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Review Officer (North Hertfordshire)
Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE)
PO Box 133
Blyth
NE24 9FE

8 August 2022

Dear Sir / Madam,

I am writing to express my views on the new pattern of wards for North Hertfordshire, on which you are currently consulting.

Background

I am writing in a personal capacity and all views expressed are entirely my own. However, it is appropriate I should give some relevant background about myself.

I have lived in Hitchin (in North Hertfordshire) since 1993 and have had involvement with elections in North Hertfordshire at various times during that period. Between 2006 and 2010 I stood (unsuccessfully) as a candidate in local elections for the Green Party of England and Wales and was its election agent for the entire district for most of that period. I was not a member of any political party between 2011 and late 2019, although still followed the activities of the local councils as a member of the public and a trustee of a charity operating across the district. Since late 2019 I have been a member of the Labour Party and in 2021 and 2022 was election agent (for both Labour Party and Labour and Co-operative Party candidates) for the wards and county divisions in North Hertfordshire that overlapped with Hitchin & Harpenden and Stevenage constituencies (as well as for one county division in Letchworth in 2021).

I would reiterate that the consultation response I am making here is not on behalf of any of the organisations with which I currently am, or have been, associated.

Total number of councillors

While the consultation is not primarily about the number of councillors, and I note that a decision in principle has already been made that it should increase from 49 (as at present) to 50, I would like to start by expressing a view on this.

In my view it is unsatisfactory for there to be an even number of councillors for any council, particularly under all-out elections. Imagine if the election result were such that two parties secured 25 councillors each. Any way of determining which party should lead the council (such as a coin toss) seems arbitrary and unsatisfactory. While I accept that, taking into account the legal requirements around the consultation, the LGBCE may not be able to prioritise targeting a particular number, if there is an acceptable set of boundaries that require 49 or 51 councillors then I would encourage the LGBCE to select that over another acceptable set that required exactly 50 councillors.

Size of wards

Before commenting on the detail, I would also like to express a view on the ideal size of wards in principle. This is an important point that underpins some of my recommendations.

In my view there are two (sometimes conflicting) principles beyond the three statutory criteria¹ that should be followed when setting boundaries. These two principles support the statutory criterion of effective and convenient local government. Firstly, ideally wards would each have 2 or 3 members. This provides greater resilience in terms of supporting residents during periods where a councillor is ill (or when a vacancy arises). It also facilitates more teamworking between councillors. I do not hold a strong view as to whether 2 or 3 is better; I can see advantages and disadvantages of each.

Secondly, wards should not be too large geographically. A 3-member ward in a rural area can be very large (such as is the case for the current Hitchwood, Offa & Hoo ward); sometimes this would also be the case for a 2-member ward. If all the councillors in the ward are members of the same party then they might adopt an informal arrangement to divide up the ward geographically with each taking the lead on community engagement and casework in a specific part of the ward. That can work, especially if the councillors live in different parts of the ward. However, such co-operation might not exist if the councillors are from different parties, and the distance will put more of a burden on them.

Under the current 'First Past The Post' electoral system, I am therefore of the view that in general rural wards should each have 1 or 2 members (ideally 2 members, but only 1 member if it would otherwise result in too large a ward geographically) and that urban wards should each have 2 or 3 members.

I am strongly of the view that wards should, as far as possible, avoid combining an urban area and a rural area given the different needs of the communities.

Detailed proposal

I have taken the approach of reviewing the consultation response agreed by North Hertfordshire Council (NHC) at its Full Council meeting of 14 July 2022 and stating where I agree and where I have an alternative proposal. As part of this I listened to the rationale for views expressed by Councillors during the debate and noted the decisions taken by NHC.

My comments should therefore be read in conjunction with the consultation response of NHC.

¹ Delivering electoral equality for local voters; reflecting the interests and identities of local communities; promoting effective and convenient local government.

Rural wards

I consider the rural ward proposals agreed by NHC for its consultation response to be generally acceptable. These cover the following proposed new wards that are mentioned in its submission:

- 2-member wards:
 - Codicote & Kimpton
 - Great Ashby
 - Knebworth
 - Offley & Pirton
 - Wymondley, Graveley & St Ippolyts
- 1-member wards:
 - Arbury
 - Cadwell
 - Ermine
 - Langley, Preston & Walden
 - Weston & Sandon

While grouped here, Great Ashby should not be considered to be a rural ward as it is much closer in nature to part of the urban extension of Stevenage. I strongly support this part of NHC's proposal separating it out from the villages that comprise the rest of what is currently Chesfield ward; this supports the statutory criteria of having regard to the interests and identities of local communities. In my view there would be a case for transferring Great Ashby from North Hertfordshire district to Stevenage borough (in order to meet the criteria of effective and convenient local government), but I understand that is outside the scope of this boundary review. However, creating a new Great Ashby ward could make it easier to facilitate a district / borough boundary change in the future through a different process.

At the NHC Full Council meeting, one Councillor expressed the view that all rural wards should, if possible, be 1-member in order not to merge villages into a single ward. While I can see that this would be desirable in some circumstances, I would draw attention to my earlier comments about optimal ward size. Even if the populations of Codicote and Kimpton were sufficiently similar for two 1-member wards to achieve electoral equality (which is not the case), in my view combining these two villages into a 2-member ward is appropriate because the combined geographical area is not too large. While I recognize that residents of Codicote and Kimpton might argue that they are quite different villages with different issues, the same is true of different areas within many multi-member urban wards. So I would oppose rural areas receiving any special consideration for that point.

Similar comments apply to the proposal for a single 2-member ward to cover Wymondley, Graveley and St Ippolyts; I consider this to be of appropriate size for a 2-member rural ward.

Knebworth is a suitably-sized settlement to work well as a 2-member ward.

The geographical area of the proposed Offley & Pirton ward is larger than I would consider ideal for a 2-member ward. Conversely the (neighbouring) proposed Cadwell ward is quite small geographically for a 1-member rural ward. I looked at the granular details of the electoral numbers for settlements in these wards and attempted to formulate a better proposal involving a different boundary but, having regard to limitations in the road network in that area, was unable to do so. Therefore although neither proposed ward is ideal, I am content with this part of NHC's proposal.

Subject to my comment above about the proposed Cadwell ward, I consider all NHC's proposals for 1-member wards to be satisfactory. Most of these are quite large wards and (with the exception of Cadwell) to combine them with another ward would create a multi-member ward that I would consider to cover too large a geographical area.

Hitchin wards

The original proposal put to the NHC Full Council meeting involved three 3-member wards, one 2-member ward and one 1-member ward. At the meeting, Councillors debated and agreed an amendment and therefore revised NHC's proposal to comprise two 3-member wards (Hitchin Bearton and Hitchin Walsworth) and three 2-member wards (Hitchin Highbury, Hitchin Oughton and Hitchin Priory).

I have reviewed the boundaries of NHC's final proposal for the Hitchin wards and agree that they are sensible. As per my earlier overarching comments, I consider 1-member wards to be undesirable in urban areas and therefore think that NHC's final proposal is much superior to the original.

Letchworth wards

NHC debated two options (Option A and Option B) and a majority of its Councillors voted for Option A.

Having listened to the arguments made at the debate, I disagree and consider Option B superior, which is as follows (the following is copied from the paper presented to Full Council).

Letchworth South East

This comprises the south eastern part of the town, bordered on east by the town boundary. The northern boundary is the railway line. The western boundary follows Norton Way South and Willian Way, then runs to the north of Whitethorn Lane, along Howard Drive, then south along the A505.

Letchworth South West

This is the remaining area of Letchworth, south of the railway line. The communities in the northern area here are distinct from those elsewhere in southern Letchworth.

Letchworth Grange

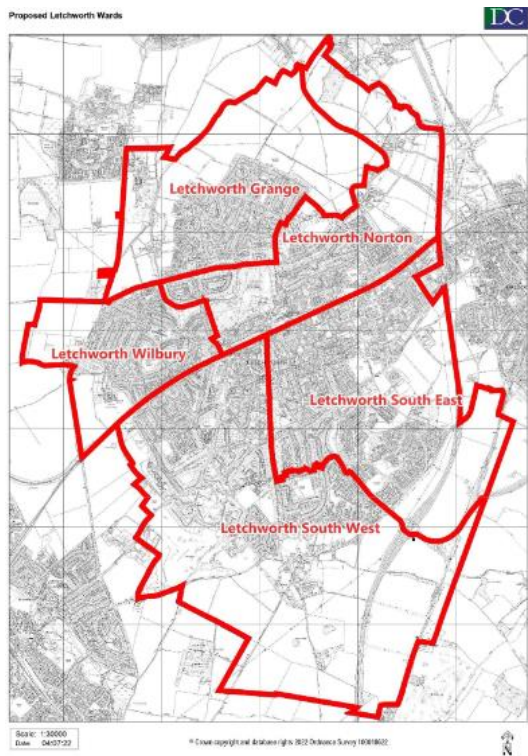
This is the northern-most part of Letchworth, bordered on the north and west by the town boundary. It includes the Grange estate, as identified by local Councillors.

Letchworth Wilbury

This ward is the Wilbury community, as identified by local Members, expanded slightly eastwards to ensure electoral equality.

Letchworth Norton

This ward is centred on Norton common, and includes the community of Norton village and the Longmead/Hawthorn Hill area.



More detailed maps of the proposed wards (as well as the numerical analysis demonstrating adequate electoral equality) are available in the paper on Option B presented to NHC Full Council: https://democracy.north-herts.gov.uk/documents/s19718/Appendix%20C%20-%20Submission_Letchworth_Option_B.pdf.pdf

As well as agreeing with the points made at the meeting by NHC Councillors supporting Option B (in particular the desirability of locating the Jackmans Estate with other communities with which it has more in common), Option B has a significant advantage that all the proposed Letchworth wards are 2-members or 3-members. NHC's preferred option, which it has submitted as part of its consultation response, includes a 1-member ward, to which I am opposed in principle in urban areas for the reasons I explained earlier.

Baldock wards

I am content with NHC's proposals for Baldock Town and Baldock East wards.

Royston wards

I disagree with an aspect of NHC's proposals for Royston as it includes, in my view unnecessarily, a 1-member ward. In my view the proposed Royston Burloes ward should be combined with the proposed Royston Heath ward or Royston Meridian ward in order to create a 3-member ward and avoid this situation. Combining Royston Burloes and Royston Meridian would appear to be the better choice given the geographical size of the various wards.

My proposal here is therefore to adopt NHC's proposal, other than to combine Royston Burloes and Royston Meridian ward to become a larger 3-member ward.

Yours faithfully,

[Submitted electronically and therefore not physically signed]

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Appendix

At the time of submitting my consultation response, NHC's consultation response does not appear to be publicly available on its website. However, I am expecting its consultation response to be based on the following. This is provided for reference; please note that, as per my earlier comments, I agree with parts of NHC's proposal, but have set out alternative proposals where I disagree with aspects of it.

NHC's proposal for rural wards, Baldock wards, Hitchin wards and Royston wards	Part of this paper submitted to NHC Full Council on 14 July 2022: https://democracy.north-herts.gov.uk/documents/s19716/Appendix%20A%20-%20Submission_MAIN_2.pdf.pdf except that the proposal in this paper was amended by Councillors to change the boundary between Hitchin Highbury and Hitchin Priory wards to comprise Queen Street and the main A602 Stevenage Road, making them both 2-member wards.
NHC's proposal for Letchworth wards	This paper submitted to NHC Full Council on 14 July 2022: https://democracy.north-herts.gov.uk/documents/s19717/Appendix%20B%20-%20Submission_Letchworth_Option_A.pdf.pdf

North Hertfordshire District Council

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Organisation Name:

Comment text:

My comments are contained in a letter, which is in the attached PDF file.

Uploaded Documents:

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