish, contending that this would disrupt community ties. County Councillor Gibson expressed concern at our proposal to divide Meopham parish and join the northern part of the parish with Istead Rise. He argued that "although satisfying the required numbers" our proposals would divide Meopham parish into two halves which he did not believe to be acceptable as it "would divide communities".

87 Meopham Parish Council opposed our proposal to link the northern part of Meopham parish with Istead Rise in a three-member ward, contending that our recommendations "do not reflect the identities and interests of local communities". It argued that the two areas "have little in common" and that "each settlement has its own schools, shops, medical centres, places of worship etc". It further noted that while Meopham is parished, Istead Rise is not, contending that "parishioners have a markedly different attitude and involvement in local government as a result of their own funding from a parish precept". It proposed that the current arrangements in this area be retained. Meopham Parish Council also expressed support for our revised parish ward names, although based on the existing parish wards, further noting that Meopham parish should be represented by 12 councillors overall from 2003. It submitted a petition from 215 local residents opposing our proposals for Meopham (and supporting the 12th parish councillor).

88 The Kent Association of Parish Councils (Gravesham Area Committee) also opposed our proposal to link the northern part of Meopham parish with Istead Rise, arguing that the two areas "have nothing in common" and that each area has its own separate services. It also argued that the A227 Wrotham Road (linking the two settlements) was "dangerous, unlit and ... is virtually unusable by pedestrians". It suggested that Steeles Lane was part of the Meopham Green area and therefore should not be included in the proposed Culverstone & Harvel parish ward. It also noted that Meopham Parish should be represented by 12 councillors from 2003. Luddesdown Parish Council opposed the proposed three-member Istead & Meopham North ward arguing that "Istead Rise is a completely separate residential community ... and has little affinity with the rest of Meopham".

89 Meopham Green Residents' Association opposed our proposals for Meopham contending that they would have a detrimental affect on "the well established community" which "enjoys its particular rural outlook". Meopham & Nurstead Women's Institute and 31 local residents of Meopham parish opposed our proposals for Meopham. A number of reasons were put forward by respondents as to why our proposals would not reflect the identities and interests of local communities, including the view that Meopham and Istead Rise are very separate communities with their own local amenities, that Meopham was parished and Istead Rise was not parished and that Meopham was "a village of considerable historic interest" whereas Istead Rise was a much more modern development. Furthermore, a number of respondents suggested that the inclusion of the northern part of Meopham parish in a ward with Istead Rise would result in the erosion of the green belt land between the two areas and would not secure as identifiable boundaries as the current arrangements.

90 Borough Councillor Jones opposed the proposal to link Istead Rise with the northern part of Meopham. He argued that Istead Rise was an "island" and was "unique within Gravesham in that it is the only area which does not join directly on to any other community in any direction". He proposed that the existing two-member Istead ward should be retained, contending that "residents feel that the small [electoral] imbalance is less important to Istead Rise than maintaining their 'island status'".

91 The Istead Rise Community Association opposed the proposal to link Istead Rise with the northern part of Meopham. It argued that the residents of Istead Rise "are a very close knit community and ... have no physical connection with any other village in any direction" and that "this identity would be damaged by linking us with Meopham North with whom we have no connection whatsoever". While it acknowledged the need to secure electoral equality it felt that it was "far more important to residents to be able to retain their community identity than by adjusting numbers to a very small percentage". Four local residents of Istead Rise also opposed our proposal to link Istead Rise with the northern part of Meopham, contending that this would not adequately reflect the community identity of Istead Rise.

92 Jacques Arnold (the former MP for Gravesham) stated that there was local opposition to our proposals for Meopham Parish / Istead Rise, arguing that while our proposals would secure "numerical parity" they would result in "flawed community representation". He proposed retaining the existing three two-member wards in the area, although suggested that Steeles Lane and South Street be transferred from the Meopham South to Meopham North ward. He also suggested that some electors from the area to the north of the railway line in Meopham parish could be included in Istead ward to improve electoral equality.

93 We have carefully considered the representations received during Stage Three and have noted the strength of opposition to our proposal to include the northern part of Meopham parish in a ward with the unparished Istead Rise. We have also noted the very high level of support, from the local communities concerned and other local interested parties, in favour of retaining the existing arrangements in this area.

94 Having considered all the evidence put forward during Stage Three, we have been persuaded that Istead Rise and Meopham are separate communities with distinct identities. We recognise that while our draft recommendations in this area would secure very good electoral equality, they

would not better reflect the identities and interests of local communities or secure more identifiable boundaries than the current arrangements. We have therefore been persuaded that the retention of the existing arrangements in this area would provide for the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria. While this would result in a poorer level of electoral equality than our draft recommendations, we are of the view that this is acceptable, given that it would avoid the need to divide the community in Meopham parish and link it to the separate community in Istead Rise, and as it would receive a high level of support locally.

95 We have also noted the proposal that Steeles Lane should be included in a ward with the remainder of the Meopham Green and therefore propose a minor modification to the existing boundary between Meopham North and Meopham South wards accordingly, in order to better reflect local communities. Furthermore, we propose that the revised Meopham South ward should be named Meopham South & Vigo to better reflect the area it covers. Similarly, we propose that the current two-member Istead ward should be named Istead Rise ward.

96 Under our final recommendations, the number of electors per councillor in our proposed two-member Istead Rise, Meopham North and Meopham South & Vigo wards, as shown on Map 2, Map A2 and the large map inserted at the back of this report, would be 8 per cent below, 12 per cent above and 3 per cent above the borough average initially (12 per cent below, 10 per cent above and 7 per cent above by 2005).

Chalk, Riverside and Central wards

97 These three wards are situated in the north-eastern part of the urban area of the borough, to the east of Windmill Street and to the north of Old Road East and the A226 Rochester Road. The single-member Chalk ward is currently under-represented by 27 per cent. By 2005, this under-representation is forecast to worsen as a result of housing development, and Chalk ward is expected to be the most under-represented ward in the borough with an electoral variance of 35 per cent. The number of electors per councillor in the three-member Riverside ward and the two-member Central ward is 15 per cent below and 11 per cent above the borough average (8 per cent below and 18 per cent above by 2005).

98 At Stage One, in order to address the significant under-representation that currently exists in the single-member Chalk ward, which is forecast to worsen by 2005, the Council Officers proposed modifying its western boundary. They proposed transferring the north-western part of the ward, an area including the Hoplands Estate and the western part of Westcourt Marshes, into a revised three-member Riverside ward, maintaining Rochester Road as the ward's southern boundary. They also put forward a revised Riverside ward, comprising the majority of the existing ward, less an area to the west of Queen Street in the western part of the ward. The Council Officers also proposed an enlarged Central ward, to be represented by three councillors. The revised ward would comprise the majority of the current ward (less an area in the north-western corner to the north of the railway line and to the west of Parrock Street), and the north-eastern and north-western parts of the existing Whitehill ward. The number of electors per councillor in the Council Officers' revised single-member Chalk, three-member Riverside and three-member Central wards would be 12 per cent above, 11 per cent below and 3 per cent below the borough average initially (2 per cent above, equal to the average and 1 per cent above by 2005).

99 The Labour Party also acknowledged the under-representation that currently exists in Chalk ward and agreed with the Council Officers that its western boundary should be modified to include the Hoplands Estate in a revised Riverside ward. It further proposed transferring properties on the northern side of Rochester Road into a revised Westcourt ward. The Labour Party also put forward a revised three-member Riverside ward, comprising the majority of the existing ward, less the area to the south of Rochester Road, which would be transferred into Westcourt ward, and an area from the northern part of Central ward (to the north-east of Parrock Street). As a consequence of its revised Riverside ward, the Labour Party proposed a revised two-member Central ward, comprising the remainder of the existing ward plus an area to the east of Wrotham Road from the current Pelham ward. The number of electors per councillor in the Labour Party's proposed single-member Chalk, three-member Riverside and two-member Central wards would be 2 per cent above, 6 per cent below and equal to the borough average respectively (10 per cent above, 1 per cent above and 6 per cent above by 2005).

100 In order to address the under-representation in Chalk ward the Conservative Group proposed that the ward should be enlarged and be represented by two councillors rather than the current one. It argued that the inclusion of the Hoplands Estate in Riverside ward would be met with "strong opposition from local residents". As an alternative, it proposed that the existing ward's southern boundary should be moved southwards to include an area to the north of Bourne Road and to the east of Cruden Road, and the Cervia Way development from the northern and eastern parts of Westcourt ward.

101 The Conservative Group also proposed extending the current Riverside ward westwards, to include an area to the east of Bath Street/Darnley Road, from the north-eastern part of Pelham ward, and the north-western corner of Central ward, in order to improve electoral equality. The Conservative Group supported the Council Officers' proposal to move Central ward's southern boundary further southwards to create a new three-member ward. However, it proposed that The Curlews and The Sandpipers should remain within the revised Whitehill ward as both cul-de-sacs are accessed via Hillside Avenue and would otherwise be 'cut-off' from the remainder of the ward. The Conservative Group also proposed that the revised ward should be named Parrock ward as the Parrock area would be "the central feature of the new ward". The number of electors per councillor in the Conservative Group's proposed two-member Chalk, three-member Riverside and three-member Parrock wards would be 1 per cent below, 8 per cent below and 5 per cent below respectively (2 per cent above, 1 per cent below and 2 per cent below by 2005).

102 The Liberal Democrats proposed that Chalk ward should be joined with the northern and eastern part of Shorne ward to create a new two-member Chalk & Shorne ward in order to secure improved electoral equality. They also proposed retaining the existing three-member Riverside and two-member Central wards unchanged. The number of electors per councillor in the Liberal Democrats' proposed Chalk & Shorne, Riverside and Central wards would be 3 per cent above, 15 per cent below and 11 per cent above the borough average respectively (5 per cent above, 8 per cent below and 18 per cent above by 2005).

103 Chalk Residents' Association opposed the Council Officers' proposal to include the Hoplands Estate in a revised Riverside ward, arguing that the residents of the Hoplands Estate "have a greater affinity with the residents of Chalk". It stated that the Council Officers' proposed boundary would include a proposed housing development site in the Riverside ward, but

suggested that if the existing boundary were retained the consequent increase in electorate could be included in Chalk ward which could then be represented by two councillors. It also submitted 76 pro forma letters from local residents of the Hoplands Estate opposing the Council Officers' proposal.

104 The Deputy Chairperson of the Chalk Residents' Association also opposed the proposal to include the Hoplands Estate in a revised Riverside ward, arguing that "the two communities are almost diametrically opposed". He commented on the possible future use of the Westcourt Marshes area and was of the view that the Council Officers' proposed boundary would encourage housing development "at the expense of the natural environment", contending that the area should be considered Green Belt land.

105 Jacques Arnold argued that the Hoplands Estate should remain within Chalk ward as residents have "no common identity" with the Northcourt Estate (in Riverside ward). He supported the proposal that Chalk ward could become a two-member ward by extending it southwards to include roads to the south of Rochester Road and around Thong Lane. Three local residents also opposed the inclusion of the Hoplands Estate in a revised Riverside ward.

106 We carefully considered all of the representations received during Stage One and noted that the main point of contention in this area related to the representation of the Chalk village area. While we acknowledged that there was local opposition to the inclusion of the Hoplands Estate in Riverside ward, we were not persuaded that the alternative proposals submitted would provide for a better reflection of the identities and interests of local communities or secure more identifiable boundaries (therefore providing for more effective and convenient local government) than the Council Officers' scheme in this area. While the Conservative Group's proposal would secure good electoral equality and retain the Hoplands Estate within Chalk ward, it would split the Westcourt area between two wards. Furthermore, as outlined earlier in this chapter, the Liberal Democrats' proposal to join Chalk ward with the northern and eastern parts of Shorne ward would not, in our view, better reflect local community identities or facilitate a good electoral scheme across the borough as a whole.

107 We noted the agreement between the Council Officers and the Labour Party that in order to secure the best balance between securing good electoral equality and reflecting the identities and interest of local communities, Chalk ward should continue to be a single-member ward and that the Hoplands Estate and the western part of Westcourt Marshes should be transferred into a revised Riverside ward, in order to address the forecast increase in electorate in this area. In addition, we were of the view that the retention of the identifiable Rochester Road as the ward's southern boundary would provide for effective and convenient local government. We therefore proposed adopting the Council Officers' proposed single-member Chalk ward as part of our draft recommendations. The number of electors per councillor in the revised single-member Chalk ward would be 12 per cent above the borough average initially (2 per cent above by 2005).

108 Given the good electoral equality and reflection of local community identities that would be secured in the Council Officers' proposed Riverside ward, we proposed adopting it as part of our draft proposals, albeit with minor boundary modifications. In order to facilitate the creation of a multi-member ward pattern in the western part of the borough, we proposed retaining the current Riverside ward's western boundary along the centre of the High Street. To ensure that

existing ward boundaries adhere to ground detail, we also proposed a minor modification to the southern boundary of Riverside ward (to the north of St John's RC Primary School) which would not affect any electors. Under our draft proposals the number of electors per councillor in the revised three-member Riverside ward would be 10 per cent below the borough average initially, improving to 3 per cent above the borough average by 2005 as a result of housing development.

109 Given that the current Central ward is notably under-represented we agreed with the Labour Party's assertion that in order to secure good electoral equality the current two-member ward needs either to reduce in size or to increase in size and become a three-member ward. We considered all the proposals put forward for this area during Stage One; however, we were of the opinion that the Liberal Democrats' proposal to retain the existing two-member ward unchanged would result in an unacceptable level of electoral imbalance. We were also of the view that, although the Labour Party's proposal for a modified two-member Central ward would secure reasonable electoral equality, it would not secure as easily identifiable boundaries or as good a level of electoral equality (particularly by 2005) as the Council Officers' proposal for an enlarged three-member Central ward, which was broadly supported by the Conservative Group. We therefore proposed adopting the Council Officers' revised Central ward, but with the minor modification put forward by the Conservative Group, which would retain The Curlews and The Sandpipers in Whitehill ward. Furthermore, in order to facilitate the creation of a multi-member ward pattern in the western part of the borough, we also proposed retaining the current Central ward's north-eastern boundary along Windmill Street and King Street. The number of electors per councillor in our proposed three-member Central ward would be 5 per cent below the borough average initially (1 per cent below by 2005).

110 We noted the Conservative Group's proposal that the revised Central ward should be named Parrock ward. However, as there was only limited support for this revised name we proposed retaining the current ward name of Central as part of our draft recommendations.

111 At Stage Three, the Conservative Group opposed our proposed single-member Chalk ward, contending that there is local opposition to the transferral of the Hoplands Estate into a revised Riverside ward. It re-iterated its support for its alternative two-member Chalk ward and revised two-member Westcourt ward submitted at Stage One, further suggesting consequential boundary modifications to our proposed Riverside, Pelham and Northfleet South wards to secure reasonable electoral equality. It argued that Westcourt "is a post-war distinctive local authority development with its own community" and that its proposals would leave that estate in its entirety in Westcourt ward, as the area it proposed transferring into a revised Chalk ward included "a pre-war development (Rochester Road and Barr Road), a distinct and more recent development (Cervia Way, Kenia Walk, Rumania Walk and Vanquisher Walk) together with the connecting roads of Thong Lane and Cruden Road". It contended that these areas "do not have a common community interest with the Westcourt Estate" and that "much of that area is included in the Chalk ecclesiastical parish", further stating that the boundary between its two proposed wards is "identifiably distinct in development and community terms".

112 We also received a further 26 representations objecting to our proposal to include the Hoplands Estate in Riverside ward, from Chalk Parish Residents Association, The Vice-Chair of Chalk Parish Residents Association, Chalk Parish History Group, Jacques Arnold and 22 local residents. Chalk Parish Residents Association opposed our proposal to include the Hoplands

Estate in Riverside ward, arguing that “residents of the Hoplands Estate want no connection with the Riverside ward as this encompasses the Dickens Estate, which has had, for many years, an unsavoury reputation” and contending that if they were to be linked with Riverside ward, residents would “suffer a drop in the value of their houses due to the Dickens reputation”. It reiterated its view that residents of the Hoplands estate “have a greater affinity with Chalk ward” and that many residents attend Chalk Church and “would be greatly dismayed to be deemed to no longer be part of the Chalk Parish”. It supported the Conservative Group’s proposal to include an area to the south of the A226 (Rochester Road) in a revised two-member Chalk ward and also submitted two petitions: one containing 155 signatures opposing the transfer of the Hoplands estate from Chalk ward to Riverside ward, and another with 79 signatures (from residents to the south of the A226 in Westcourt ward) supporting the modified two-member Chalk ward. Ten local residents also supported this revised two-member ward.

113 The Vice-Chair of Chalk Parish Residents Association expressed disappointment that the Hoplands and the Westcourt Marshes area were to be transferred out of Chalk ward into Riverside ward. He contended that the proposed housing development for the Westcourt Marshes area may be revised in the future and that the area may become part of a redefined green belt area. He opposed our proposed Chalk ward, arguing that the residents of the Hoplands estate relate to the rest of Chalk, and argued that our proposed north-western boundary of Chalk ward was less identifiable than the current boundary. He also supported the Conservative Group’s revised two-member Chalk ward. Chalk Parish History Group also opposed our proposal to transfer the Hoplands estate and Westcourt Marshes into Riverside ward, contending that “this area has always formed part of Chalk parish since Saxon times”. Jacques Arnold opposed the proposal to include the Hoplands estate in Riverside ward, arguing that it is “a distinctive community”. He also suggested that properties to the south of Rochester Road could be included in an enlarged two-member Chalk ward with consequential minor modifications to the boundaries of surrounding wards to secure electoral equality.

114 We have carefully considered all the representations and evidence received and have noted the local opposition to our proposed single-member Chalk ward. We have also noted that the basis of this opposition is centred on our proposal to transfer the Hoplands Estate from the current Chalk ward into a revised Riverside ward. A number of respondents asserted the view that the Hoplands Estate is an integral part of the Chalk community. However, we have not been persuaded that sufficient evidence has been put forward to support this view and to persuade us to modify our draft recommendations. The main reasons given by respondents to support the proposal to retain Hoplands Estate in Chalk ward were that it is within the ecclesiastical parish of Chalk (contending that if the development were transferred into another ward then this would have a consequential adverse effect on the ecclesiastical parish) and that our proposal would have a detrimental effect on house prices within the Hoplands Estate. However, we are of the view that we are unable to take these factors into consideration as part of the review of a borough’s electoral arrangements. Officers of the Commission having visited the area, we are of the view that the Hoplands Estate is quite an isolated housing development, separated from the remainder of the older properties in the village of Chalk by the North-West Kent College of Technology and, as a consequence, its only access to the remainder of Chalk ward, or in fact our proposed Riverside ward, is via Dering Way and Rochester Road.

115 However, we have also reconsidered the alternative proposal to create a revised two-member Chalk ward, put forward by the Conservative Group, but we have not been persuaded that this would provide for a better balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria than our draft recommendations. We have not been persuaded that the inclusion of an area to the south of Rochester Road in a revised two-member Chalk ward would secure a better reflection of local communities or a more identifiable boundary than our draft recommendations, particularly as this proposal would involve consequential effects on the boundaries of a number of wards elsewhere in the borough. We do not agree with the Conservative Group's assertion that the proposed boundary between its two-member Chalk and Westcourt wards would be more "identifiably distinct" than our proposal to use the Rochester Road, and therefore we are not of the view that it would facilitate effective and convenient local government. We remain of the view that our draft recommendations for the Chalk area would provide for the best balance between securing electoral equality, reflecting the identities and interests of local communities and providing effective and convenient local government. Therefore we propose adopting our draft recommendation for a single-member Chalk ward as final.

116 As detailed above, the Conservative Group reiterated its Stage One proposal for a revised two-member Chalk ward, and as a consequence suggested a modification to our proposed Riverside ward. However, as outlined above, we do not propose adopting these proposals in this area. Therefore, having considered all the representations received, we remain of the view that our draft recommendations in this area provide for the best balance currently available between electoral equality and the statutory criteria, and therefore propose endorsing them as final.

117 Under our final recommendations, the number of electors per councillor in our proposed single-member Chalk, three-member Riverside and three-member Central wards, as shown on the large map inserted at the back of this report, would be 12 per cent above, 10 per cent below and 5 per cent below the borough average initially (2 per cent above, 3 per cent above and 1 per cent below by 2005).

Westcourt, Riverview, Singlewell and Whitehill wards

118 The four wards are situated in the south-eastern part of the urban area of the borough, to the south of Old Road East and Rochester Road and to the east of Central Avenue/Cedar Avenue. The number of electors per councillor in the three-member Westcourt and Riverview wards is 14 per cent below and 1 per cent above the borough average (20 per cent below and 6 per cent below the average by 2005). The number of electors per councillor in the three-member wards of Singlewell and Whitehill is 11 per cent below and 1 per cent above the borough average (20 per cent below and 4 per cent below the average by 2005).

119 In order to address the general over-representation that would exist in this area by 2005 and to secure improved electoral equality, while reflecting the identities and interests of local communities, and as a consequence of their proposal to retain the Rochester Road as an identifiable ward boundary, the Council Officers proposed modifying the southern boundary of the current three-member Westcourt ward to include the area to the north-east of St Hilda's Way and to the north of St Francis Avenue, and Cimba Wood, from Riverview ward. The Council Officers also put forward a revised Riverview ward, to be represented by two councillors rather than the current three, proposing that the area to the south of St Hilda's Way and St Francis

Avenue should be transferred into a revised Singlewell ward. The number of electors per councillor in the Council Officers' proposed three-member Westcourt and two-member Riverview wards would be 4 per cent above and 7 per cent above the borough average initially (4 per cent below and equal to the average by 2005).

120 As a consequence of their proposed Central ward, the Council Officers put forward a revised three-member Whitehill ward, proposing to include the northern part of Singlewell ward (an area to the north of Dunkirk Close) in the revised ward in order to secure good electoral equality. They further proposed that the remainder of the current Singlewell ward, together with the area transferred from Riverview ward, should form a revised Singlewell ward, to be represented by two councillors rather than the current three. The number of electors per councillor in the Council Officers' proposed three-member Whitehill and two-member Singlewell wards would be 5 per cent above and 9 per cent above the borough average initially (2 per cent below the average in both wards by 2005).

121 As a consequence of its proposals to the north of this area, and in order to secure reasonable electoral equality, the Labour Party proposed a revised three-member Westcourt ward, comprising the current ward, properties from the northern side of Rochester Road from Chalk ward and polling district H from Riverside ward. It also proposed retaining the current three-member Riverview ward unchanged, arguing that "this would minimise confusion in the eyes of the electorate and prevent unnecessary change". The number of electors per councillor in the Labour Party's revised Westcourt and Riverview wards would be equal to and 1 per cent above the borough average initially (7 per cent below and 6 per cent below by 2005).

122 The Labour Party put forward a slightly revised Whitehill ward, proposing that the northern side of Gloucester Road, in the south of the ward, be transferred into a revised Singlewell ward. In order to secure improved electoral equality in Singlewell ward, the Labour Party further proposed modifying the existing ward's western boundary to include the south-eastern part of Woodlands ward (including the area around Goodwood Crescent and the area to the south of King's Drive and to the east of Windsor Road). The number of electors per councillor in the Labour Party's revised three-member Whitehill and Singlewell wards would be equal to and 1 per cent above the borough average initially (4 per cent below and 8 per cent below by 2005).

123 As a consequence of its proposal to include the eastern part of the current Westcourt ward in a revised Chalk ward, the Conservative Group proposed that the remainder of the ward, together with an area from the north-western part of Riverview ward (to the north-east of St Hilda's Way and to the north of St Francis Avenue), should form a revised Westcourt ward, to be represented by two councillors. Like the Council Officers, the Conservative Group also put forward a revised Riverview ward, to be represented by two councillors rather than the current three and also proposed that the area to the south of St Hilda's Way and St Francis Avenue should be transferred into a revised Singlewell ward. The number of electors per councillor in the Conservative Group's proposed two-member Westcourt and Riverview wards would be 14 per cent above the borough average in both wards initially (4 per cent above and 7 per cent above the borough average respectively by 2005).

124 The Conservative Group also proposed a modified Whitehill ward, as a consequence of its proposed Parrock ward, which would be represented by two councillors rather than the current

three. In addition to transferring the northern part of the current ward into a new Parrock ward (as detailed earlier), it proposed transferring an area to the south of Jellicoe Avenue into a revised Singlewell ward. It also proposed including an area around Ivy Close from the northern part of Singlewell ward in the revised Whitehill ward. The Conservative Group's revised three-member Singlewell ward would comprise the remainder of the current ward, in addition to the areas transferred from Whitehill and Riverview wards (as detailed earlier). It argued that its proposals would result in almost all of the King's Farm Estate being included within the revised Singlewell ward. The number of electors per councillor in the Conservative Group's revised two-member Whitehill and three-member Singlewell wards would be 7 per cent above and 9 per cent above the borough average initially (1 per cent above and 1 per cent below by 2005).

125 The Liberal Democrats proposed retaining the current three-member Westcourt ward unchanged. They also proposed a revised three-member Riverview ward which would comprise all of the current ward and the area around Astra Drive from Shorne West. The number of electors per councillor in the Liberal Democrats' proposed three-member Westcourt and Riverview wards would be 14 per cent below and 13 per cent above the borough average initially (20 per cent below and 7 per cent above by 2005). In order to secure improved electoral equality in both the existing Whitehill and Singlewell wards, the Liberal Democrats proposed modifying the boundary between the two wards to include the area to the south of Hawkins Avenue/Christianfields Avenue/Whitehill Lane in a revised two-member Singlewell ward, which would also include Marling Way and Davy's Place from Shorne West. The number of electors per councillor in the Liberal Democrats' revised three-member Whitehill and two-member Singlewell wards would be 12 per cent above and 22 per cent above the borough average initially (7 per cent above and 9 per cent above by 2005).

126 Jacques Arnold contended that the Council Officers' proposals would divide the King's Farm Estate between two wards. He suggested that if the northern boundary of Singlewell ward were to be moved northwards and be represented by three councillors "virtually the whole of the King's Farm Estate could be accommodated in one ward". However, he did not submit a detailed proposal. He further contended that, consequently, Whitehill ward should become a two-member ward which would be "more homogenous".

127 We carefully considered all of the representations received during Stage One regarding this area. As outlined earlier in this report, in the eastern part of this area, we were not persuaded that the Liberal Democrats' proposal to incorporate the Shorne West area in the Riverview and Singlewell wards would facilitate the creation of a good electoral scheme across the borough as a whole. We were also aware that there was notable local opposition to the inclusion of the more rural and parished areas of the borough in wards within the urban area. In addition, we did not believe that the Conservative's proposed Westcourt ward would provide a better reflection of local communities. We were also of the view that retaining the Rochester Road as Westcourt ward's northern boundary would provide for a more identifiable boundary, thus securing more effective and convenient local government.

128 In view of the better overall electoral equality, the better reflection of the identities and interests of local communities and the more identifiable boundaries that would be secured, we proposed adopting the Council Officers' proposals in this area, albeit with three minor boundary modifications.

129 We proposed adopting the Council Officers' revised three-member Westcourt and two-member Riverview wards as our draft recommendations. However, we proposed two minor modifications in order to secure slightly better boundaries and better reflect local communities. Given that access to the Riverview schools is gained via Cimba Wood, we agreed with the Conservative Group that the road should be included in Riverview ward. As a consequence, in order to secure reasonable electoral equality and a slightly more identifiable boundary, we proposed transferring Beltana Drive and the eastern end of Cerne Road into Westcourt ward. In order to ensure that existing ward boundaries adhere to ground detail, we also proposed a minor modification to the boundary between Westcourt and Riverview wards, (to the north of Cascades Leisure Centre), but this did not affect any electors. The number of electors per councillor in our proposed three-member Westcourt and two-member Riverview wards would be 4 per cent above and 7 per cent above the borough average initially (3 per cent below and 2 per cent below by 2005).

130 We also considered all the proposals put forward at Stage One for the western part of this area. As a consequence of our proposed Central ward, and given that we were of the view that the Council Officers' proposals would provide for the best balance between securing electoral equality, reflecting the identities and interests of local communities and providing for effective and convenient local government, we adopted the Council Officers' proposed Whitehill and Singlewell wards as part of our draft recommendations (albeit with one minor boundary modification which would include The Sandpipers and The Curlews within Whitehill ward). The number of electors per councillor in our proposed three-member Whitehill and two-member Singlewell wards would be 7 per cent above and 9 per cent above the borough average initially (1 per cent above and 2 per cent below by 2005).

131 We noted that a number of respondents proposed that the current Singlewell ward should be extended northwards and be represented by three councillors overall, in order to include the King's Farm Estate in one ward. However, we noted that there was no agreement as to where this northern boundary should be placed and only limited evidence was put forward to support each of the different proposals. Therefore, we welcomed views on this aspect of our proposals during Stage Three.

132 At Stage Three the Conservative Group proposed a revised two-member Westcourt ward, as detailed earlier. It also submitted an alternative boundary between the proposed Singlewell and Whitehill wards (which would result in the wards being represented by three and two members respectively) contending that this would enable the three "distinct estates" of King's Farm, Christianfields and Livingstone Road to be included in the same ward. The revised boundary between the two wards would follow behind the properties on the north side of Kings Drive and the west side of Kitchener Avenue before following the centre of Jellicoe Avenue. It would then follow the existing boundary behind the properties on the south-eastern side of Princes Road before following behind the properties on the north side of Christianfields Avenue and a short section of the centre of Christianfields Avenue until Whitehill Lane. The number of electors per councillor in the Conservative Group's proposed two-member Whitehill ward and three-member Singlewell ward would be 4 per cent above and 11 per cent above the borough average initially (2 per cent below and 1 per cent above by 2005). This proposal was also supported by Jacques Arnold.

133 We have considered all the representations received regarding this area. As outlined earlier in paragraph 115, we do not propose adopting the Conservative Group's modified two-member Chalk ward and, as a consequence, we therefore do not propose adopting its revised two-member Westcourt ward. Given that we did not receive any other representations for this area, we therefore propose confirming our proposed Westcourt and Riverview wards as final.

134 However, we have considered the Conservative Group's revised Whitehill and Singlewell wards and agree that these revised wards would better reflect local communities while also securing good electoral equality by 2005 and identifiable boundaries. In view of the better balance secured between electoral equality and the statutory criteria under the Conservative Group's revised proposals, we propose adopting its two-member Whitehill ward and three-member Singlewell ward as part of our final recommendations.

135 Under our final recommendations, the number of electors per councillor in our proposed three-member Westcourt ward, two-member Riverview ward, two-member Whitehill ward and three-member Singlewell ward, as shown on the large map inserted at the back of this report, would be initially 4 per cent above, 7 per cent above, 4 per cent above and 11 per cent above the borough average respectively (3 per cent below, equal to, 2 per cent below and 1 per cent above by 2005).

Pelham and Woodlands wards

136 The three-member Pelham and Woodlands wards are situated in the centre of the urban area, to the west of the High Street/Windmill Street/Central Avenue/Cedar Avenue. The number of electors per councillor in Pelham ward is currently equal to the average for the borough (7 per cent above the average in 2005). Woodlands ward is currently under-represented by 13 per cent (14 per cent by 2005).

137 At Stage One the Council Officers proposed a new single-member Gravesend Town Centre ward to incorporate "several areas of significant new residential development along the river front and in the town centre". The new ward would comprise that part of the current Pelham ward to the north of the railway line, the north-western corner of Central ward and the western part of Riverside ward (as detailed earlier) and an area to the east of Fountain Walk from Northfleet East ward. The number of electors per councillor in the Council Officers' proposed single-member Gravesend Town Centre ward would be 7 per cent below the borough average initially (3 per cent below by 2005).

138 The Council Officers also proposed a revised three-member Pelham ward comprising the remainder of the current ward, the Campbell Road pit area from Northfleet East ward and polling district L from Woodlands ward (the area to the west of Dashwood Road). As a consequence, they proposed that the remainder of Woodlands ward should form a revised three-member ward. The number of electors per councillor in the Council Officers' revised three-member Pelham and Woodlands wards would be 5 per cent below and 4 per cent below the borough average initially (3 per cent above and 3 per cent below by 2005).

139 In order to address the projected under-representation of the existing Pelham ward by 2005, the Labour Party proposed transferring an area to the east of Wrotham Road into a revised Central

ward (as detailed earlier). It also proposed a revised Woodlands ward, comprising the majority of the current ward (less the area in the south-east of the ward which it proposed including in a revised Singlewell ward, as detailed earlier), and Farm Croft and The Downage from Coldharbour ward. The number of electors per councillor in the Labour Party's proposed three-member Pelham and Woodlands wards would be 7 per cent below and 4 per cent above the borough average initially (equal to and 5 per cent above the average by 2005).

140 The Conservative Group put forward a revised three-member Pelham ward. It proposed that the area to the east of Bath Street/Darnley Road should be transferred into a revised Riverside ward; that the area to the south of Lennox Road and to the west of Pelham Road should be transferred into a new Perry Street ward (to be discussed later) and that the northern part of Northfleet East ward (to the north of London Road) should be included in the revised Pelham ward. The Conservative Group also put forward a revised three-member Woodlands ward comprising the majority of the existing ward, less that area of polling district L to the west of the cemetery, and Farm Croft and The Downage from Coldharbour ward. The number of electors per councillor in the Conservative Group's revised three-member Pelham and Woodlands wards would be 7 per cent below and 1 per cent below the borough average (both equal to the average by 2005).

141 The Liberal Democrats proposed retaining the existing three-member Pelham ward unchanged. They also proposed a revised three-member Woodlands ward (comprising the majority of the current ward less polling district L) which was the same as that put forward by the Council Officers. The number of electors per councillor in the Liberal Democrats' proposed Pelham and Woodlands wards would be equal to and 4 per cent below the borough average initially (7 per cent above and 3 per cent below by 2005).

142 We considered all of the representations received and noted that there was little support for a single-member ward in this area, as proposed by the Council Officers. Given the local support for the retention of two three-member wards in this area, from the Labour Party, the Conservative Group and the Liberal Democrats, we proposed only minor boundary modifications to the existing Pelham and Woodlands wards, which would secure improved electoral equality and more identifiable boundaries, while reflecting the identities and interests of local communities and providing for a good electoral scheme in the remainder of the western part of the urban area.

143 We proposed basing our revised Pelham ward on the Council Officers' Gravesend Town Centre ward. However, we proposed extending the ward further southwards, as put forward by the Labour Party, the Conservative Group and the Liberal Democrats, in order to secure a better reflection of local community identities. Our revised three-member Pelham ward would include the area to the east of Fountain Walk from Northfleet East ward, as proposed by the Council Officers and broadly supported by the Conservative Group. As a consequence of our proposed Riverside and Central wards, we proposed retaining the current ward's eastern boundary, but we put forward a more identifiable south-western boundary in order to provide for more effective and convenient local government. At present, the ward's south-western boundary divides Havelock Road between two wards, cutting between properties on Havelock Road and subsequently Old Road West. Therefore, in order to provide for a more logical boundary, to facilitate the retention of a three-member Pelham ward and to secure good electoral equality, we proposed transferring the area to the south of Lennox Road and to the west of Pelham Road

(comprising Campbell Road, Granville Road, Havelock Road and the northern side of Old Road West) into a new Northfleet South ward as suggested by the Conservative Group. The number of electors per councillor in our revised three-member Pelham ward would be 3 per cent below the borough average initially (2 per cent above by 2005).

144 In view of the improved electoral equality and more identifiable boundaries that would be secured under the revised Woodlands ward put forward by the Council Officers and Liberal Democrats, which was broadly supported by the Conservative Group, we proposed adopting it as part of our draft recommendations, albeit with two minor modifications in order to address two minor boundary anomalies which would not affect any electors. We proposed that the revised ward's south-western boundary should follow the centre of Coldharbour Road, along the eastern boundary of the Hospice and the properties on the south-eastern side of Marks Square until it reached the existing boundary on the eastern edge of Lanes Avenue. We also proposed that the service station situated to the south-west of the intersection between Wrotham Road and the A2 trunk road should also be included in Woodlands ward. The number of electors per councillor in our proposed Woodlands ward would be 4 per cent below the borough average initially (3 per cent below by 2005).

145 At Stage Three the Conservative Group agreed with our draft recommendations for this area, which were also commended by Jacques Arnold. In view of this support for our draft recommendations in this area, we are confirming our proposed three-member wards of Pelham and Woodlands as final.

146 Under our final recommendations the number of electors per councillor in our proposed Pelham and Woodlands wards, as shown on the large map inserted at the back of this report, would be 3 per cent below and 4 per cent below the borough average initially (2 per cent above and 3 per cent below by 2005).

Northfleet East, Northfleet West, Painters Ash and Coldharbour wards

147 These four wards cover the remainder of the urban area in the north-eastern part of the borough. The number of electors per councillor in the three-member Northfleet East ward is currently 5 per cent below the average. However, by 2005, the number of electors per councillor in Northfleet East ward is forecast to be 6 per cent above the average for the borough as a result of housing development. The number of electors per councillor in the three-member Northfleet West ward is 6 per cent below the borough average (4 per cent below by 2005). The two-member Painters Ash ward is significantly under-represented at present with an electoral variance of 27 per cent (25 per cent by 2005). The number of electors per councillor in the two-member Coldharbour ward is 4 per cent below the borough average (11 per cent below by 2005).

148 In their Stage One submission the Council Officers proposed a new three-member Northfleet North ward, comprising the area to the north of the railway line from Northfleet West ward and the area to the north of the railway line from Northfleet East ward, less the area transferred into their Gravesend Town Centre ward. They also proposed a new three-member Northfleet South ward comprising the remainder of Northfleet West ward, the remainder of Northfleet East ward (less Campbell Road pit) and the north-western part of Coldharbour ward, to the west of Snelling Avenue. The number of electors per councillor in the Council Officers'

proposed Northfleet North and Northfleet South wards would be 9 per cent below and 1 per cent above the borough average initially (equal to and 5 per cent above by 2005).

149 In order to address the under-representation of the current Painters Ash ward, the Council Officers proposed transferring a number of roads to the south of Gibson Close and to the east of Hillary Avenue/Greendale Walk/Wrens Croft/Nash Croft into a revised Coldharbour ward. As a consequence, their revised Coldharbour ward would comprise the south-eastern part of Painters Ash ward and the remainder of the current Coldharbour ward (less the area transferred into Northfleet South ward). The number of electors per councillor in the Council Officers' proposed two-member Painters Ash and Coldharbour wards would be 1 per cent above and 5 per cent above the borough average initially (1 per cent below and 2 per cent below by 2005).

150 The Labour Party put forward only minor modifications to the existing Northfleet West and Northfleet East wards, arguing that "residents have become accustomed to this [east/west] division". It contended that it had sought to make "the least change necessary", proposing that the eastern half of Vale Road in Northfleet East ward and the area to the north of Earl Road in Coldharbour ward be transferred into Northfleet West ward. The number of electors per councillor in the Labour Party's revised three-member Northfleet West and Northfleet East wards would be 3 per cent below and 7 per cent below the borough average initially (2 per cent below and 4 per cent above by 2005).

151 In order to address the under-representation in the current Painters Ash ward, the Labour Party proposed transferring the area to the north of Tennyson Walk/Holm Road into a revised Coldharbour ward. It contended that its proposal "would make practical geographical sense", opposing the Council Officers' proposal which, it believed, would "remove electors from the centre of the original Painters Ash Estate". As a consequence of this proposal, the Labour Party put forward a revised Coldharbour ward comprising the northern part of Painters Ash ward and the majority of the existing Coldharbour ward, less the areas it proposed transferring into its proposed Woodlands and Northfleet West wards (as detailed earlier). The number of electors per councillor in the Labour Party's proposed two-member Painters Ash and Coldharbour wards would be 6 per cent above and 11 per cent above the borough average initially (5 per cent above and 4 per cent above by 2005).

152 The Conservative Group proposed a new three-member Northfleet North ward, to the north of the railway line, which was almost the same as that put forward by the Council Officers. However, it proposed transferring a slightly larger part of the current Northfleet East ward into a revised Pelham ward (as detailed earlier). The number of electors per councillor in the Conservative Group's proposed Northfleet North ward would be 12 per cent below the borough average initially (4 per cent below by 2005).

153 To the south of the railway line, the Conservative Group proposed two new wards. It put forward a new three-member Perry Street ward (based on the areas surrounding Perry Street), comprising the remainder of Northfleet East ward, the south-western corner of Pelham ward, the majority of polling district L from Woodlands ward and the area to the north-west of Snelling Road from Coldharbour ward. It also proposed a new Wombwell ward (based on the areas around Wombwell Park) comprising the remainder of Northfleet West ward and two areas from the northern and western parts of the current Painters Ash ward, to the north of Tennyson Walk/Holm

Road and to the west of Painters Ash Road. The number of electors per councillor in the Conservative Group's proposed three-member Perry Street and two-member Wombwell wards would be 3 per cent below and 9 per cent below the borough average initially (3 per cent below and 2 per cent below by 2005).

154 As a consequence of its proposed Perry Street and Wombwell wards the Conservative Group proposed a new two-member New House ward, comprising the remainder of the current Coldharbour ward, less the area to the south of Coldharbour Road, together with an area to the north of Landseer Avenue and around Hillary Road from the centre of Painters Ash ward. It further proposed a new single-member Watling ward comprising the remainder of Painters Ash ward (the area to the south of Landseer Road and around Mulberry Road) and the area to the south of Coldharbour Road from Coldharbour ward. The number of electors per councillor in the Conservative Group's proposed two-member New House ward and single-member Watling ward would be 5 per cent above and 6 per cent above the borough average initially (2 per cent below and 4 per cent below by 2005).

155 The Liberal Democrats proposed retaining the existing three-member Northfleet East and Northfleet West wards unchanged. They also proposed a revised Coldharbour ward comprising the majority of the current ward, less the area to the south of Coldharbour Road, together with polling district L from the north-western part of the current Woodlands ward. In order to address the under-representation in Painters Ash ward, the Liberal Democrats proposed that the ward should be enlarged, to include that part of Coldharbour ward to the south of Coldharbour Road, and be represented by three councillors rather than the current two. The number of electors per councillor in the Liberal Democrats' proposed two-member Coldharbour and three-member Painters Ash wards would be 3 per cent above and 3 per cent below the borough average initially (2 per cent below and 5 per cent below by 2005).

156 Borough Councillor Christie submitted a number of comments regarding the Council Officers' proposals for revised Painters Ash and Coldharbour wards. She contended that the area that the Council Officers proposed transferring out of Painters Ash ward is "at the centre of the ward both physically and in community terms". She also noted a number of slight boundary anomalies contained in the Council Officers' consultation scheme (which had subsequently been taken into account in their final submission to the Commission). She also stated that she did not support any revised wards which would merge part of Northfleet with Gravesend. The former Member of Parliament for Gravesham also noted a number of slight anomalies in the Council Officers' scheme in the Painters Ash and Coldharbour areas.

157 Having carefully considered all the representations received at Stage One regarding this area, we noted that there was little agreement between the four main schemes submitted. We noted that the Council Officers and the Conservative Group both proposed that the railway line should form an east/west boundary between the two Northfleet wards, but that the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats proposed retaining the current boundary between the two wards which runs north/south. However, in view of the fact that the Council Officers' proposed Northfleet North ward would secure excellent electoral equality, and given that, in our view, the use of the railway line as the ward's southern boundary would provide for a more identifiable boundary, thus providing for more effective and convenient local government, we proposed adopting the

Council Officers' proposed three-member Northfleet North ward as part of our draft recommendations.

158 As a consequence of our decision to use the railway line as the southern boundary of Northfleet North ward and as a knock-on effect of our proposed Pelham and Woodlands ward to the east of this area (as detailed earlier), it was not possible to adopt in full any of the wards to the south of the railway line submitted by the Council Officers, the Labour Party or the Liberal Democrats. We considered the Conservative Group's proposed Perry Street ward and acknowledged that this ward would secure good electoral equality. However, having considered the comments and proposals received from other respondents for the whole of the western part of the urban area, we were of the view that the Conservative Group's proposed Perry Street ward would not facilitate the creation of a good electoral scheme elsewhere in this part of the borough. We were of the view that any boundary amendments that would need to be made to wards to the south-west and south-east of its proposed ward would result in a poor reflection of local communities in the Painters Ash and Coldharbour areas. Indeed, we were of the view that the remainder of the Conservative Group's proposals in this area would result in the splitting of the Painters Ash area between three wards, which would not reflect the identities and interests of local communities.

159 Therefore, in the light of all the different proposals submitted for this area, we put forward for consultation three wards of our own. We proposed a new three-member Northfleet South ward which would incorporate aspects of all four of the ward schemes submitted. We noted the agreement between the Council Officers, the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats that the boundary between the current Northfleet West and Painters Ash ward (which follows the centre of Hall Road) should be retained and we agreed that this was an identifiable boundary. Our proposed Northfleet South ward therefore comprised the southern part of Northfleet West ward, the areas to north-west of Earl Road/Perry Street from Coldharbour and Northfleet East wards, part of polling district L from Woodlands ward (to the north of the centre of Salisbury Road and to the west of Cecil Road) and the south-western part of Pelham ward around Campbell Road (as detailed earlier in this report). We were of the view that our proposal would secure the best balance currently available between securing electoral equality and reflecting local communities. The number of electors per councillor in our proposed Northfleet South ward would be 3 per cent below the borough average initially (3 per cent above by 2005).

160 As the current Painters Ash ward is significantly under-represented it was necessary to modify the ward's existing boundary in order to secure good electoral equality. Given that we proposed retaining the current ward's north-western boundary along Hall Road, and in view of the agreement between all respondents that the A2 trunk road should be retained as the ward's southern boundary, the options for change to this ward were limited. We acknowledged that we could either retain a two-member ward in this area by transferring part of the north-eastern or eastern part of the current Painters Ash ward into a revised Coldharbour ward (as suggested by the Council Officers, the Labour Party and the Conservative Group) or, alternatively, the ward could be expanded eastwards and become a three-member ward (as suggested by the Liberal Democrats).

161 We considered the alternative proposals put forward and we were of the view that, given the lack of consensus as to how the current Painters Ash ward should be divided in order to retain

a two-member ward, the ward should be enlarged and be represented by three councillors. We therefore proposed adopting the Liberal Democrats' proposed Painters Ash ward. We were of the view that the proposed ward's north-eastern boundary would be more identifiable as it would follow the centre of the whole length of Coldharbour Road, and it would secure the best balance between reflecting local community identities and securing reasonable electoral equality. The number of electors per councillor in our proposed three-member Painters Ash ward would be 3 per cent below the borough average initially (5 per cent below by 2005).

162 As a consequence of our proposed Painters Ash ward, Coldharbour ward would be a two-member ward, comprising the remainder of the current ward (less the area to the north-east of Earl Road transferred into our proposed Northfleet South ward), the south-eastern part of the current Northfleet East ward to the south of Perry Street and part of polling district L from Woodlands ward (the southern side of Salisbury Road and the area to the east of Cecil Road). We were of the view that our proposed ward boundaries of Coldharbour Road and Earl Road/Perry Street would be more identifiable than the alternative proposals put forward at Stage One, and would therefore provide for more effective and convenient local government, while also securing good electoral equality. The number of electors per councillor in our proposed two-member Coldharbour ward would be 8 per cent above the borough average initially (2 per cent above by 2005).

163 At Stage Three the Conservative Group agreed with our draft recommendations for this area, which were also commended by Jacques Arnold. The Labour Party stated that it did "accept the logic applied to the recommendation for Painters Ash ward and as a consequence Coldharbour ward". In view of this broad support for our draft recommendations in this area, we are confirming our proposed three-member wards of Northfleet North, Northfleet South and Painters Ash, and our proposed two-member Coldharbour ward as final.

164 Under our final recommendations the number of electors per councillor in our proposed wards of Northfleet North, Northfleet South, Painters Ash and Coldharbour, as shown on the large map inserted at the back of the report, would be initially 9 per cent below, 3 per cent below, 3 per cent below and 8 per cent above the borough average respectively (equal to, 3 per cent above, 5 per cent below and 2 per cent above by 2005).

Electoral Cycle

165 At Stage One We received one representation regarding the Borough Council's electoral cycle. The Council Officers proposed that the current system of whole council elections every four years should be retained, stating that they believed them to be "both efficient and effective". Accordingly, we made no recommendation for change to the present system of whole council elections every four years.

166 At Stage Three, the Council, the Labour Party and Luddesdown Parish Council supported the retention of whole-council elections every four years and no further comments were received to the contrary. We are therefore confirming our draft recommendation as final.

Conclusions

167 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 the south-western part of the rural area, we propose retaining the three existing two-member wards, albeit with one minor boundary modification, and propose naming the three wards Istead Rise, Meopham North and Meopham South & Vigo;
- in the south-eastern part of Gravesend, we propose transferring an area to the south of Jellicoe Avenue into Singlewell ward, to create a two-member Whitehill ward and a three-member Singlewell ward.

168 We conclude that, in Gravesham:

- a council of 44 members should be retained;
- there should be 18 wards, one less than at present;
- the boundaries of 17 of the existing wards should be modified;
- the Council should continue to hold whole-council elections every four years.

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

Figure 4: Comparison of Current and Recommended Electoral Arrangements

	2000 electorate		2005 forecast electorate	
	Current arrangements	Final recommendations	Current arrangements	Final recommendations
Number of councillors	44	44	44	44
Number of wards	19	18	19	18
Average number of electors per councillor	1,598	1,598	1,620	1,620
Number of wards with a variance more than 10 per cent from the average	10	3	10	1
Number of wards with a variance more than 20 per cent from the average	4	0	4	0

170 As Figure 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 10 to three with no wards varying by more than 20 per cent from the borough average. This level of electoral equality would improve further in 2005, with only one ward, Istead Rise, varying by more than 10 per cent from the average, at 12 per cent. We conclude that our recommendations would best meet the need for electoral equality, having regard to the statutory criteria.

Final Recommendation

Gravesham Borough Council should comprise 44 councillors serving 18 wards, as detailed and named in Figures 1 and 2, and illustrated on Map 2 and in Appendix A including the large map inside the back cover. The Council should continue to hold whole-council elections every four years.

Parish Council Electoral Arrangements

171 In undertaking reviews of electoral arrangements, we are required to comply as far as is reasonably practicable with the provisions set out in Schedule 11 to the 1972 Act. The Schedule provides that if a parish is to be divided between different borough wards, it must also be divided into parish wards, so that each parish ward lies wholly within a single ward of the borough. Accordingly, in our draft recommendations report we proposed consequential changes to the warding arrangements for Meopham parish to reflect the proposed borough wards.

172 The parish of Meopham is currently served by 11 councillors representing three wards: Nurstead (returning four councillors), Church (returning four councillors) and Priesthood (returning three councillors). However, under the Gravesham (Parishes) Order 1999, the parish is due to be represented by an additional (12th) councillor, with each parish ward being represented by four councillors.

173 In our draft recommendations report, in order to facilitate our proposals for borough warding in this area, we proposed that the boundary between the existing Nurstead and Church parish wards be modified. We proposed that the revised Nurstead parish ward should be renamed Nurstead & Hook Green, and that the remainder of the existing Church parish ward should be renamed Camer & Meopham Green. We further proposed that the existing Priesthood parish ward should be renamed Culverstone & Harvel. Meopham Parish Council supported the revised parish ward names of Nurstead & Hook Green, Camer & Meopham Green and Culverstone & Harvel.

174 Unfortunately, our draft recommendations report omitted to include the additional (12th) councillor for Meopham parish and, as a consequence, we proposed that the proposed Nurstead & Hook Green parish ward should be represented by four councillors, that the proposed Camer & Meopham Green parish ward should be represented by three councillors and that the proposed Culverstone and Harvel parish ward should be represented by four councillors.

175 In response to our consultation report, we received 47 responses objecting to our proposal to include the northern part of Meopham parish in a ward with Istead Rise for borough warding purposes, as discussed earlier in this report. These included representations from the Conservative Group, Meopham Parish Council, the Kent Association of Parish Councils (Gravesham Area Committee), Luddesdown Parish Council, Kent County Council, County Councillor Gibson, District Councillor Jones, Meopham Green Residents Association, Istead Rise Community Association, Meopham & Nurstead Womens’ Institute, Jacques Arnold (former MP for Gravesham) and 35 local residents.

176 Meopham Parish Council also submitted a petition signed by 215 local residents opposing our proposals for Meopham parish, further noting that Meopham parish should be represented by 12 councillors overall from 2003. However, it expressed support for our revised parish ward names. The Borough Council, Kent Association of Parish Councils (Gravesham Area Committee) and a local resident also noted that the parish should be represented by 12 councillors from 2003, and another local resident supported our revised parish ward names.

177 Having considered all the evidence received we have been persuaded to amend our draft proposals in this area and propose retaining three two-member borough wards in the south-western part of the rural area (as outlined earlier). Therefore, in order to reflect our final recommendations, we also propose modifying our proposals for Meopham Parish Council’s electoral arrangements. We propose retaining the current boundaries of the three existing parish wards, although we propose transferring Steeles Lane from Priesthood parish ward into Church parish ward in order to reflect our proposed borough warding. However, in view of the support for our revised parish ward names from Meopham Parish Council and a local resident, we propose confirming our revised ward names as final, with the revised parish wards of Priesthood and Church being named Culverstone & Harvel and Camer & Meopham Green respectively, and the existing Nurstead parish ward being named Nurstead & Hook Green.

178 Furthermore, we agree that under the Gravesham Parishes Order 1999, Meopham Parish Council should be represented by an additional (12th) councillor in 2003, and therefore propose that each of the three revised parish wards in Meopham parish should be represented by four parish councillors.

Final Recommendation
Meopham Parish Council should comprise 12 councillors, one more than at present (to reflect the provisions of the Gravesham Parishes Order 1999), representing three wards, each returning four councillors: Culverstone & Harvel and Camer & Meopham Green (the boundary between which should reflect the proposed borough ward boundary, as illustrated and named on Map A2 in Appendix A) and Nurstead & Hook Green ward (comprising the existing Church parish ward).

179 In our draft recommendations report we proposed that there should be no change to the electoral cycle of parish councils in the borough. At Stage Three, Luddesdown Parish Council supported the retention of parish council elections taking place every four years at the same time

as the Borough Council and no other representations relating specifically to the timing of parish council elections were received. We therefore propose confirming our proposal that there should be no change to the electoral cycle of parish councils in the borough as final.

Final Recommendation
Parish council elections should continue to take place every four years and should be held at the same time as elections for the borough ward of which they are part.

Map 2: The Commission's Final Recommendations for Gravesham

6 NEXT STEPS

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

181 It now falls to the Secretary of State to decide whether to give effect to our recommendations, with or without modification, and to implement them by means of an Order. Such an Order will not be made before 19 June 2001.

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

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

APPENDIX A

Final Recommendations for Gravesham: Detailed Mapping

The following maps illustrate the Commission's proposed ward boundaries for the Gravesham area.

Map A1 illustrates, in outline form, the proposed ward boundaries within the borough and indicates the areas which are shown in more detail in Map A2 and the large map at the back of the report.

Map A2 illustrates the proposed boundary between the borough wards of Meopham South & Vigo and Meopham North.

The **large map** inserted in the back of the report illustrates the proposed warding arrangements for Gravesend and Northfleet.

Map A1: Final Recommendations for Gravesham: Key Map

Map A2: Proposed boundary between the borough wards of Meopham South & Vigo and Meopham North

APPENDIX B

Draft Recommendations for Gravesham

Our final recommendations, detailed in Figures 1 and 2, differ from those we put forward as draft recommendations in respect of only four wards, where our draft proposals are set out below.

Figure B1: The Commission's Draft Recommendations: Constituent Areas

Ward name	Constituent areas
Istead & Meopham North	Istead ward; Meopham North ward (part – the proposed parish ward of Nurstead & Hook Green)
Meopham South & Vigo	Meopham North ward (part – the proposed parish ward Camer & Meopham Green); Meopham South ward (the proposed Culverstone & Harvel parish ward of Meopham parish and the parish of Vigo)
Singlewell	Riverview ward (part); Singlewell ward (part)
Whitehill	Singlewell ward (part); Whitehill ward (part)

Figure B2: The Commission's Draft Recommendations: Number of Councillors and Electors by Ward

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 %
Istead & Meopham North	3	4,960	1,653	3	4,882	1,627	0
Meopham South & Vigo	3	4,833	1,611	1	4,982	1,661	3
Singlewell	2	3,474	1,737	9	3,183	1,592	-2
Whitehill	3	5,149	1,716	7	4,888	1,629	1

Source: Electorate figures are based on information provided by Gravesham Borough Council.

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

APPENDIX C

Code of Practice on Written Consultation

The Cabinet Office's November 2000 *Code of Practice on Written Consultation*, www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/servicefirst/index/consultation.htm, requires all Government Departments and Agencies to adhere to certain criteria, set out below, on the conduct of public consultations. Non-Departmental Public Bodies, such as the Local Government Commission, are encouraged to follow the Code.

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

Commission compliance with Code criteria

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

