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1. **Background**

- 1.1 In December 2007, the Government accepted the County Council's proposal for a future unitary local government structure for County Durham. The County Durham (Structural Change) Order 2008 implemented that proposal with affect from 1 April, 2009 by providing that, as from that date, the County Council would be the sole principal local authority for County Durham.
- 1.2 The Council acknowledged that the Electoral Commission would need to determine an appropriate level of future representation in the County as well as review the electoral pattern. However, in the expectation that the Commission might not be in a position to complete such a review before the new unitary authority was established, it was suggested that the new Council could operate on the basis of two Councillors for each existing County Electoral Division. This provided for a phased transition based upon a geography which electors had generally become familiar with since the last major reorganisation in 1974. (Paragraph 3.3 also refers).
- 1.3 On 17 January 2008, the Electoral Commission formally directed the Boundary Committee for England to undertake an electoral review of the proposed new unitary authority and the Committee announced the start of that review on 15 July, 2008.
- 1.4 Stage 1 of the review invited submissions of views on what might be the most appropriate number of Councillors for the unitary authority.
- 1.5 Reproduced in Appendix 1 are both the Council's initial and additional submissions to the Committee in response to Stage 1 of the review.
- 1.6 On 4 March, 2009 the Boundary Committee announced that, having consulted on the proposed Council size for the new Council, it was minded that it should consist of 126 elected members. (NB: Stage 2 in the review was the Committee's consideration and response to the Stage 1 consultation).
- 1.7 On 17 March, 2009 the Committee announced the start of Stage 3 of the review to consult on a new electoral pattern for the Council, i.e. the areas within the County which Councillors would represent.
- 1.8 The Council's response to that consultation was submitted to the Boundary Committee in June 2009.

2. **Profile of County Durham**

- 2.1 The transition to unitary local government establishes a very large council, both in terms of electorate/population and area.
- 2.2 County Durham covers an area of 222, 600 hectares and has a unique settlement pattern, unlike any other shire. From a population and electorate of 500,096 and 394,940 respectively in 2008, there are in total 264 identifiable settlements of very variable size in the County.
- 2.3 Many parts of the County have high levels of deprivation. Approximately 45% of the population live in areas which are judged amongst the 30 % most deprived nationally.
- 2.4 Devising new electoral arrangements which will effectively represent this settlement pattern and socio-economic conditions presents a real challenge.

3. **Current Electoral Arrangements**

- 3.1 The County Council's Electoral Divisions were last reviewed in 2000 by the former Local Government Commission for England (LGCE). At that time, the Secretary of State decided not to implement the LGCE recommendations immediately and responsibility for this subsequently passed to the Electoral Commission. In early 2005 the Commission decided to accept these recommendations, with minor modifications, and the current electoral arrangements first applied at the County Council elections held in May that year.
- 3.2 The Statutory Order (County Durham [Electoral Changes] Order 2005) which implemented the Commission's recommendations prescribed the current 63 Electoral Divisions with at that time single councillor representation.
- 3.3 The County Durham (Structural Change) Order 2008 established a single tier of local government for County Durham and for the May 2008 elections which followed replaced a single councillor return for each Division with two councillors.
- 3.4 In June, 2008 the County electorate was 394,940. This resulted in an average electorate per two councillor Division of 6,268.
- 3.5 A summary of the percentage variations (plus or minus) across the 63 Divisions from this 2008 County average is set out below:

Less than 10% variance	-	33
Between 10% and 20% variance	-	23
Between 20% and 30% variance	-	6
Between 30% and 40% variance	-	<u>1</u>
		<u>63</u>

4. **Approach**

- 4.1 The Council's response to this Stage of the review has again been managed by a Working Group of Elected Members who not only represent all Party Groups but also the geography of the County as a whole.
- 4.2 The Working Group began its deliberations by consulting with Member colleagues to form a view on how many councillors should represent Electoral Divisions, i.e., single or multi-member divisions, or a combination of the two.
- 4.3 Following these consultations, the Working Group concluded that the present arrangements whereby each area is represented by two councillors should as far as possible be retained. However, the Group also recognised that there might be justification in certain circumstances for an area to be represented by one or even three councillors. The Group believed that in terms of stability/continuity, effectively representing the interests of the local community and supporting and sharing the resultant workload for councillors, this arrangement offered the best solution. (See also submission on council size in Appendix 1 for further analysis of councillor roles and workloads).
- 4.4 The Council has subsequently endorsed this viewpoint.
- 4.5 Thereafter, the Group turned its attention to the question of the Council's new electoral pattern.
- 4.6 Equalising the number of electors represented by each councillor is the single most important factor to be taken into account; something which can be measured objectively. By contrast, the other two main factors – reflection of community identity and convenient and effective local government - are more subjective. The Boundary Committee itself recognises that it will never be possible to achieve absolute electoral equality across the whole of the local authority area. The geography of the area, or the pattern and size of communities within it, can result in variations from one area to another. However, the Committee takes the view that it should at least start by trying to achieve as good a level of electoral equality as possible and only then adjust to reflect other factors such as community identity.
- 4.7 This is the approach which the Council has followed in developing its submission. The submission addresses representation across the whole of the County. We have had to work within a very diverse and unique settlement pattern. There has been no automatic presumption towards retaining existing Divisions – but many of these have been based around villages and neighbourhoods which accurately reflect community identities.

- 4.8 Many of the current high variances away from the County average electorate are due to the constraints of the former Borough/District Council boundaries. The removal of this restriction has been used to advantage in a number of the Council's proposals. However, in some cases the Council believes that higher than optimum variances away from the County average electorate could be justified on communities of interest and settlement basis.
- 4.9 The Council recognises that its Parishes are the building blocks of its Electoral Divisions and dividing Parishes between Divisions should if possible be avoided. But sometimes, to secure electoral equality, this is unavoidable or even desirable to achieve that prime objective.
- 4.10 Similarly, whilst the Council in developing its proposals has been mindful of both its own new Area Action Partnership boundaries and the boundaries of its six Parliamentary Constituencies, of first concern has been electoral equality across the County as a whole.
- 4.11 We have tried to avoid wherever possible dividing recognised local communities between Divisions. At the same time, we do not consider that uniting two separate villages or settlements in the same Division necessarily requires evidence of community links if the end result is good electoral equality.

5. **Consultation**

- 5.1 The Boundary Committee itself has publicised this Stage in the review and the Council has supported that process. Key stakeholders such as our own Parish and Town Councils, political parties, MPs and Fire and Rescue and Police Authorities have been consulted directly by the Committee.
- 5.2 Ideally, the Council would have wished to publicise its own proposals and engage in a consultation process with all key stakeholders prior to this submission. Due to time constraints and the scale of the exercise this unfortunately has been impractical. However, Members have been encouraged throughout the process to engage in as much local consultation as possible and all interested parties and individuals who have contacted the Council have been encouraged to submit their own views to the Boundary Committee.

6. **Proposed Electoral Arrangements**

- 6.1 Set out in Appendix 2 is the Council's response to the Boundary Committee's recommendations.
- 6.2 Although this has been a County-wide review, the proposals are presented as a reflection of the detailed deliberations within the Working Group, the importance of local knowledge and the demands of managing the exercise as a whole.

- 6.3 The proposals provide for 65/66 Electoral Divisions, with a total of 126 councillors.
- 6.4 The Council meeting held on 18 November, 2009 agreed its response to the Boundary Committee's recommendations. In addition, it is understood that individual Party Groups or individual Members of the Council will be making their own representations or submissions to the Committee on at least some Divisions.
- 6.5 The electorate figures used in Appendix 2 are those which applied in June 2008, together with projections for 2013. The methodology used to project the future electorate is a combination of nine years of trend data, together with committed housing development and clearance. The existing 2008 electorates and the 2013 projections were supplied to the Boundary Committee at the beginning of the review as the basis for all subsequent development work.
- 6.6 The figures in brackets in Appendix 2 denote variances in the proposals from the County average electorate, based as follows:-

	2008	2013
One Councillor Division	3134	3187
Two Councillor Division	6268	6374
Three Councillor Division	9402	9561

- 6.7 The Council commends these proposals to the Boundary Committee.
- 6.8 Detailed large scale maps delineating the proposals accompany this submission.