

Committee: Electoral Working Group

Agenda Item

Date: 12 December 2012

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Title: Further Electoral Review

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Item for decision

Summary

1. The Council is required to submit a revised electoral warding scheme based on a council size of 39 by no later than 14 January 2013. The purpose of the Further Electoral Review is to rectify imbalances in the existing warding scheme. An extraordinary Council meeting has been arranged on 9 January to consider recommendations from this Working Group to propose a revised scheme to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE).
2. The Working Group has met on a number of occasions to examine options for a new warding scheme. At the last meeting on 28 November officers were asked to evaluate further the options under review and to consider a possible scheme for a council size of 38. This report contains information to enable members to reach conclusions about how to proceed.

Recommendations

3. That the options described in this report are further examined with a view to agreeing a final electoral scheme to be recommended to Council.

Financial Implications

4. *There are no financial implications arising directly from this report:*

Background Papers

5. No background papers have been referred to by the author in the preparation of this report other than documents already published.

Impact

6. Please refer to the impact table below.

Communication/Consultation	The FER includes full public consultation
Community Safety	No impact
Equalities	No specific impact
Health and Safety	No impact

Human Rights/Legal Implications	No impact
Sustainability	No impact
Ward-specific impacts	All wards
Workforce/Workplace	No specific impact

Situation

7. In conducting any electoral review, the LGBCE is required to have regard to the following statutory criteria:
 - The need to secure equality of representation;
 - The need to reflect the identities and interests of local communities (including the desirability of fixing boundaries which are and will remain easily identifiable, and which will not break local ties); and
 - The need to secure effective and convenient local government
8. These criteria have equal weight and the LGBCE will seek to achieve the best scheme having regard to all the factors. In doing so the LGBCE must consider both the existing electorate (as at July 2012) and a five year forecast of the electorate (actually six years from the start of the review) as at 2018. The figures supplied to the LGBCE have been included in previous reports.
9. In considering new warding scheme options, the Council is asked to seek to bring the greatest improvement to electoral equality at the first election at which they will come into effect (May 2015). However, at the same time, we must take account of the five-year forecast as there is a requirement to have regard to the *likely increase, decrease or movement in electorate* over that time.
10. As reported previously, the LGBCE generally operates to a tolerance benchmark of no more than 10% variance from the electoral equality rule, taking account especially of the five year forecast figures.
11. In preparing the options presented in this report, officers have had regard to the following guiding principles, as already agreed:
 - Using both 2012 and 2018 figures, the average number of electors representing a councillor in each proposed ward is within 5% wherever possible, and in no case proposed to be more than 10% at variance from the electoral quota, that is the average number of electors found by dividing the total number of councillors into the overall electorate. Where it is possible to do so the percentage variance from the quota will be nearer to the average in 2018 than on the basis of existing electorate totals.

- A mix of one, two, and three member wards will be proposed with a preponderance of single member wards in rural areas and two member wards in urban areas; three member wards will be proposed only where there seems no reasonable alternative.
- The proposals avoid splitting parishes wherever possible.
- The proposals seek to have regard to principles of community identity. In other words the proposals have avoided including a mix of urban and rural areas within the same ward, unless this is unavoidable. It is however, inevitable that closely adjoining parishes will be included within the same ward, sometimes in instances where villages are considered to have little in common, or where there is no specific evidence of community identity between those parishes, or where they have not been linked within the same ward in the past.
- The proposals try to take account of the statutory criterion of effective and convenient local government, particularly in considering the likely impact of the proposals on the workload of individual councillors, e.g. the number of parish councils contained within each ward.
- Account has been taken as far as possible of coterminosity between new ward boundaries and existing county council divisions (and proposed new Parliamentary boundaries as well), but a lack of coterminosity cannot be used as an overriding objection to a new warding arrangement.
- Detached wards have not been proposed in any case as this is not considered to be good practice.
- Doughnut wards (a rural ward entirely surrounding an urban area) have not been used.
- The impact on parish electoral arrangements has not been directly considered at this stage but where parishes are to be divided by a new ward boundary, parish wards will have to be established within or along the same divisions of those boundaries.
- However, having regard to all of the above factors, it is unavoidable that the exercise of proposing new wards will be driven principally by the number and pattern of electors within the district.

12. The following decisions are now needed:

- The number and boundaries of the wards to operate from 2015.
- The number of councillors to be elected for each of those wards.
- The names of each of the proposed wards.

The options

13. The Working Group has already considered an option presented by officers for a 39 member council. This has now been revised after discussion at the last meeting, as set out in full in the attached appendix A and associated maps. However, some choices must now be made as highlighted in the following paragraphs. Options are now presented to modify the proposed scheme in the following respects.

Ashdon/Little Walden

14. The option presented proposed a transfer of the Little Walden area from a Saffron Walden based ward to a revised Ashdon ward to enable that ward to meet the statutory criterion relating to electoral equality. At the last meeting Mr Snow was asked to approach the LGBCE to establish whether the Commission might accept an imbalance of -16% on 2018 figures in respect of this ward to enable Little Walden to remain attached to a Saffron Walden ward.

15. Mr Snow has spoken to the review officer Mr Kingsley about this proposal. Mr Kingsley's advice was that the Commission would be very unlikely to accept a variance of -16% and that the Council should adopt a next favoured position in the event that the proposal to transfer Little Walden to Ashdon is not adopted.

16. The choice therefore seems to be to accept a proposed Ashdon ward incorporating Little Walden, or to agree a ward boundary excluding Little Walden but with a fallback position to accept the inclusion of Little Walden with Ashdon if the first option were to be rejected by the LGBCE. The only other option is to find an alternative way of meeting electoral equality in the proposed Ashdon ward (from either Radwinter or Wimbish).

17. Of course, any proposal to create a ward with an electoral imbalance of 16% would break the first guiding principle adopted by members as set out in paragraph 11.

Elsenham/Takeley

18. The EWG asked officers to explore ways of realigning the warding scheme while maintaining the existing Elsenham and Henham ward unchanged. The option of a combined Elsenham/Takeley ward has not been favoured and the retention of the Elsenham/Henham link has been preferred instead. The challenge has been to make the remaining wards fit around this preference.

19. Apart from the options presented by Councillor Dean which proposes a ward linking parishes either side of the A120 (see later comment), there are two possible ways of maintaining the Elsenham/Henham link. However, both of these are considered very unsatisfactory and accordingly not viable.

20. Both options involve the removal of a large chunk of Takeley village electors from a Takeley/Priors Green ward and their transfer to a revised Eastons ward. The first option to include the whole of Little Canfield within a revised Takeley ward would involve the transfer of around 680 electors from Takeley

to elsewhere. The second option, linking Little Canfield with the Eastons, would involve the transfer of around 500 Takeley electors.

21. Adopting either option would mean drawing an arbitrary line through the built up area on either side of Parsonage Road and could not be justified on the grounds of community identity.
22. Unless Councillor Dean's proposal is accepted (which would mean accepting a linkage between parishes either side of the A120 with poor or non-existent community and transport links, and scrapping the Conservative group's proposals for the parishes south of Takeley and Dunmow), there is no satisfactory way of maintaining a link between Elsenham and Henham. Under a 39 member scheme therefore, it seems inevitable there must be some link between Elsenham and Takeley.

Great Dunmow, Saffron Walden and Stansted Mountfitchet

23. Whichever scheme is accepted, members must agree precise boundaries relating to the internal ward divisions within these three settlements. Maps will be presented with proposed ward boundaries for approval. In the case of Saffron Walden, the definition of the ward boundaries will be influenced by whether Little Walden is, or is not, to be included within Ashdon ward.

Internal division of rural parishes

24. If the proposals are accepted, internal ward boundary divisions must be agreed in the parishes of Littlebury, Debden, Takeley and Felsted. Maps will be presented for members' approval. At some stage new or revised parish electoral arrangements must be proposed for all of these parishes, as well as for Great Dunmow, Saffron Walden and Stansted.
25. Other proposals make provision for the possible division of Broxton, Great Easton, Little Canfield and Wimbish parishes (see later paragraphs).

Electorate forecast for 2018

26. The information submitted to the LGBCE with the Council's case for council size included an electorate forecast for 2018, as already reported to members. The submission of the proposed electoral scheme must include full supporting information about where the forecast additional electors will be located and this may affect the precise alignment of the proposed ward boundaries. Further information will be given at the meeting.

Option for a 38 council size scheme

27. Work has been undertaken since the last meeting to produce an electoral scheme for a council size of 38 and this is attached at appendix B. Although the LGBCE has agreed a council size of 39, the Council is permitted to propose a scheme allowing for a council size varying by one either side of this number if it fits better with the pattern of electors and settlements in the district.

28. The 38 member scheme has the features described in the following paragraphs. It will be for members to judge whether the scheme provides for a better pattern of representation in the district than the other options examined.

- The mainly rural wards of Elmdon/Wenden and Clavering in the west of the district have been increased in area and in the number of electors included to offset the imbalances in the original option scheme.
- The rather unsatisfactory proposed Stort Valley ward has been replaced by a suggested Stansted West ward which incorporates two of the parishes from the existing ward of Stort Valley.
- Part of north-east Stansted has been paired with Elsenham and Ugley to form a new Elsenham and Stansted East ward; this leaves the originally proposed Stansted South (and Birchanger) ward largely unaltered and overcomes the rather unsatisfactory link between Elsenham and Takeley.
- A revised Takeley ward has been proposed, including the whole of Priors Green and Little Canfield parish, but excluding some 300 electors at the western edge of Takeley in The Street adjoining Bush End and Hatfield Forest. It is proposed that these electors are added to the proposed Broad Oak/Hallingburys ward. This is seen as the only viable way to maintain a discrete Takeley ward containing the core of the centre of the village and unifying the whole of Priors Green within one ward.
- The new Henham ward would then include the rural northern portion of Takeley parish instead of Debden Green. All other wards in the south and centre of the district would be based on the proposals discussed and agreed at the last meeting.
- Changes might be needed to the remaining eastern wards of Ashdon, The Sampfords and Wimbish/Debden to improve electoral equality but the wards can remain as they are. If agreed, this would involve dividing Wimbish between the village and Carver Barracks areas. Saffron Walden wards would remain unchanged (depending on whether or not Little Walden was to be included).

Councillor Dean's proposals

29. Councillor Dean has proposed some options which would break up the proposed Broad Oak/Hallingburys, Hatfield Heath and Rodings wards and reinstate a link between Barnston and High Easter. This would enable the Elsenham/Henham link to be maintained and would create a new ward composed of parishes located either side of the A120.

30. The previous report commented on the merits of this scheme and the variations of it put forward. It is maintained that a linkage of either Broxted/Little Easton or the Eastons with Little Canfield and High Roding does not

meet the community interests and identities test, but the electoral numbers do meet the electoral equality requirement.

31. These options do provide a means of keeping Elsenham and Henham together in the same ward which no other scheme is able to do satisfactorily.
32. If one of these options were to be selected as the Council's preferred scheme, it would involve the division of Takeley, Little Canfield and Debden parishes and possibly Broxted and/or Great Easton as well.
33. The division of Great Dunmow into North and South wards would change and some alteration (as yet unspecified) of the ward boundary would be needed, as Little Dunmow (259 electors) would be substituted for Barnston (844 electors) as a partner for either North or South ward. More detailed work would be required to identify a satisfactory ward boundary.

Conclusion

34. Some clarity is now needed from members to enable the full details of the scheme to be finalised, as well as the mapping, as a great deal of preparatory work is needed before the final electoral scheme can be presented to Council for approval on 9 January.
35. The agenda for the Council meeting must be published on 28 December and, effectively, the scheme should be fully signed off by the end of next week.
36. The names of the proposed wards should be agreed as well as their composition. Suggestions have been made in the attached papers.
37. If required, a further meeting of the EWG can be held on 19 December.

Risk Analysis

38. Please see below for the risk analysis.

Risk	Likelihood	Impact	Mitigating actions
A new electoral scheme is agreed that does not meet either the business needs of the Council or the representational needs of the communities within Uttlesford	1 – There is some risk that unsuitable arrangements will be agreed but only if the Council does not engage fully with the review and consultation	3 – The impact on the operational and decision-making needs of the Council might be severe if an unsuitable scheme is	Full engagement with the review process both at officer and at member level to ensure that the case is made for an appropriate council size and warding scheme

	process	agreed	
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- 1 = Little or no risk or impact
- 2 = Some risk or impact – action may be necessary.
- 3 = Significant risk or impact – action required
- 4 = Near certainty of risk occurring, catastrophic effect or failure of project.