

County Durham Consultation on a pattern of divisions

The Boundary Committee for England is the body responsible for conducting electoral reviews of local authorities. The broad purpose of an electoral review is to decide on the appropriate electoral arrangements – the number of councillors and the names, number and boundaries of wards or divisions – for a specific local authority. We seek to reflect communities and provide for convenient and effective local government.

Following the creation of the County Durham unitary authority in May 2008, the Electoral Commission has directed that this review be undertaken to provide new electoral arrangements.

How to propose a pattern of divisions

The Boundary Committee is holding a consultation on the number and location of electoral divisions for the new County Durham unitary authority. Proposals for a new pattern of divisions in County Durham should be submitted to the Boundary Committee by **8 June 2009**.

A good pattern of divisions should:

- Provide good electoral variance, with all councillors representing as near as possible to the same number of electors.
- Contain considerations of community identities and include evidence of community links.
- Be based on strong, easily identifiable boundaries.
- Be supported by local residents or parish or town councils.

Electoral variance

The Boundary Committee has considered the evidence submitted on council size, and decided that the new County Durham Council should have a council size of 126.

The 2008 electorate of County Durham is 394,940. This means that each of the 126 councillors should represent 3,134 electors.

The predicted electorate for County Durham in 2013 is 401,525. This means that each councillor should represent 3,187 electors in 2013.

	2008	2013
10% fewer electors	2,821	2,868
Perfect electoral equality	3,134	3,187
10% more electors	3,448	3,505

Although we strive for perfect electoral equality, this is not always possible. We generally consider variances which are within 10% of the average to be acceptable, particularly if supported by community evidence or easily identifiable boundaries.

The electoral variance is calculated for each councillor, rather than for each division. If a division plan includes two-member divisions, then the total number of electors in the division should be divided in two in order to calculate the variance from the average.

Community evidence

The Boundary Committee looks for evidence of strong links between communities. These include things such as:

- Transport links. Are there good roads between villages? Is there any form of public transport?
- Community groups. Is there a local youth group, or another type of group which represents the area?
- Facilities. Do residents from one area use doctors, dentists, shops and leisure facilities in another area?
- Identity. Does one community identify in any other way with another community?

Easily identifiable boundaries

The Boundary Committee also looks for easily identifiable boundaries to be used where possible. These include:

- Parishes. We try to avoid dividing parishes between divisions, and often use parish boundaries as a basis for division boundaries.
- Natural features. Rivers, woodland, valleys and raised ground often provide strong and recognisable boundaries.
- Man-made features. Major roads and railway lines can also provide strong boundaries.

Advice on submitting a proposal

- Each division has a knock-on effect on other divisions around it. Sometimes a proposed division in one area can create problems in a neighbouring area.
- Provide evidence of community identities and links between different communities. Use evidence rather than assertion.
- Use strong and easily identifiable boundaries, such as existing parish boundaries.
- Talk to local residents, councillors and parish or town councils about community identity and community representation.
- Be clear, and use the maps and the electorate figures on our website to help you.

To submit a pattern of divisions or further information contact Jessica Metherringham, who is the review officer for County Durham, by 8 June 2009.

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Process of the review

Before the review starts

The Boundary Committee meet Chief Officers, Members and Parish Councils. We request electorate data and 5-year electoral forecasts, which will be available on our website.

Stages One and Two

We hold a consultation on council size. We evaluate all representations made to us and propose an appropriate number of councillors.

Stage Three

During this consultation period we invite submissions and division schemes. These could be division patterns for the whole authority, or a suggestion for just one town or village. We welcome views from councillors, political parties, parish or town councils and local residents.

Stage Four

We formulate our draft recommendations.

Stage Five

We publish our draft recommendations and send copies to the council and libraries. In this consultation period everyone who wrote in is informed and invited to comment.

Stage Six

We formulate final recommendations, which may be different from the draft recommendations.

Final recommendations

We publish our recommendations and submit them to the Electoral Commission. There is a six-week period for further representations to the Electoral Commission. At this point persuasive new evidence is needed to modify recommendations.