

Mole Valley District Council

Electoral Review

Stage Two – Initial Consultation Response

Note:

This submission was prepared by a Cabinet Working Group, comprising of five councillors (3 Liberal Democrats, 1 Conservative, 1 Independent).

In drafting the response the Working Group considered the criteria set out by the LGBCE and identified a number of options for potential warding patterns.

These findings were presented to all members at a seminar and the feedback received has been included in this response.

The response was considered by Cabinet, who in turn recommended its submission to Council.

Council met to approve the submission on 22nd November 2021.

Methodology

As the Council elects by thirds, the Working Group sought in the first instance to identify a pattern of three-councillor wards which meets the Local Government Boundary Commission (LGBCE) criteria of electoral equality, community identity, and effective and convenient local government.

It was noted that, if a suitable pattern of three-member wards could not be found, the Working Group could propose a pattern including one or two member wards where there was evidence that these would provide a better fit to the LGBCE criteria.

Based on the recommended council size of 39, and the forecast electorate for 2027 of 75,731 (based on population projections which include the effects of housing developments in the district), the target average electorate per councillor is 1942. The LGBCE will allow a variance of up to +/-10% from the target ratio:

	-10%	Target ratio	+ 10%
1 councillor	1748	1942	2136
3 member ward	5243	5826	6408

In approaching the review of boundaries, Members of the Working Group were keen to recognise the marked urban/rural split of the District.

To meet these criteria the warding pattern would require a reduction in the number of wards from the existing 21 to 13. It was acknowledged that current boundaries would be required to change with the majority of wards merging into larger areas. This is particularly prevalent in the southern rural areas.

The initial area identification recognised that the split between the “urban North” (i.e. Bookham, Fetcham, Leatherhead and Ashtead) and the rest of the District was based on 3 factors:

- the urban/rural distinction
- the close numerical match of the urban North to seven 3 x member wards;
- the impact of parished areas on the flexibility to extend much of the urban Northern area

Having identified the North / South division, the Working Group identified three distinct areas within the District.

- Ashtead and Leatherhead
- Bookham and Fetcham
- Dorking and the Rural Villages

The Working Group considered a range of warding options and discussed how each met the LGBCE criteria and developed options to present to all members.

Whilst it was evident that a warding pattern of 13 wards, each with three members was technically possible and would meet the electoral equality criteria, there was strong agreement that it did not 'reflect the interest or identities of local communities' and would not encourage 'effective and convenient local government' due to the scale of the rural areas in three member wards.

This was echoed by all members in attendance at the seminar, which also confirmed that there was no clear consensus on a warding pattern for the District of Mole Valley.

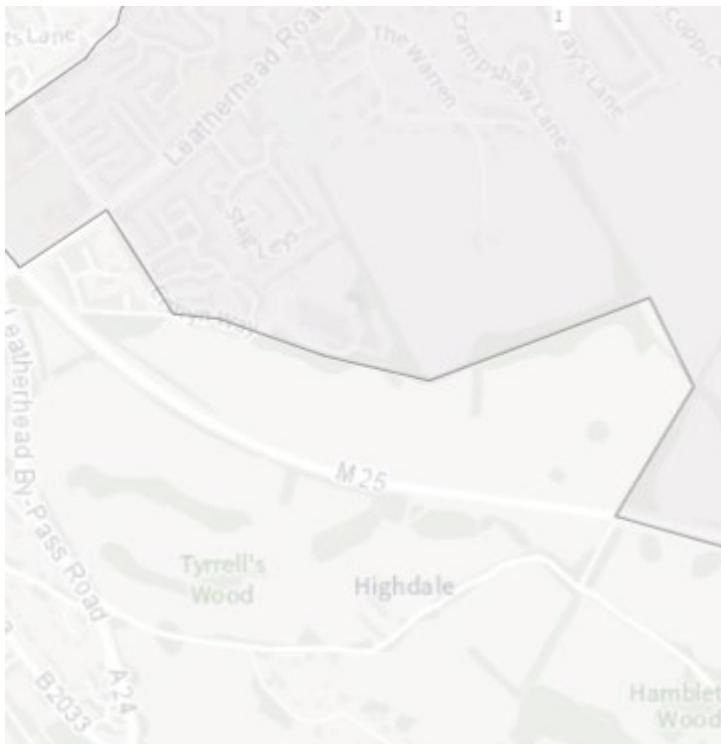
This consultation response therefore focuses on community identity of the District, looking to demonstrate areas where there is strong community cohesion which it would be detrimental to split and the strengths and weaknesses of different warding considerations in other areas.

Ashtead and Leatherhead

Ashtead currently comprises three wards with seven members and the proposal sees this reduce to two wards with six councillors.

Consideration was given as to the impact of moving the area around Ermyrn Way (figure 1), where significant development is proposed, from Ashtead into Leatherhead, to create greater electoral equality.

Figure 1



Whilst these properties have Leatherhead addresses the councillors from both Leatherhead and Ashtead saw the M25 as a firm boundary. Additionally, the area in

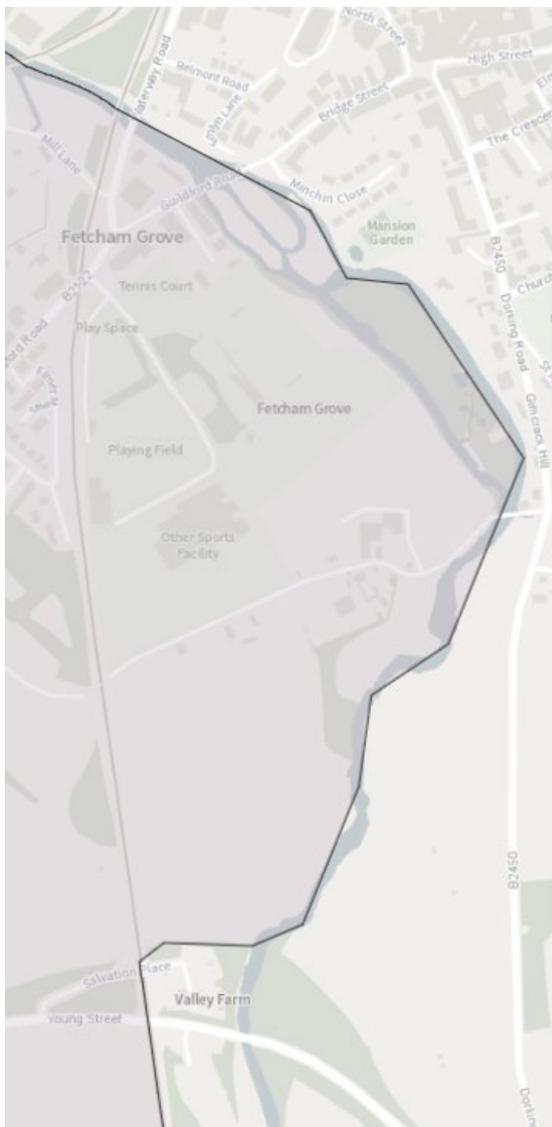
question forms part of the Ashted Neighbourhood Development Plan and would be seen to cut across a number of Ashted community links.

Whilst the variance numbers for Ashted as a whole are towards the upper limit (approx. 9%), resulting in a higher member to elector ratio, it was considered that this was preferable in order to maintain the community identity of the area.

Moving to Leatherhead, this is an area within the District where substantial growth is forecast; however, without crossing the natural boundary created by the M25, the anticipated electoral figures are lower than average.

There is significant development planned in Leatherhead in the coming years with a large proportion of this focused around the town centre. There was agreement that ideally the new development would be split between the wards, but there was no clear consensus where such a line could be drawn to meet the criteria.

Figure 2



Some councillors suggested that an alternative way of increasing elector equality within a ward could be to add the parish of Headley, which shares a border with the south of Leatherhead. It was however recognised that this would be a contentious issue with the communities of Headley, which sees itself as having much greater synergies with the rural communities it abuts to the south and west, and Box Hill which sees Headley as its natural closest community

Bookham and Fetcham

The villages of Bookham and Fetcham present their own challenges. Currently both villages consist of two wards, with Bookham having six members and Fetcham having four.

The Lower Road, which runs through both areas, provides a clear boundary between Bookham North and South.

Based on the projected number of electors for this area, electoral equality would require the total number of members to reduce from ten to nine. This suggests a new pattern of three wards, with three members each.

Two main options were considered for subdividing this area.

The first option looked to merge the existing Fetcham wards to create one three member ward and to maintain a north / south split of Bookham, with the eastern border moving down Lower Road to find an equitable electoral balance.

Whilst this was seen as the most natural evolution of the current wards, as it maintained the strong boundary (Lower Road) between Bookham North and Bookham South, it was noted that extending the Bookham wards east into Fetcham, divided part of the community within Fetcham.

To reach the minimum target ratio, Bookham South, which is currently well below, would need to extend to the Ridgeway. Concerns were raised about creating a boundary down the middle of The Ridgeway as this was very much seen by the local community as part of Fetcham, as were Church Close and the surrounding streets. This area, together with the retail area of Fetcham, is regarded as part of the historic village of Fetcham with strong community cohesion.

It was agreed that there was greater flexibility over the Fetcham boundary with Bookham North, with properties to the north of the railway line close to Bookham Common potentially being split from historic Fetcham as the sense of community between these areas was not felt to be as evident. Areas such as the Glade, much of Kennel Lane, and possibly Ashwood Park, off the Lower Road, which naturally see themselves as part of Fetcham, might also need to sit with properties in Bookham North in order to secure electoral equality.

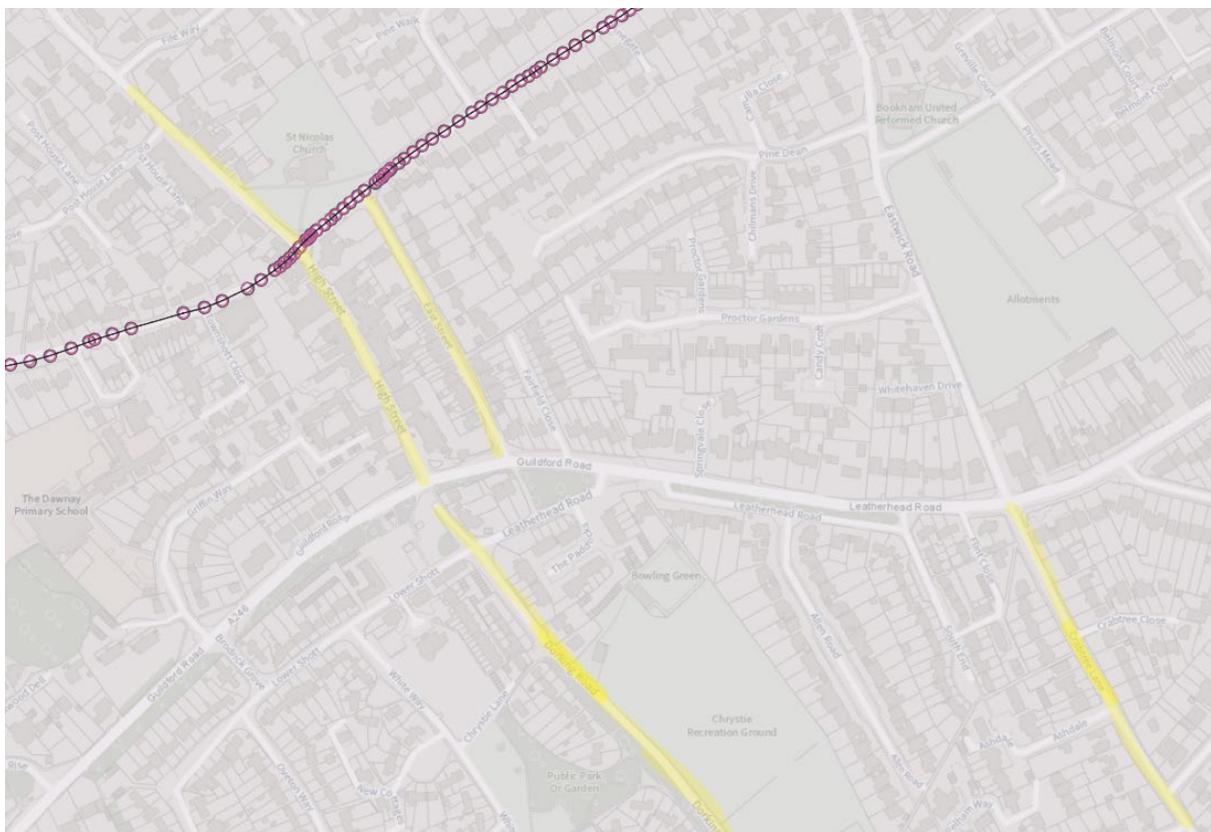
The second option considered also merged the two current Fetcham wards, but split Bookham creating two wards, East and West.

A Bookham West ward would largely cover the historic villages of Great and Little Bookham (collectively known as The Bookhams), whilst the Bookham East ward would include the historic Eastwick Park area which gives its name to a number of roads, a school and a GP surgery.

A Bookham East ward would bring residents transferred from Fetcham closer to the centre of their new ward, potentially giving them more local representation. It would also allow a more flexible approach to the Fetcham / Bookham boundary in order to reflect existing community ties. Some councillors advised that electors in the area of Eastwick Park, saw themselves very much as part of Bookham, not as a separate community and would not wish to see the community split.

However, there is no clear boundary between the Bookham wards comparable to the Lower Road. The most obvious roads for consideration are Church Road in the North down to Bookham High Street, or possibly East Street, which would be retained within Bookham West, and then down either Dorking Road (which would make the Bookham West ward too small) or along the A246 to Crabtree Lane (which would make the Bookham East ward too small). See Figure 3.

Figure 3



Having considered both options, the councillors were unable to agree on a preferred option, as there were notable strengths and weaknesses to both.

Councillors also noted the potential to move the Fetcham / Leatherhead boundary as identified in figure 2 to include the Fetcham Grove area. Concerns were raised by some members that the residents in the area identified associated more closely with the Leatherhead wards and did not see themselves as Fetcham. There was a preference for the boundary to stay as it was, if this reduced the need to move the boundary on the western side of Fetcham.

Dorking and the Rural Villages

The southern wards proved significantly more challenging and were approached using the parish ward boundaries (where applicable) and the market town of Dorking as building blocks.

It was acknowledged that if needed, parish council areas could be split to create parish wards. However, guidance from the LGBCE was that parish wards needed to comprise at least 100 electors to be considered viable. Where areas were identified for potential parish wards, they were not viable due to the low number of electors in the ward. This means that many ward boundaries cannot be adjusted to secure equal sized wards, and a building blocks approach must be used.

Geographically there is a significant area to cover given the distances between the village hubs. Additionally, whilst the centre of a rural village was easy to identify, this became more challenging as where one community is perceived to end and another begins is more difficult to delineate.

It was felt that rural Mole Valley was easier to navigate by road when travelling from north to south as opposed to journeys going from east to west.

Dorking

Dorking is currently represented by five councillors, across two wards (North and South).

Dorking councillors felt that there was a clear separation between the current North and South wards, with the High Street / West Street / A25 acting as a natural boundary.

Dorking North was seen to be slightly more urban and compact, with greater open green spaces in the southern ward, which flowed naturally into the rural villages at the south of the district.

Councillors discussed possible extensions to the Dorking ward boundaries and whilst there was no agreed consensus, comments included;

- Rough Rew and Goodwyns could sit with Dorking or the Holmwoods but should not be split
- The A24 represented a natural boundary between Dorking and Holmwoods
- The current north-south split was preferable to the alternative potential geographic orientations
- Pixham was seen to be a separate community to Dorking
- It is possible to mix representation from more urban areas and more rural areas for example the current Holmwoods ward
- Local councillors feel the existing boundaries for Dorking North and South should, in the main, remain as they are. However, it was also suggested that the ward boundaries could be adjusted to incorporate electors from Mickleham, Pixham and Westhumble into Dorking North to ensure electoral equality.

Mickleham, Westhumble and Pixham

The majority of councillors expressed a preference to see the villages of Mickleham, Westhumble and Pixham remain grouped together, but stronger links were emphasised between Mickleham and Westhumble, supporting a view that these two communities should remain together. Both villages see themselves as rural and have greater synergies and linkages with the rural villages around them; there was no evident natural community fit with Dorking.

With reference to the community of Pixham, there was no clear consensus on revised warding proposals; suggestions from both councillors and Pixham Residents' Association indicated possible inclusion in either (a) a revised configuration for Dorking or (b) one of the wards located in the rural area.

It was felt that combining the current ward westerly with Leith Hill would create a ward which would prove geographically challenging for councillors to cover effectively due to the length of the ward (given the need to respect the Abinger Parish boundaries).

Box Hill and Headley

These villages are combined within one ward, represented by one ward councillor.

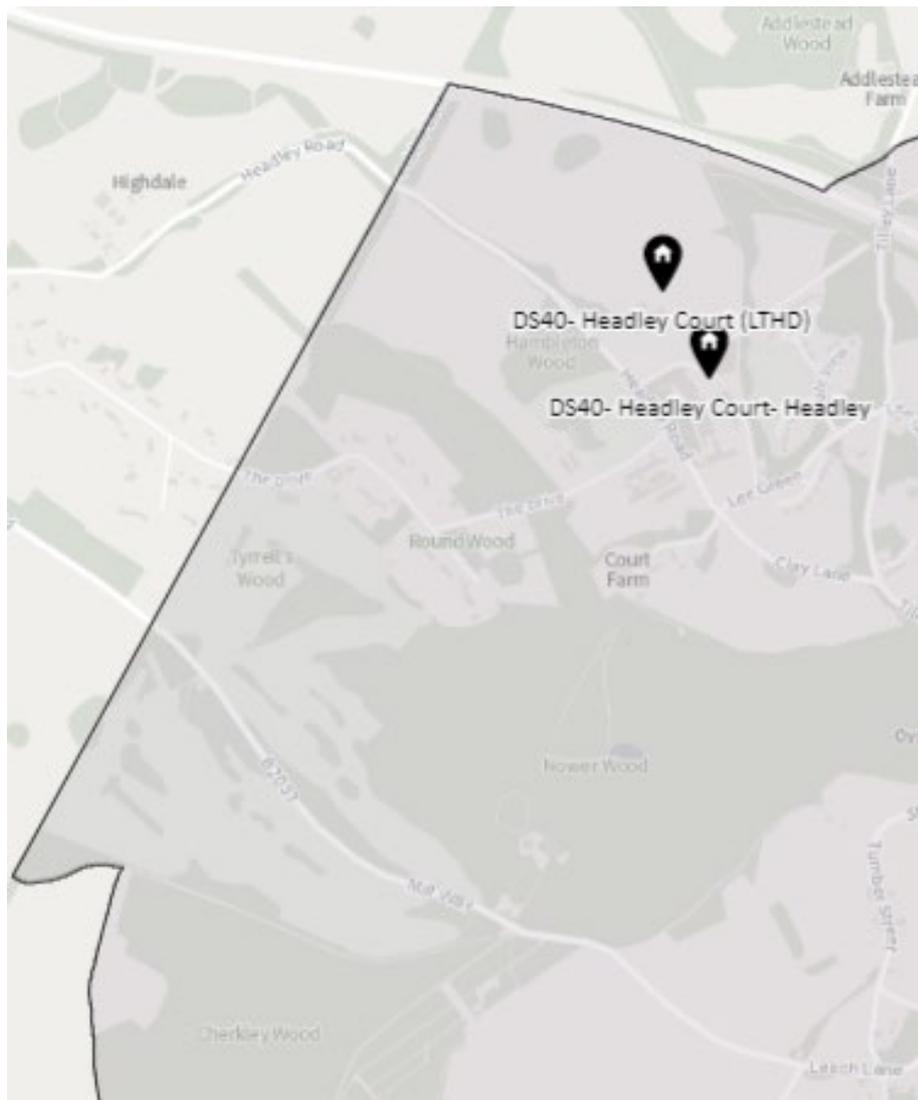
Whilst Headley is parished, Box Hill has a very effective Neighbourhood Council and there are strong community ties between the two which regard themselves as a linked community.

The villages share many of the same characteristics such as their geographical placement at the top of the North Downs, a shared Church of England parish (recently linked with Walton-on-the-Hill), Green Belt/Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty status, poor transport sustainability (narrow roads, limited bus service), conservation land-owners (National Trust, Wildlife Trust, Woodland Trust).

To the north, Headley shares a boundary with Leatherhead South (XC polling district) and new housing developments proposed at the Headley Court site would straddle the current ward boundary.

There was strong support to adjust this boundary to ensure that all of the new development was placed within a ward covering the village of Headley (Figure 4).

Figure 4



Whilst some councillors from the northern wards felt that there could be an argument for Headley electors to form a ward with South Leatherhead, this proposal was not supported by the councillors representing the southern wards. It was considered that Headley was a rural village with far greater community interests with Box Hill.

Betchworth, Brockham and Buckland

There was strong agreement that these three villages, currently one ward, served by two councillors, needed to stay together. Whilst they operate as three separate Parish Councils, they work closely to deliver a number of shared local initiatives and consultations. For example; A25 speed limits and improvements; historically the three churches have been linked; the villages share schools with children moving each year between sites at Brockham, Betchworth and Leigh. The Brockham Bonfire is currently a major event in the calendar and is supported by volunteers from the three villages. In addition to this, BERT (Brockham Emergency Response Team) supports residents in all three villages in relation to a number of issues (for example during the pandemic, and flooding to local roads and properties), thereby bolstering

community resilience in times of need. This has created strong ties between the two villages.

Charlwood (including Hookwood)

Charlwood, which includes Hookwood, is a fully parished ward, currently represented by one councillor. This ward sits in the bottom corner of the District and shares a boundary only with Newdigate, giving it limited options in terms of merging with other areas. It was noted that given its proximity to Gatwick Airport, it has a very different sense of place to the areas surrounding it and has greater links with the towns and villages outside the District boundary.

For these reasons, it was felt there was an argument for the ward to remain as a single member ward (the 2027 electorate figure would result in a 2% variance).

Holmwoods and Beare Green

The current Holmwoods ward is served by three councillors, and is recognised as having three distinct, but well integrated areas; the north, mid and south. Holmwood Parish Council covers Mid and South Holmwood.

As it stands the projected electoral forecast for the ward is too low (-12% variance). To offset this the boundary of the Holmwoods could be moved upwards or downwards.

The boundary between Holmwoods and Dorking South could be reviewed to bring additional electors into the Holmwoods to bring the ward up to a tolerable variance for a three-member ward.

Alternatively, the Holmwoods could join with the village of Beare Green (currently a single member ward). In terms of linkages these communities arguably have the greatest synergies. For example the train station is located in Beare Green but is called Holmwoods and both villages are located on the A24. Furthermore, Beare Green shares a church parish with South Holmwood. It is considered that they could lend themselves to a cohesive three member ward if part of the northern area of Holmwoods was included within the Dorking South ward taking the A24 as the boundary.

The current Beare Green ward mirrors the Capel (Beare Green) parish ward boundary. Beare Green contains a number of smaller communities, the largest of these being the village, the historic village green and the park home sites. It is felt that the village has a strong sense of place, despite a lack of traditional community amenities within the village itself.

It is also suggested that the community of Beare Green could sit well with Capel and the Holmwoods. However, the village has little connection to the Surrey Hills area to the west of the District as the railway line is regarded as a geographical boundary due to limited crossing points.

Extending the Holmwoods ward to include Beare Green and/or Capel would require it to give up some of its urban estates to Dorking South. However, some councillors felt that this would be detrimental to Dorking South ward as it would then create an

electoral imbalance within Dorking and there was no clear boundary line through the town to achieve this.

Westcott

The village of Westcott is currently served by one councillor. Whilst geographically it could be joined to Dorking North to create a three-member ward, there was general agreement that joining the village and town would limit community cohesion, given the very different needs and issues of the two communities.

For example, the Westcott Neighbourhood Development Plan specifically seeks to prevent community merger with Dorking. It was felt that Westcott has much stronger affiliations with the rural wards which surround it to the north, south and west.

Capel, Leigh and Newdigate, Okewood, Leith Hill.

Capel, Leigh and Newdigate currently comprise one District ward with two elected members.

Capel and Ockley (which is part of the current Okewood Ward) churches share a vicar and are located within a church parish and both villages share Ockley train station which provides a link between the two villages, with both sharing concerns about the lack of footpath from either village along Coles Lane which links them and the station.

Ockley is a traditional rural village with a parish council, centred around its cricket pavilion and the one remaining pub. It has a small but tight community who join together to put on local activities. The majority of Ockley residents are registered at the doctors' surgery based in Capel.

Abinger and Wotton (both within the current Leith Hill, one member ward) have strong ties given the parish links with similar settlements placed throughout the rural west side of the district and therefore share similar characteristics, leading to a shared community interest. Coldharbour (part of the district ward of Leith Hill, but a parish ward of Capel Parish Council) has strong synergies with Abinger and Wotton. The three villages all form part of the Leith Hill benefice of churches which also includes Holmbury St Mary (situated just across the border in the borough of Guildford), again demonstrating its closer affinity with the villages to the west, over Beare Green which lies to the east.

Overall, it is acknowledged that the configuration of wards in the south of the District is particularly complicated due to the size, geographical characteristics and wider distribution of electors. Alternative warding options, which deviate from the proposed three-member warding pattern may need to be considered to ensure effective and convenient local government is achieved from electors in this part of the District. It was noted that east – west transport links across these wards are less well developed than north – south transport links which could impact on the potential effectiveness of councillors to represent villages as a single ward.

Other Considerations

Deviation away from three-member warding pattern

It was acknowledged that the creation of a small number of one or two member wards in the rural area could overcome some of the issues with regard to 'effective and convenient local government'. However, there was no clear consensus as to which ward/s this could best apply to and it was identified that the argument could equally be applied for the majority of the appropriately sized village communities.

The Working Group considered two criteria that might justify having a lower elector to councillor ratio; these were the geographic size of the area (and quality of connecting road networks) and the presence of significant areas of deprivation which tends to require more casework. The lower elector to councillor ratio would enable members to represent their residents more effectively.

Concerns were raised that the size of required three member-wards in the rural areas would be an unattractive proposition for attracting new councillors to stand in these wards, given the large geographical area to be covered, with no simple vehicle route, poor public transportation links, streetlights or natural connection across the land.