

Final recommendations on the
future electoral arrangements
for Tonbridge & Malling in Kent

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

May 2001

LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND

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

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



Local Government Commission for England

9 May 2001

Dear Secretary of State

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

We have now prepared our final recommendations in the light of the consultation. We have substantially confirmed our draft recommendations, although some modifications have been made (see paragraphs 176 – 177) in the light of further evidence. This report sets out our final recommendations for changes to electoral arrangements in Tonbridge & Malling.

We recommend that Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council should be served by 53 councillors representing 26 wards, and that changes should be made to ward boundaries in order to improve electoral equality, having regard to the statutory criteria. We recommend that the Council should continue to be elected every four years.

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

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

Yours sincerely

PROFESSOR MALCOLM GRANT
Chairman

SUMMARY

The Commission began a review of Tonbridge & Malling on 9 May 2000. We published our draft recommendations for electoral arrangements on 17 October 2000, after which we undertook an eight-week period of consultation.

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

We found that the existing electoral arrangements provide unequal representation of electors in Tonbridge & Malling:

- **in 10 of the 27 wards the number of electors represented by each councillor varies by more than 10 per cent from the average for the borough with four wards varying by more than 20 per cent from the average;**
- **by 2005 electoral equality is not expected to improve, with the number of electors per councillor forecast to vary by more than 10 per cent from the average in 13 wards and by more than 20 per cent in six wards.**

Our main final recommendations for future electoral arrangements (Figures 1 and 2 and paragraphs 176 – 177) are that:

- **Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council should have 53 councillors, two fewer than at present;**
- **there should be 26 wards, instead of 27 as at present;**
- **the boundaries of 16 of the existing wards should be modified and 11 wards should retain their existing boundaries;**
- **elections should continue to take place every four years.**

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

- **In 17 of the proposed 26 wards the number of electors per councillor would vary by no more than 10 per cent from the borough average.**
- **This improved level of electoral equality is forecast to continue, with the number of electors per councillor in only three wards expected to vary by more than 10 per cent from the average for the borough in 2005.**

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

- **revised warding arrangements and the redistribution of councillors for the parish of Snodland;**
- **new warding arrangements and the redistribution of councillors for the parish of Mereworth;**
- **the redistribution of councillors for the parish of Aylesford; and**
- **minor modifications to parish ward boundaries in Hadlow parish.**

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

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

Figure 1: The Commission's Final Recommendations: Summary

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Constituent areas	Map reference
1	Aylesford	2	<i>Unchanged</i> (North and South wards of Aylesford parish)	Map 2
2	Blue Bell Hill & Walderslade	2	<i>Unchanged</i> (Blue Bell Hill and Walderslade wards of Aylesford parish)	Map 2
3	Borough Green & Long Mill	3	Borough Green ward (Borough Green parish as amended); Long Mill ward (part – Platt, Plaxtol and Shipbourne parishes)	Map 2
4	Burham, Eccles & Wouldham	2	<i>Unchanged</i> (Burham and Wouldham parishes and Eccles ward of Aylesford parish)	Map 2
5	Cage Green (in Tonbridge)	2	Cage Green ward (part); Trench ward (part); Castle ward (part)	Large map
6	Castle (in Tonbridge)	2	Castle ward (part); Cage Green ward (part); Judd ward (part); Trench ward (part)	Large map
7	Ditton	2	<i>Unchanged</i> (Ditton parish as amended)	Map 2
8	Downs	2	Birling, Leybourne & Ryarsh ward (part – Birling and Ryarsh parishes); Long Mill ward (part – Offham parish); Oast ward (Addington, Trottscliffe and Stansted parishes)	Map 2
9	East Malling	2	<i>Unchanged</i> (East Malling ward of East Malling & Larkfield parish)	Map 2
10	East Peckham & Golden Green	2	East Peckham ward (East Peckham parish as amended); Hadlow ward (part – Golden Green ward of Hadlow parish as amended)	Maps 2 and A2
11	Hadlow, Mereworth & West Peckham	2	Hadlow ward (part – Hadlow ward of Hadlow parish as amended); West Malling, West Peckham & Mereworth ward (part – Mereworth Village ward of Mereworth parish as proposed and West Peckham parish)	Maps 2 and A3
12	Higham (in Tonbridge)	3	Higham ward (part); Medway ward (part); Cage Green ward (part)	Large map
13	Hildenborough	2	<i>Unchanged</i> (Hildenborough parish as amended)	Map 2
14	Ightham	1	<i>Unchanged</i> (Ightham parish as amended)	Map 2
15	Judd (in Tonbridge)	2	Judd ward (part)	Large map
16	Kings Hill	2	West Malling, West Peckham & Mereworth ward (part – Kings Hill parish and Airfield ward of Mereworth parish as proposed)	Maps 2 and A3
17	Larkfield North	2	<i>Unchanged</i> (Larkfield North ward of East Malling & Larkfield parish as amended)	Map 2

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Constituent areas	Map reference
18	Larkfield South	2	<i>Unchanged</i> (Larkfield South ward of East Malling & Larkfield parish)	Map 2
19	Medway (in Tonbridge)	2	Higham ward (part); Medway ward (part); Vauxhall ward (part)	Large map
20	Snodland East	2	Snodland East ward (part – Snodland parish (part))	Maps 2 and A4
21	Snodland West	3	Snodland East ward (part – Snodland parish (part)); Snodland West ward (Snodland parish (part))	Maps 2 and A4
22	Trench (in Tonbridge)	2	Trench ward (part)	Large map
23	Vauxhall (in Tonbridge)	2	Vauxhall ward (part); Judd ward (part)	Large map
24	Wateringbury	1	<i>Unchanged</i> (Wateringbury parish)	Map 2
25	West Malling & Leybourne	3	West Malling, West Peckham & Mereworth ward (part – West Malling parish); Birling, Leybourne & Ryarsh ward (part – Leybourne parish)	Map 2
26	Wrotham	1	<i>Unchanged</i> (Wrotham parish as amended)	Map 2

Notes: 1 Tonbridge is the only unparished part of the borough and comprises the seven wards indicated above.

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

3 All proposed ward boundaries are based upon the revised parish boundaries which come into effect in April 2002.

Figure 2: The Commission's Final Recommendations for Tonbridge & Malling

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2000)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average (%)	Electorate (2005)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average (%)
1	Aylesford	2	3,496	1,748	14	3,496	1,748	8
2	Blue Bell Hill & Walderslade	2	3,189	1,595	4	3,199	1,600	-1
3	Borough Green & Long Mill	3	5,089	1,696	11	5,126	1,709	6
4	Burham, Eccles & Wouldham	2	2,861	1,431	-6	3,455	1,728	7
5	Cage Green (in Tonbridge)	2	3,279	1,640	7	3,279	1,640	1
6	Castle (in Tonbridge)	2	3,396	1,698	11	3,396	1,698	5
7	Ditton	2	3,640	1,820	19	3,640	1,820	13
8	Downs	2	2,837	1,419	-7	3,079	1,540	-5
9	East Malling	2	3,195	1,598	5	3,383	1,692	5
10	East Peckham & Golden Green	2	2,959	1,480	-3	3,007	1,504	-7
11	Hadlow, Mereworth & West Peckham	2	3,164	1,582	3	3,168	1,584	-2
12	Higham (in Tonbridge)	3	4,662	1,554	2	4,662	1,554	-4
13	Hildenborough	2	3,597	1,799	18	3,605	1,803	12
14	Ightham	1	1,549	1,549	1	1,549	1,549	-4
15	Judd (in Tonbridge)	2	3,318	1,659	9	3,363	1,682	4
16	Kings Hill	2	1,755	878	-43	2,922	1,461	-10
17	Larkfield North	2	2,591	1,296	-15	3,171	1,586	-2
18	Larkfield South	2	3,163	1,582	3	3,163	1,582	-2
19	Medway (in Tonbridge)	2	2,872	1,436	-6	3,382	1,691	5
20	Snodland East	2	2,932	1,466	-4	2,932	1,466	-9
21	Snodland West	3	3,810	1,270	-17	4,409	1,470	-9

Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2000)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average (%)	Electorate (2005)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average (%)
22 Trench (in Tonbridge)	2	3,092	1,546	1	3,092	1,546	-4
23 Vauxhall (in Tonbridge)	2	3,406	1,703	11	3,406	1,703	5
24 Wateringbury	1	1,535	1,535	0	1,535	1,535	-5
25 West Malling & Leybourne	3	4,225	1,408	-8	4,832	1,611	0
26 Wrotham	1	1,399	1,399	-8	1,399	1,399	-13
Totals	53	81,011	-	-	85,650	-	-
Averages	-	-	1,529	-	-	1,616	-

Source: Electorate figures are based on information provided by Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council.

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

1 INTRODUCTION

1 This report contains our final recommendations on the electoral arrangements for the borough of Tonbridge & Malling in Kent. We have now reviewed the 12 two-tier districts in Kent as part of our programme of periodic electoral reviews (PERs) of all 386 principal local authority areas in England. Our programme started in 1996 and is currently expected to be completed by 2004.

2 This was our first review of the electoral arrangements of Tonbridge & Malling. The last such review was undertaken by our predecessor, the Local Government Boundary Commission (LGBC), which reported to the Secretary of State in September 1988 (Report No. 560). The electoral arrangements of Kent County Council were last reviewed in November 1980 (Report No. 402). We completed a directed electoral review of Medway in 1996. We commenced a periodic electoral review of Medway in 2000, and intend reviewing the County Council's electoral arrangements in 2002.

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

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

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

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

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

7 The broad objective of PERs is to achieve, so far as practicable, equality of representation across the district as a whole. Having regard to the statutory criteria, our aim is to achieve as low a level of electoral imbalance as is practicable. We will require particular justification for

schemes which would result in, or retain, an electoral imbalance of over 10 per cent in any ward. Any imbalances of 20 per cent or more should only arise in the most exceptional circumstances, and will require the strongest justification.

8 We are not prescriptive on council size. We start from the general assumption that the existing council size already secures effective and convenient local government in that district but we are willing to look carefully at arguments why this might not be so. However, we have found it necessary to safeguard against upward drift in the number of councillors, and we believe that any proposal for an increase in council size will need to be fully justified: in particular, we do not accept that an increase in a district's electorate should automatically result in an increase in the number of councillors, nor that changes should be made to the size of a district council simply to make it more consistent with the size of other districts.

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

10 This review was in four stages. Stage One began on 9 May 2000 when we wrote to Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council inviting proposals for future electoral arrangements. We also notified Kent County Council, Kent Police Authority, the local authority associations, Kent Local Councils' Association, parish and town councils in the borough, the Members of Parliament with constituency interests in the borough, and the Members of the European Parliament for the South East Region. We also notified the headquarters of the main political parties. We placed a notice in the local press, issued a press release and invited the Borough Council to publicise the review further. The closing date for receipt of representations, the end of Stage One, was 31 July 2000. At Stage Two we considered all the representations received during Stage One and prepared our draft recommendations.

11 Stage Three began on 17 October 2000 with the publication of our report, *Draft recommendations on the future electoral arrangements for Tonbridge & Malling in Kent* and ended on 11 December 2000. Comments were sought on our preliminary conclusions. Finally, during Stage Four we reconsidered our draft recommendations in the light of the Stage Three consultation and now publish our final recommendations.

2 CURRENT ELECTORAL ARRANGEMENTS

12 The borough of Tonbridge & Malling covers an area of approximately 24,000 hectares and stretches from the ridge of the North Downs to the edge of the Kentish Weald. The borough includes much of the River Medway valley, with the main urban areas being Tonbridge and the Medway Gap area. The borough contains 27 parishes, but Tonbridge town itself is unparished and comprises 30 per cent of the borough's total electorate.

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

14 The electorate of the borough is 81,011 (February 2000). The Council currently has 55 members who are elected from 27 wards. Five of the wards are each represented by three councillors, 18 are each represented by two councillors and four are single-member wards. The whole Council is elected every four years.

15 Since the last electoral review in 1988 there has been an increase of just over 2 per cent in the electorate of Tonbridge & Malling.

16 At present, each councillor represents an average of 1,473 electors, which the Borough Council forecasts will increase to 1,557 by the year 2005 if the present number of councillors is maintained. However, due to demographic and other changes over the past two decades, the number of electors per councillor in 10 of the 27 wards varies by more than 10 per cent from the borough average, four wards by more than 20 per cent and in one ward by more than 30 per cent. The worst imbalance is in West Malling, West Peckham & Mereworth ward where the councillor represents 49 per cent more electors than the borough average, due to the development at Kings Hill on the former West Malling Airfield.

Map 1: Existing Wards in Tonbridge & Malling

Figure 3: Existing Electoral Arrangements

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2000)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average (%)	Electorate (2005)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average (%)
1	Aylesford	3	3,496	1,165	-21	3,496	1,165	-25
2	Birling, Leybourne & Ryarsh	2	3,181	1,591	8	4,030	2,015	29
3	Blue Bell Hill	2	3,189	1,595	8	3,199	1,600	3
4	Borough Green	2	2,770	1,385	-6	2,792	1,396	-10
5	Burham, Eccles & Wouldham	2	2,861	1,431	-3	3,455	1,728	11
6	Cage Green (in Tonbridge)	2	3,087	1,544	5	3,087	1,544	-1
7	Castle (in Tonbridge)	2	3,215	1,608	9	3,215	1,608	3
8	Ditton	3	3,640	1,213	-18	3,640	1,213	-22
9	East Malling	2	3,195	1,598	8	3,383	1,692	9
10	East Peckham	2	2,594	1,297	-12	2,642	1,321	-15
11	Hadlow	2	2,781	1,391	-6	2,781	1,391	-11
12	Higham (in Tonbridge)	3	4,105	1,368	-7	4,105	1,368	-12
13	Hildenborough	3	3,606	1,202	-18	3,614	1,205	-23
14	Ightham	1	1,491	1,491	1	1,491	1,491	-4
15	Judd (in Tonbridge)	2	3,661	1,831	24	3,706	1,853	19
16	Larkfield North	2	2,591	1,296	-12	3,171	1,586	2
17	Larkfield South	2	3,163	1,582	7	3,163	1,582	2
18	Long Mill	2	2,903	1,452	-1	2,922	1,461	-6
19	Medway (in Tonbridge)	2	2,675	1,338	-9	3,185	1,593	2
20	Oast	1	1,398	1,398	-5	1,398	1,398	-10
21	Snodland East	2	3,009	1,505	2	3,041	1,521	-2
22	Snodland West	2	3,733	1,867	27	4,300	2,150	38

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2000)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average (%)	Electorate (2005)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average (%)
23	Trench (in Tonbridge)	3	3,786	1,262	-14	3,786	1,262	-19
24	Vauxhall (in Tonbridge)	2	3,496	1,748	19	3,496	1,748	12
25	Wateringbury	1	1,535	1,535	4	1,535	1,535	-1
26	West Malling, West Peckham & Mereworth	2	4,388	2,194	49	5,555	2,778	78
27	Wrotham	1	1,462	1,462	-1	1,462	1,462	-6
	Totals	55	81,011	-	-	85,650	-	-
	Averages	-	-	1,473	-	-	1,557	-

Source: Electorate figures are based on information provided by Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council.

Notes: 1 The 'variance from average' column shows by how far, in percentage terms, the number of electors per councillor varies from the average for the borough. The minus symbol (-) denotes a lower than average number of electors. For example, in 2000, electors in Aylesford ward were relatively over-represented by 21 per cent, while electors in West Malling, West Peckham & Mereworth ward were relatively under-represented by 49 per cent. Figures have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

2 All existing wards are based upon the current parish boundaries, and will not be subject to revision when new parish boundaries come into effect in April 2002.

3 DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS

17 During Stage One we received 31 representations, including a borough-wide scheme from Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council. We received a number of representations from local political parties including Tonbridge, Edenbridge & Malling and Chatham & Aylesford Conservative Parties, and Tonbridge & Malling and Kent County Council Liberal Democrats. We also received representations from Chatham & Aylesford Constituency Labour Party, two further local branches of the Labour Party and 18 parish councils. We also received representations from five local residents and groups. 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 Tonbridge & Malling in Kent*.

18 Our draft recommendations were based on a combination of the Borough Council's proposals and our own proposals. Our draft recommendations achieved some improvement in electoral equality, and provided a pattern of four three-member, 18 two-member and five single-member wards and a council size of 53. We largely endorsed the Council's proposals in the Medway Gap and Tonbridge areas of the borough. However, we moved away from its proposals in the rural area of the borough, affecting 11 of the existing wards, where we put forward our own proposals. We proposed that:

- Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council should be served by 53 councillors, compared with the current council size of 55, representing 27 wards, the same as at present;
- the boundaries of 17 of the existing wards should be modified, while 10 wards should retain their existing boundaries;
- there should be new warding arrangements for Snodland Town Council and Aylesford, Hadlow and Mereworth parish councils.

Draft Recommendation

Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council should comprise 53 councillors, serving 27 wards. The Council should continue to be elected every four years.

19 Our proposals would have resulted in some improvement in electoral equality, with the number of electors per councillor in 11 of the 27 wards varying by no more than 10 per cent from the borough average. This level of electoral equality was forecast to improve further, with only two wards varying by more than 10 per cent from the average by 2005.

4 RESPONSES TO CONSULTATION

20 During the consultation on our draft recommendations report, 54 representations were received. A list of all respondents is available on request from the Commission. All representations may be inspected at the offices of Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council and the Commission.

Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council

21 The Borough Council supported our draft recommendations in respect of the Medway Gap and Tonbridge areas of the borough. However, it expressed disappointment that we had not adopted its proposals for the rural area. The Council stated that while it appreciated that the prime objective of the review was to achieve greater electoral equality, it considered that there was scope to “devise a scheme which meets this objective but at the same time better reflects local community ties”.

22 The Borough Council therefore put forward alternative warding arrangements for the borough. It proposed different arrangements for five of our proposed wards in the rural area of the borough. The Council endorsed our proposed council size of 53 and proposed that there should be four three-member, 19 two-member and three single-member wards. The Council considered that its proposals would receive a high level of local support and would not have a detrimental effect on electoral equality in the borough. The Council’s alternative proposals would result in three of its proposed 26 wards varying by more than 10 per cent from the borough average by 2005.

Political Groups

23 The Tonbridge, Edenbridge & Malling and Chatham & Aylesford Conservative Parties (“the Conservatives”) expressed support for our draft recommendations for the Medway Gap and Tonbridge areas of the borough and particularly welcomed our proposals for Aylesford and Ditton. However, they considered that our proposals had failed to take into account local community identities in the rural area of the borough. They expressed particular concern with regard to our warding arrangements in the Addington and Trottiscliffe, Shipbourne and Plaxtol and Mereworth and West Peckham areas, and argued that Borough Green parish should retain its separate representation at borough level. They endorsed “with some reservation” the Borough Council’s Stage Three proposals. The Rt Hon Sir John Stanley MP (Tonbridge & Malling) gave his full endorsement to the Conservatives’ submission.

24 Chatham & Aylesford and Tonbridge & Malling Liberal Democrats (“the Liberal Democrats”) broadly supported our proposals for the Tonbridge and Medway Gap areas but opposed our proposed ward name of Blue Bell Hill & Walderslade and queried our proposed electoral arrangements for Aylesford parish. They also expressed particular concern at our recommendations for the rural areas of the borough. They opposed the separation of West Peckham and Mereworth parishes between borough wards and our proposed West Malling & Leybourne ward. They proposed modifications to six of our proposed wards in the rural area of the borough. Snodland Branch Labour Party fully supported our proposals for Snodland town.

Kent County Council

25 Kent County Council broadly supported our draft recommendations for all the ongoing periodic electoral reviews of Kent districts. However, it expressed general concern that a number of rural parishes would be divided between borough wards.

Parish & Town Councils

26 We received representations from 19 parish and town councils. Aylesford, East Malling & Larkfield, Hildenborough and Ightham parish councils all supported our draft recommendations in their respective areas. Addington, Stansted and Trottiscliffe parishes opposed our draft recommendations for the north of the borough and outlined preferred warding arrangements that were broadly similar to the Borough Council's Stage Three proposals. Birling Parish Council stated that it supported being combined with Ryarsh and Trottiscliffe parishes, as proposed in our draft recommendations. Hadlow Parish Council objected to our proposal to transfer Golden Green parish ward of Hadlow parish to a revised East Peckham ward. It argued that our proposals had insufficient regard to the historic ties that exist between the two communities. East Peckham Parish Council supported the retention of existing warding arrangements for its area, but considered our revised East Peckham & Golden Green ward to be a preferable alternative should this not prove possible.

27 Kings Hill and Mereworth parish councils opposed the inclusion of the Airfield Estate from Mereworth parish in our proposed Kings Hill ward. Mereworth Parish Council was opposed to its separation from West Peckham parish for borough warding purposes and enclosed a 65-signature petition opposing our draft recommendations. West Peckham Parish Council expressed similar views and enclosed a 71-signature petition opposing our draft recommendations.

28 Platt and Plaxtol parish councils were opposed to their inclusion in a ward with Borough Green parish, arguing that this would have a detrimental effect upon their effective representation on the Borough Council. Shipbourne Parish Council objected to its separation from Plaxtol parish for the purposes of borough warding. All three parishes supported the retention of the existing Borough Green and Long Mill wards.

29 West Malling Parish Council argued that our proposed West Malling & Leybourne ward had insufficient regard to local community interests and identities. Leybourne Parish Council submitted the views of individual parish councillors who either supported or accepted our draft recommendations. Burham Parish Council queried our allocation of councillors for the Aylesford area of the borough.

Other representations

30 We received a number of representations from borough and parish councillors, local residents and local groups. Councillor Anderson (Hadlow ward) and Councillor Baulf (Golden Green parish ward) opposed the transfer of Golden Green ward of Hadlow parish from Hadlow ward to a new East Peckham & Golden Green ward. Councillor Anderson argued that the incorporation of a number of small settlements in the west of East Peckham parish with the existing Hadlow

ward could resolve this issue. The Hadlow Society reiterated its support for the retention of the existing Hadlow ward. A further nine local residents also supported the retention of the existing Hadlow ward.

31 We received representations from a further 13 local residents opposing our draft recommendations in the Mereworth and West Peckham area. All supported the retention of these two parishes in the same borough ward. A local resident opposed the incorporation of the Airfield Estate in our proposed Kings Hill ward. Another local resident opposed our proposed boundary between Medway and Higham wards in Tonbridge.

5 ANALYSIS AND FINAL RECOMMENDATIONS

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

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

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

35 Our *Guidance* states that we accept that the achievement of absolute electoral equality for the authority as a whole is likely to be unattainable. However, we consider that, if electoral imbalances are to be kept to the minimum, such an objective should be the starting point in any review. We therefore strongly recommend that, in formulating electoral schemes, local authorities and other interested parties should start from the standpoint of absolute electoral equality and only then make adjustments to reflect relevant factors, such as community identity and interests. Regard must be had to five-year forecasts of changes in electorates and we would aim to recommend a scheme which provides improved electoral equality over this five-year period.

Electorate Forecasts

36 At Stage One, the Borough Council submitted electorate forecasts for the year 2005, projecting an increase in the electorate of approximately 6 per cent from 81,011 to 85,504 over the five-year period from 2000 to 2005. It expected most of the growth to be in the Kings Hill area, although a significant amount was also expected at the former Leybourne Hospital site in Birling, Leybourne & Ryarsh ward. The Council estimated rates and locations of housing development with regard to structure and local plans, the expected rate of building over the five-year period and assumed occupancy rates. Advice from the Borough Council on the likely effect on electorates of changes to ward boundaries was obtained.

37 Borough Green Parish Council argued that consideration had not been given by the Borough Council to 47 homes under construction or becoming occupied in its electoral forecasts. Similarly, West Malling Parish Council argued that the Borough Council had under-estimated the level of growth in electorate of the Kings Hill development. They argued that new houses

were being completed at a faster rate than the Council had assumed, and that in the current housing market, this rate was likely to accelerate.

38 In the light of these arguments we sought further clarification from the Borough Council regarding its forecasts for the Borough Green and Kings Hill areas. In relation to Borough Green, the Council argued that it had included all relevant planning applications and could not take into account any applications that had been made after the commencement of the review. In relation to Kings Hill, the Council stated that it considered that, having examined previous records, the projected housing completions would not exceed those currently predicted. The Council conceded, however, that the Parish Council were correct in stating that amongst occupied dwellings on the Kings Hill development there is a higher number of electors per household than the average for the borough as a whole. However, due to the high level of unoccupied properties, the total number of electors is correct.

39 The Council recognised that it could be argued that over time the percentage of unoccupied properties would decline to a rate closer to the borough's average of 8 per cent and that, on this basis, it would be appropriate to apportion a higher electorate to the Kings Hill development and therefore to the borough as a whole. It stated that, having reconsidered its forecasts, the electorate of the Kings Hill development would have 2,677 electors by 2005 rather than 2,531 as previously forecast. Similarly, it predicted that the borough-wide electorate would increase to 85,650 rather than 85,504, as previously forecast.

40 We gave further consideration to the Borough Council's revised figures at Stage One and were content that they represented the best estimates that could reasonably be made at that time. In our draft recommendations, we welcomed further evidence on electorate forecasts. Having received no further comments on the Council's electorate forecasts during Stage Three and accepting that forecasting electorates is an inexact science, we remain satisfied that the Council's forecasts represent the best estimates presently available.

Council Size

41 Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council currently has 55 members. At Stage One, the Borough Council consulted on a small reduction in council size to 53, but considered that retaining a council size of 55 would best meet the interests of local communities and provide for effective and convenient local government. We received one further representation concerning council size. The Conservatives stated that under the Borough Council's submission, Tonbridge would be under-represented. It argued that if the Commission wished to improve electoral equality in this area, it could increase the number of councillors for the area by one, to 56.

42 As already explained, the Commission's starting point is to assume that the current council size facilitates effective and convenient local government, although we are willing to look carefully at arguments why this might not be the case. However, we advise all respondents to examine whether a small change to council size may facilitate a better balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria.

43 Under the Borough Council's Stage One proposals, its proposed allocation of councillors would not have provided a fair balance of representation between the three primary areas of the

borough: the Medway Gap, Tonbridge and the remaining rural area. (The communities that make up these areas are outlined below. For the purposes of analysis, we have considered the Malling Rural and Tonbridge Rural areas together.) Under the Council's proposals for a council size of 55, by 2005 the rural area would be entitled to 19.4 councillors, the Medway Gap would be entitled to 19.8 councillors and Tonbridge would be entitled to 15.8 councillors. However, the Council proposed that the rural area should be over-represented with 21 councillors, and that the Medway Gap and Tonbridge areas should be under-represented with 19 and 15 councillors respectively. Similarly, the Conservatives' alternative proposals, while improving electoral equality in the Tonbridge urban area, would result in over-representation of the rural area and under-representation of the Medway Gap area.

44 In view of this imbalance of representation in the borough, we gave further consideration to both the proposed warding arrangements and council size. In relation to the rural area we considered that the Council's proposals would lead to significant levels of over-representation. Upon examination, we also considered that the Borough Council's proposals for the Medway Gap and Tonbridge areas reflected community identities and interests relatively well. We found that by making a small reduction in council size, the level of electoral equality would improve significantly both overall and in the majority of the Council's proposed wards in the urban area. An alternative approach would have been to increase council size in the two urban areas, but retain the same number of councillors for the rural area. We considered that such an approach would cause significant disruption to the existing wards and would not best reflect community ties. We therefore concluded that the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria would be achieved by reducing the level of representation in the rural area rather than increasing the number of councillors for the urban areas and therefore proposed a council size of 53 (two fewer than at present).

45 At Stage Three of the review, the Borough Council and the Liberal Democrats accepted our proposed council size of 53 in their revised borough-wide proposals. The Conservatives argued that the Tonbridge area, including Hildenborough ward, would be under-represented as a result of our proposals, but accepted our draft recommendations for this area of the borough. They requested that consideration be given to a council size of 54 with the retention of the existing two-member Borough Green ward and two-member Long Mill ward. They considered that a council size of 54 would more accurately reflect community interests when compared to our draft recommendations. Burham Parish Council considered that our draft recommendations would result in the under-representation of those areas situated on the east bank of the River Medway, and requested that consideration be given to allocating three councillors to our proposed Aylesford ward rather than two. A local resident welcomed our proposed reduction in council size to 53.

46 In light of the representations received at Stage Three, we have given further consideration to our proposed council size of 53. We recognise that under a council size of 53, the Tonbridge area, including Hildenborough parish, would be entitled to 18.1 councillors, whereas in our draft recommendations, we allocated the area 17 borough councillors. However, by 2005 this area would be entitled to 17.4 councillors under a council size of 53. Therefore, we consider our allocation of councillors for the Tonbridge urban and rural area will provide for fair representation of this area on the Borough Council, and would best ensure electoral equality, taking account of likely changes over the next five years.

47 We have also considered the representation of wards located on the east bank of the River Medway. Under a council size of 53, this area is entitled to 6.2 councillors now and 6.3 councillors by 2005. While we acknowledge that Aylesford ward itself will initially have a relatively high level of electoral variance when compared to the current borough average, we note that by 2005 there will be significant improvement in levels of electoral equality in this ward. Having noted that our draft recommendations would provide six councillors for these wards, we remain of the view that our proposals provide a fair allocation of councillors for the Medway Gap area of the borough.

48 Under a 53-member scheme, by 2005 the rural areas would be entitled to 18.7 councillors, the Medway Gap would be entitled to 19.1 councillors and the Tonbridge area would be entitled to 15.2 councillors. Our proposals would provide the rural area and the Medway Gap area with 19 councillors each and Tonbridge with 15 councillors. In this way, each area of the borough would achieve a fair level of representation on the Borough Council. Having considered the size and distribution of the electorate, the geography and other characteristics of the area, together with the representations received, we remain of the opinion that the achievement of electoral equality and the statutory criteria would best be met by a council of 53 members. We therefore confirm this as our final recommendation for council size in Tonbridge & Malling.

Electoral Arrangements

49 We carefully considered all the representations received at Stage One, including the borough-wide scheme from the Borough Council. From these representations, some considerations emerged which assisted us in preparing our draft recommendations.

50 The Borough Council's proposals were largely based on existing warding arrangements, with 14 wards retaining their existing boundaries. Under the proposals, the number of wards would increase by one to 28, and the number of councillors would remain unchanged at 55. The proposals had been subject to extensive public consultation and appeared to have a significant degree of local support. The Council argued that the current wards "reflect the character and interests of parishes and communities very well". In preparing its proposals, the Council stated that it had tried to group communities with similar interests and reflect the views of smaller parishes opposed to being combined with larger parishes. The Council argued that the borough is diverse, combining rural and urban areas and with population centres in the north and south. While it recognised that one of the Commission's objectives is to achieve as close to electoral equality as possible, it considered that there is a need to reflect the borough's diversity. However, the resulting scheme failed to achieve a good level of electoral equality, with nine of the proposed 28 wards projected to have variances in excess of 10 per cent from the borough average by 2005.

51 We recognised that Tonbridge & Malling is a diverse borough, combining a significant rural area with larger settlements to the south-west and north-east. Although reviewed relatively recently, the borough has been subject to significant changes in the size and distribution of its electorate. In particular, there has been significant growth in Kings Hill and in Snodland. We recognised that the Borough Council had attempted to accommodate these changes while making only minimal changes to ward boundaries.

52 We considered that such an approach was appropriate in some parts of the borough. In particular, we largely concurred with the Council's proposals for the Tonbridge and Medway Gap areas of the borough which, on the basis of a 53-member council, represented a reasonable balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria. However, we considered that such an approach had limitations and that in order to reflect community identities and the preferences of respondents, the Council had failed to adequately address the requirement to achieve a reasonable level of electoral equality in the rural part of the borough. We therefore considered that the level of over-representation in some of the rural wards should be addressed.

53 At Stage Three, we recognised that our draft recommendations had generated opposition in the rural areas of the borough. In addition, we received alternative warding arrangements from the Borough Council, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. In the light of these representations we have given further consideration to our proposed warding arrangements. We consider that our proposals for the Medway Gap and Tonbridge urban areas of the borough reflect the identities and interests of local communities while providing for much improved levels of electoral equality in five years' time. Having noted the substantial endorsement of our proposals for these areas at Stage Three, we propose to confirm our draft proposals for the Medway Gap and Tonbridge urban areas of the borough as part of our final recommendations. We have given further consideration to our draft recommendations for the rural area of the borough. We note that, in particular, concern was expressed regarding our proposals to divide Hadlow parish between wards, to place West Peckham and Mereworth in different borough wards, and to divide the Downs parishes between wards. However, we also note that there was a degree of support for our proposed Kings Hill ward and acceptance of our proposed East Peckham & Golden Green ward by the Council, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats.

54 Having given further consideration to our proposed warding arrangements for the rural area, we propose departing from our draft recommendations. We propose basing our final recommendations for the rural area on the Borough Council's Stage Three proposals. We note that the Council have accepted our draft recommendations in a number of areas where they initially proposed alternative arrangements. Furthermore, the Council's proposals would provide the correct allocation of councillors between the three primary areas of the borough. They would also retain the villages of West Peckham and Mereworth in the same ward and would unite the rural North Downs area in the north of the borough. We consider that our revised proposals would achieve the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria. For borough warding purposes, the following areas, based on existing wards, are considered in turn:

Medway Gap

- Aylesford, Blue Bell Hill, Burham, Eccles & Wouldham and Ditton wards;
- East Malling, Larkfield North and Larkfield South wards;
- Snodland East and Snodland West wards;

Malling Rural

- Birling, Leybourne & Ryarsh and Oast wards;
- Ightham and Wrotham wards;

- West Malling, West Peckham & Mereworth and Wateringbury wards;
- Borough Green and Long Mill wards;

Tonbridge Rural

- East Peckham, Hadlow and Hildenborough wards;

Tonbridge Urban

- Cage Green, Higham and Trench wards;
- Castle, Judd, Medway and Vauxhall wards.

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

Medway Gap

Aylesford, Blue Bell Hill, Burham, Eccles & Wouldham and Ditton wards

56 The existing wards of Aylesford, Blue Bell Hill, Burham, Eccles & Wouldham and Ditton are situated in the north-eastern corner of the borough. Aylesford ward contains North and South wards of Aylesford parish and is currently represented by three councillors. Blue Bell Hill ward contains Blue Bell Hill and Walderslade wards of Aylesford parish and is currently represented by two councillors. Burham, Eccles & Wouldham ward contains Eccles ward of Aylesford parish together with the parishes of Burham and Wouldham and is currently represented by two councillors. Ditton ward is coterminous with Ditton parish and is currently represented by three councillors. Under existing arrangements, Aylesford, Burham, Eccles & Wouldham and Ditton wards would contain 21 per cent, 3 per cent and 18 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the borough average respectively (25 per cent fewer, 11 per cent more and 22 per cent fewer by 2005), while Blue Bell Hill ward contains 8 per cent more electors per councillor than the average (3 per cent more by 2005).

57 At Stage One, the Borough Council proposed no boundary changes in this area, but recommended a reduction in the number of councillors representing the two wards of Aylesford and Ditton from three each to two each. The Council consulted locally on a proposal which would combine the Holtwood area with Ditton parish, and the northern part of Ditton parish with the remainder of Aylesford village. However, in the light of local consultation it reconsidered its proposals. The Council stated that it “did not believe a practical solution is achievable so as to obtain closer electoral equality in these wards”, arguing that improving electoral equality would result in arbitrary borough and parish warding and would lead to “disruption and confusion”.

58 Chatham & Aylesford Liberal Democrats supported the Borough Council’s proposals to retain the existing boundaries for the area, particularly in Aylesford and Ditton wards. They also accepted the reduction in councillors for Aylesford and Ditton wards due to changing population distribution in the borough. Kent County Council Liberal Democrat Group generally supported the Borough Council’s proposals. The Conservatives also supported the Borough Council’s

proposals, arguing that in Aylesford and Ditton wards, any change to the existing ward boundaries “would be met by public incredulity”. Chatham & Aylesford Constituency Labour Party and the Snodland Branch Labour Party stated their opposition to any proposal which would divide Aylesford and Ditton wards, arguing that they are separate and distinct communities. Tonbridge North Branch Labour Party also supported the Borough Council’s proposed Aylesford and Ditton wards.

59 Aylesford Parish Council expressed support for the Borough Council’s proposals for this area, but proposed renaming Blue Bell Hill ward as Blue Bell Hill & Walderslade. It opposed the alternative proposal, to divide the current Aylesford and Ditton wards. Ditton Parish Council supported the proposals, while Burham Parish Council expressed concern that representation was not increasing with the area’s electorate. Finally, we received a submission from a local resident strongly supporting the reduction of councillors in Aylesford and Ditton wards, as proposed by the Council.

60 In our draft recommendations, we considered that under the Council’s proposed 55-member scheme the level of electoral inequality in this area would be unacceptably high. However, we recognised that the existing wards reflect community ties well and noted that by reducing council size to 53, electoral equality would be significantly improved. In the light of the strong consensus and distinct community identities in the area, we were content to put forward the Borough Council’s proposals for Aylesford, Blue Bell Hill, Burham, Eccles & Wouldham and Ditton wards as part of our draft recommendations, subject to one minor name change as proposed by Aylesford Parish Council. We considered Walderslade to be a significant part of Blue Bell Hill ward and proposed renaming Blue Bell Hill ward as Blue Bell Hill & Walderslade ward.

61 At Stage Three the Borough Council noted that we had substantially adopted its own proposals for this area and therefore supported our draft recommendations. In particular, the Council stated it was grateful that the Commission had accepted its proposals for the Aylesford and Ditton areas, and supported our proposed ward name change to Blue Bell Hill & Walderslade.

62 The Conservatives supported our draft recommendations in respect of this area and particularly welcomed our proposals for Aylesford and Ditton wards. The Liberal Democrats substantially endorsed our proposals, noting that our proposed warding arrangements were in accordance with local community wishes. However, they considered that our proposed ward name of Blue Bell Hill & Walderslade would not accurately reflect the distribution of electorates between the constituent communities of this ward and therefore proposed that it be renamed Walderslade & Blue Bell Hill. They also queried our proposed electoral arrangements for Aylesford parish, as discussed in detail later. We received two representations from parish councils in this area. Aylesford Parish Council supported our draft recommendations. Burham Parish Council considered that our proposals would result in the under-representation of those areas situated on the east bank of the River Medway, and requested that the number of councillors representing Aylesford ward remain at three.

63 We have carefully considered the representations received and note that our draft recommendations for this area have been substantially supported at Stage Three of the review. We note the support our proposals have received from the Borough Council, which particularly

endorsed our proposed ward name of Blue Bell Hill & Walderslade. We consider this ward name accurately identifies the constituent communities of this proposed ward and are therefore not persuaded to adopt the Liberal Democrats' proposed ward name of Walderslade & Blue Bell Hill as part of our final recommendations.

64 Having given further consideration to councillor allocation in the proposed wards, we are not persuaded that our proposals would result in the under-representation of communities situated on the east bank of the River Medway. We consider that our proposed council size of 53 provides for the most equitable distribution of councillors between the three primary areas of the borough. Our recommendations provide for a two-member Aylesford ward that would currently have 14 per cent more electors per councillor than the borough average. However, we note that the level of electoral equality in Aylesford ward is forecast to improve to 8 per cent more than the borough average by 2005. We consider that a three-member Aylesford ward, as proposed by Burham Parish Council, would have an adverse effect upon the long term level of electoral equality in this area. Having considered all the representations received at Stage Three of the review, we are content to confirm our draft recommendations for Aylesford, Blue Bell Hill & Walderslade, Burham, Eccles & Wouldham and Ditton wards as final.

65 Under our final recommendations, Aylesford, Blue Bell Hill & Walderslade and Ditton wards would have 14 per cent, 4 per cent and 19 per cent more electors per councillor than the borough average respectively (8 per cent more, 1 per cent fewer and 13 per cent more than average by 2005), while Burham, Eccles & Wouldham ward would have 6 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the borough average (7 per cent more than the average by 2005). Our proposals for this area are illustrated on Map 2.

East Malling, Larkfield North and Larkfield South wards

66 The existing wards of East Malling, Larkfield North and Larkfield South are situated in the north-east of the borough. All three wards are coterminous with the parish wards of East Malling & Larkfield parish of the same name, and are currently represented by two councillors each. Under existing arrangements, East Malling and Larkfield South wards contain 8 per cent and 7 per cent more electors per councillor than the borough average respectively, while Larkfield North ward contains 12 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the average. By 2005, Larkfield North and Larkfield South wards would each contain 2 per cent more electors per councillor than the borough average, while East Malling ward would contain 9 per cent more than average.

67 At Stage One the Borough Council proposed no change to the existing East Malling, Larkfield North and Larkfield South wards, except to realign the boundary between Larkfield North and Ditton wards to reflect the minor parish boundary change which will come into effect in 2002. We received three further submissions for this area. Chatham & Aylesford Liberal Democrats, Kent County Council Liberal Democrat Group and the Conservatives all supported the Borough Council's proposals.

68 We considered that the existing arrangements reflect community ties well, and based on a council size of 53, would provide for reasonable electoral equality by 2005. We were therefore

content to put forward the Council's proposals for East Malling, Larkfield North and Larkfield South wards as part of our draft recommendations.

69 At Stage Three, the Borough Council, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats endorsed our draft recommendations for East Malling, Larkfield North and Larkfield South wards. East Malling & Larkfield Parish Council supported our draft recommendations and requested an early review of county divisions in order that they reflect our proposed borough wards.

70 Having carefully considered the representations received, we note that our draft recommendations for this area have received significant support. We consider that our proposals provide the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria in this area, and are therefore content to confirm our draft recommendations for East Malling, Larkfield North and Larkfield South wards as final. Under our final recommendations, East Malling and Larkfield South wards would have 5 per cent more and 3 per cent more electors per councillor than the borough average respectively (5 per cent more and 2 per cent fewer than average by 2005). Larkfield North ward would have 15 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the borough average currently, and 2 per cent fewer than average by 2005. These wards are illustrated on Map 2.

Snodland East and Snodland West wards

71 The existing wards of Snodland East and Snodland West are situated in the north-east of the borough, and together cover the Snodland Town Council area. Each ward is currently represented by two councillors. Snodland East and Snodland West wards have 2 per cent and 27 per cent more electors per councillor than the borough average respectively. Electoral equality is projected to remain relatively constant in Snodland East ward over the next five years, while in Snodland West ward it is projected to deteriorate to 38 per cent more electors per councillor than the borough average by 2005.

72 At Stage One, the Borough Council proposed minimal change in this area, amending the boundary between Snodland East and Snodland West wards to follow the centre of Malling Road rather than run to the rear of the properties, and increasing the number of councillors representing Snodland West ward from two to three.

73 Chatham & Aylesford Constituency Labour Party and the Snodland Branch Labour Party strongly supported the Council's proposals for Snodland and welcomed the third councillor for Snodland West ward. The Conservatives, Chatham & Aylesford Liberal Democrats and Kent County Council Liberal Democrat Group also supported the Council's proposals for this area. We received one further submission from a local resident, who argued that the substantial population growth in Snodland justified an extra councillor.

74 In our draft recommendations, we noted the consensus behind the proposal to increase the number of councillors for Snodland West ward, and also for the Council's proposed minor boundary amendment. We considered that the Council's proposals provided for reasonable electoral equality, whilst reflecting the identities and interests of local communities and were therefore content to put forward the Council's proposals for Snodland East and Snodland West wards as part of our draft recommendations.

75 At Stage Three, the Borough Council supported our draft recommendations for this area. Our proposals were also endorsed by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. Snodland Branch Labour Party also strongly supported our proposals to increase the representation of Snodland West ward to three councillors and supported our proposal to realign the boundary of Snodland East and West wards along the centre of Malling Road.

76 Having carefully considered the representations received, we note that our proposals for Snodland East and Snodland West wards have received strong local endorsement. We remain of the opinion that our proposals reflect the interests and identities of the local community while providing for reasonable levels of electoral equality, and utilise clear and distinct ward boundaries. We are therefore content to confirm our draft recommendations for Snodland East and Snodland West wards as part of our final recommendations.

77 Under our final recommendations, Snodland East and Snodland West wards would have 4 per cent fewer and 17 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the borough average respectively, both improving to 9 per cent fewer than average by 2005. Our proposals for this area are illustrated in Map A4 at Appendix A.

Malling Rural

Birling, Leybourne & Ryarsh and Oast wards

78 The existing wards of Birling, Leybourne & Ryarsh and Oast are situated in the north of the borough. Birling, Leybourne & Ryarsh ward comprises the three parishes of Birling, Leybourne and Ryarsh and is currently represented by two councillors. Oast ward comprises the parishes of Addington, Stansted and Trottiscliffe and is currently represented by a single councillor. Under existing arrangements, Birling, Leybourne & Ryarsh ward contains 8 per cent more electors per councillor than the borough average, while Oast ward contains 5 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the average. This level of electoral equality is projected to deteriorate in both wards over the next five years, so that Birling, Leybourne & Ryarsh ward would contain 29 per cent more electors per councillor than the borough average and Oast ward would contain 10 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the average by 2005.

79 At Stage One, the Borough Council proposed significant change in this area, combining Birling and Ryarsh parishes with the existing Oast ward to form a new two-member Addington, Birling, Trottiscliffe, Ryarsh & Stansted ward. It also proposed a new two-member Leybourne ward comprising Leybourne parish. The Council argued that the five rural settlements of Addington, Birling, Trottiscliffe, Ryarsh and Stansted have strong community and historical links and share many common interests. The Council argued that Leybourne has changed significantly due to housing development since the last review and justified its own borough ward due to its distinctly more urban character. It also noted that its proposals for this area were “unanimously supported by all consultees in the area”. Under the Council’s proposed 55-member scheme the two-member Addington, Birling, Trottiscliffe, Ryarsh and Stansted ward would have 24 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the borough average (21 per cent fewer than the average by 2005), while Leybourne ward would have 20 per cent fewer than average (5 per cent fewer by 2005).

80 The Conservatives supported the Borough Council's proposals for this area. They argued that Addington, Birling, Ryarsh, Stansted and Trottiscliffe are "small village communities with similar attitudes and interests". They proposed an alternative option should the Commission find their preferred option unacceptable, which would retain the existing single-member Oast ward, whilst combining the parishes of Birling and Ryarsh with West Malling in a two-member ward.

81 Tonbridge & Malling Liberal Democrats supported the Borough Council's proposals for this area. They argued that the A20, acts as a barrier between Addington to the north of this road and Offham and West Malling to the south. Kent County Council Liberal Democrat Group also supported the Council's proposals.

82 Birling Parish Council proposed that Birling parish should no longer be warded with Leybourne parish as they are divided by the M20 motorway and Leybourne has become increasingly urbanised. It argued that the people of Birling would not be effectively represented if they remained in a ward with Leybourne. Furthermore, it argued, Birling has strong "cultural and emotional" links with the adjoining rural parishes and, as such, should form part of a rural ward consisting of Addington, Birling, Ryarsh, Stansted and Trottiscliffe parishes as proposed by the Borough Council. Addington Parish Council also proposed that it should be combined with similar rural parishes. In particular, it argued that it should retain shared representation with Trottiscliffe, with which it has strong historical links, and should not be combined with any urban area. Trottiscliffe and Ryarsh parish councils both also proposed a new two-member ward consisting of Addington, Birling, Ryarsh, Stansted and Trottiscliffe parishes, on the grounds that these parishes have strong community and historical links. Stansted Parish Council stated that they preferred no change to the current warding arrangements.

83 Tonbridge North Branch Labour Party supported the Council's Addington, Birling, Ryarsh, Stansted & Trottiscliffe ward. The Seekers Trust supported Addington Parish Council's opposition to any proposal which would unite Addington with the urban area of West Malling and emphasised Addington's links with the rural parishes of Birling, Ryarsh and Trottiscliffe. Finally, one local resident expressed support for the Council's proposals for this area.

84 In our draft recommendations, we recognised the significant local support for the Borough Council's proposed warding arrangements for this area. However, we considered the resulting level of electoral inequality in the proposed Addington, Birling, Stansted, Ryarsh & Trottiscliffe ward (which under a council size of 53 would initially have 27 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the borough average, and 23 per cent fewer than average by 2005) to be unacceptable, and were therefore not prepared to put this option forward as part of our draft recommendations. We considered, however, that there was merit in Birling and Ryarsh parishes forming part of a rural ward rather than being combined with Leybourne or West Malling parish. We therefore proposed creating a single-member Birling, Ryarsh & Trottiscliffe ward. We noted that while such a ward would be over-represented currently, the projected development in Ryarsh parish would significantly improve electoral equality by 2005.

85 We also recognised the concerns of Addington Parish Council in respect of being combined with the urban area of West Malling. While we recognised the Parish Council's preference for being combined with the rural area to its north, we were unable to find a warding arrangement that could achieve this and also provide reasonable electoral equality. We therefore proposed

combining it with the rural parishes of Offham and Mereworth to its south. We were not convinced by the Tonbridge & Malling Liberal Democrats' argument that the A20 acts a barrier between Addington and Offham. We considered the A20 to be no more of a barrier to the south of Addington than the M20 to the north. We also noted that prior to the last electoral review, Offham and Addington parishes formed part of the same ward.

86 Stansted Parish Council's proposals to retain the existing Oast ward would result in an unacceptable level of electoral inequality and would be incompatible with our proposed warding arrangements elsewhere in the area. Similarly, combining Stansted parish with Birling, Ryarsh and Trottiscliffe parishes would have resulted in an unacceptable level of electoral inequality. In the light of these considerations we considered that combining Stansted parish with the neighbouring parish of Wrotham would provide for the most appropriate balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria.

87 As detailed above, we proposed dividing the existing Birling, Leybourne & Ryarsh ward and creating a single-member Birling, Ryarsh & Trottiscliffe ward. We proposed combining Leybourne parish with West Malling parish to form a three-member ward, as we considered that the largely residential area of Leybourne looks more to the urban settlement of West Malling than the rural areas to the west, and noted that the two parishes have strong communication links. Under our draft recommendations, Birling, Ryarsh & Trottiscliffe and West Malling & Leybourne wards would have 17 per cent fewer and 8 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the borough average respectively, improving to 7 per cent fewer than and equal to the average by 2005. Wrotham & Stansted ward would have 16 per cent more electors per councillor than average initially, improving to 10 per cent more than the average by 2005.

88 At Stage Three, the Borough Council expressed disappointment that the Commission had not accepted its initial proposals which, it argued "were based on maintaining community links within wards". It appreciated the Commission's prime objective of electoral equality, but considered there was scope for proposals that achieved this while reflecting local community links. In particular, it proposed combining the existing Oast ward with the parishes of Birling, Ryarsh and Offham to form a new two-member ward. The Council argued that these parishes share common interests and have good communication and transport links. It also noted that these communities straddle the Pilgrims Way and share similar agricultural and economic interests. The Council judged that, from the representations received during the consultation process, its proposal would receive a high degree of local support. The Conservatives and Sir John Stanley MP endorsed the Borough Council's proposals for this area, arguing that our draft recommendations had failed to take into account local community ties.

89 The Liberal Democrats proposed that the parishes of Addington, Ryarsh and Trottiscliffe should be combined in a new single-member ward, and that a new two-member Birling & Leybourne ward be formed. They stated that these proposals would avoid the need to link the small rural town of West Malling with the largely new residential area of Leybourne in a new ward. They asserted that our draft recommendations for this area had aroused strong local objection. Under the Liberal Democrats' proposals, Addington, Trottiscliffe & Ryarsh and Birling & Leybourne wards would have equal to, and 13 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the borough average respectively (10 per cent and 1 per cent more than average by 2005).

90 Addington Parish Council stated that it wanted to remain part of a rural ward with its neighbouring parishes. It opposed any link with Mereworth as it does not neighbour the parish. If change was considered necessary, it stated that it would support the Borough Council's proposal to unite Addington, Birling, Offham, Ryarsh, Stansted and Trottiscliffe parishes in the same borough ward. Stansted Parish Council argued that the existing ward should be retained, but as an alternative would support the Borough Council's Stage Three proposals. Trottiscliffe Parish Council objected "most strongly" to our draft recommendations to separate it from the neighbouring parishes of Addington and Stansted. It considered that these communities share many characteristics and are subject to the same local issues. It outlined arrangements for this area that were identical to the Borough Council's Stage Three proposals. Birling Parish Council stated that it would be content to be incorporated in a borough ward with the parishes of Ryarsh and Trottiscliffe. Leybourne Parish Council submitted the individual comments of parish councillors to our draft recommendations. There was a broad preference to Leybourne being combined with West Malling parish for borough warding purposes, rather than with Birling and Ryarsh (as discussed later).

91 We have carefully considered the representations received at Stage Three of the review, and acknowledge that our draft recommendations for these wards have met with some local opposition. In the light of this, we have given consideration to the alternative proposals submitted by the Borough Council and the Liberal Democrats for this area. We recognise that there was considerable local support for uniting the parishes of Birling, Addington, Ryarsh, Trottiscliffe and Stansted (the BARTS parishes) in a single borough ward. In addition, we note that there was a degree of support from Birling Parish Council and Leybourne parish councillors for the different nature of the two parishes to be recognised in future warding arrangements. While both the Liberal Democrats' and the Council's proposals would achieve reasonable levels of electoral equality, we consider that the Council's proposals appear to better reflect community interests and identities and have more general local support in this area.

92 Having given consideration to the alternative proposals put forward, we consider that the Borough Council's Stage Three proposals would have sufficient regard for the statutory criteria while providing for reasonable levels of electoral equality in the wards affected. We have examined the Council's proposed two-member ward containing the existing Oast ward and the parishes of Birling, Offham and Ryarsh. While we note that the proposed ward would cover a relatively large area and straddle the M20 motorway, we are persuaded that the local communities are similar in nature and share community ties. Therefore, on the balance of the evidence received, we have been persuaded to modify our draft recommendations in this area.

93 We therefore propose departing from our draft recommendations for the existing wards of Birling, Leybourne & Ryarsh and Oast. We propose adopting the Borough Council's Stage Three proposals for a new two-member ward containing the parishes of Addington, Birling, Offham, Ryarsh, Stansted and Trottiscliffe as part of our final recommendations. We note that the Borough Council expressed no preference as to the most appropriate name for this ward. Having given consideration to the geographical extent of this area, we note that the constituent communities of the proposed ward are situated at the foot of the North Downs. We therefore propose that this ward be named Downs ward. Our final recommendations for warding arrangements for Leybourne parish are discussed in detail below. Under our final recommendations, Downs ward

would have 7 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the borough average, improving to 5 per cent fewer than average by 2005. Our proposals for this area are illustrated on Map 2.

Ightham and Wrotham wards

94 The existing wards of Ightham and Wrotham are situated in the north-west of the borough. Ightham ward is coterminous with Ightham parish and Wrotham ward is coterminous with Wrotham parish. Both wards are currently represented by a single councillor. Under existing arrangements, Wrotham ward contains 1 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the borough average, while Ightham ward contains 1 per cent more electors per councillor than the borough average. This level of electoral equality is projected to deteriorate over the next five years to 6 per cent and 4 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the borough average respectively.

95 At Stage One, the Borough Council proposed no change to the existing electoral arrangements of Ightham and Wrotham wards other than to reflect the proposed boundary amendments between the parishes of Ightham, Platt and Wrotham which would come into effect in 2002. We received four other submissions in relation to this area. The Conservatives, Tonbridge & Malling Liberal Democrats, Kent County Council Liberal Democrat Group and Wrotham Parish Council all supported the Council's proposals.

96 In our draft recommendations, we were content that the Borough Council's proposals for Ightham ward provided for a reasonable level of electoral equality, whilst reflecting the identities and interests of local communities. We were therefore content to put forward the Council's proposals for Ightham ward as part of our draft recommendations. However, under a Council size of 53, we considered that the Council's proposed Wrotham ward would have a relatively high level of electoral inequality, which would deteriorate as further growth occurs throughout the borough. As discussed previously, we proposed combining Wrotham parish with the neighbouring parish of Stansted, which would provide for improved electoral equality by 2005.

97 At Stage Three, the Borough Council endorsed our draft recommendations to retain the existing single-member Ightham ward, subject to the proposed external parish boundary amendments (as outlined above). The Borough Council opposed our draft recommendations for a revised Wrotham & Stansted ward and reiterated its support for retaining the existing single-member Wrotham ward. It argued that Wrotham village, which contains the majority of the ward's population, is situated in a wedge between the M20 motorway and the Downs escarpment to the north and the M26 Motorway to the south. As a result, it stated that the village shares few common interests with Stansted or any of its neighbouring parishes. The Conservatives and Sir John Stanley MP endorsed the Borough Council's Stage Three proposals for this area.

98 The Liberal Democrats supported our draft recommendations for a single-member Wrotham & Stansted ward, but proposed a new two-member Ightham, Platt & Plaxtol ward, containing the parishes of the same name. They commented that the north of the parish is virtually indistinguishable from Stansted parish. Under the Liberal Democrats' proposal, Ightham, Platt & Plaxtol and Wrotham & Stansted wards would currently have 14 per cent and 16 per cent more electors per councillor than the borough average respectively, improving to 8 per cent more and 10 per cent more than the average by 2005.

99 Ightham Parish Council endorsed our draft recommendations to retain the existing single-member Ightham ward and noted that our proposals would result in “a very fair ratio of electors to councillors...in the short as well as the medium term”. Stansted Parish Council was opposed to being linked in a borough ward with Wrotham parish, and favoured being linked with parishes to its east.

100 We have carefully considered the representations received at Stage Three of the review. We have given thorough consideration to the Stage Three proposals by the Borough Council and the Liberal Democrats. We have not been persuaded to put forward a new two-member Ightham, Platt & Plaxtol ward. We consider Ightham parish to be a distinct community to the west of Borough Green and the A227 trunk road, which shares few links with the parishes of Platt and Plaxtol. We also note that our proposed single-member Ightham ward would provide for an improved level of electoral equality when compared to these proposals. Having taken account of these factors and noting the support of the Borough Council, the Conservatives, Sir John Stanley MP and Ightham Parish Council for our proposed ward, we intend to confirm our draft recommendations for a single-member Ightham ward as part of our final recommendations.

101 We acknowledge that our proposed Wrotham & Stansted ward has met with some opposition during the consultation process. Having given consideration to the Borough Council’s Stage Three proposals for a single-member Wrotham ward, we recognise that its proposals have some merit. We accept that while there is some similarity between the two areas in the north of the parish, the majority of the population of this parish are located in the settlement of Wrotham itself, which is separated from other rural communities in the area by the M20 motorway and the Downs escarpment to the north, and the M26 motorway to the south. We also recognise the desire of the “BARTS parishes” (Birling, Addington, Ryarsh, Trottscliffe and Stansted) to be united in a single ward. While we are of the opinion that both proposals would provide a higher level of electoral inequality than we would prefer, we consider that on balance, the Borough Council’s proposals would better reflect community identities and interests than our draft recommendations.

102 While we note the support of the Liberal Democrats for our draft recommendations in this area, we consider that the retention of the existing single-member Wrotham ward would have more regard for the statutory criteria and provide for a reasonable level of electoral equality both now and in five years’ time. We therefore propose departing from our draft recommendations for this area and adopting the Stage Three proposals of the Borough Council for a single-member Wrotham ward as part of our final recommendations. Under our final recommendations, Ightham and Wrotham wards would have 1 per cent more and 8 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the borough average (4 per cent fewer and 13 per cent fewer than average by 2005). Our proposals for this area are illustrated on Map 2.

West Malling, West Peckham & Mereworth and Wateringbury wards

103 The existing wards of West Malling, West Peckham & Mereworth and Wateringbury are situated in the east of the borough. Wateringbury ward is coterminous with Wateringbury parish and is currently represented by a single councillor. West Malling, West Peckham & Mereworth ward comprises the parishes of Mereworth, Kings Hill, West Malling and West Peckham and is currently represented by two councillors. Under existing arrangements Wateringbury and West Malling, West Peckham & Mereworth wards contain 4 per cent and 49 per cent more electors per

councillor than the borough average respectively. While the level of electoral equality is projected to improve in Wateringbury ward (to 1 per cent fewer than the average), in West Malling, West Peckham & Mereworth ward it is projected to deteriorate to 78 per cent more electors per councillor than the borough average by 2005, due to extensive development in the Kings Hill area.

104 At Stage One, the Borough Council proposed dividing the current West Malling, West Peckham & Mereworth ward by creating a new two-member Kings Hill ward, comprising Kings Hill parish. The remainder of the current ward would form a revised two-member West Malling, West Peckham & Mereworth ward. It also proposed retaining the existing ward boundaries for Wateringbury ward. The Council considered the residential and business development in Kings Hill parish to be unique and relatively self-contained and to “have no common interests or historic links with its neighbouring areas”. Under the Council’s Stage One proposals for a council size of 55, West Malling, West Peckham & Mereworth and Wateringbury wards would have 2 per cent fewer and 4 per cent more electors per councillor than the borough average respectively (8 per cent and 1 per cent fewer than the average by 2005). Kings Hill ward would have 49 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the borough average, improving to 14 per cent fewer than the average by 2005.

105 The Conservatives supported the Borough Council’s proposals for Kings Hill, Wateringbury and West Malling, West Peckham & Mereworth wards but, as detailed above, also proposed alternative warding arrangements for this area should the Commission find its preferred option unacceptable. They proposed combining West Malling parish with Birling and Ryarsh parishes in a two-member ward, and combining West Peckham, Mereworth and Wateringbury parishes in a two-member ward.

106 Tonbridge & Malling Liberal Democrats supported the Borough Council’s proposals for this area, and argued that Kings Hill is a separate urban community which should not be combined with neighbouring parishes merely “to get the figures right”. Kent County Council Liberal Democrat Group supported the Council’s proposals, while Tonbridge North Branch Labour Party supported the Council’s proposed Kings Hill ward.

107 West Peckham Parish Council supported the Borough Council’s proposals and stated that it was important to recognise the community links between West Peckham and Mereworth. West Malling Parish Council also supported the Borough Council’s proposals and commented that Kings Hill should be a separate ward due to “its unique character within the borough”. Kings Hill Parish Council also expressed support for the Borough Council’s proposals for this area. Finally, a local resident expressed support for the Borough Council’s proposals, arguing that Kings Hill merited extra councillors because of the high level of population growth in this area.

108 In our draft recommendations, we concurred with the Borough Council that Kings Hill is a distinct and self-contained community that has little in common with neighbouring rural settlements, but considered that we should address the high level of electoral inequality under both the existing arrangements and the Council’s proposals. We therefore proposed amending the Council’s proposals to include the Airfield Estate from Mereworth parish in Kings Hill ward, which we considered shares relatively few links with the village of Mereworth itself and neighbours the Kings Hill development which is being constructed on the former West Malling

Airfield. We considered that, by warding that part of Mereworth parish which contains the Airfield Estate, we would be able to establish separate representation for the Kings Hill area, and would be reflecting local identities and interests. This proposal would divide no settlement and would provide for an improved level of electoral equality.

109 As discussed previously, we proposed combining West Malling and Leybourne parishes in a three-member ward. We considered both of these areas to be urban in nature and to have strong communication links. We also considered that the option provides reasonable electoral equality, and enables the smaller rural areas currently combined with the two parishes to form part of wards with a rural perspective. Also, as outlined above, we were not persuaded to combine Birling and Ryarsh parishes with West Malling parish, as proposed by the Conservatives in their alternative option, as we considered that these areas share limited links.

110 As a consequence of our proposed West Malling & Leybourne and Kings Hill wards, we considered alternative warding arrangements for Mereworth and West Peckham. While we recognised that there was some local support for maintaining links between West Peckham and Mereworth parishes, we noted that this would result in unacceptably high levels of electoral inequality. We were also not convinced that the Conservatives' alternative proposals for a Mereworth, Wateringbury & West Peckham ward would provide for the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria. As detailed above, we proposed combining Mereworth parish, less that part which would form Airfield parish ward (and would be combined with Kings Hill parish in a borough ward), with the similarly rural parishes of Offham and Addington to its north in a single-member ward. While we recognised that Mereworth shares stronger links with areas to its east and west, we noted that it is linked to areas to its north by the B2016 and considered that Addington and Offham are communities of a comparable size and nature. Furthermore, as outlined in more detail below, we proposed combining West Peckham parish with Hadlow parish, less Golden Green, and Shipbourne parish in a two-member ward.

111 We were content that the Borough Council's proposals for Wateringbury ward would provide for the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria and were therefore content to put this proposal forward as part of our draft recommendations.

112 At Stage Three, the Borough Council supported our proposal to retain the existing single-member Wateringbury ward. It also supported the transfer of the Airfield Estate of Mereworth parish into our proposed two-member Kings Hill ward and our proposed three-member West Malling & Leybourne ward. However it expressed particular concern at our proposal to divide Mereworth and West Peckham parishes between different borough wards. It argued that these parishes share long-standing community links and should remain within the same ward. The Council stated that Mereworth shares few links with the parishes of Addington and Offham and utilises separate local amenities and facilities. The Council therefore put forward alternative warding arrangements for this area. It proposed combining Hadlow parish ward with the parishes of Mereworth and West Peckham to form a new two-member Hadlow, Mereworth & West Peckham ward. The Council argued that its proposal would have more regard to the identities of local communities and was likely to generate more local support than our draft recommendations.

113 The Conservatives endorsed our proposed West Malling & Leybourne and Wateringbury wards, and the transfer of the Airfield Estate to our proposed Kings Hill ward. However, they

expressed particular concern that our draft recommendations would divide the parishes of Mereworth and West Peckham, and argued that the Borough Council's Stage Three proposals for the Mereworth and West Peckham areas would be preferable. Sir John Stanley MP also supported the Borough Council's proposals for this area.

114 The Liberal Democrats supported our proposed Wateringbury and Kings Hill wards and noted our acceptance that Kings Hill is a distinct and self-contained community having little in common with neighbouring rural settlements. Having regard to the issue of electoral equality, they also supported the inclusion of the Airfield Estate in a new Kings Hill ward. In the light of this, they proposed a new two-member ward containing the parishes of Mereworth (less the Airfield Estate), Offham, West Peckham and West Malling. They argued that there is strong local opposition to the detachment of West Peckham parish from Mereworth parish for the purposes of borough warding. They also argued that West Malling, as a small rural town, has no links with Leybourne, which has undergone substantial residential development in recent years. They considered that these proposals were more closely aligned to the wishes of local communities. Under this proposal, a borough ward containing the parishes of West Malling, West Peckham, Mereworth and Offham would have 6 per cent more electors per councillor than the current borough average and would contain equal to the average number of electors per councillor in five years' time.

115 West Malling Parish Council considered that our draft recommendations had failed to recognise the identities and links between local communities and opposed our proposed three-member West Malling & Leybourne ward. It argued that no historic links existed between the two communities and considered the demographic nature of the two areas to be diverse. It stated that West Malling is a small market town with an ageing population, and that Leybourne is a relatively urban area, containing newer housing with a younger age profile. It also argued that combining West Malling with West Peckham, Mereworth and Offham parishes, as proposed by the Liberal Democrats, would provide a more logical grouping of parishes for the purposes of borough warding. Leybourne Parish Council outlined the views of individual parish councillors. Broadly, they were supportive and noted that the area has little in common with Birling and Ryarsh since the area became more urban in the 1980 's. It was also argued that Leybourne was separated from Birling and Ryarsh by the M20 motorway. Kings Hill Parish Council reiterated their preference that the Kings Hill area form a coterminous borough ward without the inclusion of the Airfield Estate from Mereworth parish. It considered that the A228 "forms a pre-existing physical boundary" between these two areas.

116 Mereworth Parish Council also opposed our proposal to combine the Airfield Estate with Kings Hill parish. It argued that the residents of the Airfield Estate had expressed a "strong desire" two years ago not to form part of the new Kings Hill parish. It considered our draft recommendations to be a "numerical exercise", and also objected to our proposal to separate Mereworth and West Peckham parishes between two borough wards. The Parish Council also enclosed a petition signed by 65 local residents opposing the separation of Mereworth and West Peckham villages between borough wards. West Peckham Parish Council expressed similar views. It strongly objected to our proposals to separate it from Mereworth Parish at borough ward level, and opposed our recommendation to combine it in a two-member ward with Shipbourne parish and Hadlow parish ward. It enclosed a petition signed by 71 local residents opposing our

draft recommendations. Hadlow and Shipbourne parish councils also opposed our proposals for a new two-member Hadlow, Shipbourne & West Peckham ward (as discussed further below).

117 We received submissions from 12 local residents, and a representation signed by a further six residents opposed to our proposals to divide Mereworth and West Peckham villages between different wards. All argued that our proposals would separate two communities that shared numerous long standing links and shared many local facilities including the local primary school. One resident also opposed our proposal to combine the Airfield Estate with Kings Hill parish in a borough ward. He argued that there were no established links between the two areas and that the “culture and philosophy” of residents of Mereworth parish differed from those of Kings Hill.

118 Having given consideration to the representations received at Stage Three, we have noted the broad support for our draft recommendation to retain the existing Wateringbury ward. We remain of the view that Wateringbury parish contains a cohesive community of a size able to sustain a coterminous single-member borough ward. We therefore propose confirming our draft recommendations for Wateringbury ward as final.

119 We recognise that our draft recommendations for the remainder of this area have proved rather contentious. Given the weight of local opinion against our proposals in the Mereworth, West Peckham and Kings Hill areas, we have given careful consideration to the alternative proposals put forward during the consultation process. We note that the Borough Council, as well as the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, support our proposed transfer of the Airfield Estate to a new two-member Kings Hill ward. We remain of the opinion that the Airfield Estate shares relatively few links with the village of Mereworth itself, situated, as it is, in a relatively isolated location from other settlements in the parish. We also considered that the Airfield Estate shares many characteristics with the Kings Hill development which is being constructed on the former West Malling Airfield. We remain of the view that, by warding the Airfield Estate of Mereworth parish, we would be reflecting the distinct identity of this area. By establishing separate borough representation for Kings Hill parish, we would be reflecting local identities and interests, whilst providing for an improved level of electoral equality by 2005. We consider the A228 more likely to provide a focus, rather than a barrier, between the two areas and are of the opinion that our proposals will not divide local communities. We therefore propose confirming our draft recommendations as final for our proposed Kings Hill ward

120 Having further examined our draft recommendations for warding arrangements in the West Malling and Leybourne areas, we are not persuaded that our proposed West Malling & Leybourne ward would have an adverse effect upon the interests of the local community. While we recognise that there may be no bus links between the two, we note that they are well linked by road. We also remain of the opinion that Leybourne has greater links with West Malling than with areas to its north and that residents utilise services in the town. Furthermore, we consider that our proposals provide for a much improved level of long term electoral equality in this area.

121 We accept that the proposal, supported by the Liberal Democrats, for a new two-member ward containing the parishes of West Malling, West Peckham, Mereworth and Offham would provide for improved electoral equality in the area. However, it would link communities effectively divided from each other by the Kings Hill development and to adopt this proposed ward as part of our final recommendations would be contingent upon us endorsing their proposals

for the Leybourne area and for adjacent rural wards. As outlined above, we consider that there is merit in uniting the BARTS parishes (Birling Addington, Ryarsh, Trottiscliffe and Stansted), and Leybourne with West Malling.

122 As outlined in our draft recommendations, we recognised that there was considerable support for maintaining the links between West Peckham and Mereworth parishes, but were unable to find a solution which would provide reasonable electoral equality. We recognise that, at Stage Three, the Council's proposals, while not reflecting all of the different views expressed at Stage Three, would resolve this particular issue. Its proposed two-member Hadlow, Mereworth & West Peckham ward would respect the long-standing ties that exist between the communities of Mereworth and West Peckham and would also provide for an improved level of electoral equality. We recognise that under this proposal, Mereworth and West Peckham parishes would be linked with the village of Hadlow, but we note that these communities are linked by the A228 trunk road and consider that these proposals are likely to receive a greater degree of local support than our proposals. We therefore propose moving away from our draft recommendations for this area and adopt the Borough Council's Stage Three proposals for a new two-member Hadlow, Mereworth & West Peckham ward as part of our final recommendations. (Our recommendations for the Golden Green ward of Hadlow parish are discussed in detail later)

123 Under our final recommendations, Hadlow, Mereworth & West Peckham and Watlington wards would have 3 per cent more and equal to the average number of electors per councillor respectively (2 per cent fewer and 5 per cent fewer than average by 2005). Kings Hill and West Malling & Leybourne wards would have 43 per cent fewer and 8 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the borough average respectively (10 per cent fewer and equal to the average by 2005). Our proposals for this area are illustrated in Map 2 and Map A3 at Appendix A.

Borough Green and Long Mill wards

124 The existing wards of Borough Green and Long Mill are situated in the west of the borough. Borough Green ward is coterminous with Borough Green parish, and Long Mill ward comprises the parishes of Offham, Platt, Plaxtol and Shipbourne. Each ward is currently represented by two councillors. Under existing arrangements, Borough Green and Long Mill wards contain 6 per cent and 1 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the borough average respectively. This level of electoral equality is projected to deteriorate to 10 per cent and 6 per cent fewer than the average respectively by 2005.

125 At Stage One, the Borough Council proposed no change to Borough Green and Long Mill wards, other than to reflect the revised parish boundaries between Borough Green and Platt, Platt and Wrotham and Shipbourne and Hildenborough parishes, which come into effect in 2002. The Council argued that Borough Green "is unique in the west of the borough with its predominantly urban character", and as such should not be combined in a ward with any neighbouring rural parishes. It argued that Long Mill ward contains numerous small settlements abutting the A25 and A227 trunk roads.

126 The Conservatives, Tonbridge & Malling Liberal Democrats and Kent County Council Liberal Democrat Group all expressed support for the Council's proposals. Tonbridge North Branch Labour Party supported the retention of a separate Borough Green ward. Plaxtol Parish

Council supported the Borough Council's proposals and expressed strong support for maintaining the existing Long Mill ward. It considered the rural needs of Plaxtol to be quite distinct from those of Borough Green. Similarly, Borough Green Parish Council cited "a very different ambience to that of our very rural neighbours" in its case for maintaining a separate ward for Borough Green. Offham and Platt parish councils also supported the Borough Council's proposal to retain the existing Long Mill ward.

127 In our draft recommendations, we recognised the degree of local support for retaining the existing warding arrangements in this area. However, on the basis of our proposed council size of 53, we noted that both wards would have electoral variances of 10 per cent or more from the average. In addition, in order to provide reasonable electoral equality in neighbouring areas we found the retention of the existing Long Mill ward not to be viable. We are unable to consider any area in isolation, but must seek to achieve the best warding arrangement for the borough as a whole. As outlined above, we proposed combining Offham parish with Addington and Mereworth. As detailed below, we also proposed that Shipbourne parish be combined with Hadlow Village. We also proposed that Borough Green, Platt and Plaxtol parishes be combined in a three-member ward. We recognised that such an arrangement was opposed locally during the Council's consultation period. However, we considered that the levels of electoral inequality should be addressed and that, in order to provide the best scheme for the borough as a whole, these areas should form a ward. We noted that the three areas have good communication links and considered that the differences between Borough Green and Platt parishes, in particular, have been overstated. We considered these proposals reflected the most appropriate balance currently available between electoral equality and the statutory criteria.

128 Under our draft recommendations, Borough Green, Platt & Plaxtol and Addington, Mereworth & Offham wards would have 2 per cent and 12 per cent more electors per councillor than the borough average respectively (2 per cent fewer and 6 per cent more than average by 2005), while Hadlow, Shipbourne & West Peckham ward would have equal to the average (6 per cent fewer by 2005).

129 At Stage Three, the Borough Council opposed our draft recommendations for this area. They considered our proposal to transfer Offham to a new single-member Addington, Mereworth & Offham ward had insufficient regard to community identities and interests. It argued that notwithstanding the good transport connections that link Offham and Mereworth parishes, the two communities share few local facilities and do not have a shared sense of identity. The Council proposed that Offham parish be transferred to a new two-member ward of which Offham parish would form the most southerly part (as discussed in detail earlier). The Council also opposed grouping Shipbourne parish with Hadlow parish ward and West Peckham parish in a new two-member ward. It argued that Shipbourne and Plaxtol parishes are linked by the A227 trunk road that connects Borough Green in the north with Tonbridge in the south. Furthermore the Council stated that because Shipbourne, Platt and Plaxtol parishes share many common interests, it was seen as "important for them to be jointly represented in the same ward". Therefore, the Council proposed a new three-member ward containing the parishes of Borough Green, Platt, Plaxtol and Shipbourne. Under the Council's proposals, this ward would have 11 per cent more electors per councillor than the borough average now, improving to 6 per cent more than average by 2005.

130 The Conservatives also opposed our draft recommendations for this area. While they found the Borough Council's Stage Three proposals for this area "acceptable", they requested that consideration be given to an alternative scheme, whereby the existing two-member Borough Green ward be retained and that the parishes of Platt, Plaxtol and Shipbourne form a revised two-member Long Mill ward. They argued that these arrangements would "more readily reflect community interest". Under this proposal, which would result in a council size of 54, Borough Green and Long Mill wards would have 8 per cent and 23 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the borough average respectively (12 per cent and 26 per cent fewer than average by 2005). Sir John Stanley MP supported the Conservatives' proposals for this area.

131 The Liberal Democrats opposed our draft recommendations, and put forward their own proposals. They proposed that Platt and Plaxtol parishes be combined with Ightham parish to the west to form a new two-member ward and that Offham parish be combined with West Malling, West Peckham and Mereworth parishes into a new two-member ward (as discussed earlier). They also supported the transfer of Shipbourne parish into a new borough ward with Hadlow parish ward (as discussed below). They supported the retention of the existing two-member Borough Green ward which is coterminous with Borough Green parish. Under this proposal, Borough Green ward would have 9 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the borough average now, and 14 per cent fewer than the average by 2005.

132 We received three representations from parish councils in the area. Platt Parish Council objected to our proposed changes to the existing Borough Green and Long Mill wards. They argued that Borough Green is a compact and relatively urban area with a high population density, whereas Platt and Plaxtol parishes cover a comparatively large geographical area and are of a rural nature. It supported the retention of the existing warding arrangements in this area.

133 Plaxtol Parish Council strongly objected to our draft recommendations and found it "particularly reprehensible" that we proposed changing the boundaries of the existing Long Mill ward when the levels of electoral equality in that ward were currently of an acceptable level. It argued that it would prove more difficult for the parish to achieve effective representation on the Borough Council should it be combined in a three-member ward with Borough Green parish. It requested that a way be identified to retain the existing Long Mill ward or, if this was not possible, to create a ward that would avoid combining Plaxtol and Borough Green parishes in the same borough ward. Shipbourne Parish Council also opposed our draft recommendations and particularly objected to being separated from Plaxtol parish at borough ward level. It argued that the Shipbourne area had many joint interests with Plaxtol parish and that the two communities were subject to similar local issues. It stated that our proposals would result in the area being less effectively represented if it were "packaged with a much larger village".

134 Having carefully considered the representations received at Stage Three of the review, we recognise that our draft recommendations for this area have been contentious and subject to local opposition. We recognise that there is some support for retaining the existing Borough Green and Long Mill wards. However, we remain of the view that our proposals would result in a much improved level of electoral equality for this area. We cannot consider any area in isolation and, as outlined above, in order to provide a reasonable level of electoral equality in the neighbouring North Downs area, we have proposed combining Offham parish with areas to its north. As a result, the remaining part of Long Mill ward would have too few electors to sustain a two-

member ward. Similarly, the existing Borough Green ward would not provide a reasonable level of electoral equality. In relation to the Liberal Democrats' proposals, we are not persuaded that a new two-member Ightham, Platt & Plaxtol ward would better reflect community identities than our draft recommendations.

135 We have, however, given further consideration to the most appropriate warding arrangements for the Shipbourne area. We note that the Borough Council proposed enlarging our proposed Borough Green, Platt & Plaxtol ward to include Shipbourne parish. It argued that Shipbourne parish shares convenient communication and transport links with the parish of Plaxtol to its north. We consider that while this proposal would provide marginally worse electoral equality, it would better reflect the community identities and interests of Shipbourne parish. We therefore propose departing from our draft recommendations for this area and adopting the Borough Council's Stage Three proposal for a revised three-member borough ward containing the parishes of Borough Green, Platt, Plaxtol and Shipbourne and also transferring Offham parish to a new two-member Downs ward to the north (as discussed earlier) as part of our final recommendations. The Borough Council did not put forward a ward name for its proposed ward. Having given consideration to the geographical extent of this area, we propose that this ward be named Borough Green & Long Mill ward.

136 Under our final recommendations, Borough Green & Long Mill ward would have 11 per cent more electors per councillor than the borough average currently, improving to 6 per cent more than average by 2005. Our proposals for this area are illustrated on Map 2.

Tonbridge Rural

East Peckham, Hadlow and Hildenborough wards

137 The existing wards of East Peckham, Hadlow and Hildenborough are situated in the south of the borough. The three wards are each coterminous with the parishes of the same name. East Peckham and Hadlow wards are each represented by two councillors, while Hildenborough ward is represented by three councillors. All three wards are currently over-represented, and the level of electoral equality in each is projected to deteriorate over the next five years. Under existing arrangements, East Peckham, Hadlow and Hildenborough wards contain 12 per cent, 6 per cent and 18 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the borough average respectively (deteriorating to 15 per cent, 11 per cent and 23 per cent fewer than average by 2005).

138 At Stage One, the Borough Council proposed no change to boundaries in this area, other than to reflect the revised parish boundaries between East Peckham and Hadlow parishes and Hildenborough and Shipbourne parishes which come into effect in 2002. However, it did propose a reduction in the number of councillors representing Hildenborough ward from three to two. The Council argued that, because of the distance between the village centres of Hildenborough and Shipbourne to the north, the two parishes have very little in common. Furthermore the Council argued that Hildenborough retains a strong sense of community identity and therefore should not be combined with part of the urban area of Tonbridge. The Council also argued that East Peckham is isolated from its neighbouring parishes. It stated that its interests in the hop industry are shared only by areas across the borough boundary such as Paddock Wood and Yalding. It concluded therefore that East Peckham, Hadlow and Hildenborough should remain as separate

wards. Under the Council's Stage One proposals for a council size of 55, East Peckham, Hadlow and Hildenborough wards would have 14 per cent fewer, 4 per cent fewer and 22 per cent more than the average number of electors per councillor respectively (17 per cent fewer, 9 per cent fewer and 16 per cent more than average by 2005).

139 The Conservatives supported the Borough Council's proposals. However, they stated that, as recognised by the Borough Council in its submission, the Tonbridge area would be under-represented under its proposals and argued that part of Hildenborough should be combined with the existing Castle ward in Tonbridge and its representation be increased to three councillors. Tonbridge North Branch Labour Party proposed the retention of three councillors for Hildenborough and the retention of the existing East Peckham ward.

140 East Peckham Parish Council, Tonbridge & Malling Liberal Democrats and Kent County Liberal Democrats Group supported the Council's proposals, while a resident stated that she considered that Hildenborough would "be adequately served" by two councillors. Tonbridge & Malling Liberal Democrats also opposed any link between East Peckham and West Peckham parishes as they share little in common. The Hadlow Society proposed that the existing Hadlow ward should be retained, arguing that Hadlow is a distinct community.

141 In our draft recommendations, we gave consideration to the Conservatives' alternative proposals to divide Hildenborough parish and combine part of it with the town of Tonbridge. Upon examination we were unable to find a suitable boundary between the two wards which would not cause significant disruption to the wards throughout the town of Tonbridge. We therefore concluded that this option would not best reflect community ties in the area. Equally, we did not consider that there should be a continuation of the high level of over-representation proposed by Tonbridge North Branch Labour Party or that Hildenborough should be combined with Shipbourne to its east. Furthermore, we noted that, by reducing council size to 53, the level of electoral equality for the proposed two-member Hildenborough ward would improve significantly both now and in 2005.

142 While we recognised that there was some local support for retaining the existing East Peckham ward we considered that the resulting high level of electoral inequality would be unacceptable. We therefore considered alternative options for this area. We noted that this part of the borough is relatively isolated and appears to have few links with areas to its north. We therefore proposed transferring Golden Green parish ward from Hadlow borough ward and combining it with East Peckham parish to form a new East Peckham and Golden Green ward. We considered that this proposal would unite two neighbouring areas with common interests whilst providing for significantly improved levels of electoral equality. We also proposed a minor modification of the boundary of Golden Green parish ward so that the boundary follows geographical features. This amendment would result in a transfer of the two electors on Victoria Road to a revised Hadlow parish ward.

143 As a result of our proposal to combine East Peckham parish with Golden Green parish ward, the remainder of Hadlow parish would have too few electors to remain a separate ward. In order to improve electoral equality in this area, we proposed combining the remainder of Hadlow parish (the revised Hadlow parish ward) with the neighbouring parishes of West Peckham and Shipbourne. We recognised that our proposals in this area departed from local preferences, but

considered that the significant levels of electoral inequality in this area needed be addressed as part of this review.

144 Under our draft recommendations, East Peckham & Golden Green and Hadlow, Shipbourne & West Peckham wards would have 3 per cent fewer and equal to the average number of electors per councillor than the borough average respectively (7 per cent and 6 per cent fewer than the average by 2005). Hildenborough ward would have 18 per cent more electors per councillor currently but would improve to 12 per cent more than average by 2005.

145 At Stage Three, the Borough Council concurred with our draft recommendations for a revised two-member East Peckham & Golden Green ward and two-member Hildenborough ward. However, it opposed our proposed Hadlow, Shipbourne & West Peckham ward and put forward alternative arrangements that would provide for a new two-member Hadlow, Mereworth & West Peckham ward. The Council argued that our proposed Hadlow, Shipbourne & West Peckham ward had insufficient regard for the statutory criteria. It stated that Shipbourne parish does not share particularly convenient communication links with Hadlow and argued that it should remain in a borough ward with Platt and Plaxtol parishes to its north. As discussed earlier, the Council proposed transferring Hadlow parish ward of Hadlow parish to a new two-member Hadlow, West Peckham and Mereworth ward.

146 The Conservatives accepted the Borough Council's Stage Three proposals for this area. While they stated a preference for retaining the existing East Peckham ward and maintaining the two wards of Hadlow parish in the same borough ward, they accepted that this proposal would have an adverse effect upon the electoral equality in adjoining wards, and render the Borough Council's Stage Three proposals unworkable. They therefore accepted the transfer of Golden Green parish ward to a revised East Peckham ward but stated that it was "a matter of great regret that local community links should be split". While accepting our proposed Hildenborough ward, they considered that our proposals would leave the Tonbridge area of the borough "badly under-represented" but expressed the hope that this situation would be rectified at the next review.

147 The Liberal Democrats broadly supported our draft recommendations for this area. While they acknowledged local opposition to the transfer of Golden Green parish ward to a revised East Peckham ward, they stated that they were unable to find a suitable alternative for the area. They therefore decided, "with some reluctance" to accept our draft recommendations for a revised East Peckham ward containing the parish ward of Golden Green. The Liberal Democrats considered that Hadlow parish shares relatively few community links with the parishes of Mereworth and West Peckham to its north. They supported the transfer of Mereworth and West Peckham parishes to a revised two member ward which would also contain the parishes of Offham and West Malling (as discussed earlier). They also supported the amalgamation of Hadlow parish ward with Shipbourne parish to form a new two-member ward. They argued that both Hadlow and Shipbourne parishes look to Tonbridge for local services and amenities, and therefore have shared interests.

148 Under the Liberal Democrats' proposals, East Peckham & Golden Green, Hadlow & Shipbourne and Hildenborough wards would have 3 per cent fewer, 8 per cent fewer and 18 per cent more electors per councillor than the borough average (7 per cent fewer, 13 per cent fewer and 12 per cent more electors per councillor than average by 2005).

149 We received a number of representations from parish councils in this area. Hildenborough Parish Council supported our draft recommendations to retain the existing Hildenborough ward. East Peckham Parish Council expressed a preference for retaining the existing two-member East Peckham ward which would be coterminous with East Peckham parish. However, it concurred with our draft recommendation for a new two-member East Peckham & Golden Green ward should the retention of existing ward boundaries not prove possible.

150 Hadlow Parish Council accepted the need for “a degree of equality on electoral rolls”, but opposed our draft recommendations for the area, arguing that the communities of Hadlow and Golden Green are similar rural communities that share long-standing community ties and interests. It suggested that the Bells Farm Road and Little Mill areas of East Peckham parish could be combined with the whole of Hadlow parish for borough warding purposes, and that this would avoid the division of Hadlow parish between two separate borough wards. This view was supported by Councillor Anderson (Hadlow ward) who considered that our proposals would make it “highly unlikely that the residents of Golden Green will be satisfactorily represented”. Councillor Baulf (Golden Green parish ward) also concurred with this view and stated that our draft recommendations would result in a “potentially undemocratic or even unrepresentative form of local government representation”.

151 The Hadlow Society strongly objected to our proposed East Peckham & Golden Green ward and argued that the proposed ward would divide established communities for the sake of electoral equality. We received a further nine representations from local residents in this area, all of whom strongly objected to our draft recommendations. All argued that the settlements of Hadlow and Golden Green share close historical links, and that our proposed East Peckham & Golden Green ward would combine areas that share few community ties and are linked by poor communication and transport links. They all supported retaining the communities of Hadlow and Golden Green in the same borough ward.

152 We have carefully considered the representations received at Stage Three of the review. We accept that our draft recommendations for borough warding arrangements in the Hadlow and East Peckham areas have aroused particular opposition among local residents and interested parties. We acknowledge the strong ties that exist between the communities of Golden Green and Hadlow but remain of the view that the high level of electoral inequality in the existing East Peckham ward should be addressed as part of this review. Having considered the alternative arrangements suggested by Hadlow Parish Council and Councillor Anderson, we are not persuaded that they would provide a better alternative to our draft recommendations. While we acknowledge that the transfer of the Bells Farm Road and Little Mill areas of East Peckham parish might provide for an improved level of electoral equality for the existing Hadlow ward, it would result in a further deterioration in the level of electoral equality in the existing East Peckham ward and would serve only to divide East Peckham parish rather than Hadlow parish between borough wards.

153 We would emphasise that, contrary to the views expressed in some representations to us, amendments to borough ward boundaries would not have an automatic effect upon the location from which a local community obtains its services. While recognising that we have significantly departed from the wishes of local residents with regard to warding arrangements in the Hadlow and East Peckham areas, we remain of the opinion that our draft recommendations for a new two-

member East Peckham & Golden Green ward provides the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria in this area.

154 While we accept that the existing Hadlow ward has a reasonable level of electoral equality currently, we note that this is projected to deteriorate somewhat over the next five years. Moreover, when devising an appropriate warding scheme, we cannot consider wards in isolation and must adopt a borough-wide approach. We therefore consider that the retention of both the existing Hadlow or East Peckham wards is not a viable option. We remain of the opinion that the communities of Golden Green and East Peckham share good communication and transport links and are not persuaded that there are sufficient geographical or demographic barriers between these two communities to depart from our draft recommendations for this area. Having noted that our proposed East Peckham & Golden Green ward has been supported by the Borough Council, and accepted by both the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, we therefore propose to endorse our draft recommendations as final for a new two-member East Peckham & Golden Green ward.

155 As detailed earlier, we propose departing from our draft recommendations in respect of Hadlow ward of Hadlow parish. We propose that the Hadlow ward of Hadlow parish be combined with Mereworth and West Peckham parishes to form a new two-member Hadlow, Mereworth & West Peckham ward as proposed by the Borough Council at Stage Three. As outlined above, we consider that this proposal would have the advantage of recognising the community ties between West Peckham and Mereworth villages and Shipbourne and Plaxtol parishes.

156 Having given further consideration to our councillor allocation in the Tonbridge and Hildenborough areas, we have not been persuaded to depart from our draft recommendations for this area. We accept that the Tonbridge and Hildenborough areas together would be entitled to 18 councillors currently. However, under a council size of 53, by 2005 its entitlement would be 17.4 councillors. We therefore consider that the allocation of 17 councillors for this area would provide for better levels of long-term electoral equality. Although Hildenborough ward would have a relatively high level of electoral variation both now and in five years time, we consider that our proposals reflect the statutory criteria and are supported locally. Having noted the broad support for our proposals in this area, we propose confirming our draft recommendations for Hildenborough ward as final.

157 Under our final recommendations, Hadlow, Mereworth & West Peckham and East Peckham & Golden Green wards would have 3 per cent more and 3 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the borough average respectively (2 per cent fewer and 7 per cent fewer by 2005). Hildenborough ward would have 18 per cent more electors per councillor than the borough average currently, improving to 12 per cent more than average by 2005. Our proposals for this area are illustrated in Map A2 at Appendix A.

Tonbridge Urban

Cage Green, Higham and Trench wards

158 The existing wards of Cage Green, Higham and Trench are situated in the south of the borough and together cover part of the unparished, urban area of Tonbridge. Cage Green ward

is currently represented by two councillors, while Higham and Trench wards are each represented by three councillors. Under existing arrangements, Cage Green ward contains 5 per cent more electors per councillor than the borough average (1 per cent fewer by 2005) while Higham and Trench wards contain 7 per cent and 14 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the borough average respectively (12 per cent and 19 per cent fewer by 2005).

159 At Stage One, the Borough Council proposed a number of changes to warding arrangements in Cage Green, Higham and Trench wards. In order to improve electoral equality, the Council proposed reducing the number of councillors for Trench ward from three to two. It also proposed transferring the properties currently in Trench ward to the north of Hawthorn Close (including properties on Willow Lea, Elmhurst Gardens, Ashden Walk, Fernholt, Springwood Park, Delarue Close and isolated properties to the west of Shipbourne Road) to a revised Cage Green ward. The Council also proposed amending the eastern boundary of Cage Green ward, transferring the properties on Hoptarden Road, Parkway and Nursery Close to a revised Higham ward.

160 The Conservatives supported the Borough Council's proposals for this part of Tonbridge. They did however, consider that, if the Commission wanted to improve electoral equality, it could provide an additional councillor for the south of Tonbridge, as discussed below. Tonbridge North Branch Labour Party opposed the Council's proposals to divide the existing Trench ward, arguing that this would have a negative effect on participation in the electoral system and remove natural boundaries. Tonbridge & Malling Liberal Democrats and Kent County Council Liberal Democrat Group supported the Borough Council's proposals. A local resident supported the Council's proposals, arguing that Trench ward would be adequately represented by two councillors.

161 In our draft recommendations, we were content that the Council's proposals provided a reasonable level of electoral equality whilst having regard to community identities and interests and therefore proposed basing our draft recommendations on the Council's proposals, subject to some minor amendments in order to further improve boundaries and electoral equality. Firstly, we proposed amending the western boundary of the Council's proposed Higham ward so as to include properties on either side of Salisbury Road, up to, but not including, Winchester Road and Salisbury Close from Cage Green ward. Secondly, we proposed amending the southern boundary of the Council's proposed Higham ward, transferring all the properties on Hadlow Road to the north of Yardley Park Road and all the properties on Loampits Close and Yardley Close from Medway ward to a revised Higham ward. Thirdly, we proposed amending the southern boundary of Trench ward so as to follow Hilden Brook in order to create a more clearly identifiable boundary. Lastly, we proposed an amendment to the boundary between Cage Green and Medway wards to unite Cheviot Close in Medway ward.

162 At Stage Three, the Borough Council fully endorsed our draft recommendations for these wards. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats also supported our proposals. A local resident considered that our proposed amendment to the southern boundary of Higham ward was not reflective of the interests of local residents. He considered that this area identifies more strongly with communities towards the centre of the town that lie in Medway ward, rather than with the communities of Higham ward. He argued that the retention of the existing ward boundary would have little effect on long-term levels of electoral equality in these two wards.

163 We have carefully considered the representations received at Stage Three of the review. We remain persuaded that our draft recommendations for this area will provide for significantly improved levels of electoral equality while reflecting the identities and interests of local communities. We note that our draft recommendations for this area have received the support of the Borough Council, as well as the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. In the light of the representations received at Stage Three, we have given further consideration to the revised southern boundary of our proposed Higham ward. We acknowledge that the retention of the existing ward boundary would not have a significantly adverse effect upon levels of electoral equality in Higham ward. However, we have sought to improve this ward boundary by tying it to clear ground detail. We consider that our proposed Higham ward is based upon more clearly identifiable and logical ward boundaries and would continue to reflect the identities and interests of the local community. We therefore propose confirming our draft recommendations for Cage Green, Higham and Trench wards as part of our final recommendations.

164 Under our final recommendations, Cage Green, Higham and Trench wards would have 7 per cent, 2 per cent and 1 per cent more electors per councillor than the borough average respectively (1 per cent more, 4 per cent fewer and 4 per cent fewer than average by 2005). Our proposals are outlined on the large map at the back of this report.

Castle, Judd, Medway and Vauxhall wards

165 The existing wards of Castle, Judd, Medway and Vauxhall are situated in the south of the borough and together cover the southern part of the unparished, urban area of Tonbridge. All four wards are each currently represented by two councillors. Under existing arrangements, Castle, Judd and Vauxhall wards contain 9 per cent, 24 per cent and 19 per cent more electors per councillor than the borough average respectively (3 per cent, 19 per cent and 12 per cent more by 2005), while Medway ward contains 9 per cent fewer electors per councillor than the average (2 per cent more by 2005).

166 At Stage One, the Borough Council proposed amending the south-eastern boundary of Castle ward so that the properties to the south of the Big Bridge bounded by the River Medway, High Street and Barden Road would be transferred from Judd ward to a revised Castle ward. It proposed amending the eastern boundary of Judd ward to run to the rear of properties on Quarry Hill Road and Fosse Bank and transferring them to Vauxhall ward. It also proposed amending the western boundary of Medway ward, to incorporate properties to the east of the railway line from Vauxhall ward.

167 The Conservatives supported the Borough Council's proposals. However they considered that, if the Commission wished to improve electoral equality, it could combine part of Hildenborough ward with the existing Castle ward and increase its representation from two to three councillors. They argued that under the Council's proposals, Tonbridge would be under-represented with 15 councillors instead of 16. Tonbridge North Branch Labour Party opposed the Council's proposals to divide the existing Castle and Judd wards, arguing that this would have a negative effect on participation in the electoral system and remove natural boundaries. A local resident argued that Tonbridge should be warded so that boundaries of wards follow the River Medway rather than straddling it.

168 In our draft recommendations, we considered that the Council's proposals reflected community identities and interests in this area well. Under our proposed council size of 53, we noted that its proposals would also achieve a reasonable level of electoral equality and therefore proposed basing our draft recommendations on the Council's proposals, subject to some minor amendments in order to improve electoral equality. As outlined above, we considered the Conservatives' proposals to create a three-member Castle ward incorporating part of Hildenborough. We were not, however, persuaded that such an option would provide the best balance between electoral equality and the statutory criteria. We recognised that the River Medway provides a significant boundary in the town of Tonbridge but were not persuaded to realign ward boundaries to follow the river as we found this to be incompatible with reasonable electoral equality.

169 We did, however, propose some minor boundary amendments in order to improve electoral equality and provide stronger ward boundaries. Firstly, we proposed amending the southern boundary of the Council's proposed Medway ward, transferring all the properties to the east of the railway line currently in Vauxhall ward, including all properties on Vauxhall Gardens, to a revised Medway ward. Secondly, as detailed above, we proposed transferring a number of properties on Hadlow Road, Loampits Close and Yardley Close from Medway ward to a revised Higham ward. In addition, we proposed incorporating all properties on Cheviot Close and the area to the south of Hilden Brook in Castle ward, and transferring properties on Town Acres to Cage Green ward.

170 At Stage Three, the Borough Council expressed full support for our draft recommendations in the Tonbridge urban area. Our proposals were also endorsed by the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. As detailed earlier, a local resident opposed our revised ward boundary between Medway and Higham wards, arguing that the properties transferred to our revised Higham ward have a greater affinity with communities towards the centre of Tonbridge town, which are located within the existing Medway ward. He argued that our draft recommendations failed to reflect community identities and would be detrimental to the achievement of effective and convenient local government.

171 Having given full consideration to the representations received at Stage Three, we note a large degree of consensus in favour of our draft recommendations. We acknowledge the concerns of the local resident with regard to our proposed northern boundary of Medway ward. However, as discussed above, we consider that our proposed boundary is more clearly identifiable, being tied to clear ground detail, and are not persuaded that our proposed ward boundary would have an adverse effect upon community identities and interests. We therefore propose confirming our draft recommendations for Castle, Judd, Medway and Vauxhall wards as final.

172 Under our final recommendations, Castle, Judd and Vauxhall wards would have 11 per cent, 9 per cent and 11 per cent more electors per councillors than the borough average respectively, improving to 5 per cent, 4 per cent and 5 per cent more than average by 2005. Medway ward would have 6 per cent fewer than average, and 5 per cent more than average by 2005. Our proposals for this area are outlined on the large map at the back of this report.

Electoral Cycle

173 At Stage One we received one representation regarding the Borough Council’s electoral cycle. Offham Parish Council stated that it supported retaining elections of the whole council every four years. In the absence of any other representations, we proposed no change to the current electoral cycle of whole-council elections for the Borough Council as part of our draft recommendations.

174 At Stage Three, the Borough Council made no comment on the issue of electoral cycle. We received three further representations regarding the Council’s electoral cycle. The Liberal Democrats supported the continuation of whole-council elections every four years, although they recognised that this may change to a two-year electoral cycle as a consequence of the government’s local government modernisation agenda. East Malling & Larkfield Parish Council supported the retention of the existing electoral cycle, and stated that parish council elections should continue to coincide with Borough Council elections. It considered that with the pressures of county, European and General elections, Borough elections by thirds would result in “electoral overload”. A local resident also supported the retention of whole-council elections.

175 We recognise that at Stage Three, there was considerable support for retaining the existing electoral cycle. In the absence of any other representations, and recognising the apparent lack of support for changing the existing electoral cycle, we propose no change to the current electoral cycle of whole-council elections every four years as part of our final recommendations.

Conclusions

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

- we propose a new two-member Downs ward, a new three-member Borough Green & Long Mill ward and a new two-member Hadlow, Mereworth & West Peckham ward, as proposed by the Borough Council at Stage Three;
- we propose retaining the existing single-member Wrotham ward, as proposed by the Borough Council.

177 We conclude that, in Tonbridge & Malling:

- there should be a reduction in council size from 55 to 53;
- there should be 26 wards, one fewer than at present;
- the boundaries of 16 of the existing wards should be modified;
- the Council should continue to hold whole-council elections every four years.

178 Figure 4 shows the impact of our draft recommendations on electoral equality, comparing them with the current arrangements, based on 2000 electorate figures and with forecast electorates for the year 2005.

Figure 4: Comparison of Current and Recommended Electoral Arrangements

	2000 electorate		2005 forecast electorate	
	Current arrangements	Final recommendations	Current arrangements	Final recommendations
Number of councillors	55	53	55	53
Number of wards	27	26	27	26
Average number of electors per councillor	1473	1529	1557	1616
Number of wards with a variance more than 10 per cent from the average	10	9	13	3
Number of wards with a variance more than 20 per cent from the average	4	1	6	0

179 As shown in Figure 4, our final recommendations for Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council would initially result in a reduction in the number of wards varying by more than 10 per cent from the borough average from 10 to nine. This level of electoral equality would improve further by 2005, with only three wards forecast to vary by more than 10 per cent from the average for the borough, compared with 13 wards under the existing arrangements. We conclude that our recommendations would best meet the need for electoral equality, having regard to the statutory criteria.

Final Recommendation
 Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council should comprise 53 councillors serving 26 wards, as detailed and named in Figures 1 and 2, and illustrated on Map 2, in Appendix A, and the large map inside the back cover. Elections should continue to be held for the whole council every four years.

Parish and Town Council Electoral Arrangements

180 In undertaking reviews of electoral arrangements, we are required to comply as far as possible with the provisions set out in Schedule 11 to the 1972 Act. The Schedule provides that if a parish is to be divided between different borough wards it must also be divided into parish wards, so that each parish ward lies wholly within a single ward of the borough. Accordingly, we proposed consequential warding arrangements for the parishes of Mereworth and Snodland to

reflect the proposed borough wards. At the request of Aylesford Parish Council and a local resident, we also proposed changes to Aylesford Parish Council’s electoral arrangements.

181 The parish of Mereworth is currently served by seven councillors and is not warded. In our draft recommendations we proposed that the parish should be divided between the two borough wards of Addington, Mereworth & Offham and Kings Hill. As a consequence of our draft recommendations we proposed that Mereworth parish should also be divided into two parish wards, Mereworth Village parish ward and Airfield parish ward, reflecting the proposed borough ward boundary. As a result, we also proposed that each ward should have separate representation on the parish council.

182 In response to our consultation report the Borough Council, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats supported our proposed arrangements for Mereworth parish. As detailed earlier, Mereworth and Kings Hill parish councils and a local resident opposed our proposed borough warding arrangements for the Airfield Estate, but did not make specific comment on our proposed parish warding arrangements.

183 We note that our proposed parish electoral arrangements for Mereworth are supported by the Borough Council, as well as the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats. Aside from our proposed borough warding arrangements, we consider that the Airfield Estate is a distinct part of Mereworth parish, and therefore warrants separate representation on the parish council. We therefore propose confirming our draft recommendations for the electoral arrangements of Mereworth parish as final.

Final Recommendation
Mereworth Parish Council should comprise seven councillors, as at present, representing two wards: Mereworth Village parish ward (returning five councillors) and Airfield parish ward (returning two councillors). The parish ward boundaries should reflect the proposed borough ward boundaries in the area, as illustrated and named on Map A3 in Appendix A.

184 The town of Snodland is currently served by 15 councillors and is not warded despite being divided between two borough wards. As outlined above, if a parish is divided between separate borough wards, it should also be divided between parish wards. In our draft recommendations we proposed that the town should continue to be divided between the two borough wards of Snodland East and Snodland West, albeit on slightly modified boundaries, as proposed by the Borough Council. At Stage One, the Borough Council and Chatham & Aylesford Liberal Democrats also proposed that Snodland parish be divided between two wards in order to reflect the proposed borough wards. As a consequence of our draft recommendations we proposed that Snodland Town should be divided into two town wards, Snodland East ward and Snodland West ward, reflecting the proposed borough wards.

185 In response to our consultation report, the Borough Council and the Liberal Democrats supported our draft recommendations for electoral arrangements in the Snodland Town Council

area. Our proposals were also supported by the Snodland Branch Labour Party. Our proposed electoral arrangements for Snodland Town Council would reflect our proposed borough warding arrangements in this area and have a measure of local support. We therefore propose confirming our draft recommendations for Snodland Town Council as final.

Final Recommendation
Snodland Town Council should comprise 15 councillors, as at present, representing two wards: Snodland East town ward (returning seven parish councillors) and Snodland West town ward (returning eight parish councillors). The boundary between the two town wards should reflect the proposed borough ward boundary, as illustrated and named on Map A4 in Appendix A.

186 The parish of Hadlow is currently served by 13 councillors representing two wards. In order to provide clear, identifiable boundaries for our proposed borough wards, we proposed amending the boundary between Golden Green parish ward and Hadlow parish ward so that the boundary between the two wards follows field boundaries. As a result of this change, one property, Victoria House, Victoria Road would be transferred from Golden Green parish ward to Hadlow parish ward. We did not propose to make changes to the number of councillors representing each parish ward.

187 While we received a number of representations in respect of borough warding arrangements for the Hadlow area, we received none in relation to our proposed amendment between the parish wards of Golden Green and Hadlow. As outlined above, we propose confirming our proposals for borough warding purposes. We therefore confirm our draft recommendations for electoral arrangements for Hadlow parish as final.

Final Recommendation
Hadlow Parish Council should comprise 13 councillors, as at present, representing two wards: Hadlow parish ward (returning 11 councillors) and Golden Green parish ward (returning two councillors). The boundary between the two parish wards should reflect the proposed borough ward boundary, as illustrated on Map A2 in Appendix A.

188 At Stage One, we received submissions from Aylesford Parish Council and a local resident requesting modifications to the electoral arrangements of Aylesford parish. Aylesford Parish Council requested an additional councillor for Walderslade parish ward. A local resident argued that, in order to provide equality of representation between the different parts of the parish, Eccles parish ward should have one fewer parish councillor and Walderslade parish ward should have one more parish councillor. He noted that Eccles and Blue Bell Hill parish wards are of a similar size yet currently have differing levels of representation on the parish council.

189 In our draft recommendations, we concurred with the assessment of Aylesford Parish Council and a local resident that Walderslade parish ward should have an increase in its representation. We also concurred with the view of the local resident that Eccles parish ward should have one fewer parish councillor in order to provide fair representation for each of the areas on the parish council.

190 In response to our consultation report, the Borough Council supported our proposed electoral arrangements for Aylesford Parish Council. Our draft proposals were also endorsed by Aylesford Parish Council. The Liberal Democrats expressed concern regarding our proposal to reduce the representation of Eccles parish ward from four to three parish councillors. They considered that this proposal was likely to be viewed in Eccles as reducing the village’s influence within Aylesford parish as a whole.

191 Having considered the representations received at Stage Three, we remain of the view that in order to ensure the fair representation of each area of the parish, there should be changes to the representation of Eccles and Walderslade parish wards. We therefore confirm our draft recommendations for Aylesford parish as final.

Final Recommendation
Aylesford Parish Council should comprise 20 councillors, as at present, representing five wards: Aylesford North parish ward (returning two councillors), Aylesford South parish ward (returning seven councillors), Blue Bell Hill parish ward (returning three councillors), Eccles parish ward (returning three councillors) and Walderslade parish ward (returning five councillors). The boundaries between these parish wards would remain unchanged.

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

Final Recommendation
For parish and town councils, whole-council elections should continue to take place every four years, on the same cycle as that of the Borough Council.

Map 2: The Commission's Final Recommendations for Tonbridge & Malling

6 NEXT STEPS

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

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

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

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

APPENDIX A

Final Recommendations for Tonbridge & Malling : Detailed Mapping

The following maps illustrate the Commission's proposed ward boundaries for the Tonbridge & Malling area.

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

Map A2 illustrates the proposed amended Golden Green ward of Hadlow parish (and the proposed ward boundaries of East Peckham & Golden Green ward).

Map A3 illustrates the proposed warding of Mereworth parish (and the proposed ward boundaries of Kings Hill ward).

Map A4 illustrates the proposed Snodland East and Snodland West borough and town wards.

The **large map** inserted in the back of the report illustrates the existing and proposed warding arrangements for the Tonbridge area.

Map A1: Final Recommendations for Tonbridge & Malling: Key Map

Map A2: Proposed Boundary between Golden Green and Hadlow Wards of Hadlow Parish

Map A3: Proposed Warding of Mereworth Parish

Map A4: Proposed Warding of Snodland Town

APPENDIX B

Draft Recommendations for Tonbridge & Malling

Our final recommendations, detailed in Figures 1 and 2, and the maps in Appendix A differ from those we put forward as draft recommendations in respect of a number of wards, where our draft proposals are set out below.

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

Ward name	Constituent areas
Addington, Mereworth & Offham	Long Mill ward (part – Offham parish); Oast ward (part - Addington parish); West Malling, West Peckham & Mereworth ward (part – Mereworth Village ward of Mereworth parish as proposed)
Birling, Ryarsh & Trottscliffe	Birling, Leybourne and Ryarsh ward (part – Birling and Ryarsh parishes); Oast ward (part – Trottscliffe parish)
Borough Green, Platt & Plaxtol	Borough Green ward (Borough Green parish as amended); Long Mill ward (part – Platt parish as amended and Plaxtol parish)
Hadlow, Shipbourne & West Peckham	Hadlow ward (part – Hadlow ward of Hadlow parish as amended); Long Mill ward (part – Shipbourne parish as amended); West Malling, West Peckham & Mereworth ward (part – West Peckham parish)
Wrotham & Stansted	Oast ward (part – Stansted parish); Wrotham ward (Wrotham parish as amended)

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

Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2000)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average (%)	Electorate (2005)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average (%)
Addington, Mereworth & Offham	1	1,709	1,709	12	1,709	1,709	6
Birling, Ryarsh & Trottscliffe	1	1,265	1,265	-17	1,505	1,505	-7
Borough Green, Platt & Plaxtol	3	4,696	1,565	2	4,737	1,579	-2

Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2000)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average (%)	Electorate (2005)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average (%)
Hadlow, Shipbourne & West Peckham	2	3,042	1,521	0	3,042	1,521	-6
Wrotham & Stansted	1	1,777	1,777	16	1,777	1,777	10

Source: Electorate figures are based on Tonbridge & Malling Borough Council's submission.

Note: 1 The 'variance from average' column shows by how far, in percentage terms, the number of electors per councillor varies from the average for the borough. The minus symbol (-) denotes a lower than average number of electors. Figures have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

2 All proposed ward boundaries are based upon the revised parish boundaries which come into effect in April 2002.

APPENDIX C

Code of Practice on Written Consultation

The Cabinet Office's November 2000 *Code of Practice on Written Consultation*, www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/servicefirst/index/consultation.htm, requires all Government Departments and Agencies to adhere to certain criteria, set out below, on the conduct of public consultations. Non-Departmental Public Bodies, such as the Local Government Commission, are encouraged to follow the Code. The Code of Practice applies to consultation documents published after 1 January 2001, which should reproduce the criteria, give explanations of any departures, and confirm that the criteria have otherwise been followed.

Commission compliance with Code criteria

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

