

Final recommendations on the future electoral arrangements for North Hertfordshire in Hertfordshire

Further electoral review

May 2006

Translations and other formats

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What is the Boundary Committee for England?

The Boundary Committee for England is a committee of the Electoral Commission, an independent body set up by Parliament under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. It is responsible for conducting reviews as directed by the Electoral Commission or the Secretary of State.

Members of the Committee are:

Pamela Gordon (Chair)

Robin Gray

Joan Jones CBE

Ann M. Kelly

Professor Colin Mellors

Archie Gall (Director)

When conducting reviews our aim is to ensure that the number of electors represented by each councillor in an area is as nearly as possible the same, taking into account local circumstances. We can recommend changes to ward boundaries, the number of councillors and ward names. We can also recommend changes to the electoral arrangements of parish and town councils.

Executive summary

The Boundary Committee for England is the body responsible for conducting electoral reviews of local authorities. A further electoral review of North Hertfordshire is being undertaken to provide improved levels of electoral equality across the district. It aims to ensure that the number of voters represented by each district councillor is approximately the same. The Electoral Commission directed the Boundary Committee to undertake this review on 2 June 2004.

Current electoral arrangements

Under the existing arrangements four wards currently have electoral variances of more than 10% from the district average. The development that was anticipated in the five-year period between 1996 and 2001, which were the dates the Local Government Commission for England (LGCE) used when undertaking its review, was overestimated. However, in Graveley & Wymondley ward more development was undertaken, which has resulted in the ward having a particularly poor variance, with 72% more electors than the district average.

Every review is conducted in four stages, in this case:

Stage	Stage starts	Description
One	3 August 2004	Submission of proposals to us
Two	30 November 2004	Our analysis and deliberation
Three	21 June 2005	Publication of draft recommendations and consultation on them
Four	13 September 2005	Analysis of submissions received and formulation of final recommendations

Draft recommendations

During Stage One we proposed to retain the council size of 49. We made amendments to 20 of the districts ward boundaries in order to improve electoral equality. We received no compelling community identity argument at Stage One and therefore made amendments to the existing warding arrangements in order to improve electoral equality.

Responses to consultation

During Stage Three we received 33 submissions in relation to our draft recommendations. The District Council put forward revised electorate forecast figures, and resubmitted its Stage One proposal with additional argument. We received 17 submissions specifically opposing our revised Ermine and Weston & Sandon wards.

Analysis and final recommendations

Electorate figures

The District Council initially submitted electorate forecasts for the year 2008 projecting an increase in the electorate of approximately 3% from 93,999 to 96,599 over the five-year period from 2003 to 2008. At Stage Three it provided us with amended electorate forecast figures for 2008. It estimated that a further 2,399 electors would be in the district. We were concerned that this large increase was not picked up in the original forecast. After discussions with council officers and the Government Office for the East we propose accepting builds that have been granted permission, in accordance with paragraph 3.20 of the Electoral Commission guidance, an additional 936 electors. Therefore the revised electorate figure for 2008 will be 97,535.

Council size

We proposed retaining the existing council size of 49 in our draft recommendations. At Stage Three the District Council resubmitted its proposal for 50 councillors. It justified this in terms of its revised electorate figures and the best allocation of councillors across the district. However, we have not accepted all the revised figures and therefore we consider that a council size of 49 would still provide the district with the best representation.

General analysis

We are endorsing our draft recommendations as final in all but two areas. We are proposing to revert to the existing ward arrangements for Codicote, Kimpton, Weston & Sandon and Ermine wards.

What happens next?

All further correspondence on these final recommendations and the matters discussed in this report should be addressed to the Electoral Commission, which will not make an Order implementing them before 27 June 2006. The information in the representations will be available for public access once the Order has been made.

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The contact details above should only be used for implementation purposes.

This report is available to download at www.boundarycommittee.org.uk.

Table 1: Final recommendations: summary

Ward name (by district council area)	Number of councillors	Constituent district wards
1 Arbury	1	The existing Arbury ward (the parishes of Ashwell, Bygrave, Caldecote, Hinxworth, Newnham and Radwell)
2 Baldock East	1	The existing Baldock East ward (unparished); part of the existing Baldock Town ward (unparished)
3 Baldock Town	3	Part of the existing Baldock Town ward (unparished)
4 Cadwell	1	The existing Cadwell ward (the parishes of Holwell and Ickleford)
5 Chesfield	2	The existing Graveley & Wymondley ward (the parishes of Graveley and Wymondley)
6 Codicote	1	The existing Codicote ward (Village parish ward of Codicote parish)
7 Ermine	1	The existing Ermine ward (the parishes of Barkway, Barley, Kelshall, Nuthampstead, Reed and Therfield)
8 Hitchin Bearton	3	The existing Hitchin Bearton ward (unparished); part of the existing Hitchin Highbury ward (unparished)
9 Hitchin Highbury	3	Part of the existing Hitchin Highbury ward (unparished); part of the existing Hitchin Priory ward (unparished)
10 Hitchin Oughton	2	The existing Hitchin Oughton ward (unparished)
11 Hitchin Priory	2	Part of the existing Hitchin Priory ward (North parish ward of St Ippolyts parish and an unparished area)
12 Hitchin Walsworth	3	The existing Hitchin Walsworth ward (unparished); part of the existing Hitchin Highbury ward (unparished)

Table 1: Final recommendations: summary (continued)

Ward name (by district council area)	Number of councillors	Constituent district wards
13 Hitchwood, Offa & Hoo	3	The existing Hitchwood ward (the parishes of Langley and St Paul's Walden and South parish ward of St Ippolyts parish); the existing Hoo ward (the parishes of Hexton, King's Walden, Lilley and Preston and Cockernhoe parish ward of Offley parish); the existing Offa ward (the parish of Pirton and Offley parish ward of Offley parish)
14 Kimpton	1	The existing Kimpton ward (Kimpton parish)
15 Knebworth	2	The existing Knebworth ward (Knebworth parish and East parish ward of Codicote parish)
16 Letchworth East	2	Part of the existing Letchworth East ward (proposed Letchworth East parish ward of Letchworth Garden City parish)
17 Letchworth Grange	3	The existing Letchworth Grange ward; part of the existing Letchworth East ward (proposed Letchworth Grange parish ward of Letchworth Garden City parish)
18 Letchworth South East	3	The existing Letchworth South East ward; part of the existing Letchworth East ward; part of the existing Letchworth South West ward (proposed Letchworth South East parish ward of Letchworth Garden City parish)
19 Letchworth South West	3	Part of the existing Letchworth South West ward; part of the existing Letchworth East ward; part of the existing Letchworth Wilbury ward (proposed Letchworth South West parish ward of Letchworth Garden City parish)
20 Letchworth Wilbury	2	Part of the existing Letchworth Wilbury ward; part of the existing Letchworth East ward (proposed Letchworth Wilbury parish ward of Letchworth Garden City parish)
21 Royston Heath	2	Part of the existing Royston Heath ward; part of the existing Royston Meridian ward (proposed Royston Heath parish ward of Royston parish)

Table 1: Final recommendations: summary (continued)

Ward name (by district council area)	Number of councillors	Constituent district wards
22 Royston Meridian	2	Part of the existing Royston Meridian ward (proposed Royston Meridian parish ward of Royston parish)
23 Royston Palace	2	The existing Royston Palace ward; part of the existing Royston Heath ward (proposed Royston Palace ward of Royston parish)
24 Weston & Sandon	1	The existing Weston & Sandon ward (the parishes of Clothall, Rushden, Sandon, Wallington and Weston)

Notes:

1. The district comprises 35 parishes and the unparished towns of Baldock and Hitchin.
2. The maps accompanying this report illustrate the proposed wards outlined above.
3. We have made a number of minor boundary amendments to ensure that existing ward boundaries adhere to ground detail. These changes do not affect any electors.

Table 2: Final recommendations for North Hertfordshire district

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2003)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %	Electorate (2008)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
1	Arbury	1	2,064	2,064	8	2,095	2,095	5
2	Baldock East	1	2,099	2,099	9	2,099	2,099	5
3	Baldock Town	3	5,628	1,876	-2	5,691	1,897	-5
4	Cadwell	1	1,823	1,823	-5	1,828	1,828	-8
5	Chesfield	2	3,303	1,652	-14	4,505	2,253	13
6	Codicote	1	2,091	2,091	9	2,127	2,127	7
7	Ermine	1	2,010	2,010	5	2,041	2,041	3
8	Hitchin Bearton	3	5,645	1,882	-2	6,045	2,015	1
9	Hitchin Highbury	3	5,438	1,813	-6	5,722	1,907	-4
10	Hitchin Oughton	2	3,757	1,879	-2	3,757	1,879	-6

Table 2: Final recommendations for North Hertfordshire district (continued)

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2003)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %	Electorate (2008)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
11	Hitchin Priory	2	3,603	1,802	-6	3,778	1,889	-5
12	Hitchin Walsworth	3	5,951	1,984	3	5,958	1,986	0
13	Hitchwood, Offa & Hoo	3	5,557	1,852	-3	5,594	1,865	-6
14	Kimpton	1	1,762	1,762	-8	1,772	1,772	-11
15	Knebworth	2	4,041	2,021	5	4,051	2,026	2
16	Letchworth East	2	3,960	1,980	3	4,144	2,072	4
17	Letchworth Grange	3	5,803	1,934	1	5,946	1,982	0
18	Letchworth South East	3	5,816	1,939	1	5,819	1,940	-3
19	Letchworth South West	3	6,076	2,025	6	6,152	2,051	3
20	Letchworth Wilbury	2	4,016	2,008	5	4,268	2,134	7

Table 2: Final recommendations for North Hertfordshire district (continued)

Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2003)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %	Electorate (2008)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
21 Royston Heath	2	3,968	1,984	3	4,182	2,091	5
22 Royston Meridian	2	3,957	1,979	3	4,224	2,112	6
23 Royston Palace	2	4,032	2,016	5	4,119	2,060	3
24 Weston & Sandon	1	1,599	1,599	-17	1,618	1,618	-19
Totals	49	93,999	-	-	97,535	-	-
Averages	-	-	1,918	-	-	1,991	-

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

Source: Electorate figures are based on information provided by North Hertfordshire District Council.

1 Introduction

1 This report contains our final recommendations for the electoral arrangements for the district of North Hertfordshire.

2 At its meeting on 12 February 2004 the Electoral Commission agreed that the Boundary Committee should make on going assessments of electoral variances in all local authorities where the five-year forecast period following a periodic electoral review (PER) has elapsed. More specifically, it was agreed that there should be closer scrutiny where either:

- 30% of wards in an authority had electoral variances of over 10% from the average or
- any single ward had a variance of more than 30% from the average

3 The intention of such scrutiny was to establish the reasons behind the continuing imbalances, to consider likely future trends, and to assess what action, if any, was appropriate to rectify the situation.

4 This is our first review of the electoral arrangements of North Hertfordshire. North Hertfordshire district's last review was carried out by the Local Government Commission for England (LGCE), which reported to the Secretary of State in February 1998. An Order implementing new electoral arrangements was made on 16 October 1998 and the first elections on the new arrangements took place in May 1999.

5 In carrying out our work, the Boundary Committee has to work within a statutory framework.¹ This refers to the need to:

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

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

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

7 Our task is to make recommendations to the Electoral Commission on the number of councillors who should serve on a council, and the number, boundaries and names of wards. We can also propose changes to the electoral arrangements for any parish and town councils in the district. We do not in these reviews consider changes to the external boundaries of areas.

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

8 The broad objective of an electoral review is to achieve, as far as possible, equal representation across the district as a whole, i.e. to ensure that all councillors in the local authority represent similar numbers of electors. Schemes which would result in, or retain, an electoral imbalance of over 10% in any ward will have to be fully justified. Any imbalances of 20% or more should only arise in the most exceptional circumstances, and will require the strongest justification.

9 Electoral equality, in the sense of each elector in a local authority having a 'vote of equal weight' when it comes to the election of councillors, is a fundamental democratic principle. Accordingly, the objective of an electoral review is to ensure that the number of electors represented by each councillor is, as nearly as possible, the same across a district. In practice, each councillor cannot represent exactly the same number of electors given geographical and other constraints, including the make-up and distribution of communities. However, our aim in any review is to recommend wards that are as close to the district average as possible in terms of the number of electors per councillor, while also taking account of evidence in relation to community identities and effective and convenient local government.

10 We are not prescriptive about council size and acknowledge that there are valid reasons for variations between local authorities. However, we believe that any proposals relating to council size, whether these are for an increase, a reduction or the retention of the existing size, should be supported by strong evidence and arguments. Indeed, we believe that consideration of the appropriate council size should be the starting point for our reviews, and that whatever size of council is proposed to us should be developed and argued in the context of the authority's internal political management structures, put in place following the Local Government Act 2000. It should also reflect the changing role of councillors in the new structure.

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

12 In addition, we do not accept that an increase or decrease in the electorate of the authority should automatically result in a consequent increase or decrease in the number of councillors. Similarly, we do not accept that changes should be made to the size of a council simply to make it more consistent with the size of neighbouring or similarly sized authorities; the circumstances of one authority may be very different from another's. We will seek to ensure that our recommended council size recognises all the factors and achieves a good allocation of councillors across the district.

13 Where multi-member wards are proposed, we believe that the number of councillors to be returned from each ward should not exceed three, other than in very exceptional circumstances. Numbers in excess of three could result in an unacceptable dilution of accountability to the electorate and we have not, to date, prescribed any wards with more than three councillors.

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

Table 3: Stages of the review

Stage	Stage starts	Description
One	3 August 2004	Submission of proposals to us
Two	30 November 2004	Our analysis and deliberation
Three	21 June 2005	Publication of draft recommendations and consultation on them
Four	13 September 2005	Analysis of submissions received and formulation of final recommendations

15 Stage One began on 3 August 2004, when we wrote to North Hertfordshire District Council inviting proposals for future electoral arrangements. We also notified Hertfordshire Police Authority, the Local Government Association, Hertfordshire Local Councils Association, parish councils in the district, Members of Parliament with constituency interests in the district, Members of the European Parliament for the Eastern Region and the headquarters of the main political parties. We placed a notice in the local press, issued a press release and invited North Hertfordshire District Council to publicise the review further. The closing date for receipt of representations, the end of Stage One, was 29 November 2004.

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

17 Stage Three began on 21 June 2005 with the publication of the report *Draft recommendations on the future electoral arrangements for North Hertfordshire in Hertfordshire*, and ended on 12 September 2005.

18 During Stage Four we reconsidered the draft recommendations in the light of the Stage Three consultation, decided whether to modify them, and now submit final recommendations to the Electoral Commission. It is now for the Commission to accept, modify or reject our final recommendations. If the Electoral Commission accepts the recommendations, with or without modification, it will make an electoral change Order. the Electoral Commission will determine when any changes come into effect.

Equal opportunities

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

- The general duty set out in Section 71(1) of the Race Relations Act 1976 and the statutory Code of Practice on the Duty to Promote Race Equality (Commission for Racial Equality, May 2002), i.e. to have due regard to the need to:
 - eliminate unlawful racial discrimination
 - promote equality of opportunity and
 - promote good relations between people of different racial groups

National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (ANOB) and the Broads

20 The Boundary Committee has also had regard to:

- Section 11A(2) of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 (as inserted by section 62 of the Environment Act 1995). This states that, in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in a National Park, any relevant authority shall have regard to the Park's purposes. If there is a conflict between those purposes, a relevant authority shall attach greater weight to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the Park.
- Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. This states that, in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in an AONB, a relevant authority shall have regard to the purpose of the AONB.
- Section 17A of the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads Act (as inserted by Section 97 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000). This states that, in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in the Broads, a relevant authority shall have regard to the purposes of the Broads.

2 Current electoral arrangements

21 The district of North Hertfordshire was created in the structural review of 1972, which brought together the former urban districts of Baldock, Hitchin, Letchworth and Royston with the surrounding rural villages, covering 37,357 hectares. Letchworth was the first garden city, planned and founded in 1903, and has since had great influence on the development of town planning of both shopping areas and housing estates.

22 The electorate of the district is 93,999 (December 2003). The Council presently has 49 members who are elected from 26 wards. Eight wards are represented by three members, seven by two members and 11 by a single member. The district average is calculated by dividing the total electorate of the district by the total number of councillors representing them on the council. At present, each councillor represents a district average of 1,918 electors (93,999 divided by 49), which the District Council forecasts will increase to 1,991 (using the amended figures we have accepted) by the year 2008 if the present number of councillors is maintained (97,535 divided by 49).

23 During the last review of North Hertfordshire, the District Council forecast there would be an increase of approximately 3,788 electors between 1996 and 2001. However, electorate growth since that time has resulted in a significant amount of electoral inequality between the wards. To compare levels of electoral inequality between wards, we calculated the extent to which the number of electors per councillor in each ward varies from the district average in percentage terms.

24 Data from the December 2003 electoral register showed that under these arrangements electoral equality in the district met criteria that the Electoral Commission agreed would warrant further investigation. The electoral variance of Graveley & Wymondley ward varies from the district average by 72%. Having noted that this level of electoral equality is unlikely to improve, and is in fact forecast to worsen significantly, the Electoral Commission directed the Boundary Committee to undertake a review of the electoral arrangements of North Hertfordshire District Council on 2 June 2004.

Table 4: Existing electoral arrangements in North Hertfordshire district

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2003)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %	Electorate (2008)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
1	Arbury	1	2,064	2,064	8	2,095	2,095	5
2	Baldock East	1	1,794	1,794	-6	1,794	1,794	-10
3	Baldock Town	3	5,933	1,978	3	5,996	1,999	0
4	Cadwell	1	1,823	1,823	-5	1,828	1,828	-8
5	Codicote	1	2,091	2,091	9	2,127	2,127	7
6	Ermine	1	2,010	2,010	5	2,041	2,041	3
7	Graveley & Wymondley	1	3,303	3,303	72	4,505	4,505	126
8	Hitchin Bearton	3	5,470	1,823	-5	5,870	1,957	-2
9	Hitchin Highbury	3	5,586	1,862	-3	5,870	1,957	-2
10	Hitchin Oughton	2	3,757	1,879	-2	3,757	1,879	-6
11	Hitchin Priory	2	4,061	2,031	6	4,236	2,118	6
12	Hitchin Walsworth	3	5,520	1,840	-4	5,527	1,842	-7

Table 4: Existing electoral arrangements in North Hertfordshire district (continued)

Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2003)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %	Electorate (2008)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
13 Hitchwood	1	2,064	2,064	8	2,090	2,090	5
14 Hoo	1	1,843	1,843	-4	1,845	1,845	-7
15 Kimpton	1	1,762	1,762	-8	1,772	1,772	-11
16 Knebworth	2	4,041	2,021	5	4,051	2,026	2
17 Letchworth East	3	5,334	1,778	-7	5,518	1,839	-8
18 Letchworth Grange	3	5,127	1,709	-11	5,270	1,757	-12
19 Letchworth South East	3	5,287	1,762	-8	5,290	1,763	-11
20 Letchworth South West	3	5,790	1,930	1	5,866	1,955	-2
21 Letchworth Wilbury	2	4,133	2,067	8	4,385	2,193	10
22 Offa	1	1,650	1,650	-14	1,659	1,659	-17
23 Royston Heath	2	4,038	2,019	5	4,252	2,126	7

Table 4: Existing electoral arrangements in North Hertfordshire district (continued)

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2003)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %	Electorate (2008)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
24	Royston Meridian	2	4,041	2,021	5	4,308	2,154	8
25	Royston Palace	2	3,878	1,939	1	3,965	1,983	0
26	Weston & Sandon	1	1,599	1,599	-17	1,618	1,618	-19
Totals		49	93,999	-	-	97,535		
Averages		-	-	1,918	-	-	1,991	-

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 2003, the councillor in Weston & Sandon ward had 17% fewer electors than average, while the councillor in Graveley & Wymondley ward had 72% more electors than the average. Figures have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Source: Electorate figures are based on information provided by North Hertfordshire District Council.

3 Draft recommendations

25 During Stage One five submissions were received, including a district-wide scheme from the District Council. We also received representations from three parish councils and one town council. 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 North Hertfordshire in Hertfordshire*.

26 Our draft recommendations were based on a combination of the existing wards and our own proposals. The District Council did not suggest any boundary amendments in its scheme, and proposed retaining the existing arrangements with the exception of adding another councillor to Graveley & Wymondley ward, making it a two-member ward. We did not receive any substantial argument to maintain the existing ward arrangements. We therefore, for the most part, looked to improve on electoral equality within the district. This led to a reduction in the number of single-member wards in North Hertfordshire. We noted that we would be prepared to move away from these proposals should we receive compelling arguments and evidence in favour of single-member wards that meet our statutory criteria at Stage Three. We proposed that:

- North Hertfordshire District Council should be served by 49 councillors, the same as at present, representing 23 wards, three fewer than at present.
- The boundaries of 20 of the existing wards should be modified, while three wards should retain their existing boundaries.
- There should be new parish warding arrangements for Letchworth Garden City and Royston parishes, where the parish ward boundaries should reflect the proposed district ward boundaries.

27 Our proposals would have resulted in significant improvements in electoral equality, with the number of electors per councillor in 22 of the 23 wards varying by no more than 10% from the district average. By 2008, 21 of the 23 wards would have levels of electoral representation varying by no more than 10% from the average.

4 Response to consultation

28 During the consultation on the draft recommendations we received 33 representations, all of which may be inspected at both our offices and those of the District Council. Representations may also be viewed on our website at www.boundarycommittee.org.uk.

North Hertfordshire District Council

29 The District Council submitted revised electorate forecast figures across the district for 2008. It resubmitted its Stage One proposal to increase the council size by one from 49 to 50, and to retain the existing arrangements across the district with the exception of having an additional councillor representing the proposed Chesfield ward. The District Council supported our proposals for the four wards that did not have boundary changes. However, it opposed all our other ward recommendations. It considered that under its revised electorate figures for the district Letchworth town would be entitled to 14 councillors and therefore a better allocation would be achieved under a council size of 50.

30 The Council provided explanations for each of its proposed wards. The Council raised its general opposition to multi-member rural wards, and it also highlighted that it considered using the centre of roads as boundaries in preference to boundaries behind properties in the urban areas. It also raised concern about the effect that making amendments to boundaries would have on voters, and considered that this would lead to a 'diminution of community cohesion [...and ...] disenfranchise the electorate with a resultant reduction in an already low turnout'.

Political groups

31 North Hertfordshire District Council Liberal Democrat Group (the Liberal Democrats) considered that no changes should be made outside of the proposed Chesfield ward. However, they accepted that we might not find this acceptable, and put forward a combination of support and alternative proposals for the district.

32 North East Hertfordshire Conservative Association (the Conservatives) commented on wards in the north east of the district. It considered that the existing arrangements should be retained as there was no reason to make changes. It also considered that the Great Ashby area should be in a ward on its own.

Member of Parliament

33 One submission was received from Oliver Heald MP. He considered that the changes to the wards would lead to voter confusion and reduce turnout. He considered that the ward pattern should remain as it is with an additional single-member Great Ashby ward.

Parish and town councils

34 Representations were received from 10 parish and town councils. Codicote, Kelshall, Kimpton, Preston and Therfield parish councils and Royston Town Council opposed the draft proposals and considered that the existing arrangements should

be retained in their respective areas. Weston Parish Council made comments regarding the proposals for Weston & Sandon ward. Letchworth Garden City Council had no comments to make at this stage. Ickleford Parish Council was pleased with our draft recommendations for the parish. Pirton Parish Council opposed our proposed Hitchwood, Offa & Hoo ward.

District Councillors

35 Councillor Marshall (Ermine ward), opposed our draft recommendations for Weston & Sandon and Ermine wards.

Other representations

36 A further 18 representations were received from local residents. 17 of these were from local residents of Kelshall or Therfield villages and opposing our draft recommendations for the area. We also received a submission regarding numerous areas across the district from one local resident and opposition to the Hitchwood, Offa & Hoo ward from another.

5 Analysis and final recommendations

37 We have now finalised our conclusions on the electoral arrangements for North Hertfordshire.

38 As described earlier, the prime aim in considering the most appropriate electoral arrangements for North Hertfordshire is to achieve electoral equality. In doing so we have regard to section 13(5) of the Local Government Act 1992 (as amended) which defines the need to:

- the need to secure effective and convenient local government
- reflect the identities and interests of local communities and
- secure the matters in respect of equality of representation referred to in paragraph 3(2)(a) of Schedule 11 to the Local Government Act 1972

39 Schedule 11 to the Local Government Act 1972 refers to the number of electors per councillor being 'as nearly as may be, the same in every ward of the district or borough'. In relation to Schedule 11, our recommendations are not intended to be based solely on existing electorate figures, but also on estimated changes in the number and distribution of local government electors likely to take place over the next five years. We must also have regard to the desirability of fixing clearly identifiable boundaries and to maintaining local ties.

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

41 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 identities and interests. Five-year forecasts of changes in electorate should also be taken into account, and we aim to recommend a scheme which provides improved electoral equality over this period.

42 The recommendations do not affect county, district or parish external boundaries, local taxes, or result in changes to postcodes. Nor is there any evidence that these recommendations will have an adverse effect on house prices, or car and house insurance premiums. Our proposals do not take account of parliamentary boundaries. We are not, therefore, able to take into account any representations which are based on these issues.

Electorate figures

43 As part of the previous review of North Hertfordshire, the District Council forecast an increase in the electorate of 4% between 1996 and 2001. The actual increase was just 2%. However, between 2001 and the start of this review the electorate had increased by 4%. The District Council had expected growth in Graveley & Wymondley ward, and it was accepted that this ward would have a large electoral imbalance by 2001 (35%). However, between 2001 and 2004 extensive growth occurred in this ward, and further growth is expected. At Stage One the District

Council submitted electorate forecasts for the year 2008, projecting an increase in the electorate of approximately 3% from 93,999 to 96,599 over the five-year period from 2003 to 2008. It expected almost half of the growth to be in Graveley & Wymondley ward due to the expansion of the Great Ashby development. In order to prepare these forecasts, the Council estimated rates and locations of housing development with regard to local development plans, the expected rate of building over the five-year period and assumed occupancy rates.

44 The District Council amended the initial electorate figures it provided during Stage One by approximately 40 electors. It said that it had failed to include some planned housing in the Great Ashby development of Graveley & Wymondley ward and also overestimated a small number in Knebworth ward that should have been included in Codicote ward.

45 In its Stage Three submission the District Council provided us with amended electorate forecast figures for 2008. It estimated that a further 2,399 electors would be in the district, making a total forecast projection of 98,928 for 2008, an increase in electorate of 5% since 2003 across the district. The majority of these (1,231 electors) it said would be in Letchworth town, with a similarly large number in Hitchin town (1,066 electors) and the remainder in the towns of Baldock and Royston. The Council stated that this was because 'new projects have come on line.'

46 We were concerned that such a large increase in electors, almost double that which was originally forecast, was now predicted for the district, and that this was not picked up in the original forecast. We met with officers of the District Council who provided us with further information on this expected growth in terms of planning permissions. The new developments that the council had taken into consideration when making its revised forecast figures were a mixture of developments with permissions granted and applications that were expected to be submitted during 2006 and in one instance an application that had been refused, although it was still within the appeals period.

47 We also obtained advice relating to the new forecast figures from the Government Office for the East of England to gauge its opinion of the projected builds in terms of the information the District Council provided it with. It considered that the district would require an increase 'in the build rate (currently 550 rounded per annum) to achieve the totals they [the Council] sent'. We were concerned that the projected figures were substantially greater than those expected by the Government Office.

48 We recognise that forecasting electorates is difficult. However, having considered all the information available to us we did not consider that there was enough information to justify the new total electorate forecast. We propose to accept builds that have been granted permission, in accordance with paragraph 3.20 of the Electoral Commission's *Guidance*, which states that 'forecasts should take account of the development expected to be completed within the five-year period, in accordance with planning permissions already granted.' Therefore the revised electorate figure for 2008 will be 97,535. We have found the electorate forecast figures for North Hertfordshire to be a particularly difficult issue, as the figures have changed through out the process. We have therefore taken the approach of only taking account of those developments where there is a degree of certainty and where permissions have been granted.

Council size

49 North Hertfordshire District Council presently has 49 members. During Stage One the District Council proposed a council of 50 members, an increase of one. It considered that 'there should be no substantial change to the total number of members on the council' adding that 'there are no areas of the decision making process that are a cause for concern due to the lack of member involvement'. It therefore considered that increasing the number of members by one would 'provide adequately for the electorate of Graveley & Wymondley' ward.

50 After considering the proposal received at Stage One we did not consider that we had received any evidence on which to base a decision on council size for North Hertfordshire. We did not consider we had been provided with sufficient discussion of the ways in which the proposed council size increase would better reflect the District Council's political management structures, taking into account the representational elements of councillors' work in order to secure effective and convenient local government. The only justification given for the increase in council size was for improving electoral equality in one area, Graveley & Wymondley ward. In our view, on its own such justification is insufficient to warrant an increase in council size. We were therefore in the position of having to reach our own conclusions on the most appropriate council size for North Hertfordshire District Council. To assist us in reaching an informed decision we asked the District Council to provide us with more information regarding the council's political management structure and councillors' representational work, in order that we would be able to recommend the most appropriate council size for the district.

51 The District Council responded to this request saying that 'the Council did not set out to ignore any advice we received from your team [...but...] believed that the key issue to be considered was electoral equality and based our submission on that'. The District Council continued that the additional evidence submitted 'fully supports [the] assertion that in general there should be no significant change to the size of the authority', and considered that 'an increase of one, whilst not significant, seems an acceptable resolution to the electoral equality issue in Graveley & Wymondley'.

52 In the further information provided, the District Council outlined the new system of governance that it had adopted in 2001. The Cabinet consists of the Leader and seven councillors who are each assigned a portfolio. The District Council went on to describe its structure in detail, referring to its scrutiny committees, standards committee, area committees and other meetings and partnerships. It detailed meetings attended, and said that excluding extra meetings the District Council and scrutiny committees hold approximately 120 meetings per year. Combined with this evidence, we examined the distribution of councillors across the district, compared with the distribution of the electorate, in order to see which council size provides the best fit between the four towns and the rural areas. From this it was possible to see that a council size of 50 produces an incorrect allocation of councillors between the towns and the rural areas. It would lead to an imbalance in the number of electors represented by each councillor, and would necessitate combining rural and urban areas, which we are reluctant to do, as we do not consider that this would reflect a community of identity.

53 Under the existing and original projected electorate figures, used in our draft recommendations, Letchworth is over-represented by one councillor, electing 14

members while being entitled to only 13, and the rural area is under-represented by one councillor, electing 12 councillors while being entitled to 13. This remained the case under the District Council's proposals for a council size of 50. Under a council size of 50, Hitchin would be entitled to 12.91 (13) councillors, Letchworth to 13.35 (13), Royston to 6.44 (6), Baldock to 4.03 (4) and the rural areas to 13.27 (13) councillors. When these figures are rounded the district is actually only entitled to 49 councillors. The District Council's proposed council size of 50 attempted to address the under-represented rural area (Graveley & Wymondley ward), but it would not solve the over-representation in Letchworth. Therefore under our draft recommendations we proposed to retain a council size of 49.

54 During Stage Three the Council and the Liberal Democrats commented on council size. The Council resubmitted its proposal for a council size of 50. It considered that given its amended electorate forecast figures Letchworth town would be entitled to 14 councillors. With the Council's entire forecast of 98,928 Letchworth town would be entitled to 13.65 (14) councillors and in fact a council size of 49 would result in an incorrect allocation of councillors between the towns and rural areas. We note that the District Council's proposed increase in council size is linked to a proposed increase in the electorate forecast. However, given that we have only accepted a revised electorate forecast figure of 97,535 for 2008, Letchworth remains entitled to 13.23 (13) councillors as under our draft recommendations. Under the existing and this new projected electorate Letchworth remains over-represented by one councillor, electing 14 members when only being entitled to 13. The Liberal Democrats supported our proposed council size of 49. It stated that 'there is no compelling case for any change and the current size allows an appropriate balance ... between the towns and the rural areas.'

55 Therefore, having looked at the size and distribution of the electorate, the geography and other characteristics of the area, together with the responses received, we conclude that the statutory criteria would best be met by a council of 49 members.

Electoral equality

56 Electoral equality, in the sense of each elector in a local authority having a vote of equal weight when it comes to the election of councillors, is a fundamental democratic principle. The Electoral Commission expects the Boundary Committee's recommendations to provide for high levels of electoral equality, with variances normally well below 10%. Therefore when making recommendations we will not simply aim for electoral variances of under 10%. Where no justification is provided for specific ward proposals we will look to improve electoral equality, seeking to ensure that each councillor represents as close to the same number of electors as is possible, providing this can be achieved without compromising the reflection of the identities and interests of local communities and securing effective and convenient local government. We take the view that any proposals that would result in, or retain, electoral imbalances of over 10% from the average in any ward will have to be fully justified, and evidence provided which would justify such imbalances in terms of community identity or effective and convenient local government. We will rarely recommend wards with electoral variances of 20% or more, and any such variances proposed by local interested parties will require the strongest justification in terms of the other two statutory criteria.

57 During Stage One, in the absence of any strong community identity argument or evidence, we sought to improve electoral equality in North Hertfordshire. As we did not receive any opposition to the existing wards or submissions that suggested that they do not provide effective and convenient local government and represent community of identities, we tried to base our recommendations on the existing wards. However, because of the lack of strong evidence, we looked to improve electoral equality even in those areas where the existing arrangements provide electoral variances under 10% from the district average. Therefore, in the urban areas in particular, we made amendments to the existing ward boundaries, and in two rural areas in the west and south of the district we adopted the approach of combining wards in order to improve electoral equality. However, we accepted variances of over 10% in Chesfield and Weston & Sandon wards because having considered the options available to us we consider that these facilitate the best combination of the statutory criteria for the whole district.

58 During Stage Three we received greater levels of community identity evidence, which has meant that we have moved away from electoral equality in order to better reflect communities within the district. We have moved away from our draft recommendations in two areas, leading to higher levels of electoral inequality because of the strong community identity arguments we received for these areas during Stage Three. The Council's revised electorate forecast figures have meant that electoral equality across the district has altered slightly in some proposed wards since the draft recommendations as result of a different district average. We have not attempted to further amend boundaries because of this as we consider that the changes in electoral equality are minimal.

59 The district average is calculated by dividing the total electorate of the district, 97,535, by the total number of councillors representing them on the council, 49 under our final proposals. Therefore the average number of electors per councillor under our final recommendations is 1,991 for 2008.

General analysis

60 During Stage One the District Council did not suggest any boundary amendments in its scheme, and proposed retaining the existing arrangements with the exception of adding another councillor to Graveley & Wymondley ward, making it a two-member ward. We did not receive any substantial argument to maintain the existing ward arrangements, and therefore for the most part we looked to improve on electoral equality within the district. We recommended 23 wards in the district: five single-member wards, 10 two-member wards and eight three-member wards. In the urban areas we proposed small boundary amendments to all but one of the existing wards to achieve better levels of electoral equality, and in Letchworth town to address the problem of the additional councillor currently representing the area. Although there was a lack of substantive evidence in the submissions we received, we took account of the issue of community identities where possible following a visit to the area. Our draft recommendations were a combination of the existing arrangements and our own proposals.

61 During Stage Three we received both opposition to and support for our draft recommendations across the district. We received particular opposition to our proposals for the rural wards of Ermine, Weston & Sandon, Codicote, Kimpton, Hitchwood, Offa and Hoo. As a result of the consultation on our draft

recommendations, we considered that we received strong and convincing arguments in terms of community identity leading us to amend our proposed Ermine, Weston & Sandon and Codicote & Kimpton wards. We received extensive evidence regarding the relationship between the parishes of Kelshall and Therfield, which would be separated under our draft recommendations for Weston & Sandon and Ermine wards, detailing community groups, clubs, facilities, and school as well as a combined newsletter for the parishes. For Codicote and Kimpton wards we received a similar level of evidence as to why the areas had little in common and would be better represented separately. In each case we are reverting to the existing arrangements for these areas. We are not convinced by the evidence given in opposition to our three-member Hitchwood, Offa & Hoo ward or to the urban wards. We do not consider that the evidence we received regarding our draft recommendations in these areas was convincing compared to the evidence we received for those areas we are proposing to amend at this stage. We do not feel we have received enough evidence to propose any amendments to our draft recommendations for the remainder of the district.

62 We received general comments from the District Council concerning the use of the middle of roads as boundaries. The district Council considered that these are 'key determinants of the public perception of what defines a community.' It continued that boundaries following the backs of properties to be 'less recognisable.' We acknowledge these comments, however we also note paragraphs 3.42 and 3.43 from *the Guidance* that states that 'there can be no set rules on where ward boundaries should be located... in more suburban areas a road may effectively act as a focus for communities so that a boundary line is best placed behind the houses on one side of the road. There are thus no set rules on ward boundaries. The key issues to remember are that they must relate to firm ground detail, and be capable of being mapped.' In North Hertfordshire we have sought to provide boundaries that follow the Guidance above and reflect the statutory criteria.

Warding arrangements

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

- Letchworth East, Letchworth Grange, Letchworth South East, Letchworth South West and Letchworth Wilbury wards (page 33)
- Hitchin Bearton, Hitchin Highbury, Hitchin Oughton, Hitchin Priory and Hitchin Walsworth wards (page 37)
- Baldock East and Baldock Town wards (page 39)
- Royston Heath, Royston Meridian and Royston Palace wards (page 41)
- Graveley & Wymondley ward (page 42)
- Arbury, Ermine and Weston & Sandon wards (page 44)
- Cadwell, Hitchwood, Hoo and Offa wards (page 46)
- Codicote, Kimpton and Knebworth wards (page 49)

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

Letchworth East, Letchworth Grange, Letchworth South East, Letchworth South West and Letchworth Wilbury wards

65 Under the existing arrangements Letchworth comprises the five wards of Letchworth East, Letchworth Grange, Letchworth South East, Letchworth South West and Letchworth Wilbury. Letchworth town is contained wholly within Letchworth Garden City parish, and each parish ward reflects the district ward boundaries of the same name. Table 4 (pages 20 – 22) outlines the existing electoral variances for 2003 and also the variances which the wards are forecast to have by 2008 if the existing arrangements remained in place.

66 During Stage One we received one submission relating to Letchworth, which was from the District Council. It did not propose any changes to the electoral arrangements for Letchworth. It provided some community identity arguments for the current wards, but much of its evidence was descriptive of the roads and boundaries of each ward, rather than providing details of why exactly these particular wards could not be altered during this review. We therefore did not consider that the argument put forward by the District Council was strong enough to retain the existing warding arrangements in the town.

67 As discussed in the 'Council size' section of this report (page 29), we noted that under a council size of 49 (and also a council size of 50, as proposed by the District Council) the area of Letchworth town is entitled to 13 councillors, not 14 as under the current arrangements. Therefore it was not possible to retain the existing arrangements and provide a good level of electoral equality for the town. We therefore proposed our own amendments to the five wards to take account of the councillor allocation and improve electoral equality. Our proposals were based on the existing ward pattern in Letchworth.

68 We proposed to include all those properties in the Longmead and Hawthorn Hill area as well as the properties on Norton Road from the existing Letchworth East ward in our proposed three-member Letchworth Grange ward. We also proposed to transfer properties on Cowslip Hill from Letchworth East ward into the existing Letchworth Wilbury ward. We considered that these properties would be better placed with their neighbours across the road in light of the amendment outlined above, which would mean that these properties were no longer in the same ward as the rest of Cowslip Hill and other neighbouring properties.

69 To further improve the electoral equality in Letchworth Wilbury we proposed transferring properties from the Marmet Avenue area into the existing Letchworth South West ward, as well as properties in the area east of Bridge Road from the existing Letchworth East ward. We acknowledged that the railway line is a strong existing boundary; however, as it can be crossed at both Norton Way North and Bridge Road, we considered that these two areas would have suitable access to the rest of our proposed three-member Letchworth South West ward.

70 We proposed to transfer the properties in the Jackman's Place area, which we considered a distinct area of housing, from our proposed Letchworth East ward into Letchworth South East ward. We considered that there were good links between this area and Letchworth South East ward, and confirmed this on visiting the area. We also proposed to transfer all the properties on Whitethorn Lane from Letchworth South West ward into our proposed three-member Letchworth South East ward.

Again we considered that these areas had good road links to the rest of the ward and that this proposal would provide improved electoral equality. Under our draft recommendations (using the District Council's original electoral forecast) all our proposed Letchworth wards were expected to have electoral variances within 3% of the district average by 2008.

71 During Stage Three we received five submissions in relation to Letchworth town. The District Council opposed our draft recommendations and considered that under its revised electoral forecast for 2008 Letchworth town would be entitled to 14 councillors. The District Council provided arguments for each of its proposed wards. In general for all the wards it considered that roads should be used as ward boundaries rather than creating boundaries behind the backs of properties. It referred to Section 1.12a of The Electoral Commission's *Guidance* to conducting electoral reviews, which mentions 'the desirability of fixing ward boundaries which are and will remain easily identifiable.' The District Council considered that boundaries that followed the backs of properties are not easily identifiable.

72 The District Council addressed each of our proposed amendments in turn. Regarding properties along the Norton Road, it considered that the backs of houses were not an identifiable boundary; it also noted that these residents use shops, a post office, church and schools in Letchworth East. The Council considered that the Longmead and Hawthorn Road area we proposed transferring from Letchworth East has 'little relationship with the Grange estate.' It said 'younger children generally attend the Wilbury Primary School and shopping is carried out in the town centre'. It considered that transferring the area east of Bridge Road from Letchworth East into Letchworth South West, as we proposed, would create a 'disjointed community' in Letchworth South West ward. Regarding the removal of Jackmans Place from Letchworth East ward to Letchworth South East, it considered that it 'is a wholly separate and identifiable community with very strong links to the Pixmore area.' It noted that the housing in Jackmans Place was different from that in Letchworth South ward. It noted that schools and recreational areas for Jackmans Place residents are in Letchworth East ward. It considered that the residents of Letchworth South East have their own shops, schools and community centre. It considered that this proposal for Letchworth South East would create a 'diverse group' and that this would 'possibly weaken further the community that does exist.'

73 The District Council opposed our amendments to Letchworth South West ward. It opposed the transfer of Whitehorn Lane into Letchworth South East ward, considering that this road is different to areas such as the Lordship Farm Estate, where houses are more recently built and have smaller gardens. It also opposed transferring the Marmet Avenue area into the ward, again arguing that this would create a 'disjointed community.' It considered this area to be 'physically separate' from Letchworth South West ward, and uses facilities in Letchworth Wilbury ward.

74 The Liberal Democrats supported our proposed Letchworth Grange, Letchworth Wilbury and Letchworth East wards. It did, however, consider that the area north of Jackmans Place should also be transferred out of Letchworth East ward in light of the District Council's revised figures. It proposed an alternative Letchworth Central ward to comprise the area north of Hitchin Road from our proposed Letchworth South West ward. It considered that this would cover the majority of the 'original Letchworth Garden City.' It considered that the remainder of our proposed Letchworth South West ward should be combined with part of Letchworth South East ward and the

properties west of Letchworth Gate to form a two-member Letchworth South ward. It proposed that the remainder of our proposed Letchworth South East ward form a new Letchworth South East ward, with the addition of the area known as the Skills Centre site, north of Jackmans Place. Under our revised figures, the Liberal Democrats proposed Letchworth Central, Letchworth South and Letchworth South East wards would have electoral variances 2% and 2% above and 3% below the district average by 2008, respectively.

75 The Conservatives considered that changes to the town would 'damage community cohesion.' It considered that Letchworth Grange is centred around the 'Grange shops' and has its own community centre. It stated that the Longmead and Hawthorn area has nothing in common with Letchworth Grange. It considered that there is no evidence to justify amending any of the boundaries. It considered that our proposals for Letchworth Wilbury ignored natural boundaries of roads and the railway line. It considered that the Marmet Road area we propose to move out of Letchworth Wilbury ward has 'no ties' with the Letchworth South West and stated that properties east of Bridge Road that we propose transferring into Letchworth South West have no common community interest. It considered that our argument for the transferral of properties on Cowslip Hill conflicted with our proposals for Whitehorn Lane. It opposed our proposals to transfer Jackmans Estate into Letchworth South East, it considered that the main Baldock road provides a natural boundary, and that Jackmans Pace has more in common with the Pixmore area.

76 A resident of the area opposed the transfer of Jackmans Place into Letchworth South East. He considered that it is a distinct area and that the A505 is a busy road separating the areas. He suggested a two-member ward based around Jackmans Estate, or the ward could be extended into the Howards Drive area. He also considered that our proposals for Letchworth Grange and Letchworth Wilbury wards are reasonable. Letchworth Parish Council had no comment to make.

77 Having considered the representations received we have decided to endorse the draft recommendations for Letchworth town wards as final. We note that the District Council wished to retain the existing wards. However, as outlined previously in the Electorate forecast and Council size sections of this report (pages 27 – 30), we have not accepted the District Council's full revised electorate forecast for the district, and are still proposing a council size of 49. Therefore Letchworth is still only entitled to 13 councillors, as under our draft recommendations. Therefore it is not possible to retain the existing boundaries for the wards in Letchworth.

78 We note the District Council's preference for boundaries to follow roads however, given the change in council members in the town, it is not possible to consistently use main roads as boundaries and achieve good levels of electoral equality. We note, too, that part of the existing boundary follows the backs of properties on the southern side of Norton Road as does the existing Whitethorn Lane boundary between Letchworth South East and Letchworth South West wards. We also note paragraphs 3.42 and 3.43 of the *Guidance* which states that 'there can be no set rules on where ward boundaries should be located ... in more suburban areas a road may effectively act as a focus for communities so that a boundary line is best placed behind the houses on one side of the road. There are thus no set rules on ward boundaries. The key issues to remember are that they must relate to firm ground detail, and be capable of being mapped.' We therefore consider that in this area our proposed boundary remains satisfactory.

79 We also note the support we received for the transfer of properties along Norton Road from the Liberal Democrats and that a resident considered this reasonable. We note the opposition to our proposals for the Longmead and Hawthorn Hill area. We do not consider that the District Council's argument to retain it in the existing Letchworth East ward very compelling, particularly as neither the town centre, nor Wilbury School which the Council stated the area uses, is in the existing Letchworth East ward. We did not consider that the Conservatives provided us with any convincing opposition to this amendment, and we also note again the support we received from the Liberal Democrats and the resident.

80 We acknowledge the concerns regarding transferring the areas around Marmet Avenue and east of Bridge Road into Letchworth South West ward due to the railway line running between this transferred area and the rest of the ward. However, we remain content that there are reasonable road links between these areas of our proposed Letchworth South West ward. We also do not consider that we have received any strong community evidence to convince us that this area cannot be included in a ward with the town centre.

81 We note the opposition to our proposal to transfer Whitehorn Lane into Letchworth South East ward. However, we are still content that this area has good links to Letchworth South East. We note the District Council's statement that properties on the Lordship Farm are physically different types of buildings; however, types of housing themselves cannot be taken as an indicator of community identity, and we therefore do not consider this to be a strong argument. We also note the Conservatives' concern that the transfer of Whitehorn Lane into Letchworth South East ward is in conflict with our proposed Cowslip Hill amendment. However, the properties on Whitehorn Lane abut properties on either side of the sports ground within Letchworth South East ward, whereas those on Cowslip Hill would be isolated from other properties within Letchworth East ward if they were to be retained in the existing ward, given our other amendments to the area.

82 We also note the opposition to the transfer of Jackmans Place into Letchworth South East ward. We note the argument that this area is more closely linked to the Pixmore area and that the A505 separates it from Letchworth South East ward; however, none of the arguments clearly justifies why it should remain in Letchworth East ward. We also note that the District Council described Jackmans Place as a 'separate and identifiable' area in its submission. The Liberal Democrats' proposed wards also include removing the Jackmans Place area from Letchworth East ward. We have therefore not been persuaded away from our original conclusion that, given that a number of electors need to be transferred out of Letchworth East ward to provide acceptable levels of electoral equality, the self contained Jackmans place area is the most sensible area to be transferred, particularly in light of the fact that we did not receive any viable alternatives for the area. We also note that given the reduction in council size for Letchworth town from 14 to 13 under our proposed council size of 49, it is not possible to retain the existing ward boundaries and provide good levels of electoral equality.

83 We considered the Liberal Democrats' proposals for a new ward pattern covering South East and South West wards. We note that while this proposal does not have strong justification for its new boundaries, it does produce marginally better levels of electoral equality than our proposed Letchworth South East and Letchworth South

West wards and we acknowledge that improving electoral equality was the basis on which we made our draft recommendations due to the absence of any community identity arguments. However, we also note that we based our draft recommendations on the existing warding arrangements in Letchworth in the absence of any alternative proposals. We have also considered how this proposal uses the centre of main roads to form the ward boundaries, with the exception of those areas mentioned above, and how the District Council considers this preferable to the backs of houses. We also note that the Liberal Democrats' proposal still transfers the Jackmans Estate and the areas east of Bridge Road from the existing Letchworth East ward, as well as the Marmet Avenue area, from Letchworth Wilbury ward, to which there has been opposition. Therefore, we do not consider that the Liberal Democrats' proposed wards would receive any more support than our draft recommendations. We are concerned about making such large amendments to wards at this stage with limited support, given also that they provide similar levels of electoral equality to our draft recommendations. We also do not consider that we have received enough community identity evidence to support moving away from our draft recommendations, which were based on the existing wards. We are therefore proposing to confirm our draft recommendations as final for the Letchworth South East and Letchworth South West wards.

84 None of our proposed Letchworth wards would have an electoral variance of more than 7% from the district average by 2008. Tables 1 and 2 (on pages 9 and 12, respectively) provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our final recommendations for Letchworth. Our final recommendations are shown on Map 1 and Map 3 accompanying this report.

Hitchin Bearton, Hitchin Highbury, Hitchin Oughton, Hitchin Priory and Hitchin Walsworth wards

85 Under the existing arrangements Hitchin comprises the four unparished wards of Hitchin Bearton, Hitchin Highbury, Hitchin Oughton and Hitchin Walsworth as well as Hitchin Priory ward which contains North parish ward of St Ippolyts and an unparished area. Table 4 (pages 20 – 22) outlines the existing electoral variances for 2003 and also the variances which the wards are forecast to have by 2008 if the existing arrangements were to remain in place.

86 We received one submission in relation to Hitchin during Stage One, which was from the District Council. It did not propose any changes to the electoral arrangements for Hitchin. As with its proposal for Letchworth, the Council's submission did not provide any convincing evidence to retain the existing arrangements. When considering ward arrangements in the town, rather than creating new arbitrary wards we looked at making amendments to the existing wards to improve the electoral variances because we did not receive any evidence to suggest that the existing arrangements do not provide effective and convenient local government or reflect community identities. We looked for areas that had obvious ground features to which we could tie new boundaries and areas of wards that appeared to relate to adjoining wards.

87 We proposed transferring the properties to the east of the railway line from Hitchin Highbury ward into a three-member Hitchin Walsworth ward. This amendment worsened electoral equality in Hitchin Highbury ward; we therefore looked to transfer electors from Hitchin Priory ward into Hitchin Highbury ward. We proposed

transferring the town centre area of Hitchin Priory that lies between the eastern boundary of the existing ward and east of Park Way. Having visited this area we considered that the A602 is a strong boundary and maintains the links between the main settlements in the remainder of the ward.

88 We also proposed an additional amendment to our proposed three-member Hitchin Highbury ward by transferring properties in the Benslow Lane area into our proposed three-member Hitchin Bearton ward. We considered that, in light of the lack of any strong community identity evidence, this small amendment to improve electoral equality was acceptable. We proposed retaining the existing Hitchin Oughton ward. Under our draft recommendations all our proposed Hitchin wards were expected to have electoral variances within 5% of the district average by 2008 (using the District Council's original electorate forecast).

89 We received three submissions in relation to our draft recommendations for Hitchin town at Stage Three. The District Council considered that the existing arrangements should be retained. The District Council again maintained that it considered that main roads should be used as boundaries. It considered that the amended Hitchin Bearton ward had 'no justification for [the] change on voter variance.' It also stated that our amendment 'divides Benslow Lane and its community into two wards' and that it would 'serve to divide rather than unite the local community.' It also regarded our proposed amendments to Hitchin Highbury and Hitchin Priory wards as unnecessary. It considered that we were making Hitchin 'Priory ward almost exclusively residential' and taking 'all the issues pertinent to the town centre' into Hitchin Highbury ward. The District Council also considered that the area transferred into Hitchin Walsworth ward was an example of reverting back to the boundary used before the last review, and perhaps a confusing amendment. It also considered that the new development it forecast for the area would mean there was little point making any changes to the ward. It supported our proposal for the retention of the existing Hitchin Oughton ward.

90 The Liberal Democrats considered that North parish ward of St Ippollyts parish should be removed from Hitchin town into a ward with the remainder of St Ippollyts parish. It considered that its inclusion in Hitchin town was unsatisfactory when it was proposed in the last review. It therefore proposed a new two-member Priory ward comprised of the exiting Hitchin Priory ward less North parish ward. The Liberal Democrats also put forward an alternative ward pattern if the District Council's revised forecast figures were taken into consideration. It proposed that 100 electors be transferred from Hitchin Oughton ward into Hitchin Priory ward from the Oughton Head Lane area. It also considered that the areas north of the railway line in Hitchin Bearton ward should be transferred into Hitchin Walsworth ward. It considered that the remainder of the wards should remain unchanged. The Liberal Democrats provided no community arguments for its proposed wards.

91 A resident supported our proposed Hitchin Bearton and Hitchin Walsworth wards. He was however, 'less convinced' by our proposed boundary between Hitchin Highbury and Hitchin Priory wards and considered that our proposed Hitchin Priory ward should be renamed as the 'Priory' would no longer be in Hitchin Priory ward. He did not suggest an alternative name for the ward.

92 Having considered the representations received we have decided to endorse the draft recommendations for the five Hitchin wards as final. We carefully considered

the arguments put forward by the District Council, Liberal Democrats and the resident. We considered the Liberal Democrats' proposal to exclude North parish ward of St Ippollyts parish from Hitchin Priory ward; however, we do not consider that a sufficient argument was put forward as to why this area should be combined with rural parishes. We are also of the opinion that North parish ward is an extension of Hitchin town and should not be separated from it. Also, combining it in a rural ward would produce worse levels of electoral equality than our draft recommendations. Given this, and given that the Liberal Democrats did not provide any compelling argument for its proposals we did not consider that we could accept them.

93 We note the District Council's opinion that the Benslow Lane community is divided in our recommendations. However, it did not provide any details of this community, or how our proposed boundary would divide it. We also acknowledge the District Council's preference for ward boundaries to follow the centre of roads and that this amendment moves away from such a boundary. However we would also highlight paragraphs 3.42 and 3.43 of the electoral Commissions *Guidance which states* that 'there can be no set rules on where ward boundaries should be located ... in more suburban areas a road may effectively act as a focus for communities so that a boundary line is best placed behind the houses on one side of the road. There are thus no set rules on ward boundaries. The key issues to remember are that they must relate to firm ground detail, and be capable of being mapped.' Without any strong argument against this approach and also the support we got for our proposed Hitchin Bearton ward from the resident we are content with our proposed boundary. We also note the resident's suggestion that Hitchin Priory ward should be renamed. However, without an alternative suggestion and with no other objections to this name we are content to retain the name Hitchin Priory.

94 We acknowledge the District Council's view on our approach to the review with regard to reverting to boundaries created before the previous review, in relation to Hitchin Walsworth ward. However, the District Council did not provide any compelling argument why this amendment would not reflect communities or facilitate effective and convenient local government. In the absence of strong community identity evidence we consider that this best meets the statutory criteria at this time. We again note the support of the resident for our proposed Hitchin Walsworth ward.

95 Given the lack of strong and convincing argument opposing our draft recommendations and the support we received for some wards in the town, we are content to recommend our draft recommendations as final for the five wards in Hitchin town. Tables 1 and 2 (on pages 9 and 12, respectively) provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our final recommendations for Hitchin Bearton, Hitchin Highbury, Hitchin Oughton, Hitchin Priory and Hitchin Walsworth wards. Our final recommendations are shown on Map 1 and Map 2 accompanying this report.

Baldock East and Baldock Town wards

96 Under the existing arrangements Baldock comprises the two unparished wards of Baldock East and Baldock Town. Table 4 (pages 20 –22) outlines the existing electoral variances for 2003 and also the variances which the wards are forecast to have by 2008 if the existing arrangements were to remain in place.

97 We received one submission in relation to Baldock during Stage One, which was from the District Council. The District Council did not propose any changes to the electoral arrangements of Baldock. It provided some community identity arguments relating to the history of the two wards, its facilities and ground features. However, as there was no strong argument we considered that the electoral variances could be improved.

98 We considered that the residential area to the north of the railway line in Baldock Town ward appeared relatively separate from the rest of the ward, and that to get into other parts of either Baldock Town or Baldock East ward from this area it is necessary to travel along the existing ward boundary. Therefore it appeared to make little difference, with regard to road links, which ward the area joins. On visiting the area we were content that this part of Baldock Town ward could be transferred into Baldock East ward, improving electoral equality and maintaining links within the wards. We therefore proposed to transfer this area from Baldock Town into Baldock East ward. Under our draft recommendations our proposed Baldock wards were expected to have electoral variances within 7% of the district average by 2008, (using the Council's original forecast figures).

99 During Stage Three we received three representations relating to Baldock. The District Council and the Conservatives opposed our amendment to the two Baldock wards. The District Council considered that the area proposed to be transferred 'is more in keeping with the older part of Baldock town' with regard to physical appearance and housing type. It argued that it is separated from Baldock East ward by the A505 and the railway line, which has only one crossing point. It noted that the majority of houses were contained on the Clothall Common Estate which has its own school and open spaces. It considered that an application for village green status in the ward has created a sense of community identity. It also considered that people in the area we propose to transfer had formed a 'degree of common identity [with Baldock Town ward] based on concerns about commuter parking.' The Conservatives said they were 'confused' about our draft proposals, as this area was 'closer to Baldock town centre than most residents of Baldock town.'

100 The Liberal Democrats support our draft recommendations for Baldock. It stated that Baldock East is, as the Council noted, made up predominately of the Clothall Common Estate. However, it also noted that between the railway line and the A505 in the existing Baldock East ward there is similar, older housing, and it could see no 'compelling reason why the similar housing on the north of the railway should not be included to achieve improved electoral equality.' It also noted that arguments regarding a single road linking the proposed area to be transferred and Baldock East ward 'ignore the fact that this is the case of linkage to the majority of the rest of the current Baldock Town ward.'

101 Having considered the representations received we have decided to endorse the draft recommendations for Baldock East and Baldock Town wards as final. We have considered the arguments put forward by the District Council and the Conservatives. However, while we note that some community evidence was put forward, we are not convinced that this is consistent with the physical descriptions provided. By describing the A505 as a barrier between the areas proposed to be transferred and Baldock East ward, the District Council is ignoring the properties north of the A505, already in Baldock East ward, which are as the Liberal Democrats state similar to those north of the railway line. Given that our proposed wards

received some support, and given the improved electoral equality they provide, we have not been persuaded to move away from our draft recommendations.

102 Tables 1 and 2 (on pages 9 and 12, respectively) provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our final recommendations for Baldock East and Baldock Town wards. Our final recommendations are shown on Map 1 and Map 3 accompanying this report.

Royston Heath, Royston Meridian and Royston Palace wards

103 Under the existing arrangements Royston comprises the three wards of Royston Heath, Royston Meridian and Royston Palace. Table 4 (pages 20 – 22) outlines the existing electoral variances for 2003 and also the variances which the wards are forecast to have by 2008 if the existing arrangements were to remain in place.

104 We received two submissions in relation to Royston during Stage One, from the District Council and Royston Town Council. The District Council did not propose any changes to the electoral arrangements of Royston. Royston Town Council considered that no changes were necessary since the last review, but provided no evidence in support of the existing wards.

105 We noted that the existing wards enjoy reasonable electoral equality. However, we considered that this could be improved slightly, and given the lack of any strong community arguments we considered that improving electoral equality should take precedence. We examined a number of options for the area; however, as with all the urban areas in the district, we looked to make small, well-defined amendments to the existing arrangements, which we proposed in two areas.

106 We proposed to transfer the properties on the north side of Barkway Road and in Limekin Close from Royston Meridian ward into Royston Heath ward. We also proposed to transfer the properties on Minster Road and Willowside Way and the area north of these properties from Royston Heath ward into Royston Palace ward. Under our draft recommendations our proposed Royston wards are expected to have electoral variances within 6% of the district average by 2008.

107 We received five submissions in relation to our draft recommendations for Royston town. The District Council considered that the existing ward boundaries should be retained, and again voiced its preference for using main roads as boundaries. The District Council did not provide any strong community arguments for its proposal and described each ward in terms of its facilities and boundaries.

108 The Liberal Democrats fully supported our draft recommendations for Royston town 'since they produce slightly better electoral equality whilst having no significant effect on community links.' The Conservatives considered that our draft recommendations made 'a mockery of using natural boundaries such as roads.' It also considered that the properties on Minster Road and Willowside Way look to the Rock Road area, and saw no reason to divide the community. Royston Town Council considered that the existing warding arrangements should be retained and that, due to future development in Palace ward, amendments should be held off until a later review.

109 Oliver Heald, MP considered that these changes would lead to voter confusion. He considered that our proposed amendment affecting Minster Road and Willowside Way was confusing as the boundary would change and residents would have to move polling stations. He considered that it was a 'pity' to make the changes when residents have 'voted in the same place for years.' He continued that these particular roads are 'related to the Orchard Road/ York Way loop,' and that the current boundary makes 'a good deal of sense.' He also considered that the properties we proposed to transfer from Royston Meridian ward into Royston Heath ward looked more towards Royston Meridian ward.

110 Having considered the representations received we have decided to endorse our draft recommendation for Royston town as final. We note the opposition to these wards from the District Council. However, it only described the wards and the facilities and services within each of them and did not explain how these facilities and services could not be provided under our proposed wards. Therefore, we consider that the Council did not provide any strong or compelling argument as to why our proposed wards could not provide effective or convenient local government or reflect community identities. We also note the objections to our draft proposals from the Conservatives, Royston Town Council and Oliver Heald, MP. However, we were not convinced by any of the arguments put to us in these submissions that the areas we are proposing to transfer between wards could not be sufficiently represented in our proposed wards. We did not consider that the Conservatives had backed up its statements regarding the Minster Road area with any compelling evidence. Similarly, Oliver Heald, MP provided no details of how the areas we proposed to transfer would provide more effective and convenient local government or better reflect community identity in the existing wards. We also do not consider polling station location to be any justification for retaining ward boundaries. We also note Royston Town Council's opinion that a review should be held off until future development has been completed. However, we are only able to take into account development within five years of the start of the review and cannot consider any that may occur after this date. We have therefore not been convinced to move away from our draft recommendations, particularly in light of the support these received from the Liberal Democrats.

111 Tables 1 and 2 (on pages 9 and 12, respectively) provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our final recommendations for Royston Heath, Royston Meridian and Royston Palace wards. Our final recommendations are shown on Map 1 and Map 4 accompanying this report.

Graveley & Wymondley ward

112 Under the existing arrangements Graveley & Wymondley ward comprises the parishes of Graveley and Wymondley. Table 4 (pages 20 – 22) outlines the existing electoral variance for 2003 and also the variance that the ward is forecast to have by 2008 if the existing arrangements were to remain in place.

113 We received two submissions in relation to Graveley & Wymondley ward at Stage One, from the District Council and Wymondley Parish Council. The District Council proposed to add an additional councillor to the ward to make it a two-member ward, with no boundary amendments to the ward. Under a council size of 49 (and 50 as proposed by the Council) Graveley & Wymondley ward is entitled to two councillors. The District Council also proposed to name this ward Chesfield.

Wymondley Parish Council stated that it did not wish for the parish to be contained in a ward that mixed urban and rural settlements, and felt that it should be in a ward with other, similar parishes' 'i.e. small rural communities or villages where the issues are similar' to its own.

114 We considered a number of alternatives for the ward that the District Council had considered before submitting its proposal as well as some of our own alternatives, combining the ward with surrounding wards and dividing the ward so that Great Ashby could be represented in its own ward. However, given that the existing Graveley & Wymondley ward is located between urban wards and the district boundary the number of options available to us was limited, and having examined possible options with similar rural areas we considered that the District Council's proposal for this ward provided the best balance of the statutory criteria.

115 Under our draft recommendations the proposed Chesfield ward was expected to have an electoral variance of 14% from the district average by 2008 (using the District Council's original electoral forecast).

116 During Stage Three we received five submissions relating to our proposed Chesfield ward. The District Council supported our draft recommendations. The Liberal Democrats 'reluctantly' supported our draft recommendations; however, it expressed concern about the level of electoral imbalance the ward is forecast to have and also the combination of the rural villages in the ward with the newer, 'essentially urban community at Great Ashby'. The Conservatives considered that 'the best solution is to make Great Ashby a two-member ward and rename it' they did not propose a name for it, however. Weston Parish Council considered that the proposed Chesfield ward was 'probably as good as can be managed at the moment', but considered the Great Ashby development should really be in Stevenage, although it recognised this was not something we could do as part of this review. A resident also considered that the Boundary Committee's time would be better spent conducting 'an administrative review between districts' to take account of the Great Ashby development. He also expressed concern regarding the electoral variance the ward is forecast to have by 2008.

117 Having considered the representations received we have decided to endorse our draft recommendation for Chesfield ward as final. We acknowledge the concern over the higher electoral variance; however, we remain of the opinion that this ward provides the best balance of the criteria, given its location on the edge of the district which limits the options available to us to combine the whole, or parts, of the ward with surrounding areas. We note that the Great Ashby area may be better served in a ward on its own; however, we examined this possibility at Stage One and were unable to find a satisfactory solution due to the fact that the Great Ashby area alone would be entitled to two councillors, and incorporating the remainder of Graveley parish and Wymondley parish into other wards would result in unsatisfactory wards and electoral equality. We therefore consider the existing boundaries for the Chesfield ward to be the best option available to us at this time. We also note that some respondents considered that a review of the administrative boundary between North Hertfordshire and Stevenage should take place; however, this is outside the remit of this review. Representations relating to the administrative boundary should be sent to the Secretary of State (Office of the Deputy Prime Minister).

118 Tables 1 and 2 (on pages 9 and 12, respectively) provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our final recommendations for Chesfield ward. Our final recommendations are shown on Map 1 accompanying this report.

Arbury, Ermine and Weston & Sandon wards

119 The three rural wards in this section are located in the east of the district. Table 5 (below) outlines the constituent areas of each of the existing wards. Table 4 (pages 20 – 22) outlines the existing electoral variances for 2003 and also the variances that the wards are forecast to have by 2008 if the existing arrangements were to remain in place (using the District Council's revised electorate forecast).

Table 5: Existing arrangements

Name of ward	Constituent areas	Councillors
Arbury	Ashwell, Bygrave, Caldecote, Hinxworth, Newnham and Radwell parishes	1
Ermine	Barkway, Barley, Kelshall, Nuthampstead, Reed and Therfield parishes	1
Weston & Sandon	Clothall, Rushden, Sandon, Wallington and Weston parishes	1

120 We received one submission in relation to these wards during Stage One. The District Council proposed retaining the existing warding arrangements for these wards. It noted the imbalance in Weston & Sandon ward but considered that this should remain owing to the fact that it was bounded by East Hertfordshire district and the railway line and the A505. We did not consider that this argument alone was sufficient to justify the large imbalance in Weston & Sandon ward and therefore looked to the two wards of Arbury and Ermine, which border the ward, to attempt to address the situation.

121 In the District Council's submission it described all three wards as collectives of individual and independent communities that focus principally on their own individual village facilities. We therefore considered that, as the parishes in this area appeared to be quite independent, there was no reason why parishes could not be transferred between wards to address the imbalance in Weston & Sandon ward.

122 We looked at moving either Kelshall parish from Ermine ward or Bygrave parish from Arbury ward into the existing Weston & Sandon ward in order to address the imbalance. We noted that transferring Bygrave parish would result in better levels of electoral equality; however, on visiting the area, we considered that the road links between Kelshall parish and the Weston & Sandon ward were markedly better. The railway line and the A505 provide a significant barrier between Bygrave parish and the existing Weston & Sandon ward, making travelling between the areas difficult. It would be necessary to drive into Baldock town and back out again to get from one part of the ward to the other, which we did not consider would reflect community identity when an alternative exists. We therefore proposed transferring Kelshall parish from Ermine ward into Weston & Sandon ward, and retaining the existing arrangements for Arbury ward.

123 Under our draft recommendations the proposed single-member Arbury, Ermine and Weston & Sandon wards were expected to have electoral variances with 11% of the district average by 2008.

124 During Stage Three we received 23 submissions relating to these wards. The District Council considered that we should revert to the existing warding arrangement for Weston & Sandon and Ermine wards. It provided good community identity evidence outlining the strong relationship between Kelshall and Therfield parishes, which would be in separate wards under our draft proposals. It discussed the various community groups the villages share as well as a broader outlook towards Royston rather than Baldock for shops, schools and primary care. It supported our draft recommendations for Arbury ward.

125 The Liberal Democrats opposed our proposal to transfer Kelshall parish, and outlined the strong links between Kelshall and Therfield parishes similar to the evidence given by the District Council. It considered that it would be 'preferable to transfer the parish of Bygrave into the Weston & Sandon ward' as it is also associated with Baldock 'like the rest of Weston & Sandon' ward, sharing a 'commonality of interest' relating to schools. The Conservatives also opposed separating Kelshall and Therfield parishes and considered that the existing arrangements should be retained. It also supported our proposed Ermine ward.

126 Weston Parish Council considered that 'adding Kelshall parish [to Weston & Sandon ward was] a reasonable way of increasing the size of the electorate.' Therfield Parish Council and Kelshall Parish Meeting both strongly opposed our draft recommendations. Kelshall parish meeting outlined many shared clubs, education and committees the two parishes share. It also sent a copy of the newsletter that covers the two parishes of Kelshall and Therfield. Councillor Marshall said that he had no objection to moving Kelshall into Weston & Sandon ward in terms of electoral equality; however, he did object in terms of community identity. He too spoke of the shared facilities and groups such as the thespians society, mother and toddler groups, Women's Institute and health care. He also objected to any proposal that might combine the district wards of Weston & Sandon and Ermine into one ward, considering it would be too large and 'residents would not feel they were properly represented.'

127 We received a further 16 submissions from local residents of Kelshall and Therfield villages, all opposing our draft recommendations and proposing that the existing arrangements be retained. All spoke of the close links between the two villages and outlined the community groups, societies and clubs they share. One resident from Luton supported our draft recommendations for Weston & Sandon and Ermine wards.

128 Having considered the representations received we have decided to revert to the existing ward arrangements for Weston & Sandon, Ermine and Arbury wards. We note that we did receive some support for our draft recommendations in terms of electoral equality; however, the very strong and compelling community identity arguments outweigh the support we received. We consider that the strength of links between the two parishes has been demonstrated, particularly in light of the local newsletter for Kelshall and Therfield that we received. We acknowledge the Liberal Democrats' suggestion that we should transfer Bygrave parish into Weston & Sandon

ward. However, we rejected this as an option at Stage One due to the clear barrier of the A505 and difficult road links between the two areas. We maintain this opinion and therefore do not consider this to be a suitable option for the area. We note the opposition to combining Weston & Sandon and Ermine wards to create a large two-member ward. We do not consider that we could recommend such a large ward at this stage, particularly as it would go against much of the strong argument we received about the villages in these wards looking either east or to Baldock.

129 We note that retaining the existing wards in this part of the district results in a Weston & Sandon ward with an electoral variance of -19% by 2008. However, we consider that the argument to retain Kelshall and Therfield parishes together and the lack of a suitable alternative arrangement outweigh the high electoral inequality of this ward.

130 Tables 1 and 2 (on pages 9 and 12, respectively) provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our final recommendations for Arbury, Ermine and Weston & Sandon wards. Our final recommendations are shown on Map 1 accompanying this report.

Cadwell, Hitchwood, Hoo and Offa wards

131 The four rural wards in this section are located in the west of the district. Table 6 (below) outlines the constituent areas of each of the existing wards. Table 4 (pages 20 – 22) outlines the existing electoral variances for 2003 and also the variances that the ward is forecast to have by 2008 if the existing arrangements were to remain in place.

Table 6: Existing arrangements

Name of ward	Constituent areas	Councillors
Cadwell	Holwell and Ickleford parishes	1
Hitchwood	Langley and St Pauls Walden parishes and South parish ward of St Ippolyts parish	1
Hoo	Hexton, Kings Walden, Lilley and Preston parishes and Cockernhoe parish ward of Offley parish	1
Offa	Pirton parish and Offley parish ward of Offley parish	1

132 We received one submission in relation to these wards during Stage One, which was from the District Council. The District Council did not propose any changes to the electoral arrangements of these wards. It noted the imbalance of Offa ward (-16% from the district average by 2008, under the original forecast figures), but considered that this should remain given that the ward has ‘a cricket club, as well as an active and engaging community which supports many clubs’. It also considered that the ‘undulating panoramic countryside, as well as a very active parish council’ and community facilities of the ward justified the imbalance. We did not consider that

this argument was compelling enough to justify the large imbalance in Offa ward and therefore sought to improve this variance.

133 We noted that the existing wards surrounding Offa ward are all also expected to have electoral variances below the district average by 2008, with the exception of Hitchin Priory ward. Therefore transferring the whole or parts of parishes from the neighbouring wards would only move the imbalance elsewhere in the district.

134 We therefore looked at combining Offa ward with the surrounding rural wards. As outlined before, while we did not receive substantial evidence in favour of retaining the existing arrangements, we also did not receive any that suggested the existing arrangements did not reflect community identities. We therefore looked at combining whole wards to address the imbalance. We looked initially at a ward comprising the existing Offa and Cadwell wards. However, we considered that the settlements in Cadwell looked more towards Hitchin town than Offa ward. We also looked at combining Offa and Hoo wards in a two-member Hoo & Offa ward, and we noted that this would still provide a variance of over 10% from the district average (-11% by 2008). Therefore we looked to improve the electoral variance further by combining Hitchwood, Hoo and Offa wards together in a three-member ward. We considered that this proposed ward would combine areas with similar geography.

135 We acknowledged that this created a geographically large ward. However, in the absence of any strong argument stating why the existing wards reflect community identities or provide the most effective and convenient local government we considered that we had little option but to recommend wards that provide for as high levels of electoral equality as possible. We noted in our draft recommendations report that this arrangement was open for further consultation and that we would reassess these proposals, and might recommend alternative proposals in light of any additional information we received. We specifically invited comments on proposals for this ward during Stage Three. We proposed retaining the existing Cadwell ward in light of our proposals in other areas and the good level of electoral equality that the existing arrangements returned. Under our draft recommendations our proposed Hitchwood, Hoo & Offa and Cadwell wards were expected to have electoral variances within 7% of the district average by 2008.

136 We received six submissions in relation to our proposed Hitchwood, Hoo & Offa and Cadwell wards during Stage Three. We received no support for our proposed three-member Hitchwood, Hoo & Offa ward. The District Council argued for the existing ward pattern to be retained. It was concerned that our proposal would reduce the sense of community by 'creating a situation where voters can identify less with their local member in a defined area known to them.' It noted that parish councillors have expressed a preference for having their 'elected councillor living in their rural neighbourhood' and that 'there is a feeling that the democratic process is enhanced by the closer relationship between the community and individual councillor.' It continued that our proposed ward could lead to 'increased levels of confusion and apathy.' It considered that there 'is a high degree of independence within each of the wards.'

137 The District Council went on to describe each of the existing wards in turn. It outlined the details of each parish within the wards, outlining their facilities and transport infrastructures, and discussed how each of these is an independent area.

However, it did not refer to how these parishes actually relate to each other within the existing ward structure. The District Council supported our proposed Cadwell ward.

138 The Liberal Democrats considered that the communities within our proposed Hitchwood, Hoo & Offa ward would be better served in three single-member wards. It considered that our proposed ward would pose difficulties for both councillors and the electorate, although it did not expand on this. The Liberal Democrats therefore proposed alternative wards for this area. Its proposals required uniting North parish ward of St Ippolyts parish from Hitchin Priory ward with the rest of St Ippolyts parish and Preston and Langley parishes in a proposed Hitchwood ward. Its proposed Hoo ward would combine Cockenhoe parish ward of Offley parish with Kings Walden and St Pauls Walden parishes, and its proposed Offa ward would comprise Pirton, Lilley and Hexton parishes together with Offley parish ward of Offley parish.

139 Ickleford Parish Council stated that it understood the 'rationale behind the proposals' but gave neither support nor opposition. A resident considered that the existing ward arrangement should remain as our proposed ward 'is far too large. The villages and hamlets have different needs and aspirations. Communication between three councillors could be more difficult and remote. Access is by country lanes that may involve unnecessary travelling.' Another resident considered that our proposals 'fail to reflect community identity'; he continued that the settlements of Cockernhoe, Lilley and Hexton look to the west for shopping and employment, while residents of villages such as St Ippolyts are unlikely to have reason to visit Luton and have direct road links north/south. He proposed an alternative arrangement for the wards; Great Offley & Lilley ward comprising the existing Offa ward and Hexton and Lilley parishes, and a two-member Kings Walden & St Ippolyts ward comprising the current Hitchwood ward, Kings Walden and Preston parishes and Cockenhoe parish ward of Offley parish.

140 Having considered the representations received we have decided to endorse our draft recommendations for both these wards as final. We have carefully considered the arguments put forward in each of the submissions. We acknowledge the support for our proposed Cadwell ward and see no reason to amend this.

141 We note the opposition to our proposed Hitchwood, Hoo & Offa ward from the District Council. We have considered the community identity evidence it provided. However, the Council described all the parishes in our proposed ward as independent areas, and did not refer to how specific parishes might actually relate to one another, or find common links between areas in terms of community, or indeed reasons why areas would not be represented well in the same ward. In creating wards in this area parishes have to be combined, even in single-member wards. Therefore, while the independence of the constituent villages is noted, this does not help us to consider which parishes should be combined and indeed why all of these independent villages cannot be represented within one ward.

142 We also note the District Council's preference for single-member wards and concerns over voter turnout, apathy and electorate confusion that might be associated with multi-member rural wards. However, no evidence has been provided to support this assertion and our existing *Guidance* does not express a preference for single- or multi-member wards and states that we must make our recommendations based on whatever number of councillors allows us to best meet the statutory criteria.

143 We also note the proposals for alternative wards in the area from the Liberal Democrats and a local resident. However, neither of these proposals were backed up with any convincing community evidence that we consider compelling enough to move away from our draft recommendations. We do not consider that the Liberal Democrats put forward a sufficient argument to convince us as to why North parish ward of St Ippolyts parish should be combined with the neighbouring rural parishes as we are of the opinion that North parish ward is an extension of Hitchin town and should not be separated from it. We acknowledge that while the resident noted the different urban areas that groups of the villages look to, he did not provide any more detailed argument regarding the nature of these areas to substantiate his proposals. Therefore we did not consider that we had received convincing evidence to encourage us to move away from our draft recommendations while maintaining consistency in our approach to the district.

144 Tables 1 and 2 (on pages 9 and 12, respectively) provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our final recommendations for Cadwell and Hitchwood, Hoo & Offa wards. Our final recommendations are shown on Map 1 accompanying this report.

Codicote, Kimpton and Knebworth wards

145 The three wards in this section are located in the south of the district. Table 7 (below) outlines the constituent areas of each of the existing wards. Table 4 (pages 20 – 22) outlines the existing electoral variances for 2003 and also the variances that the ward is forecast to have by 2008 if the existing arrangements were to remain in place.

Table 7: Existing arrangements

Name of ward	Constituent areas	Councillors
Codicote	Village parish ward of Codicote parish	1
Kimpton	Kimpton parish	1
Knebworth	Knebworth parish and East parish ward of Codicote parish	2

146 We received two submissions in relation to these wards during Stage One, from the District Council and Kimpton Parish Council. The District Council did not propose any changes to the electoral arrangements of these wards. Kimpton Parish Council expressed its contentment with the current arrangements for the parish, but did not provide any further evidence in support of this opinion.

147 Our approach to formulating the draft recommendations was that, while reasonable electoral variances for the existing wards in this area were expected by 2008, without any significant argument and evidence in support of the existing wards our principal aim must be to improve electoral equality throughout the district. We therefore explored ways to reduce the electoral variances of these wards.

148 Our draft recommendations combined Codicote and Kimpton wards as both these communities share a common boundary on the southern side of the district and appeared to have good connections to one another via rural road links. Under our

draft recommendations a two-member Codicote & Kimpton ward would have had an electoral variance within 1% of the district average by 2008 (under the District Council's original forecast figures). We considered that the existing Knebworth ward had a good electoral variance and therefore proposed to retain the existing Knebworth ward.

149 Under our draft recommendations our proposed Codicote & Kimpton and Knebworth wards were expected to have electoral variances within 3% of the district average by 2008.

150 During Stage Three we received four submissions opposing our draft recommendations for our proposed Codicote & Kimpton ward. The District Council reaffirmed its opinion of 'one member, one ward' for rural wards. It listed the facilities in each of the existing wards, and said that they are separated by rural roads. However, it did not explain why independent communities could not be represented in the same ward. It supported our draft proposal for Knebworth ward. The Liberal Democrats also opposed our Codicote & Kimpton ward through its general opposition to multi-member wards. It also supported our proposed Knebworth ward.

151 Kimpton Parish Council set out its opposition to our proposed Codicote & Kimpton ward in terms of identifiable boundaries, community identities and convenient and effective local government. It said that the two parishes are 'separate autonomous communities that do not share any social, economic or recreational facilities.' It continued by illustrating how these two areas have no 'common denominator.' It stated that Kimpton has around 50 clubs and organisations that serve predominately Kimpton residents. It continued that there is 'little or no cross use' of the facilities in the parish by Codicote residents. It also continued that the wider areas to which the two parishes look for secondary schools are different, with Kimpton children looking to Harpenden or St Albans and Codicote children looking to Welwyn Garden City or Hitchin. It went on to outline local facilities used by the residents of Kimpton and noted that each community is well served by its own shops and services and 'does not depend on the services of the other.' It highlighted differences in the services used, such as that the mobile library service for Kimpton comes from Harpenden library whereas the mobile library service for Codicote comes from Hitchin library. It also noted that only one bus service runs between the parishes and a rural lane is the only road that connects them.

152 Codicote Parish Council also opposed the draft recommendations. It stated there are 'very few' social links between the parishes, and also referred to education and shopping needs being met by different areas for each parish, as noted by Kimpton Parish Council. It also spoke of the bus service, stating that only six buses run between the parishes each day.

153 Having considered the representations received we have decided to revert to the existing arrangements for Codicote and Kimpton wards, and maintain their single-member status. We note that this results in wards with worse electoral equality than our draft proposals (7% and -11% by 2008, respectively). However, we have been persuaded by the strong and compelling evidence from Kimpton Parish Council, which highlights and justifies the differences between the areas, such as the use of clubs and organisations used only by Kimpton parish not Codicote parish residents, the shops used only by the parish residents in which they are located, as well as schools and library services based in different areas. We consider that it illustrated

clearly why these areas are separate and would be better served by single-member wards rather than a two-member ward.

154 We are proposing to endorse our draft recommendation as final for Knebworth ward, as we received only support for this ward and it is expected to have good electoral variances by 2008.

155 Tables 1 and 2 (on pages 9 and 12, respectively) provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our final recommendations for Codicote, Kimpton and Knebworth wards. Our final recommendations are shown on Map 1 and accompanying this report.

Conclusions

156 Table 8 shows the impact of our final recommendations on electoral equality, comparing them with the current arrangements based on 2003 and 2008 electorate figures.

Table 8: Comparison of current and recommended electoral arrangements

	Current arrangements		Final recommendations	
	2003	2008	2003	2008
Number of councillors	49	49	49	49
Number of wards	26	26	24	24
Average number of electors per councillor	1,918	1,991	1,918	1,991
Number of wards with a variance of more than 10% from the average	4	6	2	3
Number of wards with a variance of more than 20% from the average	1	1	0	0

157 As shown in Table 8, our final recommendations for North Hertfordshire District Council would result in a reduction in the number of wards with an electoral variance of more than 10% from four to two. By 2008 three wards are forecast to have an electoral variance of more than 10%. We propose to retain the existing council size and are therefore recommending a council size of 49 members.

Final recommendation

North Hertfordshire District Council should comprise 49 councillors serving 24 wards, as detailed and named in Tables 1 and 2, and illustrated on the large maps accompanying this report.

Parish electoral arrangements

158 As part of an FER the Boundary Committee can make recommendations for new electoral arrangements for parishes. Where there is no impact on the district council's electoral arrangements, the Committee will generally be content to put forward for consideration proposals from parish and town councils for changes to parish electoral arrangements in FERs. However, the Committee will usually wish to see a degree of consensus between the district council and the parish council concerned. Proposals should be supported by evidence, illustrating why changes to parish electoral arrangements are required. The Committee cannot recommend changes to the external boundaries of parishes as part of an FER.

159 Responsibility for reviewing and implementing changes to the electoral arrangements of existing parishes, outside of an electoral review conducted by the Boundary Committee, lies with district councils.² If a district council wishes to make an Order amending the electoral arrangements of a parish that has been subject to an electoral arrangements Order made by either the Secretary of State or the Electoral Commission within the past five years, the consent of the Commission is required.

160 During Stage One we received no proposals relating to parish electoral arrangements. However, when reviewing electoral arrangements we are required to comply as far as possible with the rules set out in Schedule 11 to the 1972 Local Government Act. The Schedule provides 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, we propose consequential warding arrangements for the parishes of Royston and Letchworth Garden City to reflect the proposed district wards.

161 The parish of Royston is currently served by 15 councillors representing three wards: Royston Heath, Royston Meridian and Royston Palace. Under our draft recommendations we did not propose changing the number of councillors for Royston parish but made amendments to reflect the district wards. During Stage Three Royston Town Council considered that the parish ward boundaries should remain the same. However, we did not consider that it provided strong argument to retain the existing wards, as described in paragraph 108 of this report. As we are proposing to retain our draft recommendations for the district wards in Royston we are also confirming our draft recommendations as final for the three parish wards.

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

Final recommendation

Royston Parish Council should comprise 15 councillors, as at present, representing three wards: Royston Heath (returning five councillors), Royston Meridian (returning five councillors) and Royston Palace (returning five councillors). The parish ward boundaries should reflect the proposed district ward boundaries in the area, as illustrated and named on Map 4 accompanying this report.

162 The Secretary of State made an Order creating the parish of Letchworth Garden City on 2 December 2004, following a petition from local residents requesting that a parish be established. On 4 May 2005 North Hertfordshire District Council made an Order for the electoral arrangements of this parish, which allocates it 24 councillors, representing five wards: Letchworth East, Letchworth Grange, Letchworth South East, Letchworth South West and Letchworth Wilbury. These are to be based on the existing district wards of the same names. We were unaware of any local consultation being carried out regarding the parish council size of 24 councillors and therefore welcomed comments from interested parties at Stage Three, whether it was considered that this council size was appropriate for this parish.

163 At Stage Three we received one representation relating to Letchworth Garden City parish. The Conservatives noted that Letchworth Garden City parish is twice the size of Royston parish and does not have twice the number of councillors; however, it acknowledged that the elected representatives are 'happy with the current situation' and did not put forward any alternative proposals or objections. We received no further comments and therefore confirm our draft recommendations as final for Letchworth Garden City parish.

Final recommendation:

Letchworth Garden City Parish Council should comprise 24 councillors, as at present, representing five wards: Letchworth East (returning four councillors), Letchworth Grange (returning five councillors), Letchworth South East (returning five councillors), Letchworth South West (returning six councillors) and Letchworth Wilbury (returning four councillors). The boundaries between the five parish wards should reflect the proposed district ward boundaries, as illustrated and named on Map 3 accompanying this report.

6 What happens next?

164 Having completed our review of electoral arrangements in North Hertfordshire and submitted our final recommendations to the Electoral Commission, we have fulfilled our statutory obligation.³

165 It is now up to the Electoral Commission to decide whether or not 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 27 June 2006 and the Electoral Commission will normally consider all written representation made to them by that date.

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

**The Secretary
The Electoral Commission
Trevelyan House
Great Peter Street
London SW1P 2HW**

Fax: 020 7271 0667

Email: implementation@electoralcommission.org.uk

The contact details above should only be used for implementation purposes.

³ Under the Local Government Act 1992 (as amended by SI No. 2001/3962)

7 Mapping

Final recommendations for North Hertfordshire district

The following maps illustrate our proposed ward boundaries for North Hertfordshire district.

Sheet 1, Map 1 illustrates in outline form the proposed wards for North Hertfordshire District Council, including constituent parishes.

Sheet 2, Map 2 illustrates the proposed boundaries in Hitchin town.

Sheet 3, Map 3 illustrates the proposed boundaries in Baldock and Letchworth towns.

Sheet 4, Map 4 illustrates the proposed boundaries in Royston town.

Sheet 5, Map 5A illustrates St Ippolyts Parish.

Sheet 5, Map 5B illustrates wards in Codicote Parish.

Appendix A

Glossary and abbreviations

AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty)	A landscape whose distinctive character and natural beauty are so outstanding that it is in the nations interest to safeguard it
The Boundary Committee	The Boundary Committee for England is a committee of the Electoral Commission, responsible for undertaking electoral reviews
Constituent areas	The geographical areas that make up any one ward, expressed in parishes or existing wards, or parts of either
Consultation	An opportunity for interested parties to comment and make proposals at key stages during the review
Council size	The number of councillors elected to serve on a council
Order (or electoral change Order)	A legal document which implements changes to the electoral arrangements of a local authority
The Electoral Commission	An independent body that was set up by the UK Parliament. Its mission is to foster public confidence and participation by promoting integrity, involvement and effectiveness in the democratic process
Electoral equality	A measure of ensuring that every person's vote is of equal worth
Electoral imbalance	Where there is a large difference between the number of electors represented by a councillor and the average for the district
Electorate	People in the authority who are registered to vote in local government elections
FER (or further electoral review)	A further review of the electoral arrangements of a local authority following significant shifts in the electorate since the last periodic electoral review conducted between 1996 and 2004

Multi-member ward	A ward represented by more than one councillor and usually not more than three councillors
National Park	The 12 National Parks in England and Wales were designated under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949 and will soon be joined by the new designation of the South Downs. The definition of a National Park is: 'an extensive area of beautiful and relatively wild country in which, for the nations benefit and by appropriate national decision and action: – the characteristic landscape beauty is strictly preserved; – access and facilities for open-air enjoyment are amply provided; – wildlife and buildings and places of architectural and historic interest are suitably protected; – established farming use is effectively maintained'
Number of electors per councillor	The total number of electors in a local authority divided by the number of councillors
Over-represented	Where there are fewer electors per councillor in a ward than the average the electors can be described as being over-represented
Parish	A specific and defined area of land within a single district enclosed within a parish boundary. There are over 10,000 parishes in England, which provide the first tier of representation to their local residents
Parish council	A body elected by residents of the parish who are on the electoral register, which serves and represents the area defined by the parish boundaries
Parish electoral arrangements	The total number of parish councillors; the number, names and boundaries of parish wards; and the number of councillors for each ward

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

Appendix B

Code of practice on written consultation

The Cabinet Office's November 2000 *Code of Practice on Written Consultation*, www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/regulation/Consultation/Code.htm, requires all Government departments and agencies to adhere to certain criteria, set out below, on the conduct of public consultations. Public bodies, such as the Boundary Committee for England, are encouraged to follow the Code.

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

Table B1: The Boundary Committee for England's compliance with Code criteria

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