

Final recommendations on the
future electoral arrangements
for South Oxfordshire

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

August 2001

© Crown Copyright 2001

Applications for reproduction should be made to: Her Majesty's Stationery Office Copyright Unit.

The mapping in this report is reproduced from OS mapping by the Local Government Commission for England with the permission of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, © Crown Copyright.

Unauthorised reproduction infringes Crown Copyright and may lead to prosecution or civil proceedings.
Licence Number: GD 03114G.

This report is printed on recycled paper.

Report no: 247

CONTENTS

page

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

SUMMARY *vii*

1 INTRODUCTION *1*

2 CURRENT ELECTORAL ARRANGEMENTS *3*

3 DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS *7*

4 RESPONSES TO CONSULTATION *9*

5 ANALYSIS AND FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS *13*

6 WHAT HAPPENS NEXT? *35*

APPENDIX

A Final Recommendations for South Oxfordshire:
Detailed Mapping *37*

A large map illustrating the proposed ward boundaries for Didcot
is inserted inside the back cover of this report.

WHAT IS THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND?

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

Members of the Commission are:

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

Barbara Stephens (Chief Executive)

We are required by law to review the electoral arrangements of every principal local authority in England. Our aim is to ensure that the number of electors represented by each councillor in an area is as nearly as possible the same, taking into account local circumstances. We can recommend changes to ward boundaries, the number of councillors, ward names and the frequency of elections. We can also recommend changes to the electoral arrangements of parish and town councils.

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

SUMMARY

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

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

We found that the existing arrangements provide unequal representation of electors in South Oxfordshire.

- **In 21 of the 32 wards the number of electors represented by each councillor varies by more than 10 per cent from the average for the district and nine wards vary by more than 20 per cent.**
- **By 2005 this situation is expected to worsen slightly, with the number of electors per councillor forecast to vary by more than 10 per cent from the average in 22 wards and by more than 20 per cent in nine wards.**

Our main final recommendations for future electoral arrangements (see Tables 1 and 2 and paragraphs 123-124) are that:

- **South Oxfordshire District Council should have 48 councillors, two less than at present;**
- **there should be 29 wards, instead of 32 as at present;**
- **the boundaries of 28 of the existing wards should be modified, resulting in a net reduction of three, and four wards should retain their existing boundaries;**
- **elections should continue to take place every four years.**

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

- **In only five of the proposed 29 wards the number of electors per councillor would vary by more than 10 per cent from the district average.**
- **This improved level of electoral equality is forecast to continue, with the number of electors per councillor in only one ward, Forest, expected to vary by more than 10 per cent from the average for the district in 2005.**

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

- **new warding arrangements and the redistribution of councillors for Didcot, East Hagbourne, Thame and Wallingford parishes.**

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

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

Table 1: Final Recommendations: Summary

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Constituent areas	Map reference
1	Aston Rowant	1	the parishes of Aston Rowant, Crowell, Sydenham, Tetsworth and Towersey	Map 2
2	Benson	2	the parishes of Benson, Ewelme, Berrick Salome and Brightwell Baldwin	Map 2
3	Berinsfield	2	the parishes of Berinsfield, Dorchester, Drayton St Leonard, Newington, Stadhampton and Warborough	Map 2
4	Brightwell	1	<i>unchanged</i> ; parishes of Brightwell-cum-Sotwell, Little Wittenham and Long Wittenham	Map 2
5	Chalgrove	1	the parish of Chalgrove	Map 2
6	Chinnor	2	<i>unchanged</i> ; the parish of Chinnor	Map 2
7	Cholsey & Wallingford South	2	the parishes of Cholsey, Moulsoford, and the proposed Wallingford South parish ward of Wallingford parish	Maps 2 and A4
8	Crowmarsh	1	the parishes of Crowmarsh, Ipsden and Nuffield	Map 2
9	Didcot All Saints	2	part of Didcot North ward; part of Didcot South ward	Maps 2 and large map
10	Didcot Ladygrove	3	part of Didcot North ward; part of Didcot Northbourne ward	Maps 2 and large map
11	Didcot Northbourne	2	Didcot Northbourne ward; part of Didcot South ward; part of the Millbrook parish ward of East Hagbourne parish	Maps 2 and large map
12	Didcot Park	2	part of Didcot South ward	Maps 2 and large map
13	Forest	1	the parishes of Bix & Assendon, Checkendon, Highmoor, Rotherfield Greys and Stoke Row	Map 2
14	Forest Hill & Holton	1	the parishes of Beckley & Stowood, Elsfield, Forest Hill-with-Shotover, Holton, Stanton St John and Woodeaton	Map 2
15	Garsington	1	the parishes of Cuddesdon & Denton, Garsington, Marsh Baldon and Toot Baldon	Map 2
16	Goring	2	the parishes of Goring, Goring Heath, South Stoke and Whitchurch-on-Thames	Map 2
17	Great Milton	1	the parishes of Great Haseley, Great Milton, Little Milton, Tiddington-with-Albury, Waterperry-with-Thomley and Waterstock	Map 2
18	Hagbourne	1	the parishes of Aston Tirrod, Aston Upthorpe, North Moreton, South Moreton, West Hagbourne and the East Hagbourne parish ward of East Hagbourne	Maps 2 and large map
19	Henley North	2	the Henley North parish ward of Henley parish	Maps 2 and A2

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Constituent areas	Map reference
20	Henley South	2	the Henley South parish ward of Henley parish	Maps 2 and A2
21	Sandford	1	the parishes of Clifton Hampden, Culham, Nuneham Courtenay and Sandford-on-Thames	Map 2
22	Shiplake	2	the parishes of Binfield Heath, Eye & Dunsden, Harpsden, Kidmore End, Mapledurham and Shiplake	Map 2
23	Sonning Common	2	the parishes of Rotherfield Peppard and Sonning Common	Map 2
24	Thame North	2	the proposed Thame North parish ward of Thame parish	Maps 2 and A3
25	Thame South	2	the proposed Thame South parish ward of Thame parish	Maps 2 and A3
26	Wallingford North	2	the proposed Wallingford North parish ward of Wallingford	Maps 2 and A4
27	Watlington	2	the parishes of Adwell, Britwell Salome, Cuxham-with-Easington, Lewknor, Nettlebed, Pishill-with-Stonor, Pyrton, Shirburn, Swyncombe, Stoke Talmage, Watlington and Wheatfield	Map 2
28	Wheatley	2	the parishes of Horspath and Wheatley	Map 2
29	Woodcote	1	<i>unchanged; the parish of Woodcote</i>	Map 2

Note: 1 Map 2 and Appendix A, including the large map in the back of the report, illustrate the proposed wards outlined above.

Table 2: Final Recommendations for South Oxfordshire

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 Aston Rowant	1	1,891	1,891	-8	1,934	1,934	-8
2 Benson	2	3,761	1,881	-8	3,916	1,958	-7
3 Berinsfield	2	4,400	2,200	7	4,369	2,185	4
4 Brightwell	1	1,978	1,978	-4	1,952	1,952	-7
5 Chalgrove	1	2,159	2,159	5	2,197	2,197	4
6 Chinnor	2	4,556	2,278	11	4,567	2,284	8
7 Cholsey & Wallingford South	2	3,986	1,993	-3	4,095	2,048	-3
8 Crowmarsh	1	1,834	1,834	-11	1,909	1,909	-9
9 Didcot All Saints	2	4,041	2,021	-2	4,045	2,023	-4
10 Didcot Ladygrove	3	5,014	1,671	-19	6,631	2,210	5
11 Didcot Northbourne	2	4,015	2,008	-2	3,960	1,980	-6
12 Didcot Park	2	4,281	2,141	4	4,306	2,153	2
13 Forest	1	1,914	1,914	-7	1,871	1,871	-11
14 Forest Hill & Holton	1	2,290	2,290	11	2,326	2,326	10
15 Garsington	1	2,197	2,197	7	2,179	2,179	3
16 Goring	2	4,625	2,313	13	4,607	2,304	9
17 Great Milton	1	2,091	2,091	2	2,086	2,086	-1
18 Hagbourne	1	2,092	2,092	2	2,106	2,106	0
19 Henley North	2	4,351	2,176	6	4,364	2,182	3
20 Henley South	2	4,202	2,101	2	4,320	2,160	2
21 Sandford	1	1,996	1,996	-3	2,023	2,023	-4
22 Shiplake	2	3,894	1,947	-5	3,923	1,962	-7
23 Sonning Common	2	4,134	2,067	1	4,237	2,119	0
24 Thame North	2	4,288	2,144	4	4,214	2,107	0

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 %
25 Thame South	2	4,006	2,003	-3	4,232	2,116	0
26 Wallingford North	2	4,259	2,130	4	4,356	2,178	3
27 Watlington	2	4,173	2,087	2	4,174	2,087	-1
28 Wheatley	2	4,242	2,121	3	4,360	2,180	3
29 Woodcote	1	1,961	1,961	-5	1,976	1,976	-6
Totals	48	98,631	-	-	101,235	-	-
Averages	-	-	2,055	-	-	2,109	-

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

Note: The 'variance from average' column shows by how far, in percentage terms, the number of electors per councillor varies from the average for the 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 district of South Oxfordshire in Oxfordshire on which we are now consulting. We are reviewing the five districts in Oxfordshire as part of our programme of periodic electoral reviews (PERs) of all 386 principal local authority areas in England. Our programme started in 1996 and is currently expected to be completed by 2004.

2 This is our first review of the electoral arrangements of South Oxfordshire. The last such review was undertaken by our predecessor, the Local Government Boundary Commission (LGBC), which reported to the Secretary of State in June 1980 (Report No. 385). The electoral arrangements of Oxfordshire County Council were last reviewed in June 1982 (Report No. 428). We expect to review the County Council's electoral arrangements in 2002.

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

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

4 We are required to make recommendations to the Secretary of State on the number of councillors who should serve on the District Council, and the number, boundaries and names of wards. We can also make recommendations on the electoral arrangements for parish and town councils in the district.

5 We also have regard to our *Guidance and Procedural Advice for Local Authorities and Other Interested Parties* (fourth edition published in December 2000). This 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, as far as possible, 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, ie 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 Order 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 two-tier areas, and our present *Guidance*.

10 This review was in four stages. Stage One began on 25 July 2000, when we wrote to South Oxfordshire District Council inviting proposals for future electoral arrangements. We also notified Oxfordshire County Council, Oxfordshire Police Authority, the local authority associations, Oxfordshire Association of Local Councils, parish and town councils in the borough, the Members of Parliament with constituencies 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 District Council to publicise the review further. The closing date for receipt of representations, the end of Stage One was 16 October 2000. At Stage Two we considered all the representations received during Stage One and prepared our draft recommendations.

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

2 CURRENT ELECTORAL ARRANGEMENTS

12 The district of South Oxfordshire covers the south-eastern area of Oxfordshire. Much of its southern border is formed by the River Thames. Reading and West Berkshire adjoin the district to the south; Vale of White Horse to the west; Oxford City, Cherwell, Aylesbury Vale to the north; Wycombe to the east; and Wokingham to the south east. The district includes the main towns of Didcot, Henley and Thame and the smaller towns of Chinnor and Wallingford, with the remainder of the area being predominantly rural.

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

14 The district has a population of approximately 125,000 within an area of 67,125 hectares. The current electorate is 98,631 and is forecast to increase to 101,235 over the next five years. Didcot, in particular, is forecast to undergo considerable growth by 2005. Elections are of the whole council every four years. The existing council comprises 20 Liberal Democrats, 20 Conservatives, 7 Labour and 3 Independents.

15 Since the last electoral review there has been an increase in the electorate in South Oxfordshire district, with around 3 per cent more electors than two decades ago as a result of new housing developments. The most notable increase has been in Didcot North ward.

16 At present, each councillor represents an average of 1,973 electors, which the District Council forecasts will increase to 2,025 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 21 of the 32 wards varies by more than 10 per cent from the district average, nine wards by more than 20 per cent and four wards by more than 30 per cent. The worst imbalance is in Didcot North ward where the councillor represents 124 per cent more electors than the district average.

Map 1: Existing Wards in South Oxfordshire

Table 3: Existing Electoral Arrangements

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2000)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %	Electorate (2005)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
1	Aston Rowant	1	2,131	2,131	8	2,175	2,175	7
2	Benson	2	3,362	1,681	-15	3,520	1,760	-13
3	Berinsfield	1	1,924	1,924	-2	1,894	1,894	-6
4	Brightwell	1	1,978	1,978	0	1,952	1,952	-4
5	Chalgrove	2	3,492	1,746	-11	3,546	1,773	-12
6	Chinnor	2	4,556	2,278	15	4,567	2,284	13
7	Cholsey	2	3,082	1,541	-22	3,071	1,536	-24
8	Clifton Hampden	1	2,331	2,331	18	2,355	2,355	16
9	Crowmarsh	1	2,385	2,385	21	2,417	2,417	19
10	Didcot North	2	8,835	4,418	124	10,450	5,225	158
11	Didcot Northbourne	1	3,060	3,060	55	2,985	2,985	47
12	Didcot South	3	4,950	1,650	-16	5,000	1,667	-18
13	Dorchester	1	1,797	1,797	-9	1,777	1,777	-12
14	Forest Hill	1	1,606	1,606	-19	1,598	1,598	-21
15	Garsington	1	1,862	1,862	-6	1,847	1,847	-9
16	Goring	2	3,038	1,519	-23	3,031	1,516	-25
17	Goring Heath	1	1,787	1,787	-9	1,773	1,773	-12
18	Great Milton	1	1,900	1,900	-4	1,898	1,898	-6
19	Hagbourne	1	2,599	2,599	32	2,613	2,613	29
20	Henley	5	8,553	1,711	-13	8,684	1,737	-14
21	Horspath	1	1,106	1,106	-44	1,104	1,104	-45
22	Kidmore End	1	1,481	1,481	-25	1,472	1,472	-27
23	Nettlebed	1	1,927	1,927	-2	1,920	1,920	-5
24	Rotherfield Peppard	1	1,648	1,648	-16	1,769	1,769	-13
25	Shiplake	1	2,213	2,213	12	2,254	2,254	11
26	Sonning Common	2	3,005	1,503	-24	2,991	1,496	-26
27	Thame North	2	4,439	2,220	13	4,361	2,181	8
28	Thame South	2	4,213	2,107	7	4,440	2,220	10
29	Wallingford	3	5,163	1,721	-13	5,380	1,793	-11

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 %
30 Watlington	1	2,236	2,236	13	2,243	2,243	11
31 Wheatley	2	4,011	2,006	2	4,172	2,086	3
32 Woodcote	1	1,961	1,961	-1	1,976	1,976	-2
Totals	50	98,631	–	–	101,235	–	–
Averages	–	–	1,973	–	–	2,025	–

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

Note: The 'variance from average' column shows by how far, in percentage terms, the number of electors per councillor varies from the average for the district. The minus symbol (-) denotes a lower than average number of electors. For example, in 2000, electors in Horspath ward were relatively over-represented by 44 per cent, while electors in Didcot North ward were relatively under-represented by 124 per cent. Figures have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

3 DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS

17 During Stage One we received 21 representations, including district-wide schemes from South Oxfordshire District Council and from the South Oxfordshire Conservative Association, and representations from Oxfordshire County Council, one town and ten parish councils, one district councillor and six 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 South Oxfordshire*.

18 Our draft recommendations were based on the Conservatives' proposals, which achieved some improvement in electoral equality, and provided a pattern of two- and three-member wards in Didcot, Thame and Henley, and a mix of single and two-member wards in the rest of the district. However, we moved away from the Conservatives' scheme in a number of areas, affecting sixteen wards, using options generated by Council officers during the early stages of the review process, together with some of our own proposals. We proposed that:

- South Oxfordshire District Council should be served by 48 councillors, compared with the current 50, representing 26 wards, six less than at present;
- the boundaries of 30 of the existing wards should be modified, while two wards should retain their existing boundaries;
- there should be new warding arrangements for the parishes of East Hagbourne and Thame.

Draft Recommendation

South Oxfordshire District Council should comprise 48 councillors, serving 26 wards. The whole Council should continue to be elected every four years.

19 Our proposals would have resulted in significant improvements in electoral equality, with the number of electors per councillor in 22 of the 26 wards varying by no more than 10 per cent from the district average. This level of electoral equality was forecast to improve further, with only Forest ward varying by more than 10 per cent from the average in 2005.

4 RESPONSES TO CONSULTATION

20 During the consultation on our draft recommendations report, we received 70 representations. A list of all respondents is available from us on request. All representations may be inspected at our offices and those of South Oxfordshire District Council.

South Oxfordshire District Council

21 The District Council supported our basic proposals for a 48-member council and elections every four years. However, it opposed our recommendations relating to Wheatley, Forest Hill, Holton and Great Milton in the north west of the district, and for our proposal placing Brightwell-cum-Sotwell and Wallingford parishes in the same ward. Instead it proposed warding Wallingford, and retaining the existing Brightwell ward. It put forward an alternative to our proposed Berinsfield, Wheatley, and Watlington wards. It also put forward alternative warding arrangements for the southern part of the district, and a slight boundary amendment between our Thame North and Thame South wards. South Oxfordshire District Council also proposed the following ward name changes: that Didcot East be renamed Didcot Northbourne; Didcot North be renamed Didcot Ladygrove; Didcot South be renamed Didcot Park; and Didcot West & Central be renamed Didcot All Saints.

Oxfordshire County Council

22 The County Council was primarily concerned with the effect that the review of the district wards would have on the review of county divisions.

South Oxfordshire Conservative Association

23 The Conservative Association (hereafter referred to as the Conservatives) expressed broad support for our proposals, but proposed more single-member wards as put forward by the District Council at Stage Three. It supported the District Council's recommendations for the southern area, but opposed its proposals for Crowmarsh, Forest, Goring, Shiplake and Watlington wards.

Parish and Town Councils

24 At Stage Three we received representations from Didcot and Wallingford town councils and a further 28 submissions from parish councils. Wallingford Town Council opposed combining Wallingford and Brightwell-cum-Sotwell parishes. It provided an alternative warding arrangement by including the Winterbrook area of Cholsey parish with Wallingford town. Didcot Town Council generally supported our recommendations, however, they proposed new names for the town's wards, based on historical principles.

25 Aston Rowant Parish Council supported our draft recommendation for their area. Chinnor Parish Council supported our proposals for Chinnor and Aston Rowant wards. Highmoor and Checkendon parish councils accepted the proposed Forest ward but suggested it should be renamed Beech Hills or Witheridge. Stoke Row Parish Council also supported the proposed Forest ward but suggested that it be renamed Beech Woods.

26 Pyrton Parish Council and the neighbouring Lewknor Parish Council supported our proposed Watlington ward. Nuffield Parish Council objected to the District Council's proposal placing the parish in a new Icknield ward, while Cuxham-with-Easington Parish Council supported this proposal. Our proposal for Berinsfield parish was supported by Berinsfield Parish Council, while Benson Parish Council had no objections to the recommendations for its area. Baldons Parish Council stated that it wished to remain linked with Nuneham Courtenay parish.

27 Holton Parish Council supported remaining in a ward with Wheatley parish. Wheatley Parish Council broadly supported our recommendations but proposed that Forest Hill should have its own district member, stating that the large workload for three members in a large ward would not make for effective and convenient local government. Stanton St John Parish Council objected to our proposal combining Forest Hill with Wheatley and Horspath, stating that it would prefer the status quo or the District Council's Stage Three proposal. Beckley & Stowood Parish Council objected to the merging of Forest Hill and Wheatley wards. Waterstock Parish Council requested that we considered the District Council's proposal for Great Milton ward to include Waterperry-with-Thomley parish.

28 Whitchurch-on-Thames and Goring Heath parish councils supported our draft recommendations for Goring ward. Shiplake Parish Council stated that it would like consideration given to the possibility of two wards in Shiplake. Kidmore End Parish Council proposed name changes of Southern Parishes or Southern South Oxford for Shiplake ward. Harpsden Parish Council stated that they would prefer the status quo for their area, but preferred our proposals to those of the District Council. Rotherfield Peppard Parish Council objected to the proposed merging of Rotherfield Peppard and Sonning Common parishes.

29 East Hagbourne Parish Council objected to our proposed warding arrangements in its area and instead supported the alternative tendered by Councillor Morgan. Long Wittenham Parish Council expressed a preference for a 48-member council, with single-member wards in rural areas. Further to this they proposed an alternative to the proposed Brightwell ward, this opinion was also voiced by Brightwell Parish Council. West Hagbourne Parish Council supported our draft proposal retaining the link between East and West Hagbourne.

Other Representations

30 A further 39 representations were received in response to our draft recommendations from local political groups, local organisations, councillors and residents.

31 Dr Totterdell, from Oxford university, supported our draft recommendations for West Hagbourne, while Didcot Conservative Group proposed that Didcot West & Central be renamed Didcot Central, and Didcot be represented by 18 town councillors. Berinsfield Information & Volunteer Centre and Councillor Hiles supported the District Council's proposal for two single-member wards in the Berinsfield area. Two members of the public supported our proposals for Goring ward; a further two residents offered support for our proposed Aston Rowant, Chinnor and Thame wards. Councillor Mann supported the majority of the District Council's proposals, but preferred our recommendations for Icknield and Watlington wards.

32 A resident objected to the creation of a three-member ward for Wheatley. He proposed that Forest Hill ward remain as it is and that Holton parish remain with Wheatley and Horspath parishes in a two-member ward. Two members of the public and Councillor Purse supported the District Council's option

for the north west of the district, involving warding Waterperry parish with Great Milton and Holton parishes in Forest Hill ward while creating a separate Wheatley ward.

33 Councillor Rudge supported our proposed 48-member council and our recommendations for Shiplake and Harpsden wards while nine residents objected to the proposed combining of Rotherfield Peppard and Sonning Common parishes in a district ward. Alternatives cited by Sir David Money-Coutts were supported by some residents while others preferred the status quo.

34 A resident supported our Brightwell, Cholsey, Hagbourne and Wallingford wards, but stated that reducing the number of district councillors from seven to six “causes difficulties”. He proposed including the Winterbrook area of Cholsey parish in the proposed Brightwell & Wallingford ward. However, six district councillors and eight local residents objected to our proposals for Brightwell, Wallingford, Cholsey and East & West Hagbourne parishes. Councillors Griffin and Morgan supported the District Council’s alternative for Wallingford, while Councillor Dobbin, Councillors P and M Greene, and two residents put forward a four-member ward alternative. Councillor Cooper, supported by Councillor Phillips, proposed the same scheme as that of the District Council.

5 ANALYSIS AND FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

35 As described earlier, our prime objective in considering the most appropriate electoral arrangements for South Oxfordshire 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”.

36 In relation to Schedule 11, our recommendations are not intended to be based solely on existing electorate figures, but also on estimated changes in the number and distribution of local government electors likely to take place over the next five years. We also must have regard to the desirability of fixing identifiable boundaries and to maintaining local ties.

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

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

Electorate Forecasts

39 At Stage One the District Council submitted electorate forecasts for the year 2005, projecting an increase in the electorate of some 3 per cent from 98,631 to 101,235 over the five-year period from 2000 to 2005. It expected most of the growth to be in Didcot North ward. The Council estimated rates and locations of housing development with regard to structure and local plans, the expected rate of building over the five-year period and assumed occupancy rates. Advice from the District Council on the likely effect on electorates of changes to ward boundaries was obtained.

40 We received no further comments regarding the electorate forecast during Stage Three, and remain satisfied that they represent the best estimates that can be reasonably made at that time.

Council Size

41 As already explained, we start by assuming that the current council size facilitates effective and convenient local government, although we are willing to carefully look at arguments why this might not be the case. At present the council has 50 members.

42 In our draft recommendations report we adopted the Conservatives’ proposal for a council of 48-members as we considered that there is little justification or local support for an increase in council size.

We noted the Council's proposed increase in council size to 54 but did not consider that it provided any detailed analysis or evidence demonstrating how such an increase in council size would impact on its operation. Moreover, the majority of letters submitted to the District Council during its own consultation opposed both an increase in council size and its proposed scheme, with a large number of respondents showing support for the Conservatives' alternative 48-member scheme. Having considered the appropriate allocation of councillors across the district, we noted that while a 54-member council would provide reasonable representation in the rural parts of the district, to secure the best balance of representation between the urban and rural areas, it would be necessary to ward rural parishes with urban areas in several parts of the district to provide reasonable levels of electoral equality. Under a 48-member council, as proposed by the Conservatives, it is possible to retain external town boundaries, without the inclusion of surrounding rural parishes while also securing good electoral quality.

43 In our draft recommendations report we considered the size and distribution of the electorate, the geography and other characteristics of the area, together with the representations received. We concluded that the achievement of electoral quality and the statutory criteria would be best met by a council of 48 members.

44 At Stage Three, we received endorsement from South Oxfordshire District Council, the Conservatives, Long Wittenham Parish Council and a district councillor for our 48-member council, therefore we are content to confirm our draft recommendation for a 48-member council as final.

Electoral Arrangements

45 As set out in our draft recommendations report, we carefully considered all the representations received at Stage One, including the district-wide scheme from the Conservatives. From these representations, some considerations emerged which helped to inform us when preparing our draft recommendations. In view of the degree of consensus behind large elements of the Conservatives' Stage One proposals, we concluded that we should base our draft 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, while respecting the urban and rural identities. However, to improve electoral equality further and to offer more clearly identifiable boundaries while having regard to local community identities and interests, we decided to move away from the Conservatives' proposals in Wallingford and the surrounding area, in the north east and south east of the district.

46 During Stage Three we received a degree of support for our draft recommendations. In particular we received support for our proposals for Goring, Chinnor and Aston Rowant. We received a number of representations objecting to our proposals for Sonning Common, Wallingford & Brightwell-cum-Sotwell wards and the proposed Wheatley ward. While we recognise that there is some merit in the arguments that we have divided areas that share strong connections, we remain of the view that our draft recommendations offer the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria. We consider that our draft recommendations combine well-connected areas and avoid warding parishes where possible, which we consider is in the best interests of representing local community identities.

47 Having reviewed our draft recommendations in the light of further evidence and the representations received during Stage Three, we remain of the opinion that they offer the best balance between the statutory criteria and electoral quality. We are content, therefore, to confirm our draft recommendations as final, subject to one minor boundary amendment and changes to four ward names.

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

- (a) Didcot North, Didcot Northbourne, Didcot South wards;
- (b) Brightwell, Cholsey, Hagbourne and Wallingford wards;
- (c) Benson, Berinsfield, Chalgrove, Clifton Hampden and Dorchester wards;
- (d) Crowmarsh, Goring, Goring Heath and Woodcote wards;
- (e) Kidmore End, Rotherfield Peppard, Shiplake and Sonning Common wards;
- (f) Henley ward;
- (g) Aston Rowant, Chinnor, Nettlebed and Watlington wards;
- (h) Thame North and Thame South wards;
- (i) Forest Hill, Garsington, Great Milton, Horspath and Wheatley wards.

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

Didcot North, Didcot Northbourne, Didcot South wards

49 The town of Didcot is situated at the south western edge of the district. Didcot North ward (comprising the All Saints and Georgetown parish wards of Didcot parish) is represented by two councillors, Didcot Northbourne ward (comprising the Didcot Northbourne parish ward of Didcot parish) is represented by a single councillor and Didcot South ward (comprising the Greenmere and Park parish wards of Didcot parish) is represented by three councillors. Under the existing arrangements, the number of electors per councillor in Didcot North, Didcot Northbourne and Didcot South wards is 124 per cent above, 55 per cent above and 16 per cent below the district average respectively (158 per cent above, 47 per cent above and 18 per cent below by 2005).

50 In our draft recommendations we recognised that Didcot is currently significantly under-represented and requires additional representation to address this and to account for the considerable growth forecast in the north of the town over the five-year period to 2005. We also noted that the Council and two local residents proposed that the Millbrook area of East Hagbourne parish be warded and placed in a ward with part of Didcot. This was also supported by East Hagbourne Parish Council during the District Council's local consultation. The Conservatives proposed that Didcot should be represented by nine councillors overall, but did not submit detailed proposals, stating it should be "warded as necessary". Therefore, to secure the best balance of representation between the town area and the surrounding parishes, while also reflecting local community identities, we proposed that East Hagbourne parish be warded, and that the Millbrook area be included in a ward with part of Didcot, with the Didcot area as a whole being represented by nine councillors. It did not however put forward detailed warding proposals and we therefore put forward our own proposals as part of our draft recommendations.

51 We proposed a three-member Didcot North ward comprising the polling districts RG and RH to the north of the railway line. We proposed a new two-member Didcot West & Central ward comprising the remainder of the existing Didcot North ward to the south of this boundary, with the inclusion of the properties on Barleyfields and Elbourne and those on Wantage Road up to Park Road. We proposed including the Millbrook area of East Hagbourne parish in our proposed two-member Didcot East ward. To improve electoral equality further in Didcot East and Didcot South wards, we proposed that Mereland Road, Richmere Road, Ridgeway Road, Sinodun Road and the roads leading from them should be included in Didcot East ward.

52 Under our draft recommendations, the number of electors per councillor in our proposed Didcot East and Didcot North wards would be 2 per cent and 19 per cent below the district average respectively

(6 per cent below and 5 per cent above by 2005). The number of electors per councillor in our proposed Didcot South and Didcot West & Central wards would be 4 per cent above and 2 per cent below the district average respectively (2 per cent above and 4 per cent below by 2005).

53 At Stage Three, Didcot Town Council proposed ward name changes as they wished the names to retain a “historical context”. They proposed that Didcot North be renamed Didcot Ladygrove, Didcot East be renamed Didcot Northbourne, Didcot South be renamed Didcot Park and Didcot West be renamed Didcot All Saints. Didcot Conservative Group proposed that Didcot West & Central ward be renamed Didcot Central, and that the town be represented by 18 town councillors. In the light of further support from the District Council for the Town Council’s proposals we are proposing that the ward names be changed accordingly. However, we have not been convinced that there would be local support for the ward name change proposed by the Didcot Conservative Group. We received no further submissions in relation to our draft recommendations for Didcot.

54 Having considered the representations received, we have decided to endorse our draft recommendations in full, apart from the proposed ward name changes put forward by Didcot Town Council for this area. We note that our proposals have received some local support and offer what we consider to be the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria.

55 Under our final recommendations the number of electors per councillor would be the same as at draft recommendations. Our final recommendations are illustrated on Map 2 and on the large map at the back of the report.

Brightwell, Cholsey, Hagbourne and Wallingford wards

56 These wards are situated in the west and south-west of the district. The number of electors per councillor in the existing single-member Brightwell ward (comprising the parishes of Brightwell-cum-Sotwell, Little Wittenham and Long Wittenham), and the two-member Cholsey ward (comprising the parishes of Cholsey and Moulsoford) is equal to the district average and 22 per cent below respectively (4 per cent below and 24 per cent below by 2005). The number of electors per councillor in the single-member Hagbourne ward (comprising the parishes of Aston Tirrold, Aston Upthorpe, East Hagbourne, North Moreton, South Moreton and West Hagbourne) and the three-member Wallingford ward (comprising the parish of Wallingford) is 32 per cent above the district average and 13 per cent below respectively (29 per cent above and 11 per cent below by 2005).

57 In formulating our draft recommendations, we noted the opposition to the possible warding of West Hagbourne parish with Didcot town and to any proposed separation of West Hagbourne from East Hagbourne parishes from four local residents. We also recognised that there was strong support in favour of retaining the association between the parishes of Aston Tirrold, Aston Upthorpe, North Moreton and South Moreton and noted the objections to dividing these parishes from each of the parish councils. It was particularly difficult to devise new warding arrangements in this part of the district due to the location of the parishes and the geographical constraints of Didcot and the River Thames. We considered several options for district wards in this area in order to secure the best balance between securing good electoral equality and reflecting local communities.

58 To secure good electoral equality and reflect the identities and interests of local communities, we proposed a three-member ward comprising the existing Hagbourne ward, less the Millbrook area of East Hagbourne, (which would be transferred to Didcot Northbourne as described earlier), Cholsey ward and the parishes of Little Wittenham and Long Wittenham from Brightwell ward. The number of electors

per councillor in our proposed Cholsey & Hagbourne ward would be 4 per cent below the district average initially (7 per cent below by 2005). We acknowledged that it would be a geographically large ward. However, we considered that it would represent the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria, given the aforementioned constraints. As a consequence of our proposed Cholsey & Hagbourne ward, we proposed linking Brightwell-cum-Sotwell parish with Wallingford ward to form a new three-member ward which would both secure good levels of electoral equality and have good road links. We noted that under a 48-member council, the current three-member Wallingford ward would be over-represented by 15 per cent initially (11 per cent by 2005). However, the number of electors per councillor in our revised three-member Wallingford & Brightwell-cum-Sotwell ward would be 4 per cent above the district average both initially and in 2005.

59 In formulating our draft proposals for this area we considered other alternative warding arrangements. We noted alternative proposals received for this area from the Conservatives and North Moreton Parish Council. However, these would result in either poorer levels of electoral equality or have a detrimental effect on community identity and ties in the area.

60 Under our draft recommendations for a 48-member council, the number of electors per councillor in our proposed Cholsey & Hagbourne and Wallingford & Brightwell-cum-Sotwell wards would be 4 per cent below and 4 per cent above the district average respectively (7 per cent below and 4 per cent above by 2005).

61 At Stage Three, the District Council proposed a new scheme for the south west of the district, which received support from the Conservatives. We have noted the volume of objections to our proposals for this area. The combining of Brightwell-cum-Sotwell parish and Wallingford parish has attracted the majority of opposition, with the lack of community identity and the opposition to combining rural and urban parishes within a single ward being cited as the main objections. The District Council's scheme involved the warding of Wallingford Town, and placing the southern part of the town, to the south of Hithercroft and St Johns' road, crossing St Mary Street and continuing along Lower Wharf until reaching the river to the east, in a ward with Cholsey and Moulsoford parishes. Consequently, the existing Brightwell and Hagbourne wards would be retained. This proposal was supported by Councillor Morgan, who stated that it provided for wards "...all with strong identity...". Councillor Griffin and Councillors P and M Greene also supported the District Councils scheme.

62 Wallingford Town Council proposed including the Winterbrook area of Cholsey parish, just south of the town and north of the A4130, in our Wallingford ward. A resident also provided support for this proposal. A further alternative was forwarded by Brightwell-cum-Sotwell Parish Council, which received local support. It proposed retaining the link with Little Wittenham and Long Wittenham parishes, and involved the creation of a four-member ward for Wallingford, Cholsey & Moulsoford. Brightwell-cum-Sotwell Parish Council objected to being combined with Wallingford due to Brightwell-cum-Sotwell being a rural parish and Wallingford being largely urban.

63 We noted the objections made to our draft proposals by East Hagbourne Parish Council, who supported Councillor Morgan's alternative for their parish, which involved the same Wallingford warding scheme as that of the District Council. Dr Totterdell, from Oxford University, supported our proposals for the village of West Hagbourne.

64 Nine residents opposed our proposals for Brightwell-cum-Sotwell, Little Wittenham and Long Wittenham on the grounds that community identity was not reflected by our proposals. A resident

opposed our proposals for East Hagbourne and West Hagbourne parishes on the basis of our proposals being geographically unwieldy, stating that he would prefer the status quo.

65 Having carefully considered the representations received during the consultation period we have decided to move away from our draft recommendations and adopt the District Council's proposed scheme for the area. We have considered all the alternatives provided and feel that the District Council's proposal offers the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria. Having visited the area, officers of the Commission were persuaded that Brightwell and Wallingford parishes are distinct communities. Therefore we have been convinced by the District Council's proposal to link the southern part of Wallingford with Cholsey & Moulsoford ward, with which it has greater community identity. It is a locally generated scheme with support from residents and councillors alike. We consider that warding Wallingford parish and placing the southern part of the town in a two-member ward with Cholsey and Moulsoford parishes would address many of the concerns that have arisen during Stage Three, concerning placing Brightwell-cum-Sotwell parish in a ward with Wallingford town. We consider that there are good transport links between the proposed South Wallingford parish ward and Cholsey parish. There is also local support for this scheme, with Little Wittenham Parish Council describing Cholsey parish as being "...effectively a suburb of Wallingford". This scheme retains the existing Brightwell ward and the existing Hagbourne ward, less part the proposed Millbrook parish ward which is included in the proposed Didcot Northbourne ward. We consider that our proposed single-member Brightwell ward, two-member Wallingford North ward and Cholsey & Wallingford South ward would reflect community identity in the area, while providing good levels of electoral equality.

66 We have considered the alternative proposals put forward for this area. Brightwell Parish Council put forward a proposal for a four-member ward, which received considerable local support. However, the Commission is of the opinion that the number of councillors to be returned from each ward should not exceed three, as this could result in an unacceptable dilution of accountability as stated in our Guidance. We have also considered the proposal to place the Winterbrook area in a ward with Wallingford parish, as proposed by Wallingford Town Council. Although this would result in an electoral variance of 9 per cent in 2000 (5 per cent in 2005) the Town Council's scheme does not provide arrangements for the surrounding area and we are unable to consider any area in isolation. We consider this scheme unacceptable given the alternative warding arrangements available which provide better levels of electoral equality.

67 Under our final recommendations the number of electors per councillor in the Brightwell, Cholsey & Wallingford South, Hagbourne, Wallingford North wards would vary by 4 per cent (7 per cent in 2005), 3 per cent (3 per cent in 2005), 2 per cent (equal to the average in 2005) and 4 per cent (3 per cent in 2005) respectively from the district average. Our final recommendations are illustrated on Map 2 and on the large map at the back of the report. The proposed boundary between Wallingford North and Wallingford South is also illustrated on Map A4.

Benson, Berinsfield, Chalgrove, Clifton Hampden and Dorchester wards

68 These wards are situated in the centre of the district. Benson ward (comprising the parishes of Benson and Ewelme) and Chalgrove ward (comprising the parishes of Berrick Salome, Brightwell Baldwin, Britwell Salome, Chalgrove, Cuxham-with-Easington, Newington and Stadhampton) are each represented by two councillors. Under the current arrangements, the number of electors per councillor in these wards is 15 per cent below the district average and 11 per cent below respectively (13 per cent and 12 per cent by 2005). Berinsfield ward (comprising the parish of Berinsfield), Clifton Hampden

ward (comprising the parishes of Clifton Hampden, Culham, Marsh Baldon, Nuneham Courtenay, Sandford-on-Thames and Toot Baldon) and Dorchester ward (comprising the parishes of Dorchester, Drayton St Leonard and Warborough) are each represented by a single councillor. Under the existing arrangements, the number of electors per councillor in these wards is 2 per cent below the district average, 18 per cent above and 9 per cent below respectively (6 per cent below, 16 per cent above and 12 per cent below by 2005).

69 We based our draft recommendations on the Conservatives' scheme. We considered that the Conservatives' proposals for this area of the district better reflect local community identities and interests as they combined parishes with existing links and similar identities while also securing reasonable electoral equality. However, we had some reservations about their proposed Ward 24 (comprising the parishes of Stadhampton, Newington, Dorchester and Warborough) as we did not consider that they are well linked. In the absence of any direct road links from the north to the south of the proposed Ward 24, we considered that combining the Conservatives' proposed Wards 7 (comprising the parishes of Berinsfield and Drayton St Leonard) and 24 to form a revised two-member Berinsfield ward would create a more cohesive ward with better communications links, and adopted this as part of our draft recommendations.

70 We considered that the Conservatives' proposed Ward 21 (combining the parishes of Benson, Berrick Salome, Brightwell Baldwin and Ewelme) represented a good balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria and therefore adopted this proposal as part of our draft recommendations. We also considered that their proposed Chalgrove ward would best reflect local interests and facilitate the most appropriate warding arrangements to the east and south of the district, and also adopted it as part of our draft recommendations.

71 Under our draft recommendations for a 48-member council, the number of electors per councillor in our proposed Benson ward (comprising the parishes of Benson, Brightwell Baldwin, Berrick Salome and Ewelme), Berinsfield ward (comprising the parishes of Berinsfield, Dorchester, Drayton St Leonard, Newington, Stadhampton and Warborough) and Chalgrove ward (comprising the parish of Chalgrove) would be 8 per cent below, 7 per cent above and 5 per cent above the district average respectively (7 per cent below, 4 per cent above and 4 per cent above by 2005).

72 At Stage Three, the Conservative Group objected to our draft recommendations for Berinsfield ward, instead supporting the District Council's proposal for two single-member wards of Berinsfield (comprising Berinsfield and Drayton St Leonard parishes) and Dorchester (comprising Dorchester, Stadhampton, Warborough and Newington parishes) citing that this would be a "sensible proposal". The District Council argued that the Commission did not appreciate the "special circumstances" that gave rise to their proposal and stated that there were two very different communities involved. Councillor Hiles objected to our proposed Berinsfield ward and was supported by Berinsfield Information and Volunteer Centre. He stated that two single-member wards would serve the area better and did not wish to see Berinsfield "watered down" with a two-member ward.

73 At Stage Three, Berinsfield Parish Council supported our proposal for a two-member Berinsfield ward. We also received local support for our proposed Benson ward from Benson Parish Council and Councillor Cooper.

74 Having carefully considered the representations received, we have decided to endorse our draft recommendations for this area. Our draft recommendations would achieve good levels of electoral equality and have received some local support. We recognise that our proposed two-member Berinsfield

ward has received opposition at Stage Three, although it also received support from Berinsfield Parish Council. We have considered the alternative proposals put forward by the District Council, (which were the same as its Stage One proposals), but have not been persuaded to adopt their scheme as we feel it does not offer the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria. It would mean that to travel from Stadhampton to Dorchester you would have to drive through Berinsfield on the A4704, and we remain of the opinion that this would not provide for convenient and effective local government. However, the District Council did state that they recognise that our proposal is more cohesive than a two single-member ward option. Therefore, in the light of the support for our proposed Benson and Chalgrove wards and the lack of convincing argumentation for two single-member Berinsfield and Dorchester wards, we propose confirming our draft recommendations for Berinsfield, Benson and Chalgrove wards as final. The number of electors per councillor would be the same as at draft recommendations and our final recommendations are illustrated on Map 2.

Crowmarsh, Goring, Goring Heath and Woodcote wards

75 These wards are situated in the south of the district and are each represented by a single councillor, except for Goring ward which is currently served by two councillors. Under the existing arrangements, the number of electors per councillor in Crowmarsh ward (comprising the parishes of Checkendon, Crowmarsh, Ipsden and Stoke Row) and Goring ward (comprising the parishes of Goring and South Stoke) is 21 per cent above and 23 per cent below the district average respectively (19 per cent above and 25 per cent below by 2005). The number of electors per councillor in Goring Heath ward (comprising the parishes of Goring Heath, Mapledurham and Whitchurch-on-Thames) and Woodcote ward (comprising the parish of Woodcote) is 9 per cent below and 1 per cent below respectively (12 per cent below and 2 per cent below by 2005).

76 At Stage One we gave careful consideration to the views received about this area. We recognised that available warding arrangements are constrained by the district boundary and the River Thames. We also noted the opposition to the Council's proposals for Goring and Whitchurch wards, which involved separating Whitchurch-on-Thames and Goring Heath parishes, a proposal which did not receive support from Whitchurch-on-Thames Parish Council and a local resident from Whitchurch parish. In the light of this opposition and to better reflect the identity and interests of the parishes in this area, we proposed our own warding arrangements for Goring and Whitchurch wards. We proposed that the existing Goring ward be joined by the parishes of Goring Heath and Whitchurch-on-Thames to form a two-member Goring ward. We considered that the Conservatives' amended Crowmarsh ward, combining the parishes of Crowmarsh, Ipsden and Nuffield, would better reflect local communities by combining parishes with similar interests. We adopted the Conservatives' proposals to retain the existing Woodcote ward, which was also suggested by the Council, as this would maintain a good balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria.

77 Under our draft recommendations for a 48-member council, the number of electors per councillor in our proposed Crowmarsh (comprising Crowmarsh, Ipsden and Nuffield parishes), Goring (comprising Goring, Goring Heath, South Stoke and Whitchurch-on-Thames parishes) and Woodcote (comprising Woodcote parish) wards would be 11 per cent below, 13 per cent above and 5 per cent below the district average respectively (9 per cent below, 9 per cent above and 6 per cent below by 2005).

78 At Stage Three, the District Council objected to our draft recommendations, offering a new scheme for the southern wards. This involved alterations to our proposed Crowmarsh, Goring, Forest and Shiplake wards, creating a new Kidmore End ward (comprising Checkendon, Kidmore End,

Mapledurham and Stoke Row parishes), Goring ward (comprising Goring, Goring Heath and Whitchurch-on-Thames parishes) and Crowmarsh ward (comprising Crowmarsh, North Stoke, Ipsden and South Stoke parishes) while retaining the proposed Woodcote ward. Under these proposals the number of electors per councillor in Kidmore End, Goring and Crowmarsh wards would vary by 6 per cent, 3 per cent and 10 per cent from the district average respectively (1 per cent, equal to the average and 9 per cent from the district average by 2005).

79 The Conservatives, supporting our proposals, opposed the District Council's recommendations in the southern area. They further stated that these changes seem to be driven by the desire of one political group to create a single-member ward for Watlington. We also received support for our draft recommendations from three parish councils and a local resident.

80 It has been noted that our draft recommendations have received considerable support in this area from residents and parish councils. Whitchurch, Goring Heath and South Stoke parish councils all supported our draft recommendations, with the only opposition coming from the District Council. We carefully considered the District Council's proposals for this area. However, we have not been convinced that its scheme would secure local support. Although it offers slightly better levels of electoral equality, in light of the support that we received for our proposed wards of Crowmarsh, Goring and Woodcote, we are confirming our draft recommendations for these wards as final. The electoral variances are the same as our draft recommendations, and these are illustrated on Map 2.

Kidmore End, Rotherfield Peppard, Shiplake and Sonning Common wards

81 These wards are situated in the south of the district and are each currently represented by a single councillor except for Sonning Common ward which is currently represented by two councillors. Under the existing arrangements the number of electors per councillor in Kidmore End ward (comprising the parishes of Eye & Dunsden and Kidmore End) and Rotherfield Peppard ward (comprising the parishes of Highmoor, Rotherfield Greys and Rotherfield Peppard) is 25 per cent below and 16 per cent below the district average respectively (27 per cent below and 13 per cent below by 2005). The number of electors per councillor in Shiplake ward (comprising the parishes of Harpsden and Shiplake) and Sonning Common ward (comprising the parish of Sonning Common) is 12 per cent above and 24 per cent below the district average respectively (11 per cent above and 26 per cent below by 2005).

82 We put forward our own draft recommendations in this area. As previously discussed, we were of the view that the Whitchurch-on-Thames and Goring Heath parishes should continue to remain in the same ward, as proposed by Whitchurch-on-Thames Parish Council and a local resident. As a consequence of our proposals for Goring ward, possible warding arrangements for the remainder of the parishes at the southern edge of the district are limited. We noted that potential warding arrangements in this area are constrained by the district boundary and the town of Henley, as well as the strong boundaries of the River Thames, the A4130 and the A4074. We also received local opposition from Rotherfield Parish Council and ten residents to placing any of the smaller, more rural parishes in a ward with Sonning Common parish, with a strong preference being stated for being in a ward with other similar parishes. We recognised that parishes in this area have distinct groupings and in formulating our draft proposals, we attempted to respect their identity while improving on the current levels of electoral imbalance. Accordingly, and in the absence of any other viable alternatives which would secure equivalent levels of electoral equality, we proposed that the parish of Mapledurham merge with the current Kidmore End ward (comprising Eye & Dunsden and Kidmore End parishes) and Shiplake ward (comprising Binfield Heath, Harpsden and Shiplake parishes) to form a new two-member Shiplake ward which would be 5 per cent below the district average initially (7 per cent below by 2005).

Councillor Rudge objected to warding Binfield Heath with Sonning Common or Eye & Dunsden because of rural and urban differences. Shiplake Parish Council also expressed its opposition to any proposal to link the future Binfield Heath parish with Sonning Common parish, providing alternative ward groupings. However, no figures or supporting evidence accompanied the alternatives.

83 We considered Rotherfield Peppard Parish Council's opposition to combining Rotherfield Peppard and Sonning Common parishes in a Sonning Common ward, as proposed by the Conservatives. While we are sympathetic to the nature of the concerns expressed in relation to a rural area being merged with a more urban area, we noted that there are good communications links between the two wards and we were not persuaded that such a proposal would adversely affect the statutory criteria. We also considered that a merger into a two-member ward would facilitate the creation of a good electoral scheme across this area as a whole. The number of electors per councillor in the proposed Sonning Common ward would be 1 per cent above the district average initially (equal to the average by 2005). We consequently proposed that the parishes of Rotherfield Greys, Bix & Assendon, Highmoor, Stoke Row and Checkendon form a new single-member Forest ward. The number of electors per councillor would be 7 per cent below the district average initially (11 per cent below by 2005). We recognised that this would result in a ward with a variance of 11 per cent below the district average in 2005, however we considered that this ward combines rural parishes which are well linked and that have similar identities and would facilitate the achievement of good electoral equality, community interest and identity in surrounding wards.

84 At Stage Three, the District Council proposed alterations to our draft proposals in the area, except for our proposed Sonning Common ward, creating new Kidmore End, Nettlebed and Shiplake wards. Under this scheme the number of electors per councillor in Kidmore End, Nettlebed and Shiplake wards would vary by 6 per cent (1 per cent in 2005), 2 per cent (4 per cent in 2005) and 8 per cent (6 per cent in 2005) respectively. The District Council cited communication difficulties between our proposed wards and contended that our Forest ward had "no particular focus".

85 Highmoor, Stoke Row and Checkendon parish councils supported our draft recommendations for the proposed Forest ward. However, they proposed renaming the ward Beech Hills or Witheridge, Beech Woods, or Beech Hills respectively. Kidmore End Parish Council, who also supported our proposals, wished to rename Shiplake ward, Southern Parishes or Southern South Oxford ward. Shiplake Parish Council opposed the District Council's proposals but requested that the Commission consider the possibility of two wards in Shiplake. Councillor Rudge supported our proposals for a 48-member council and for the proposed Shiplake & Harpsden ward.

86 We noted the amount of local opposition we received for our proposed Sonning Common ward (comprising Rotherfield Peppard and Sonning Common parishes). Rotherfield Peppard Parish Council and nine local residents opposed our draft recommendation. They argued that our proposals would not reflect community identity in this area and that they would result in the interests of residents in Rotherfield Peppard being outweighed by those of the more populated area of Sonning Common. The District Council and the Conservatives both supported our proposals. Councillor Naish supported our recommendation, stating that both areas have common roads, shops and amenities. Sir David Money-Coutts, with local support from Rotherfield Peppard Parish Council, offered several alternatives to our scheme. However, each of his proposals either resulted in poorer levels of electoral equality than our draft recommendations or created detached wards, which we do not consider would provide for effective and convenient local government. Further to this, his proposals had a consequential effect on the surrounding area and we are unable to consider any area in isolation from the rest of the district. Five local residents preferred the status quo.

87 We have carefully considered all the representations received during the consultation period and note that our draft recommendations for this area have gained some support, apart from the proposed Sonning Common ward. While we have some sympathy with the opposition that we received to our proposed Sonning Common ward, we have not been persuaded that we should alter this recommendation. We have not been convinced that we should adopt the alternative proposals put forward, and having visited the area, officers from the Commission remain of the opinion that there are good transport links between the parishes of Rotherfield Peppard and Sonning Common, and that they lie in close proximity to one another.

88 We have noted the alternative proposals from the District Council for the other wards in this area, but in view of the other support received, we are not convinced that its proposals would command local support. In relation to the proposed renaming of Forest ward, it is our opinion that due to the lack of consensus on a new name it should remain Forest ward. In the light of the lack of consensus on a new ward name for our proposed Shiplake ward, we also propose retaining the ward name of Shiplake.

89 Therefore, we remain of the view that our draft recommendations offer the best balance between ensuring electoral equality and reflecting the statutory criteria in this area. We are therefore confirming our draft recommendations as final, and electoral equality for the three wards of Forest, Shiplake and Sonning Common will be the same as at draft. Our final recommendations are illustrated on Map 2.

Henley ward

90 Henley ward covers the town of Henley in the south east of the district and is currently represented by five councillors. Under the existing arrangements the number of electors per councillor in Henley ward is 13 per cent below the district average (14 per cent below by 2005).

91 In formulating our draft recommendations for Henley, we noted that the current ward is significantly over-represented. We have noted that at Stage One the Conservatives proposed that the town be represented by four councillors overall and be divided into a two-member Henley North and a two-member Henley South ward. Having considered how many councillors Henley would be entitled to under a 48-member council we agreed with this view, and proposed that it should be represented by four councillors representing two two-member wards. We were also of the view that the Conservatives' proposals to utilise the current Henley parish ward boundaries as district ward boundaries would make for effective and convenient local government without damaging local interests and we therefore endorsed the proposal that the centre of Greys Road be used as the boundary between the proposed Henley North and Henley South wards.

92 Under our draft recommendations for a 48-member council, the number of electors per councillor in our proposed Henley North and Henley South wards would be 6 per cent above and 2 per cent above the district average respectively (3 per cent and 2 per cent by 2005).

93 At Stage Three, we received no further representations on our draft recommendations for Henley. Although we are dividing Henley, we do not propose any changes to the parish representatives as the district ward boundaries reflect those of the parish boundaries. With the number of electors per councillor in Henley North and Henley South wards varying by 6 per cent and 2 per cent from the district average respectively, improving over the next five years to vary by 3 per cent and 2 per cent from the district average respectively, we propose endorsing our draft recommendations as final. Our final recommendations are illustrated on Map 2. The proposed boundary between Henley North and Henley South can be seen on Map A2.

Aston Rowant, Chinnor, Nettlebed, and Watlington wards

94 These wards are situated in the north-east and east of the district. Under the current arrangements, Aston Rowant ward (comprising the parishes of Adwell, Aston Rowant, Crowell, Lewknor, Stoke Talmage, Sydenham, Tetsworth and Wheatfield), Nettlebed ward (comprising the parishes of Bix & Assendon, Nettlebed, Nuffield, Pishill-with-Stonor and Swyncombe) and Watlington ward (comprising the parishes of Pyrton, Shirburn and Watlington) are each represented by a single councillor. The number of electors per councillor in these wards is 8 per cent above, 2 per cent below and 13 per cent above the district average respectively (7 per cent above, 5 per cent below and 11 per cent above by 2005). Chinnor ward (comprising the parish of Chinnor) is currently represented by two councillors. The number of electors per councillor in Chinnor ward is 15 per cent above the district average (13 per cent by 2005).

95 At Stage One, Pyrton Parish Council wished to retain its links with Watlington ward and Sydenham Parish Council opposed any proposal to combine Sydenham parish in a ward with Thame. Lewknor Parish Council opposed any proposal which would divide the parish between two wards.

96 We carefully considered the representations received regarding this area, and noted in particular the local opposition to any proposal which involved the transfer of Tetsworth and Sydenham parishes to the more urban Thame wards. We noted that Pyrton Parish Council wished to retain its links with Watlington parish. Having considered the Conservatives' proposed wards in this area, we were of the view that they would provide a good balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria. In particular, we considered it important to reflect the interests of the rural parishes surrounding Thame and Chinnor and were of the opinion that the Conservatives' proposals achieved this without adversely affecting the identities and interests of local communities.

97 With these considerations in mind, we adopted the Conservatives' proposal for a slightly modified Aston Rowant ward, an unchanged Chinnor ward and an enlarged two-member Watlington ward, subject to a minor amendment to the boundary between its proposed Aston Rowant and Watlington ward. We were of the view that the parishes of Adwell, Stoke Talmage and Wheatfield have more identity and better road links with parishes to the south due to the boundary of the M40 to their north. We proposed that these parishes be included in the proposed Watlington ward. We considered available options for a revised Watlington ward and concluded that, although geographically large, the Conservatives' proposed two-member ward would enable us to maintain groupings of parishes which have common identities and long-standing associations.

98 Under our draft recommendations for a 48-member council, the number of electors per councillor in our proposed Aston Rowant ward (comprising Aston Rowant, Crowell, Sydenham, Tetsworth and Towersey parishes), Chinnor ward (comprising Chinnor parish) and Watlington ward (comprising Adwell, Britwell Salome, Cuxham-with-Easington, Lewknor, Nuffield, Pishill-with-Stonor, Pyrton, Shirburn, Stoke Talmage, Swyncombe, Watlington and Wheatfield parishes) would be 8 per cent below, 11 per cent above and 2 per cent above the district average respectively (8 per cent below, 8 per cent above and 1 per cent below by 2005).

99 At Stage Three, we received opposition from the District Council to our proposed two-member Watlington ward. Its alternative proposal involved creating two single-member wards, allowing Watlington parish to have its own member and creating a new Icknield ward. Under this scheme the number of electors per councillor in both Watlington and Icknield wards would vary by 4 per cent and 4 per cent from the district average by 2005. This level of electoral equality would deteriorate over the

next five years in Watlington and Icknield wards to vary by 6 per cent and 6 per cent from the district average. The District Council contended that Watlington should have its own member as the pressures that arise from Watlington could create an impossible position for councillors if they were elected to represent both the “market town” and the surrounding rural parishes. Further to this, the District Council also cited the possibility of a by-pass being built which may “cut off” areas.

100 The Conservatives supported our draft recommendations for the proposed Chinnor, Aston Rowant and Watlington wards. The Conservatives opposed the District Council’s two single-member proposal for Watlington ward as they felt it was “geographically too large”, and contained “too many parishes for a single councillor to work effectively”.

101 Cuxham-with-Easington Parish Council supported the District Council’s proposals as it stated that it would ensure the election of a councillor looking after other small communities who would understand “our special problems and needs.” Councillor Griffin agreed, stating that two single-member wards separates the urban and rural communities, which would better reflect community identity than our draft recommendation. He also stated that rural parishes, most notably Cuxham, would feel dominated by Watlington if they shared councillors. However, Lewknor and Pyrton parish councils supported our draft recommendations, with Lewknor Parish Council stating that there is more potential for flexibility within the two-councillor option.

102 We have noted the objection of Nuffield Parish Council to its inclusion in the District Council’s proposed Icknield ward. It argued that it is currently connected to parishes with common interests and that any new arrangements would remove the historical connection. Nuffield Parish Council also contended that they have nothing in common with other parishes in the proposed Icknield ward and that there are poor transport links between them and the other parishes. “Intuitively, economically, educationally and practically” Nuffield Parish Council believe they should remain with their traditional partners on the Chiltern Crest. We have considered the arguments put forward by Nuffield Parish Council, and recognise that they do have merit. Although they wish to retain the status quo, we consider that our proposed draft recommendations result in good electoral equality and places Nuffield parish in a ward with other similar parishes with which it has good road links.

103 Aston Rowant Parish Council supported our proposals as they unite rural parishes to the north of the M40. However, it rejected the suggestion from the District Council that Chinnor should be included in this ward. Two members of the public were also pleased to see the rural parishes on the northern side of the M40 grouped together.

104 We have given careful consideration to the evidence and representations received at Stage Three. We note the District Council’s objections to our proposals and also note their proposed scheme. However, we have not been persuaded to depart from our draft recommendations on the basis of the Council’s argumentation. Although our proposed Watlington ward is geographically large, we consider that it provides the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria, with the District Council’s warding proposals creating a “wedge” that would isolate the north of the ward from the south. We are content that a single two-member ward would serve the interests of the local communities better than that of two single-member Icknield and Watlington wards. The proposed Icknield ward, by the District Council’s own admission, would be geographically unwieldy, and we have not been convinced that it would provide for more effective and convenient local government than our draft recommendations. While we recognise the importance of Watlington as a town, we believe that the two-member proposal in our draft recommendations best achieves a balance of community interest and electoral equality for the area as a whole.

105 The District Council proposed placing Nuffield parish in Watlington ward, to be represented by a single member. However, we do not consider that we have received sufficient argumentation to adopt such a change as it has a consequential effect for the surrounding area, resulting in high levels of electoral inequality. Our recommendations for the surrounding area have received local support. Furthermore, we are unable to consider the possible event of a by-pass being built as it will not be completed by 2005. We note that our proposed Aston Rowant and Chinnor wards have received local support and we endorse these wards in our final recommendations.

106 Having carefully considered all the representations received, we consider that our draft recommendations offer the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria and we are confirming them as final. Our final recommendations would offer the same levels of electoral equality as our draft recommendations and are illustrated on Map 2.

Thame North and Thame South wards

107 The parish of Thame is currently divided between the wards of Thame North and Thame South, which are both represented by two councillors. Under the existing arrangements, the number of electors per councillor in Thame North and Thame South wards is 13 per cent above and 7 per cent above the district average respectively (8 per cent above and 10 per cent above by 2005).

108 At Stage One, we noted the merit of using the existing parish ward boundaries in creating a two-member Thame North and a two-member Thame South ward, as proposed by the Conservatives. This would avoid placing surrounding parishes in either ward, as proposed by the District Council and objected to by Sydenham Parish Council and a local resident. Although the District Council's proposals received support from Thame Town Council and Sydenham Parish Council, we considered that the Conservatives' proposals would provide a better reflection of local communities and were content to put this forward as part of our draft recommendations. However, to use a more easily identifiable boundary between the Conservatives' proposed Thame North and Thame South wards, and to achieve improved electoral equality by 2005, we proposed a minor amendment so that the boundary follows the centre of Priestend, High Street, Buttermarket, East Street and Kingsley Road.

109 The number of electors per councillor in our proposed Thame North and Thame South wards would be 4 per cent above and 3 per cent below the district average respectively (both equal to the average by 2005).

110 At Stage Three, the District Council proposed a minor boundary amendment between Thame North and Thame South wards, including the car park on High Street within Thame South ward, following High Street until it joins East Street. This amended boundary does not affect any electors and provides a straighter, more easily identifiable boundary.

111 We received two further representations from local residents supporting our proposals for Thame and the surrounding area.

112 Having carefully considered the representations received, we have decided to endorse our draft recommendations for this area, subject to the minor boundary amendment proposed by the District Council. Under our final recommendations, the number of electors per councillor would be the same as at draft, and our final recommendations are illustrated on Map 2 and on Map A3.

Forest Hill, Garsington, Great Milton, Horspath and Wheatley wards

113 These wards are situated in the north and north west of the district and are each represented by a single councillor, except for Wheatley ward which is represented by two councillors. Under the existing arrangements, the number of electors per councillor in Forest Hill ward (comprising the parishes of Beckley & Stowood, Elsfield, Forest Hill-with-Shotover, Stanton St John and Woodeaton), Garsington ward (comprising the parishes of Cuddesdon & Denton and Garsington) and Great Milton ward (comprising the parishes of Great Haseley, Great Milton, Little Milton and Tiddington-with-Albury) is 19 per cent below, 6 per cent below and 4 per cent below the district average respectively (21 per cent, 9 per cent and 6 per cent by 2005). The number of electors per councillor in Horspath ward (comprising the parish of Horspath) and Wheatley ward (comprising the parishes of Holton, Waterperry-with-Thomley, Waterstock and Wheatley) is 44 per cent below and 2 per cent above the district average respectively (45 per cent below and 3 per cent above by 2005).

114 We gave careful consideration to the views received at Stage One and noted that the Conservatives' scheme for this area secured reasonable levels of electoral equality. However, we noted that the Conservatives proposed including Waterperry-with-Thomley parish in a ward with which it does not have any direct road access. Therefore, to better reflect the identities and interests of local communities we proposed that the parish should be included in a ward with parishes to its north-west. We therefore put forward a single-member Great Milton ward comprising the existing ward and the parish of Waterstock. As a consequence, the number of electors per councillor in our proposed Great Milton ward would be 5 per cent below the district average initially (7 per cent below by 2005). While we acknowledged that this is a slightly worse level of electoral equality than under the Conservatives' proposal, we were of the view that it provides a better reflection of local communities and more effective and convenient local government. Having studied the links between the parishes and given the constraints of the district boundary, we recognised that the pattern of parishes restricts the number of available options to create district wards without warding parishes and splitting them between wards and we noted the opposition to such a proposal from Wheatley Parish Council. Therefore, to reflect the identities and interests of local communities in this area while also securing a good level of electoral equality, we proposed combining the Conservatives' proposed Ward 9 (comprising the parishes of Beckley & Stowood, Elsfield, Forest Hill-with-Shotover, Holton, Stanton St John and Woodeaton) and Ward 11 (comprising the parishes of Horspath and Wheatley), with the parish of Waterperry-with-Thomley, to form a three-member Wheatley ward.

115 We also adopted the Conservatives' proposed single-member Ward 22 (comprising the parishes of Dorchester, Newington, Stadhampton and Warborough), as we considered that this would reflect the identities and interests of local communities while achieving good electoral equality by 2005. As the Conservatives did not provide a ward name at Stage One, we proposed that this ward be named Garsington.

116 Under our draft recommendations, the number of electors per councillor in our proposed Garsington ward (comprising Cuddesdon & Denton, Garsington, Marsh Baldon and Toot Baldon parishes), Great Milton ward (comprising Great Haseley, Great Milton, Little Milton, Tiddington-with-Albury and Waterstock parishes) and Wheatley ward (comprising Beckley & Stowood, Elsfield, Forest Hill-with-Shotover, Holton, Horspath, Stanton St John, Waterperry-with-Thomley, Wheatley and Woodeaton parishes) would be 7 per cent above the district average, 5 per cent below and 8 per cent above respectively (3 per cent above, 7 per cent below and 8 per cent above by 2005).

117 At Stage Three, the District Council proposed changes to our recommended Wheatley and Great Milton wards. It proposed including Waterperry-with-Thomley parish in Great Milton ward while creating a separate two-member Wheatley ward (comprising the parishes of Wheatley and Horspath). This would result in electoral equality improving in Wheatley and Great Milton to 3 per cent and 2 per cent from the district average respectively with a new Forest Hill & Holton ward varying by 11 per cent from the district average. This electoral variance is expected to improve in Forest Hill & Holton and Great Milton ward to 10 per cent and 1 per cent respectively, with Wheatley parish remaining at 3 per cent above the district average by 2005. The District Council's proposal received support from the Conservatives, who stated that single-member wards are more beneficial to communities. Urging us to consider the District Council's proposal for the Great Milton ward, Waterstock Parish Council stated that it wished to be included in a ward with Waterperry parish, due to its close community links. Wheatley Parish Council, in opposition to our draft recommendations, cited difficulties of access throughout the proposed large Wheatley ward as detrimental to convenient and effective local government. It said that the closure of the A40 for safety reasons has created poor road links between Wheatley parish and the north west of the ward.

118 Holton Parish Council wished to retain its link with Wheatley parish and a resident proposed that Forest Hill ward remain as it is, with Holton parish being grouped with Wheatley and Horspath parishes. Councillor Purse also voiced support for the District Council's proposal, stating the need for Wheatley parish to have its own member due to its urban nature, as opposed to the existing Forest Hill ward's rural nature.

119 Baldons Parish Council objected to our draft recommendations in relation to Sandford ward. It stated that it wished to retain its links with Nuneham with Courtenay parish. We received no representations regarding the proposed Garsington ward.

120 We have given careful consideration to the representations and evidence received at Stage Three. In the light of the further representations, and due to the weight of argumentation opposing our draft proposal for a single three-member ward for the Wheatley area, we are proposing to adopt the District Council's proposal. This proposal allows for two wards which separate the more urban Wheatley and Horspath parishes from those within the distinctly rural Forest Hill & Holton ward. We have noted the desire of Waterperry-with-Thomley and Waterstock parishes to be linked within the Great Milton ward, and in the interests of community identity and good levels of electoral equality we have considered adopting this proposal as part of our final recommendations. While we have some sympathy with Holton Parish Council's preference to retain a link with Wheatley parish, this results in what we consider to be an unacceptably high level of electoral variance; 20 per cent from the district average (21 per cent in 2005). Therefore, in the light of the support for the District Council's proposals in this north west area of the district, we are proposing to adopt its proposals for Forest Hill & Holton, Great Milton and Wheatley wards. In the light of having received no objections at Stage Three, we propose endorsing our proposed Garsington ward as final. Under our final recommendations the number of electors per councillor in our proposed Forest Hill & Holton, Garsington, Great Milton and Wheatley wards will vary by 11 per cent (10 per cent by 2005), 7 per cent (3 per cent by 2005), 2 per cent (1 per cent by 2005) and 3 per cent (3 per cent by 2005) respectively from the district average. Our final recommendations are illustrated in Tables 1 and 2 and on Map 2.

Electoral Cycle

121 At Stage One, we received no proposals in relation to the electoral cycle of the district. Accordingly, we made no recommendation for change to the present system of whole-council elections every four years.

122 At Stage Three, no further comments were received to the contrary, and we confirm our draft recommendation as final.

Conclusions

123 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:

- a minor boundary amendment between Thame North and Thame South wards;
- Didcot North, Didcot East, Didcot South and Didcot West should be renamed Didcot Ladygrove, Didcot Northbourne, Didcot Park and Didcot All Saints respectively;
- the creation of a new two-member Wheatley ward;
- the creation of an amended single-member Great Milton ward, and new single-member Forest Hill & Holton and Hagbourne wards;
- the retention of the existing Brightwell ward;
- Wallingford town be warded forming Wallingford North parish ward and Wallingford South parish ward, with Wallingford South parish ward being placed in a district ward with Cholsey and Moulsoford parishes.

124 We conclude that, in South Oxfordshire:

- there should be a reduction in council size from 50 to 48;
- there should be 29 wards, three fewer than at present;
- the boundaries of 28 of the existing wards should be modified;
- the Council should continue to hold whole-council elections every four years.

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

Table 4: Comparison of Current and Recommended Electoral Arrangements

	2000 electorate		2005 forecast electorate	
	Current arrangements	Final recommendations	Current arrangements	Final recommendations
Number of councillors	50	48	50	48
Number of wards	32	26	32	29
Average number of electors per councillor	1,973	2,055	2,025	2,109
Number of wards with a variance more than 10 per cent from the average	21	4	22	1
Number of wards with a variance more than 20 per cent from the average	9	0	9	0

126 As Table 4 shows, our recommendations would result in a reduction in the number of wards with an electoral variance of more than 10 per cent from 21 to four, with no wards varying by more than 20 per cent from the district average. This level of electoral equality would improve further in 2005, with only one ward, Forest, varying by more than 10 per cent from the average, at 11 per cent. We conclude that our recommendations would best meet the need for electoral equality, having regard to the statutory criteria.

Final Recommendation

South Oxfordshire District Council should comprise 48 councillors serving 29 wards, as detailed and named in Tables 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 elections of the whole-council every four years.

Parish and Town Council Electoral Arrangements

127 When reviewing electoral arrangements, we are required to comply as far as is reasonably practicable with the rules set out in Schedule 11 to the 1972 Act. The Schedule states that if a parish is to be divided between different district wards, it must also be divided into parish wards, so that each parish ward lies wholly within a single ward of the district. Accordingly, in our draft recommendations report we proposed consequential changes to the warding arrangements for the parishes of Didcot, East Hagbourne, Wallingford and Thame to reflect the proposed district wards.

128 The parish of Didcot is currently served by 21 councillors serving five wards: All Saints ward (represented by three councillors), Georgetown ward (represented by five councillors), Greenmere ward (represented by five councillors), Northbourne ward (represented by three councillors) and Park ward

(represented by five councillors). At Stage One the District Council did not make any specific proposals in relation to the allocation of town councillors in Didcot. In the light of our draft recommendations for district warding in Didcot town, we proposed modifying the parish ward boundaries to correspond with those of the district wards within the town, with Didcot East, Didcot South and Didcot West & Central wards being represented by five councillors and Didcot North ward being represented by six councillors. We also propose that the parish ward names reflect those of the district wards.

129 In response to our consultation report, the Conservatives proposed that Didcot be represented by 18 councillors. However, this proposal did not receive any local support, and having considered all the evidence received, and in the light of the confirmation of our proposed district wards in the area, we confirm our draft recommendation for the warding of Didcot as final. However, we propose adopting the alternative town ward names proposed by the Town Council at Stage Three.

Final Recommendation

Didcot Town Council should comprise 21 councillors, as at present, representing four wards, one less than at present: Didcot Northbourne ward (returning five councillors), Didcot Ladygrove ward (returning six councillors), Didcot Park ward (returning five councillors) and Didcot All Saints ward (returning five councillors). The parish ward boundaries should reflect the proposed district ward boundaries in the area, as illustrated and named on the large map at the back of the report.

130 The parish of East Hagbourne is currently served by seven councillors and is not warded. To reflect our draft recommendations on a district level, we proposed that East Hagbourne parish should comprise two parish wards. We proposed that Millbrook parish ward be represented by three councillors and that East Hagbourne parish ward be represented by four councillors.

131 In response to our draft recommendations the District Council contended that East Hagbourne parish be varied by increasing the number of councillors to nine, with six in East Hagbourne parish ward and three in the Millbrook parish ward. In the light of the support that this proposal received from East Hagbourne Parish Council, we are adopting this proposal as part of our final recommendations.

Final Recommendation

East Hagbourne Parish Council should comprise nine councillors, an increase of two, representing two wards: East Hagbourne parish ward (comprising that part of East Hagbourne parish contained in the proposed Cholsey & Hagbourne district ward) returning six councillors and Millbrook parish ward (comprising that part of East Hagbourne parish contained in the proposed Didcot Northbourne district ward) returning three councillors. The boundary between the two parish wards should reflect the proposed district ward boundary, as illustrated and named on the large map at the back of the report.

132 The parish of Thame is currently divided into two parish wards; Thame North, returning eight councillors and Thame South, returning eight councillors. In the light of our draft recommendations for district warding in Thame Town, we proposed modifying the parish ward boundaries to that proposed by the District Council, to reflect the district wards in Thame district.

133 At Stage Three the District Council proposed that we amend the boundary slightly to include the car park in Thame South parish ward, providing for a more easily identifiable boundary. Having adopted this amendment as part of our final recommendations at district level, we also propose that the parish ward boundary be amended to reflect the district ward boundary.

Final Recommendation

Thame Parish should comprise 16 councillors, as at present, representing two wards: Thame North, returning eight councillors and Thame South, returning eight councillors. The boundary between the two parish wards should reflect the proposed district ward boundary, as illustrated and named on Map A3 in Appendix A.

134 The parish of Wallingford is currently represented by sixteen councillors and is not warded. At Stage Three we received a proposal from the District Council to ward the town, creating two parish wards, in order to facilitate district warding arrangements in the light of opposition to our draft proposal placing Brightwell-cum-Sotwell parish in a ward with Wallingford. Therefore as part of our final recommendations we propose creating two parish wards; Wallingford North, returning thirteen town councillors, and Wallingford South, returning three town councillors. The boundary between the parish wards is to reflect the district ward boundary between Wallingford North and Cholsey & Wallingford South district wards.

Final Recommendation

Wallingford Town should comprise 16 councillors, as at present, representing two wards: Wallingford North, returning thirteen councillors, and Wallingford South, returning three councillors. The boundary between the two parish wards should reflect the proposed district ward boundary between Wallingford North and Cholsey & Wallingford South district wards, as illustrated on Map A4 in Appendix A.

135 In our draft recommendations report we proposed that there should be no change to the electoral cycle of parish councils in the borough, and are confirming this as final.

Final Recommendation

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

Map 2: Final Recommendations for South Oxfordshire

6 WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

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

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

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

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

APPENDIX A

Final Recommendations for South Oxfordshire: Detailed Mapping

The following maps illustrate our proposed ward boundaries for the South Oxfordshire area.

Map A1 illustrates, in outline form, the proposed ward boundaries within the district and indicates the areas which are shown in more detail in Maps A2, A3, A4 and the large map at the back of the report.

Map A2 illustrates the proposed warding of Henley parish.

Map A3 illustrates the proposed boundary warding of Thame parish.

Map A4 illustrates the proposed warding of Wallingford town.

The **large map** inserted at the back of this report illustrates the proposed warding arrangements for Didcot.

Map A1: Final Recommendations for South Oxfordshire: Key Map

Map A2: Proposed warding of Henley parish

Map A3: Proposed warding of Thame parish

Map A4: Proposed warding of Wallingford town