

ELECTORAL WORKING GROUP held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.00 pm on 26 SEPTEMBER 2011

Present: Councillors R Chambers, J Davey, A Dean, J Freeman, E Hicks, J Ketteridge and M Lemon.

Officers in attendance: L Bunting (Electoral Services Officer), J Mitchell (Chief Executive) and Peter Snow (Democratic and Electoral Services Manager).

EWG9 APOLOGIES AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

An apology for absence was received from Councillor J Rose.

Councillor Chambers declared an interest as a member of Essex County Council and Essex Fire Authority.

EWG10 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting of the Electoral Arrangements Working Group held on 23 August 2011 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

EWG11 2013 REVIEW OF PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager outlined to Members the Boundary Commission for England's (BCE) published initial proposal for new Parliamentary constituency boundaries in this area. He reported that the effect of the proposal would be to divide Uttlesford between three separate constituencies. He explained that the Council had to decide how to respond to this proposal and if the Council decided to object, the nature of the objection would have to be determined and whether the objection should include an alternative proposal.

The BCE had published its proposals for the new Parliamentary constituency boundaries on 13 September 2011 and a 12 week period of consultation would take place which would close on 5 December. Responses to the consultation could either be made in writing or in person at a public hearing, or by a combination of the two methods.

The allocation of constituencies within England had been decided on a regional basis as used for European Parliamentary elections. This gave an allocation to the Eastern region of 56 constituencies which was a reduction of two seats over the whole region. The overriding rule in making the proposals was that every constituency must have an electorate within the range determined under the BCE's formula which was referred to in the report. These rules were therefore very strict and the BCE accordingly had little room for manoeuvre in determining its initial proposals. The rules also had the effect that boundaries between shire counties could be crossed within regions, as well as boundaries between adjoining districts which had always been the case.

In its determination of proposals for the Eastern region, the BCE had decided that, as it was not possible to allocate whole numbers of constituencies to individual counties or unitary authorities, the new constituencies would have to be grouped into sub-regions which gave the following result:

- Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire – 16 (reduction of one)
- Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk – 23 (no change overall)
- Essex – 17 (reduction of one)

The BCE therefore based its proposals for Essex on the number indicated which inevitably resulted in a number of changes to accommodate the reduction of one seat. Only the seats of Colchester and Thurrock were proposed to remain unchanged. The impact of these changes on Uttlesford therefore had been to divide the district between three separate constituencies which would result in the loss of the historic name of the Saffron Walden constituency.

Three wards of Uttlesford were proposed to be included in a revised Harlow constituency. Five wards were paired with Billericay and parts of the Chelmsford Borough area to form a new Billericay and Great Dunmow seat. The remaining 19 wards of Uttlesford were proposed to be included in a new North West Essex constituency together with 13 wards of Braintree district. The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager explained the probable demographics of this as follows:

Billericay and Great Dunmow CC	74,961
District of Basildon wards	33,357
Borough of Chelmsford wards	26,313
District of Uttlesford wards	15,291

Uttlesford wards included in Billericay and Great Dunmow constituency: Barnston and High Easter; Felsted; Great Dunmow North; Great Dunmow South; Takeley and the Canfields.

Harlow CC	73,223
District of Epping Forest wards	8,320
District of Harlow wards	59,380
District of Uttlesford wards	5,523

Uttlesford wards included in Harlow constituency: Broad Oak and the Hallingburys; Hatfield Heath; The Rodings.

North West Essex CC	74,218
District of Braintree wards	35,424
District of Uttlesford wards	38,794

Uttlesford wards included in North West Essex constituency: Ashdon; Birchanger; Clavering; Elsenham and Henham; Littlebury; Newport; Saffron Walden Audley; Saffron Walden Castle; Saffron Walden Shire; Stansted North; Stansted South; Stebbing; Stort Valley; Thaxted; The Chesterfords; The Eastons; The Sampfords; Wenden Lofts; Wimbish and Debden.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager considered that the BCE's proposed fragmentation of the district between three different constituencies might disadvantage both the District Council and residents of the district in any future dealings with the Government and in seeking to promote the interests of the district as a cohesive community. Although a secondary consideration, the administration of Parliamentary elections would become more complex and challenging.

He advised Members that the Council must decide the nature of its response and whether it would be possible to prepare a counter proposal, which would carry more weight, within the confines of the tight rules agreed by Parliament. He therefore invited the Working Group to consider what that response should be and to recommend accordingly to Council on the following day, 27 September 2011.

Councillor Dean informed the Working Party that he had looked at the BCE's proposal and had attempted to put together an alternative plan by making some changes to the map and figures. He had discussed the plan with the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager who had checked the figures. He said that the figures were within the tolerance level dictated by the BCE and that the plan could be used as a basis for an objection.

Councillor Lemon said he thought that the BCE's proposal in respect of his own ward of Hatfield Heath would not be unduly detrimental as there were many local links to Harlow. He said that he was not personally concerned about the loss of the historical constituency name of Saffron Walden.

Councillor Hicks congratulated Councillor Dean for coming up with an alternative proposal. He felt that the Council ought to make a protest and should not sit back and take the BCE's proposal as final.

Councillor Freeman agreed with Councillor Hicks' comments and said that Councillor Dean's plan would make a good platform to start with. He suggested consulting the wards affected. He also commented that history did matter with regard to the constituency name.

The Chief Executive considered that the Saffron Walden constituency was one of five in Essex presently within the required electoral quota and did not think it should be changed. He suggested using that argument as a starting point.

The Chairman stated that he was biased concerning the historical name of the constituency and agreed with the Chief Executive. He suggested that Councillor Dean should liaise with the Leader of Council and then consult with the political parties.

Councillor Ketteridge said he was unhappy with the proposals and said that the whole of the Uttlesford District should be in one constituency. He said that any objection the Council made would need to 'have some meat on' to be able to have a chance of being favourably considered.

Councillor Dean said that it would be reasonable to say that we could not stay the same and would need an alternative proposal.

It was suggested that other affected authorities should be contacted to ascertain their views on the proposals although it was considered that the Uttlesford District was the most affected and thereby may be isolated in objecting to the proposals.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager said that the Working Group must decide upon a recommendation as there would not be another Council meeting until 29 November.

After further discussion, it was

RECOMMENDED that:

- 1 the Council objects to the initial proposals of the Boundary Commission for England insofar as they relate to the proposed constituencies in the County of Essex and the boroughs of Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock;
- 2 the objection be based upon the effect of the initial proposals on the Uttlesford district and, in particular, on the proposal to divide Uttlesford between parts of three constituencies;
- 3 the objection should address the underlying assumptions behind the proposals given that the electorate of the current Saffron Walden constituency is within 5% of the electoral quota being used in the review, as required by law;
- 4 no objection be raised to the proposals within the Eastern Region insofar as they relate to the counties of Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Suffolk;
- 5 any counter-proposal to be submitted as part of the Council's objection would be based upon the principle of either retaining the whole of the district, or as much of the district as possible, within a single constituency; and that
- 6 authority be delegated to the Chief Executive, in consultation with members of the Electoral Working Group, to submit an objection on the Council's behalf.

The meeting ended at 7.40 pm.