

The Secretary,
The Electoral Commission,
Trevelyan House,
Great Peter Street,
London
SW1P 2HW



26 June 2006

Future Electoral Arrangements for North Hertfordshire

Dear Sirs,

Please find below my comments concerning the above review.

1. Criteria for Carrying out a Periodic Electoral Review.

The criteria for conducting a review are either

- 30% of wards in an authority have electoral variances of more than 10% from the average

or

- any single ward has a variance of more than 30% from the average.

Clearly North Hertfordshire meets the second of these criteria in Graveley and Wymondley Ward, but is 50% below the first with only 15% of Wards currently exceeding 10% variance (including Graveley and Wymondley).

The net result of implementing the final recommendations of this review is that, based on the electorate forecast for 2008 contained in the report, North Hertfordshire will move from the current position of 4 wards out of 26 with a variance of greater than 10% from the average electorate per councillor (including 1 ward with a variance of 72%), which is 15% of the total; to a forecast position in 2008 of 3 wards out of 24 with a variance of greater than 10%, which is 12.5% of the total. This is a very small gain for the major upheaval that will be caused to large numbers of the electorate. I submit that the BCFE did not have sufficient justification for carrying out a district wide review and should have restricted themselves to reviewing Graveley and Wymondley.

2. Electoral Figures and Council Size.

The BCFE decided to only include those developments which had already been granted planning permission, in spite of representations made concerning some imminent proposals, one of which has now been received and two more are expected by September 2006. All three are, and will remain, in Letchworth East, which is recommended to reduce from having 3 councillors to 2. The application that has been received is for 250 units which equates to 450 electors. If this is taken into account the reasoning that led the BCFE to reject NHDC's proposal for 50 Councillors becomes flawed. The total number of electors would increase to 97,985. With 50 councillors this equates to 1960 electors per councillor and Letchworth would be entitled to 13.7 councillors. With 49 councillors it equates to 2000 electors per councillor and Letchworth would be entitled to 13.4 councillors. Should the review be implemented as proposed and all three developments mentioned above take place, Letchworth East will have a variance of +21% in 2008, not a very satisfactory outcome when the review is meant to improve electoral equality, not make it worse! The next review would then be faced with either trying to identify more areas to move out of the ward, or which ones to bring back to re-create the three member ward which we currently have.

Stage Three Consultation.

The response of the BCFE to representations received at stage three is inconsistent and shows that little consideration has been given to the views of the District Council whose members voted unanimously to support the Council's submission. Nor does it take account of the very real problems that will exist following the creation of a three member rural ward, which has obviously only been created to marginally improve electoral equality without any consideration being given to the problems that will be created for member support of constituents. If the creation of a three member ward to improve electoral equality for Hitchwood, Offa and Hoo is the right thing to do, why didn't the BCFE also recommend a three member ward combining Weston and Sandon with Chesfield which would significantly improve electoral equality in those two wards?

3. Community Support.

Community support is a very important part of local government and the role of Members and the local police is key. Ward policing is a key plank of government policy aimed at improving the quality of life for our communities. This is based on having identifiable Ward Constables who know their local Councillors and members of the community and work very closely with them to reduce crime and improve the quality of life for those communities. The proposed urban changes, particularly those affecting Letchworth East, Wilbury and some areas in Hitchin will result in a drop in community support. Electoral stability is a major component in creating and supporting stable communities where electors recognise and work with local members over time to develop and improve their local community. Many of the electorate being recommended for transfer from Letchworth East into Letchworth Grange and Letchworth South West were transferred from Letchworth Wilbury into Letchworth East at the last review, in 1999, and some still complain that they are not in Wilbury Ward! These proposals will have a negative effect on voter turnout at local elections.

4. Conclusions.

- a. The criteria for carrying out a full review were not met.
- b. The gain from the full review is minimal in terms of electoral equality and the same overall end result can be achieved by just creating the new Ward of Chesfield with two Councillors.
- c. A 50 member council without the full review will improve the electoral equality across the district.
- d. With current forecast and proposed developments there is a serious risk that many of the recommended changes will need to be reversed at the next review or earlier.
- e. The creation of the three member rural ward of Hitchwood, Offa and Hoo is not consistent with the failure to combine Weston & Sandon with Chesfield.
- f. Ward policing is now an effective tool that is improving communities, these recommendations will undo much of that work while Constables learn their new beat.
- g. Voter turnout at local elections will deteriorate.
- h. Having given due consideration to the above, will you therefore please just issue an Order for the creation of Chesfield Ward with two Councillors to replace the existing Graveley and Wymondley Ward.

Yours Faithfully

Michael Paterson

District Councillor, Letchworth East.