

ELECTORAL WORKING GROUP held at COUNCIL OFFICES LONDON ROAD SAFFRON WALDEN at 9.15 am on 12 DECEMBER 2012

Present: Councillors R Chambers – Chairman.
J Davey, A Dean, J Freeman, E Hicks, 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).

EWG30 APOLOGIES AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

An apology for absence was received from Councillor J Rose. There were no declarations of interest.

EWG31 MINUTES

The Minutes of the meeting held on 28 November 2012 were agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chairman.

EWG32 FURTHER ELECTORAL REVIEW

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager submitted a report informing members of progress to date on the preparation of the Council's options for an electoral scheme to be submitted to the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) in response to the Further Electoral Review. In conducting the review officers had to be aware of the Boundary Commission's statutory criteria which were as follows: the need to secure equality of representation; the need to reflect the identities and interests of local communities; and also the need to secure effective and convenient local government. The criteria had been taken into consideration when preparing the options and would carry equal weight with the LGBCE in seeking to achieve the best scheme.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager had received a joint representation from Elsenham and Henham Parish Councils to retain both parishes in the same ward. A representation had also been received from Stansted Parish Council requesting that Stansted be kept as a discrete urban unit.

In considering the new warding scheme options, the Council had been asked to seek the greatest improvement to electoral equality at the first election at which they would come into effect in May 2015. Concurrently, the Council must consider the five-year electorate forecast as there was a need to take account of the likely increase, decrease or movement in electorate over that time. As reported at previous meetings, the LGBCE generally operated a tolerance benchmark of no more than 10% variance from electoral equality.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager reported that in preparation of the options outlined in the report, account had been taken of the guiding principles already agreed by the Working Group. He said that the following decisions were now required from members:

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

The Working Group had already considered an option for a 39 member council, in accordance with the LGBCE's decision on council size. The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager had now revised this option as agreed at the last meeting. He explained that some choices would now need to be made which had been highlighted in the report.

The aim should be to secure as close to a position of electoral equality as possible while, at the same time, reflecting community interests and identities. The proposals as drafted attempted to stay within 5% of electoral equality using the six-year electorate forecast and, in no case, achieve a variance of more than 10%.

Mr Snow said that he had spoken to the Commission's review officer regarding members' wish to retain Little Walden within a Saffron Walden based ward instead of transferring it to a revised Ashdon ward. He reported that Mr Kingsley had indicated the Commission would be very unlikely to accept a variance of 16% from electoral equality and had suggested the Council should adopt a next preferred option as a fallback position. Councillor Dean considered that departure from the guidance would be risky.

Councillor Hicks said that many decisions needed to be made and proposed that the definition of boundaries be delegated to officers to finalise and this was agreed by the Working Group.

At the last meeting of the Working Group the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager had been asked to work out an option for a 38 member council. This had been intended primarily to allow an adjustment of wards to be made to avoid linking together Elsenham with Takeley. He then went on to explain the work undertaken to produce an electoral scheme for a council size of 38. Although the LGBCE had agreed a council size of 39, the Council was permitted to propose a scheme allowing for a council size varying by one either side of this number if it fitted better with the pattern of electors and settlements in the district.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager described the 38 member scheme he had developed as a radical reworking, especially as far as it related to the Stansted wards and the western and central parts of the district. Stansted had been reallocated between three wards, all incorporating one or more surrounding parishes, including Elsenham. This meant that a two member Takeley ward could be formed, including the central core of the village as well as all of Priors Green and Little Canfield. The remainder of the district was largely unaffected. He said that it would be for members to judge whether the scheme provided for a better pattern of representation in the district than the other options put forward.

He went on to summarise the principal elements of the 38 member scheme as follows:

- The mainly rural wards of Elmdon/Wenden and Clavering in the west of the district had been increased both in area and in the number of electors included to offset the imbalances in the original option scheme.
- The Stort Valley ward would be replaced by a suggested Stansted West ward which incorporated two of the parishes from the existing ward of Stort Valley, together with the parish of Ugley.
- Part of north-east Stansted had been paired with Elsenham to form a new Elsenham and Stansted East ward; this left the originally proposed Stansted South (and Birchanger) ward largely unaltered and provided an option to avoid link Elsenham and Takeley in the same ward.
- A revised Takeley ward was proposed, which included 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 was proposed that these electors be added to the proposed Broad Oak/Hallingburys ward. This was 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.
- A 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 could be made to the remaining eastern wards of Ashdon, The Sampfords and Wimbish/Debden to improve electoral equality but the wards could equally remain as they were. 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 said that he appreciated the work undertaken by the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager to create a 38 member option but considered that the fundamental principle was to keep urban centres as discrete units and not mix them with rural areas. He thought it would be totally unacceptable to 'carve up' Stansted and that it would be a recipe for disaster. He considered it best to stay with the 39 member option and make it work.

The Chairman agreed with this and said that from a District point of view a 39 member council would make sense and would mean more rural area representation.

Councillor Ketteridge asked what changes had been made to the 39 member option. The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager explained that everything to the north of the District was the same as before. However the wards to the south of Takeley and Dunmow had been adjusted as proposed at the last meeting by the Conservative group. As a result the link between Elsenham and Takeley had been maintained as it had not been possible to

find a satisfactory alternative alignment. There would be a separate ward consisting of the whole of Priors Green and Little Canfield parish.

Councillor Dean said that there were no lines of communication between Elsenham and Takeley. A merger between the two areas would not be easy and he foresaw unacceptable implications. In response, the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager said that the only way he could find of retaining a ward including both Elsenham and Henham and excluding Takeley would be to create a ward based on the existing Eastons ward, incorporating a chunk of Takeley village on either side of Parsonage Road south of the A120. The other option was to adopt something similar to Councillor Dean's initial suggestion of linking areas in a long string either side of the A120. This would have the effect of breaking up those proposed wards south of Takeley and Dunmow as already agreed.

Councillor Ketteridge said it was clear that it would be difficult to satisfy all members and parish councils and looking at all of the schemes put to the Working Group, he thought that option A should be the preferred choice.

Most of the members agreed with this suggestion. However Councillor Dean declared that he would not support option A and the Liberal Democrat Group would not accept it. He said he could not accept the linkage of two different areas with no community association. He suggested looking at option C which he considered was more logical by placing Takeley with Priors Green.

Councillor Hicks thought that it would be more logical for High Easter and Barnston to be separated as they did not 'link together' naturally. However he considered that option A would suit most purposes.

The Chairman then asked members to make a final decision. All members agreed as before that option A should be adopted with the exception of Councillor Dean.

Councillor Dean said that he wanted to register his dissent very strongly. He considered that option A was totally unacceptable and would work to identify weaknesses within it. He also asked the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager to continue to finalise the Liberal Democrats' proposals as set out in option C.

Answering a question regarding parish council consultation, the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager said that he had not consulted with parishes directly other than to remind them of the various consultation stages arranged by the Boundary Commission. Each parish council had the option of making its own representations to the Commission as it was them conducting the review and not Uttlesford.

Councillor Ketteridge said he would be disappointed if the review became a political divide.

Councillor Dean said that the Liberal Democrats had done a lot of work to try to submit an alternative scheme and that there would always be anomalies. He also said that it should not become a party political matter.

The Democratic and Electoral Services Manager said that he appreciated all contributions from members which had all been positive and had helped to provide alternative proposals for consideration.

The Chairman then proposed the adoption of Option A as the Council's submission to the LGBCE for an electoral scheme providing for a 39 member council. This was seconded by Councillor Hicks. A show of hands indicated five for and one against the proposal.

RECOMMENDED that Option A be submitted to the next Full Council meeting for agreement as the Council's formal submission with precise boundaries to be confirmed in due course.

Councillor Dean reiterated his personal dissent and asked that the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager finalise Option C as a counter proposal from the Liberal Democrat Party.

There was a short discussion on ward names and the Chairman said that, in principle, the names as outlined in the schedule should be agreed with delegation to the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager. There was no need for a further meeting.

Members then thanked the Democratic and Electoral Services Manager for all his work. The Chairman wished Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to those present at the meeting.

The meeting ended at 10.50 am.