

ELECTORAL WORKING GROUP held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 7.00 pm on 28 NOVEMBER 2012

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

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

EWG27 APOLOGIES AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

An apology for absence was received from Councillor J Rose.

EWG28 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 26 September 2012 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman, subject to the amendment of Minute EWG 24 where Councillor J Davey was incorrectly listed as a member of the Saffron Walden Town Council rather than Great Dunmow Town Council.

EWG29 FURTHER ELECTORAL REVIEW

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager presented a report and maps to members which gave an explanation of the proposals received since the last meeting where it had been decided to defer further work until after the PCC elections on 15 November. The deferment also allowed political groups more time to submit suggestions and he hoped that members would now provide him with a clear steer for him to be able to finalise the scheme for approval.

As there was very limited time for the exercise to be completed, a timetable of further meetings was discussed as the fully developed scheme must be prepared and signed off by no later than 20 December. It was decided that a meeting would be held on Wednesday, 12 December at 9.00 am. If it was felt that a further meeting was required it would be arranged for Wednesday, 19 December at 7.00 pm.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager went on to explain the detailing on the maps and outline the comments received from political groups. There had also been comments from Great Hallingbury Parish Council and from several residents of Wicken Bonhunt.

Conservative Group

The Conservative Group had highlighted three areas of particular concern. These concerns are listed below with officer comments appended.

- 1 Broad Oak and the Hallingburys: The Group wished to retain the existing connection between Hatfield Broad Oak and Great and Little Hallingbury and submitted a proposal to re-jig boundaries of the three wards south of Takeley and Dunmow to achieve that.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager commented that the proposal added Great Canfield to the existing Broad Oak and the Hallingburys ward, appended White Roding to the existing Hatfield Heath ward, and also added High Easter to what remained of the existing Rodings ward. This proposal in effect reallocated the eleven parishes without affecting any of the remaining proposed wards. The variance of all of the proposed wards was within the accepted tolerance range and was likely to be acceptable to the LGBCE. There appeared to be a straight choice between the original option and the Conservative Group proposal. Both would work in terms of equality of representation and community identities and interests.

2 Ashdon: On the proposed inclusion of Little Walden within Ashdon ward and its consequent exclusion from a Saffron Walden based ward, the Group had proposed that Ashdon ward should remain as at present and that Little Walden should be added to a Saffron Walden ward instead.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager commented that this proposal would not work in terms of electoral equality and was unlikely to be accepted by the LGBCE. The deviation from the electoral average would be -15% at current figures and -16% by 2018. There was little point in putting forward a proposal that obviously did not meet the statutory criteria unless there was enough overwhelming evidence of community ties to justify a departure from the requirement for electoral equality. Although Little Walden was adjacent to the parish of Saffron Walden, it did not form part of the urban core of Saffron Walden. It was a separate and distinct rural community and could integrate well with the nearby similar settlements of Hadstock and Ashdon.

If members decided to link Little Walden to Saffron Walden instead of Ashdon, then a compensatory change would be needed to bolster electoral numbers in the proposed Ashdon ward which could only be achieved by combining 200-300 electors from either Radwinter or Wimbish. The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager said the Council must have regard to the need to secure equality of representation first and then take account of community interests and identities.

Councillor Ketteridge asked if it would be possible to sound out the acceptability of the proposal with the Boundary Commission. The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager said that he would contact the review officer and report back any guidance received.

3 Elsenham and Takeley: The Group said that a merger between the villages of Elsenham and Takeley in a three member ward (or two wards of two members each incorporating Little Canfield) was too large and joined two completely unrelated communities. Two possible alternatives were suggested. The first would be to retain Takeley and Little Canfield in the same ward leaving the existing ward of Elsenham and Henham intact. The second option was to leave Takeley as a standalone ward thus removing Little Canfield.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager commented that the proposal to combine Elsenham with Takeley (less the Priors Green area) in a three member ward (leaving Little Canfield and the Priors Green area as a single member ward) was acknowledged to be a difficult one for members to accept. It was also not ideal from the viewpoint of community identity because the two

villages were located a few miles apart and had separate interests and identities.

If Elsenham and Henham Ward were to be retained in its present form, the proposal for a Henham ward to incorporate Debden Green and other neighbouring parishes would fall apart. Takeley and Little Canfield combined produced a 2018 electorate of 4231 which was 19% greater than the average per councillor and therefore very unlikely to be accepted. By excluding Little Canfield from Takeley it would be very near to the required electoral average at -2% and would therefore be acceptable, although it would divide the community of Priors Green, but it left Little Canfield parish adrift with no ward to which it could be attached. Alternative arrangements to avoid a pairing of Elsenham with Takeley would continue to be explored but there may be no acceptable or practicable option available.

Liberal Democrats – Councillor Dean

In September Councillor Dean had suggested an alternative means of arranging new ward boundaries to enable the Elsenham/Henham and Barnston/High Easter wards to remain intact. The scheme had contained a number of flaws including the probability of detached wards of Takeley/Broxted and the Canfields/High Roding/Little Easton. Councillor Dean had now suggested two revised options to overcome these difficulties.

Option 1: Elsenham and Henham ward would gain the northern half of Broxted parish (which would then be warded) giving a total in the region of 3,800 electors amounting to a variance of +7%.

Takeley ward (x2 members) would then consist of the remainder of Broxted (230 electors) and the whole of Takeley parish, including Priors Green (although not the part in Little Canfield). There would be in the region of 3,700 electors or a variance of +4%.

He proposed a ward consisting of Great Canfield, Little Easton, High Roding and the majority of Little Canfield parish excluding only that part east of High Cross Lane West and south of the old A120. The detached eastern part of Little Canfield including just over 100 electors would be added to a Great Dunmow based ward. The resulting ward would include some 1770 electors thus achieving electoral equality. Great Dunmow would then receive 104 voters from Little Canfield, together with Little Dunmow producing 8996 electors divided by five members which overall would be about the correct number.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager commented that these revised arrangements were designed to take account of the problems resulting from detached wards mentioned above. The proposed Canfields based ward seemed unsatisfactory in a number of respects. First, the division of Little Canfield took little account of community loyalties as the proposed split was not between Priors Green and the village community but divided the old village community along what seemed to be an artificial boundary. Part of the old village was then paired with that part of Priors Green included within Little Canfield and that was where the parish ward division would fall. This then left the community of Priors Green itself divided between two wards. If Little Canfield were to be divided it would be better to make a clean division between Priors Green, including some properties clustered nearby along Stortford Road, and the rest. The LGBCE would not normally recommend the creation of parish wards containing less than 100 electors. The proposed

eastern division of Little Canfield would result in a parish ward very close to that minimum figure. In addition it seemed less than satisfactory to attach a very small number of rural electors to a ward with largely urban characteristics (in Great Dunmow), especially where no close community links could be found.

The other problem with the Canfields ward was the inclusion of Little Easton as there were no direct road or other links between that village and the other parishes concerned. This was in contravention of the LGBCE's guidance in seeking to ensure that wards were internally coherent by ensuring there were reasonable road links across the ward so that it could be easily traversed. In terms of electorate figures, the proposals in Cllr Dean's option 1 were all within tolerance levels.

Option 2: Takeley ward consisting of the main core of Takeley village and the whole of Priors Green (including that part in Little Canfield) but excluding everything in Takeley parish north of the A120. There would be in the region of 3860 electors in this ward with a variance of +9.

Elsenham and Henham ward would then consist of the existing electors together with some 200 electors in Takeley north of the A120, producing a total of 3830 with a variance of +8%. The Canfields ward would then include Great Canfield as well as most of the old community of Little Canfield (170 electors), together with Broxted, Little Easton and High Roding. There would be in the region of 1710 electors in this ward at a variance of -4%.

Great Dunmow wards would remain as before but without the addition of any electors from Little Canfield.

As an alternative to the above, Great Easton could be transferred into the Canfields ward to replace Broxted which would then go into the Thaxted ward.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager commented that many of the comments listed in respect of option 1 applied also to this option. The figures would all work but the two member wards of Elsenham/ Henham and Takeley/Priors Green would both have variances close to the limit of what might be acceptable.

Independent – Councillor Lemon

Councillor Lemon had proposed a single member ward for Hatfield Heath, as at present, but with the addition of electors from the New Common area of Little Hallingbury to make the numbers balance between Hatfield Heath and the Hallingburys which would then revert to a single member ward. He stated that it would be easier for the elected member to work in one community where it was possible to get to know everyone and that Hatfield Heath, as one of the seven principal villages of Uttlesford, should be separately represented.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager commented that if members selected the Conservative option the problem alluded to by Councillor Lemon would be resolved as White Roding would be added to Hatfield Heath to produce the required number of electors. Under Councillor Lemon's proposal it seemed there were an insufficient number of electors at New Common (approximately 50) to balance the numbers between the two areas, whereas around 200 would be required.

Great Hallingbury Parish Council

The Parish Council had written to the LGBCE, copied to UDC, asking for Broad Oak and the Hallingburys ward to remain intact with the addition of Great Canfield. A case was made for this proposal based on a commonality of community interests relating to Hatfield Forest, Stansted Airport and other related matters.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager commented that the parish Council's proposal coincided exactly with the proposal from the Conservative Group although it conflicted with the original officer option and the options submitted by Councillor Dean. As already stated above, the alternative Conservative proposal fitted with the statutory criteria and therefore provided an acceptable solution.

Residents of Wicken Bonhunt

A number of residents from Wicken Bonhunt had objected to the proposal to detach Wicken Bonhunt from the Clavering ward and to include it instead within the Newport ward. The objections were all based on community links and values and the strong representation received from the Clavering ward member. The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager had responded to the objectors that no firm proposals had been decided in formulating a revised scheme and indicating that the whole of the District must be taken into account.

Speaking on all proposed options, the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager said that there appeared to be no easy solution to the difficulties highlighted by the report. Members discussed the options as outlined and made various suggestions which the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager noted and commented on. The general view expressed was that Elsenham and Henham should remain in the same ward if this proved to be possible.

Councillor Dean expressed surprise when the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager commented that Priors Green residents had strong links with Little Canfield rather than with Takeley. He said that this had become apparent when the Council undertook the parish review in 2010 and residents had been asked to complete a survey. Views expressed indicated that many residents associated Takeley with Stansted Airport.

After further discussion the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager was asked to continue to evaluate the options considered with a view to keeping Elsenham and Henham together, and the whole of Priors Green with Takeley.

Councillor Dean suggested reducing the number of members to 38 to spread the electorate around. The Chairman asked the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager to look at this suggestion and he agreed to do so. He said that the primary purpose of the exercise was to achieve electoral equality so that votes in all parts of the district were of equal value.

Councillor Lemon thanked the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager for all his work on the review so far.

The meeting ended at 8.25 pm.