

Final recommendations on the future electoral arrangements for Castle Morpeth in Northumberland

Further electoral review

August 2006

Translations and other formats

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What is the Boundary Committee for England?

The Boundary Committee for England is a committee of the Electoral Commission, an independent body set up by Parliament under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000. It is responsible for conducting reviews as directed by the Electoral Commission or the Secretary of State.

Members of the Committee are:

Pamela Gordon (Chair)
Robin Gray
Joan Jones CBE
Ann M. Kelly
Professor Colin Mellors

Director:

Archie Gall

When conducting reviews our aim is to ensure that the number of electors represented by each councillor in an area is as nearly as possible the same, taking into account local circumstances. We can recommend changes to ward boundaries, the number of councillors and ward names. We can also recommend changes to the electoral arrangements of parish and town councils.

Executive summary

The Boundary Committee for England is the body responsible for conducting electoral reviews of local authorities. A further electoral review of Castle Morpeth is being undertaken to provide improved levels of electoral equality across the borough. It aims to ensure that the number of voters represented by each borough councillor is approximately the same. The Electoral Commission directed the Boundary Committee to undertake this review on 12 May 2005.

Current electoral arrangements

Under the existing arrangements, eight wards currently have electoral variances of more than 10% from the borough average and Hebron, Hepscoth & Mitford ward contains 32% more electors than the borough average. Development across the borough has been intermittent.

Every review is conducted in four stages:

Stage	Stage starts	Description
One	21 June 2005	Submission of proposals to us
Two	13 September 2005	Our analysis and deliberation
Three	17 January 2006	Publication of draft recommendations and consultation on them
Four	11 April 2006	Analysis of submissions received and formulation of final recommendations

Draft recommendations

In view of the lack of evidence in support of the proposals submitted, we put forward our own proposals which provided good electoral equality and, where possible, reflected any community identity argument received. We retained just one existing ward and put forward new warding arrangements for the parishes of Hepscoth, Morpeth, Ponteland and Wallington Demesne. We proposed six single-member, six two-member and five three-member wards.

Responses to consultation

At Stage Three we received 32 submissions. The Council put forward comments for the district, including comments from the Conservative and Labour groups. We received objections to our proposals for the Ulgham, Pegswood & Hebron and Hartburn wards. We also received objections to our proposals for Ponteland and proposals for the Hepscoth and Thirston parish areas. We received a submission supporting our proposed Lynemouth & Ellington ward and another supporting our proposal for Capheaton parish.

Analysis and final recommendations

Electorate figures

At Stage One, after several revisions, the Council submitted electorate projections of 14%. We considered this very high and therefore re-examined its projections. Following consideration, we decided to revise its projections to only include only those areas actually granted planning permission. However, this gave a projected growth of 12% by 2009, which we still considered high, however, and we based our draft recommendations on these figures. We received no further comments on the figures at Stage Three, and are confirming them as final.

Council size

We received one comment on council size at Stage Three. However, it provided insufficient evidence and we were not persuaded to move away from our draft recommendations and are confirming a council size of 33 as final.

General analysis

We propose broadly confirming our draft recommendations as final, subject to a number of amendments to reflect the community identity evidence received. We are reverting back to a modified version of the existing arrangements in Ponteland and propose a minor amendment to our draft recommendations in Morpeth. In the north area we propose transferring Widdrington parish back to Ulgham ward and we propose transferring Meldon parish back to Hartburn ward.

In the remainder of the borough we are confirming our draft recommendations as final.

What happens next?

All further correspondence on these final recommendations and the matters discussed in this report should be sent to the Electoral Commission through the contact details below. The Commission will not make an Order implementing them before 26 September 2006. The information in the representations will be available for public access once the Order has been made.

**The Secretary
The Electoral Commission
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Great Peter Street
London SW1P 2HW**

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Email: implementation@electoralcommission.org.uk

The contact details above should only be used for implementation purposes.

The full report is available to download at www.boundarycommittee.org.uk.

Table 1: Final recommendations: Summary

Ward name	Number of councillors	Constituent areas
1 Chevington	2	(unchanged) The existing Chevington ward (the parish of East Chevington: West Chevington parish ward of Tritlington & West Chevington parish)
2 Hartburn	1	Part of the existing Hartburn ward (the parishes of Netherwitton, Hartburn, Meldon, Wallington Demesne and Belsay)
3 Heddon-on-the-Wall	1	(unchanged) The existing Heddon-on-the-Wall ward (the parish of Heddon-on-the-Wall)
4 Longhorsley	1	Part of the existing Longhorsley ward (the parishes of Thirston and Longhorsley)
5 Lynemouth & Ellington	3	The existing Ellington ward (the parishes of Ellington & Linton and Cresswell); Lynemouth ward (the parish of Lynemouth)
6 Morpeth Kirkehill	2	Part of the existing Morpeth Kirkehill ward; part of the existing Morpeth South ward
7 Morpeth North Central	3	The existing Morpeth North ward; part of the existing Morpeth Central ward
8 Morpeth South	2	Part of the existing Morpeth Central ward; part of the existing Morpeth South ward; part of the existing Morpeth Stobhill ward
9 Morpeth Stobhill	2	Part of the existing Hebron, Hepscott & Mitford ward; part of the existing Morpeth Stobhill ward (the proposed Morpeth Stobhill Manor parish ward of Hepscott parish)
10 Pegswood & Hebron	3	The existing Pegswood ward; part of the existing Hebron, Hepscott & Mitford ward (the parish of Hebron), part of the existing Longhorsley ward (Tritlington parish ward of Tritlington and West Chevington parish)
11 Ponteland North	2	Part of the existing Ponteland East ward; part of the existing Ponteland North ward; part of the existing Ponteland West ward
12 Ponteland North East	2	Part of the existing Ponteland East ward; part of the existing Ponteland North ward

Table 1 (continued): Final recommendations: Summary

Ward name	Number of councillors	Constituent areas
13 Ponteland South	2	Part of the existing Ponteland South ward; part of the existing Ponteland East ward; part of the existing Ponteland West ward
14 Ponteland West	2	Part of the existing Ponteland North ward; part of the existing Ponteland West ward
15 Stamfordham	1	The existing Stamfordham ward; part of the existing Hartburn ward (the parish of Capheaton)
16 Stannington & Mitford	2	The existing Stannington ward; part of the existing Hebron, Hepscott & Mitford ward (the parish of Mitford, and the proposed Hepscott Manor parish ward of Hepscott parish)
17 Ulgham	2	(unchanged) The existing Ulgham ward (the parishes of Ulgham, Widdrington Station & Stobswood and Widdrington Village)

Notes

- 1 The whole borough is parished and comprises 28 parishes.
- 2 The maps accompanying this report illustrate the proposed wards outlined above.
- 3 We have made a number of minor boundary amendments to ensure that existing ward boundaries adhere to ground detail. These changes do not affect any electors.

Table 2: Final recommendations for Castle Morpeth borough

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2004)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %	Electorate (2009)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
1	Chevington	2	1,799	900	-24	2,254	1,127	-14
2	Hartburn	1	1,239	1,239	5	1,498	1,498	14
3	Heddon-on-the-Wall	1	1,273	1,273	8	1,402	1,402	6
4	Longhorsley	1	1,134	1,134	-4	1,316	1,316	0
5	Lynemouth & Ellington	3	3,644	1,215	3	3,993	1,331	1
6	Morpeth Kirkhill	2	2,585	1,293	10	2,764	1,382	5
7	Morpeth North Central	3	3,993	1,331	13	4,216	1,405	7
8	Morpeth South	2	2,211	1,106	-6	2,648	1,324	1
9	Morpeth Stobhill	2	2,641	1,321	12	2,834	1,417	8
10	Pegswood & Hebron	3	3,319	1,106	-6	3,712	1,237	-6

Table 2 (continued): Final recommendations for Castle Morpeth borough

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2004)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %	Electorate (2009)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
11	Ponteland East	2	2,310	1,155	-2	2,534	1,267	-4
12	Ponteland North	2	2,221	1,111	-6	2,467	1,234	-6
13	Ponteland South	2	2,324	1,162	-1	2,496	1,248	-5
14	Ponteland West	2	2,261	1,131	-4	2,516	1,258	-4
15	Stamfordham	1	1,230	1,230	4	1,334	1,334	1
16	Stannington & Mitford	2	2,324	1,162	-1	2,540	1,270	-4
17	Ulgham	2	2,370	1,185	1	2,927	1,464	11
	Totals	33	38,870	-	-	43,451	-	-
	Averages	-	-	1,178	-	-	1,317	-

1 Introduction

1 This report contains our final recommendations for the electoral arrangements for the borough of Castle Morpeth.

2 At its meeting on 12 February 2004 the Electoral Commission agreed that the Boundary Committee should make on-going assessments of electoral variances in all local authorities where the five-year forecast period following a periodic electoral review (PER) has elapsed. More specifically, it was agreed that there should be closer scrutiny where either:

- 30% of wards in an authority had electoral variances of over 10% from the average, or
- any single ward had a variance of more than 30% from the average

3 The intention of such scrutiny was to establish the reasons behind the continuing imbalances, to consider likely future trends, and to assess what action, if any, was appropriate to rectify the situation.

4 This is our first review of the electoral arrangements of Castle Morpeth. Castle Morpeth's last review was carried out by the Local Government Commission for England (LGCE), which reported to the Secretary of State in March 1997. An electoral change Order implementing the new electoral arrangements was made on 21 September 1998 and the first elections on the new arrangements took place in May 1999.

5 In carrying out our work, the Boundary Committee has to work within a statutory framework.¹ This refers to the need to:

- reflect the identities and interests of local communities
- secure effective and convenient local government
- achieve equality of representation

In addition we are required to work within Schedule 11 to the Local Government Act 1972.

6 Details of the legislation under which the review of Castle Morpeth is being conducted are set out in a document entitled *Guidance and procedural advice for periodic electoral reviews* (published by the Electoral Commission in July 2002). This *Guidance* sets out the approach to the review and will be helpful in both understanding the approach taken by the Boundary Committee for England and in informing comments interested groups and individuals may wish to make about our recommendations.

7 Our task is to make recommendations to the Electoral Commission on the number of councillors who should serve on a council, and the number, boundaries and names of wards. We can also propose changes to the electoral arrangements for any parish and town councils in the borough. We cannot consider changes to the external boundaries of either the borough or of parish areas as part of this review.

¹ As set out in section 13(5) of the Local Government Act 1992 (as amended by SI 2001 No. 3962).

8 The broad objective of an electoral review is to achieve, as far as possible, equal representation across the borough as a whole, i.e. that all councillors in the local authority represent similar numbers of electors. Schemes which would result in, or retain, an electoral imbalance of over 10% in any ward will have to be fully justified. Any imbalances of 20% or more should only arise in the most exceptional circumstances, and will require the strongest justification.

9 Electoral equality, in the sense of each elector in a local authority having a 'vote of equal weight' when it comes to the election of councillors, is a fundamental democratic principle. Accordingly, the objective of an electoral review is to ensure that the number of electors represented by each councillor is, as near as is possible, the same across a district. In practice, each councillor cannot represent exactly the same number of electors given geographic and other constraints, including the make up and distribution of communities. However, our aim in any review is to recommend wards that are as close to the district average as possible in terms of the number of electors per councillor, while also taking account of evidence in relation to community identity and effective and convenient local government.

10 We are not prescriptive about council size and acknowledge that there are valid reasons for variations between local authorities. However, we believe that any proposals relating to council size, whether these are for an increase, a reduction, or the retention of the existing size, should be supported by strong evidence and arguments. Indeed, we believe that consideration of the appropriate council size is the starting point for our reviews and whatever size of council is proposed to us should be developed and argued in the context of the authority's internal political management structures, put in place following the Local Government Act 2000. It should also reflect the changing role of councillors in the new structure.

11 As indicated in its *Guidance*, the Electoral Commission requires the decision on council size to be based on an overall view about what is right for the particular authority and not just by addressing any imbalances in small areas of the authority by simply adding or removing councillors from these areas. While we will consider ways of achieving the correct allocation of councillors between, say, a number of towns in an authority or between rural and urban areas, our starting point must always be that the recommended council size reflects the authority's optimum political management arrangements and best provides for convenient and effective local government and that there is evidence for this.

12 In addition, we do not accept that an increase or decrease in the electorate of the authority should automatically result in a consequent increase or decrease in the number of councillors. Similarly, we do not accept that changes should be made to the size of a council simply to make it more consistent with the size of neighbouring or similarly sized authorities; the circumstances of one authority may be very different from that of another. We will seek to ensure that our recommended council size recognises all the factors and achieves a good allocation of councillors across the district.

13 Where multi-member wards are proposed, we believe that the number of councillors to be returned from each ward should not exceed three, other than in very exceptional circumstances. Numbers in excess of three could result in an

unacceptable dilution of accountability to the electorate and we have not, to date, prescribed any wards with more than three councillors.

14 The review is in four stages (see Table 3).

Table 3: Stages of the review

Stage	Stage starts	Description
One	21 June 2005	Submission of proposals to us
Two	13 September 2005	Our analysis and deliberation
Three	17 January 2006	Publication of draft recommendations and consultation on them
Four	11 April 2006	Analysis of submissions received and formulation of final recommendations

15 Stage One began on 21 June 2005, when we wrote to Castle Morpeth Borough Council inviting proposals for future electoral arrangements. We also notified Northumberland Police Authority, Northumberland Association of Local Councils, parish and town councils in the borough, Members of Parliament with constituency interests in the borough, Members of the European Parliament for the North East Region and the headquarters of the main political parties. We placed a notice in the local press, issued a press release and invited Castle Morpeth Borough Council to publicise the review further. The closing date for receipt of representations, the end of Stage One, was 12 September 2005.

16 During Stage Two we considered all the submissions received during Stage One and prepared our draft recommendations.

17 Stage Three began on 17 January 2006 with the publication of the report *Draft recommendations on the future electoral arrangements for Castle Morpeth in Northumberland*, and ended on 10 April 2006.

18 During Stage Four we reconsidered the draft recommendations in the light of the Stage Three consultation, decided whether to modify them, and now submit final recommendations to the Electoral Commission. It is now for the Commission to accept, modify or reject our final recommendations. If the Electoral Commission accepts the recommendations, with or without modification, it will make an electoral changes Order. The Electoral Commission will determine when any changes come into effect.

Equal opportunities

19 In preparing this report the Boundary Committee has had regard to the general duty set out in section 71(1) of the Race Relations Act 1976 and the statutory Code of Practice on the Duty to Promote Race Equality (Commission for Racial Equality, May 2002), i.e. to have due regard to the need to:

- eliminate unlawful racial discrimination
- promote equality of opportunity
- promote good relations between people of different racial groups

National Parks, Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) and the Broads

20 The Boundary Committee has also had regard to:

- Section 11A(2) of the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 (as inserted by section 62 of the Environment Act 1995). This states that, in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in a National Park, any relevant authority shall have regard to the Park's purposes. If there is a conflict between those purposes, a relevant authority shall attach greater weight to the purpose of conserving and enhancing the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the Park.
- Section 85 of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. This states that, in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in an AONB, a relevant authority shall have regard to the purpose of the AONB.
- Section 17A of the Norfolk and Suffolk Broads Act (as inserted by section 97 Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000). This states that, in exercising or performing any functions in relation to, or so as to affect, land in the Broads, a relevant authority shall have regard to the purposes of the Broads.

2 Current electoral arrangements

21 The borough of Castle Morpeth comprises the town of Morpeth located in the Wansbeck Valley, the large village of Ponteland as well as a substantial rural area. The borough is by the coast and has industry such as engineering and offshore supplies. The borough contains 28 parishes, and the whole borough is parished. Morpeth town comprises 29% of the borough's total electorate.

22 The Council presently has 33 members who are elected from 20 wards, nine of which are relatively urban and the remainder being predominantly rural. Thirteen wards are two-member wards and the remainder are single-member. The borough average is calculated by dividing the total electorate of the borough, 38,870, by the total number of councillors representing them on the council. At present, each councillor represents a borough average of 1,178 electors (38,870 divided by 33), which the Council forecasts will increase to 1,317 by the year 2009 if the present number of councillors is maintained (43,451 divided by 33).

23 During the last review of Castle Morpeth, the Council forecast that there would be a growth of 992 electors between 1996 and 2001. Since the last review, the electorate has actually seen a small decline of 97 electors. However, housing development has been more variable than expected, resulting in significant electoral inequality between wards. To compare levels of electoral inequality between wards, we calculated the extent to which the number of electors per councillor in each ward varies from the borough average in percentage terms

24 Data from the December 2004 electoral register showed that under these arrangements, electoral equality across the borough met the criteria that the Electoral Commission agreed would warrant further investigation.

25 In all, eight wards had electoral variances of greater than 10% and one ward, Hebron, Hepscott & Mitford had a variance of over 30%. Having noted that this level of electoral equality is unlikely to improve, the Electoral Commission directed the Boundary Committee to undertake a review of the electoral arrangements of Castle Morpeth Borough Council on 12 May 2005.

Table 4: Existing electoral arrangements in Castle Morpeth borough

	Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2004)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %	Electorate (2009)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
1	Chevington	2	1,799	900	-24	2,254	1,127	-14
2	Ellington	2	2,327	1,164	-1	2,552	1,276	-3
3	Hartburn	1	1,353	1,353	15	1,620	1,620	23
4	Hebron, Hepscott & Mitford	1	1,550	1,550	32	1,699	1,699	29
5	Heddon-on-the-Wall	1	1,273	1,273	8	1,402	1,402	6
6	Longhorsley	1	1,318	1,318	12	1,515	1,515	15
7	Lynemouth	1	1,317	1,317	12	1,441	1,441	9
8	Morpeth Central	2	2,378	1,189	1	2,607	1,304	-1
9	Morpeth Kirkhill	2	2,139	1,070	-9	2,318	1,159	-12
10	Morpeth North	2	2,218	1,109	-6	2,441	1,221	-7
11	Morpeth South	2	2,046	1,023	-13	2,262	1,131	-14
12	Morpeth Stobhill	2	2,386	1,193	1	2,579	1,290	-2

Table 4 (continued): Existing electoral arrangements in Castle Morpeth borough

Ward name	Number of councillors	Electorate (2004)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %	Electorate (2009)	Number of electors per councillor	Variance from average %
13 Pegswood	2	2,801	1,401	19	3,139	1,570	19
14 Ponteland East	2	2,415	1,208	3	2,639	1,320	0
15 Ponteland North	2	2,150	1,075	-9	2,396	1,198	-9
16 Ponteland South	2	2,290	1,145	-3	2,462	1,231	-7
17 Ponteland West	2	2,261	1,131	-4	2,516	1,258	-4
18 Stamfordham	1	1,116	1,116	-5	1,212	1,212	-8
19 Stannington	1	1,363	1,363	16	1,470	1,470	12
20 Ulgham	2	2,370	1,185	1	2,927	1,464	11
Totals	33	38,870	-	-	43,451	-	-
Averages	-	-	1,178	-	-	1,317	-

Source Note Electorate figures are based on information provided by Castle Morpeth Borough Council. The 'variance from average' column shows by how far, in percentage terms, the number of electors per councillor varies from the average for the borough. The minus symbol (-) denotes a lower than average number of electors. For example, in 2004, electors in Chevington ward were over-represented by 24%, while electors in Hebron, Hepscott & Mitford ward were significantly under-represented by 32%. Figures have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

3 Draft recommendations

26 During Stage One we received eight submissions. The Council submitted five separate borough-wide proposals from the Council's Conservative Group, Liberal Democrat Group and Green Party plus East Chevington, Longhorsley and Thirston parish councils and a submission from the Council officers supported by the Independent Group. We also received submissions from four parish councils, one local political party and two local councillors. In the light of these representations and evidence available to us, we reached preliminary conclusions which were set out in our report, *Draft recommendations on the future electoral arrangements for Castle Morpeth in Northumberland*.

27 In view of the lack of evidence in support of all of the proposals submitted, our draft recommendations were based on our own proposals which provided good electoral equality and, where possible, reflected any community identity argument received. We proposed that:

- Castle Morpeth Borough Council should be served by 33 councillors, the same as at present, representing 17 wards (three fewer than at present)
- the boundaries of 19 of the existing wards should be modified, while one ward should retain its existing boundaries
- there should be new warding arrangements for Hepscoth, Morpeth, Ponteland and Wallington Demesne parishes

28 Our proposals would have resulted in significant improvements in electoral equality, with the number of electors per councillor in two of the 17 wards varying by more than 10% from the borough average. This level of electoral equality was forecast to improve further, with no ward varying by more than 10% from the average by 2009.

4 Responses to consultation

29 During the consultation on the draft recommendations report we received 32 representations, all of which may be inspected at both our offices and those of the Council. Representations may also be viewed on our website at www.boundarycommittee.org.uk.

Castle Morpeth Borough Council

30 The Council objected to our proposals in Morpeth and Ponteland. It objected to the creation of three-member wards. It also put forward comments from its Conservative and Labour groups.

Parish and town councils

31 We received representations from nine parish and town councils. Widdrington Village and Ulgham parish councils objected to our proposals to transfer Widdrington Village parish from Ulgham to Chevington ward. Meldon, Netherwitton and Pegswood parish councils objected to the inclusion of Meldon parish in the Pegswood & Hebron ward. Ponteland Parish Council objected to our draft recommendations for the Ponteland area. Hepscott Parish Council objected to the proposal to include part of the parish in a ward in Morpeth. Thirston Parish Council objected to our proposals for Tritlington. Capheaton Parish Council expressed support for our draft recommendation to place its parish in Stamfordham ward.

Councillors

32 Councillor Grant objected to our proposals to transfer Widdrington Village parish from Ulgham to Chevington ward. Councillor Ramsey objected to our proposals for Ponteland, in particular the creation of multi-member wards. Councillor Baker expressed support for our Ellington & Lynemouth ward.

Local residents and political groups

33 A further 19 representations were received from local political groups and local people. Ponteland Liberal Democrats objected to our proposal to redraw the boundaries for the whole of Ponteland.

34 Seventeen local residents objected to our proposals to transfer Widdrington Village parish from Ulgham to Chevington ward. Another local resident objected to the transfer of Meldon parish to Pegswood & Hebron ward.

5 Analysis and final recommendations

35 We have now finalised our conclusions on the electoral arrangements for Castle Morpeth.

36 As described earlier, the prime aim in considering the most appropriate electoral arrangements for Castle Morpeth is to achieve electoral equality. In doing so we have regard to section 13(5) of the Local Government Act 1992 (as amended), with the need to:

- secure effective and convenient local government
- reflect the identities and interests of local communities
- secure the matters in respect of equality of representation referred to in paragraph 3(2)(a) of Schedule 11 to the Local Government Act 1972

37 Schedule 11 to the Local Government Act 1972 refers to the number of electors per councillor being 'as nearly as may be, the same in every ward of the district or borough'. In relation to Schedule 11, our recommendations are not intended to be based solely on existing electorate figures, but also on estimated changes in the number and distribution of local government electors likely to take place over the next five years. We must also have regard to the desirability of fixing clearly identifiable boundaries and to maintaining local ties.

38 In reality, the achievement of absolute electoral equality is unlikely to be attainable. There must be a degree of flexibility. However, our approach, in the context of the statutory criteria, is to keep variances to a minimum.

39 If electoral imbalances are to be minimised, the aim of electoral equality should be the starting point in any review. We therefore strongly recommend that, in formulating electoral schemes, local authorities and other interested parties should make electoral equality their starting point, and then make adjustments to reflect relevant factors such as community identity and interests. Five-year forecasts of changes in electorate should also be taken into account and we aim to recommend a scheme which provides improved electoral equality over this period.

40 The recommendations do not affect county, district or parish external boundaries, local taxes, or result in changes to postcodes. Nor is there any evidence that these recommendations will have an adverse effect on house prices, or car and house insurance premiums. Our proposals do not take account of parliamentary boundaries, and we are not, therefore, able to take into account any representations which are based on these issues.

Electorate figures

41 As part of the previous review of Castle Morpeth borough, the Council forecast an increase in the electorate of 3% between 1996 and 2001. However, between 1996 and the start of this review the electorate slightly decreased by 0.2%. During this time there has only been significant growth in Hebron, Hepscott & Mitford (19% increase) and Longhorsley (25% increase) wards and no substantial growth overall in the majority of the remaining wards. In fact, the electorate in Chevington and Lynemouth wards has decreased by 14% and 15% respectively. This has resulted in a knock-on

effect across the borough with many wards having substantially fewer electors per councillor than the borough average.

42 The Council initially submitted electorate forecasts for the year 2009, projecting an increase in the electorate of approximately 7% from 38,870 to 41,650 over the five-year period from 2004 to 2009. However, in its Stage One submission, it revised this, stating that it had neglected to count 13- to 17-year-old future voters (attainers). The attainers represented an additional 3,329 electors by 2009 to its original, giving overall growth of almost 16% (6,109 electors).

43 We were concerned at this level of growth, which in our experience is almost unprecedented, particularly given that the borough has in fact seen a slight decline in electorate since the last review. We therefore requested additional information from the Council, seeking firm evidence for this level of growth.

44 The Council confirmed that the electorate had declined in the last five years, but added that it was 'confident that the developments [...] will be granted planning permission within the next five years'. It was unable to provide any further evidence to justify its substantial electorate forecast, but did acknowledge that it had not taken account of the death rate and therefore adjusted its figures to reflect this, but this meant that it still predicted 14% growth.

45 We still considered the Council's electorate projections to be very high and therefore revisited its methodology. We noted that during its formulation of electorate projections it had produced two scenarios: Scenario One including those sites with planning development (resulting in 4.5% electorate growth); and Scenario Two including all development and those yet to gain planning permission (resulting in 7% electorate growth). The Council favoured Scenario Two, but did not detail its reasons for this (neither scenario contained the attainers that the Council added on later).

46 In light of the evidence received we were not persuaded that the Council's electorate projections under Scenario Two were realistic. We considered that it provided insufficient evidence to show that these construction projects will be completed by 2009. We therefore considered it more prudent to base our figures on Scenario One and those areas actually granted planning permission. We considered that these represent the most reasonable figures for development currently available. In addition to this, we included the attainers and adjusted the total forecast electorate to include deaths, giving a projected growth of 12%.

47 However, we were still concerned that this represents exceptionally high growth which may not be attained. We have therefore tried to have consideration for electoral variances under the 2004 figures. In addition to this, we also requested further evidence and comments during Stage Three from local organisations or individuals in relation to how accurate they considered the forecast figures to be.

48 The Council predicted that most of the growth would be in the existing Chevington and Ulgham wards and Morpeth parish, although a significant amount is also expected in Hartburn ward and Ponteland parish.

49 At Stage Three we received no further comments on electorate forecasts and propose confirming them as final.

Council size

50 Castle Morpeth Borough Council presently has 33 members. At Stage One the Council proposed retaining the existing council size of 33, arguing that the existing council size enables members to successfully fulfil their role. The Liberal Democrats rejected the Council's argument, stating that the additional electors would mean additional work for members. Therefore it argued for a small increase of one, to 34 members. The Green Party, officers/Independents and parish councils proposed retaining the existing council size of 33 members while the Conservatives proposed to increase the council size by one to 34.

51 None of the respondents provided sufficient evidence to justify their proposals, so we requested additional evidence, particularly in terms of the impact of their proposed council size on the Council's political management structure. We received only limited further evidence.

52 We did not consider that any respondents put forward strong evidence in relation to council size, despite our request for additional evidence. While it was argued that councillor workloads have increased, we did not consider there was clear evidence of how this had impacted on management structures. In addition to this, there was no clear evidence of how an additional councillor would improve the effectiveness of the Council. Finally, much of the evidence including allocation was based on electorate figures that we have subsequently rejected.

53 We examined the allocation for the two towns and surrounding rural area under both 33 and 34 members. It is possible to achieve the correct allocation of councillors for all areas under both council sizes. However, the arguments for an increase are based solely on the concern that councillor workload would increase given an increase in electorate. We stated that we cannot propose an increase in council size purely on the basis of an increase in electorate. Consequently we were not persuaded to move away from the existing council size as we considered that we had received insufficient supporting evidence for an increase in council size. We therefore retained the existing council size of 33 members, as part of our draft recommendations.

54 At Stage Three the Council stated that 'the Council does accept that equality of representation throughout the Borough might better be accommodated by the reduction of one councillor, from 33 to 32, with representation in Morpeth being reduced from 10 to 9'. We received no other comments concerning council size.

55 We note the Council's comments, but that it did not put forward any additional argument in terms of the impact of this reduction in terms of its political management structure and the impact on councillor workload. In addition to this, a reduction in council size would have a knock-on effect to the levels of electoral equality under our draft recommendations. We therefore do not concur with this proposal and are confirming our draft recommendations for a 33-member council as final.

Electoral equality

56 Electoral equality, in the sense of each elector in a local authority having a vote of equal weight when it comes to the election of councillors, is a fundamental democratic principle. The Electoral Commission expects the Boundary Committee's

recommendations to provide for high levels of electoral equality, with variances normally well below 10%. Therefore, when making recommendations we will not simply aim for electoral variances of under 10%. Where inadequate justification is provided for specific ward proposals we will look to improve electoral equality seeking to ensure that each councillor represents as close to the same number of electors as is possible, providing this can be achieved without compromising the reflection of the identities and interests of local communities and securing effective and convenient local government. We take the view that any proposals that would result in, or retain, electoral imbalances of over 10% from the average in any ward will have to be fully justified, and evidence provided which would justify such imbalances in terms of community identity or effective and convenient local government. We will rarely recommend wards with electoral variances of 20% or more, and any such variances proposed by local interested parties will require the strongest justification in terms of the other two statutory criteria.

57 Given our ongoing concerns over the accuracy of the electorate forecasts during the formulation of our draft recommendations, we tried to have consideration for electoral variances under the 2004 figures as we considered that these may reflect the most accurate figures available. Under our draft recommendations no ward had a variance of greater than 17% based on 2004 figures and only two would had a variance greater than 10%.

58 As a result of the lack of evidence in support of the proposals received for wards with variances of over 10%, we did not adopt these and instead proposed wards which secured good electoral equality. Our draft recommendations secured a good level of electoral equality throughout the borough, as no ward varied by more than 8% by 2009.

59 Under our final recommendations the variances in a number of wards will deteriorate. Our final recommendations would see a very marginal worsening in electoral equality in the Morpeth Stobhill ward from 3% to 8% by 2009. We consider this acceptable in order to provide a stronger boundary.

60 Our proposals would worsen electoral equality in Ulgham and Chevington wards from 5% to 11% and -8% to -14% by 2009, respectively, in order to reflect the community links of Widdrington parish. We propose worsening electoral equality in Hartburn and Pegswood & Hebron wards from -1% to 14% and 1-% to -6%, respectively, to reflect the community links of Meldon parish. Finally, we propose an amendment in the Ponteland area. These would worsen electoral equality, but provide boundaries that reflect local community links.

61 However, it should also be noted that we propose creating a Chevington ward which would have 24% fewer electors than the borough average in 2004. We acknowledge that this goes somewhat against our attempts to have greater consideration for the 2004 figures than would usually be the case, however given the strength of argument put forward, we consider this acceptable. It is also worth noting that the trigger point for the Electoral Commission to consider future FERs is the presence of any ward with an electoral variance of greater than 30% or 30% of all wards with electoral variances of over 10%.

General analysis

62 At Stage One, the five borough-wide schemes submitted put forward conflicting proposals backed up by limited or no evidence. Given this, we investigated alternative options and produced our own proposals which provided good electoral equality and, where possible, reflected any community identity argument received. In addition to this, we were unable to consider adopting any of the Green Party's four-to seven-member proposed wards, as we considered it did not provide sufficient supporting evidence to justify wards with more than three members. We consider that wards with four or more members could dilute the accountability of members to their electorate and provide ineffective local government. In view of this and the lack of justification for the wards' relatively poor electoral equality we did not adopt any of its proposals.

63 At Stage One, we proposed retaining just one existing ward, and put forward our own new warding arrangements for the parishes of Morpeth and Ponteland. We considered that these new borough and parish wards used strong boundaries as well as improving electoral equality and took account of the Labour Group's suggestion that the ward boundaries for both towns be completely revised in order to secure better electoral equality.

64 At Stage Four, we propose broadly confirming our draft recommendations as final, subject to a number of amendments to reflect the community identity evidence received.

65 We note the Council's view that it considered that the Committee's decision to put forward its own proposals was 'in effect a refusal to accept that the elected representatives of this Council do understand the very communities they represent'. However, the Council also stated 'whilst the Council accepts it did not reach unanimity on any proposals, it believes all the proposals submitted at that stage emphasised that Castle Morpeth is very definitely a collection of distinct communities, a view apparently ignored by the Boundary Committee'. We also note that the Council states that it 'could put up similar arguments about community cohesiveness for the all the rural communities, but this would be a largely repetitive exercise', adding 'we think the arguments for linking certain parishes in the rural area are self explanatory'.

66 The Committee would acknowledge that Castle Morpeth is a collection of distinct communities and has not sought to ignore the views of any party who submitted comments at Stage One and Stage Three. Indeed, we would concur that local members and local people are best placed to tell us how the area should be divided. However, it is not enough for the Council to state that the links between certain parishes are 'self-explanatory'. While this may be clear to people within the review area, the Committee requires written evidence of what these links are, in order to help it formulate its proposals. We cannot make decisions on the basis of supposition.

67 In addition to this, given the number of different, sometimes conflicting proposals, a lack of community identity evidence and poor levels of electoral equality, at Stage One we found it necessary to explore alternative proposals that sought to secure better levels of electoral equality while aiming to represent any community identity evidence received. We therefore put forward our own proposals for large

parts of the borough. Our draft recommendations asked for comments on specific proposals that we put forward.

68 At Stage Three, we have sought to reflect those submissions that put forward good community identity argument. In Morpeth we note the objections to our draft recommendations, but do not consider that respondents put forward strong evidence supporting alternative proposals. We are therefore confirming our draft recommendations as final, subject to a minor amendment to Morpeth Stobhill ward to address a boundary anomaly and issue of access.

69 In Ponteland, we note the general objections to our proposed ward. Although there was only limited community identity argument, we note the concerns that these wards were originally created to purposely combine the old parts of the town with the new in order to prevent divisions between the different communities. Our rationale for moving away was to create stronger ward boundaries, albeit with only minor improvements to electoral equality, as also recommended by the Labour Group. However, on reflection, despite limited community identity argument, we acknowledge that these boundaries may not reflect a local desire to avoid separating the old and new areas of the town. As such, we therefore propose reverting back to the existing boundaries, subject to two very minor amendments to improve electoral equality.

70 In the North area, we note the strong objections to our proposals to transfer Widdrington parish to Chevington ward. Although retaining Widdrington parish in Ulgham ward would worsen electoral equality in Ulgham to 11% and in Chevington ward to -14% by 2009, we consider that the evidence is sufficiently strong to persuade us to make the amendment in order to reflect local communities. We also propose transferring Meldon parish back to Hartburn ward, to reflect local community identity. Although we note the concerns about the remainder of the Pegswood & Hebron ward, we do not consider there to be strong evidence or alternative options available, we are therefore confirming our draft recommendations for Pegswood & Hebron ward as final.

71 We also note the support and objections to our Lynemouth & Ellington ward. On balance, given the support and acknowledgment of links between the communities and the good levels of electoral equality, we propose confirming our draft recommendations for Lynemouth & Ellington ward as final. Finally, we received some support for our Stamfordham ward and are confirming this as final. We received no other comments on the remaining wards and therefore, in light of their good electoral equality we are confirming them as final.

Warding arrangements

72 For borough warding purposes, the following areas, based on existing wards, are considered in turn:

- Hartburn, Hebron, Hepscoth & Mitford, Heddon-on-the-Wall, Stamfordham and Stannington wards (page 31–34)
- Chevington, Ellington, Longhorsley, Lynemouth, Pegswood and Ulgham wards (page 34–38)

- Morpeth Central, Morpeth Kirkhill, Morpeth North, Morpeth South and Morpeth Stobhill wards (page 38–41)
- Ponteland East, Ponteland North, Ponteland South and Ponteland West wards (page 41–43)

73 Details of our final recommendations are set out in Tables 1 and 2 (on pages 9 and 11, respectively), and illustrated on the large maps accompanying this report.

Hartburn, Hebron, Hepscoth & Mitford, Heddon-on-the-Wall, Stamfordham and Stannington wards

74 The above five wards are located in the south and middle of the borough and the whole area is parished. Table 5 (below) outlines the constituent areas of each ward. Table 4 (on page 18–19) outlines the existing electoral variances for 2004 and also the variances that the wards are forecast to have by 2009 if the existing arrangements remained in place.

Table 5: Existing arrangements

Ward name	Constituent areas	Number of councillors
Hartburn	Capheaton parish; Belsay parish; Hartburn parish; Meldon parish; Netherwitton parish; Wallington Demesne parish	1
Hebron, Hepscoth & Mitford	Hebron parish; Hepscoth parish; Mitford parish	1
Heddon-on-the-Wall	Heddon-on-the-Wall parish	1
Stamfordham	Matfen parish; Stamfordham parish	1
Stannington	Stannington parish; Whalton parish	1

75 During Stage One we received four representations in relation to this area. The Council submitted five sets of proposals on behalf of the Council's Conservative and Liberal Democrat Groups and the Green Party. It also submitted a proposal from the officers supported by the Independent Group (officers/Independents), and another from East Chevington, Longhorsley and Thirston parish councils (parish councils). Morpeth Liberal Democrat Branch supported the Liberal Democrat's proposals, while Councillor Taylor argued for his Hebron, Hepscoth & Mitford ward.

76 We gave careful consideration to the evidence received, but noted that none of the submissions provided strong evidence. We therefore rejected a large number of the proposals on the basis of poor electoral equality and lack of community identity evidence. We put forward our own proposals, which secured good electoral arrangements that reflected, where possible, the limited comments on community identity that we received.

77 We noted the consensus between the Conservatives, parish councils, Liberal Democrats and officer/Independents to retain the existing Heddon-on-the-Wall ward.

We noted that it is isolated at the edge of the borough and has limited road links with the rest of the borough. Therefore, given its location, good electoral equality and relatively strong local support we retained the existing Heddon-on-the-Wall ward as part of our draft recommendations. We also noted the good electoral equality and limited local support for the Conservatives', parish councils' and officer/Independents' proposed single-member Stamfordham ward and adopted this as part of our draft recommendations.

78 We also adopted the parish councils', Liberal Democrats' and officers/Independents' proposal to transfer part of Hepscott parish, Stobhill Manor housing development, into Morpeth Stobhill ward. From our tour of the area we noted that the parish boundary arbitrarily divided the housing development, and considered this amendment reflected local communities.

79 Due to the lack of supporting evidence, we examined a number of options to try to provide better electoral equality in the area to the north of Ponteland parish. However, these did not secure good electoral equality and had significant knock-on-effects across the borough. We identified a two-member ward comprising Mitford, Stannington and Whalton parishes and Hepscott parish (less Stobhill Manor housing development), which had good electoral equality. We adopted this ward in view of its good electoral equality and noting that it enabled us to transfer that part of Stobhill Manor housing development in Hepscott parish, into a ward with the remainder of the development. We named this ward Stannington & Mitford.

80 We also examined different options in the area to the north of Stamfordham ward, but concluded that given our proposals elsewhere and the sparsely populated nature of the area, there were limited alternatives, without creating an extensive multi-member ward. However, we did note that transferring Meldon parish out of the remainder of Hartburn ward (in view of our proposal to transfer Capheaton into Stamfordham ward) significantly improved the electoral equality. Having visited the area we did have some concerns about Meldon parish's road links with our proposed Pegswood & Hebron ward. However, given the lack of community identity evidence we sought to improve electoral equality and therefore proposed an amended single-member Hartburn ward comprising Belsay, Hartburn, Netherwitton and Wallington Demesne parishes.

81 Finally, given that the lack of community identity evidence and relatively poor electoral equality forced us to explore alternatives, we requested additional evidence of community identity from local groups and individuals during Stage Three regarding our draft recommendations, particularly our proposed Hartburn and Stannington & Mitford wards.

82 At Stage Three the Council put forward very limited comments for this area. It supported the proposal to transfer the area of development at Stobhill Manor into Morpeth Stobhill ward. It also agreed that Belsay parish should be divided into two parish wards along the A696, with the southern parish ward being transferred to Stamfordham ward and the north to Hartburn ward. It provided no argument for why it should be divided. The Council also submitted comments on behalf of its Conservative Group. It accepted the argument that the Stobhill Manor development is split and that it would be advantageous to join them, but argued that it would be a disadvantage to split Hepscott parish. It argued that this would then avoid the need to create a two-member Stannington & Mitford ward.

83 Hepscoth Parish Council also objected to the proposals to divide the parish between two wards, arguing that ‘it would be confusing and at worst result in conflicting opinions and representation’. It also objected to the ward name, but did not suggest an alternative. Capheaton Parish Council expressed support for our proposal to place it in Stamfordham ward.

84 Meldon, Netherwitton and Pegswood parish councils objected to the transfer of Meldon parish to Pegswood & Hebron ward, arguing that it should be in Hartburn ward. Meldon Parish Council argued that it has no community links with the area to the east of Morpeth which is ‘more densely populated and in fact urbanised’. It added that it had ‘similar characteristics and interests such as Hartburn, Netherwitton, Belsay and Wallington Demesne [parishes]’, but without actually specifying what these interests are. Netherwitton Parish Council argued that Meldon ‘has close social links with Whalton, with representation on the Whalton Village Hall Committee’ and ‘church council links with Hartburn through the Hartburn with Meldon Parochial Church Council’. It also cited the potential of a future planning application in Pegswood parish. Pegswood Parish Council stated that it has no community links and argued that it should remain in Hartburn ward. It also argued that a future planning application would add sufficient electors to Pegswood & Hebron ward to provide good electoral equality, without Meldon parish being included.

85 A local resident also objected the transfer of Meldon parish to Pegswood & Hebron ward, arguing that it should be in Hartburn ward. She put forward strong community identity argument for this amendment, highlighting that ‘Meldon has much stronger road links to the western parishes along the B6343, than it does to Hebron and the parishes to the east. She stated that ‘electors in Meldon parish use the B6343 to take them to Hartburn, Scots Gap or Morpeth for [...] shopping needs [...] schools [...] Doctors’, surgeries [and] religious activities’, providing examples of each.

86 We have given careful consideration to the evidence received. We note the Conservative Group comments about dividing Hepscoth parish and that Hepscoth parish council also objected to this proposal. However, we also note the support for this proposal from the Council. We acknowledge the concerns about dividing the parish between two wards. However, the division of parishes between wards is not an unusual situation. For example, Tritlington & West Chevington parish is divided between wards. In addition to this, as stated in our draft recommendations, from our tour of the area, we were strongly persuaded that this housing development should not be arbitrarily divided in two. We therefore propose confirming our draft recommendation to transfer this area to Morpeth Stobhill ward as final. It should be noted that this issue may be best addressed by a review of the external boundaries of Hepscoth and Morpeth parishes, although this cannot be considered as part of this review. Castle Morpeth Borough Council can conduct a parish review following the conclusion of this further electoral review and make recommendations to the Secretary of State.

87 We note the strong objections to our proposal to transfer Meldon parish to Pegswood & Hebron ward and the argument that it should be in the proposed Hartburn ward. We also note the comments about a future planning application. This planning application was not included in the figures submitted by the Council and as such we are not persuaded that it will be completed within the five-year forecast period. However, as stated in our draft recommendations, we proposed this amendment to improve the level of electoral equality, particularly given the very

limited community identity evidence for the proposed wards. Transferring Meldon parish back to Hartburn ward would leave Hartburn ward with 14% more electors than the average by 2009 and Pegswood & Hebron ward with 6% fewer. However, we note that there were strong objections to this proposal and notice the strong evidence of Meldon’s community links towards the west and the rest of Hartburn parish. Therefore, on balance, although transferring Meldon to Hartburn would significantly worsen electoral equality, we consider that respondents have provided good evidence of the community links and propose adopting this amendment as part of our final recommendations.

88 In the remainder of this area, we have received very few comments. We note the support of Capheaton Parish Council for the proposal in its area. We therefore propose confirming our draft recommendations for the remainder of this area as final. Tables 1 and 2 (on pages 9 and 11, respectively) provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our final recommendations for Hartburn, Heddon-on-the-Wall, Stamfordham and Stannington & Mitford wards. Our final recommendations are shown on Map 1 accompanying this report.

Chevington, Ellington, Longhorsley, Lynemouth, Pegswood and Ulgham wards

89 The above six wards are located in the north of the borough and the whole area is parished. Table 6 (below) outlines the constituent areas of each ward. Table 4 (on page 18–19) outlines the existing electoral variances for 2004 and also the variances that the wards are forecast to have by 2009 if the existing arrangements remained in place.

Table 6: Existing arrangements

Ward name	Constituent areas	Number of councillors
Chevington	East Chevington parish; West Chevington parish ward of Tritlington & West Chevington parish	2
Ellington	Creswell parish; Ellington & Linton parish	2
Longhorsley	Longhorsley parish; Thirston parish; Tritlington parish ward of Tritlington & West Chevington parish	1
Lynemouth	Lynemouth parish	1
Pegswood	Longhirst parish; Pegswood parish	2
Ulgham	Ulgham parish; Widdrington Station & Stobswood parish; Widdrington Village parish	2

90 During Stage One we received five representations in relation to this area. The Council submitted five sets of proposals on behalf of the Council’s Conservative Group, Liberal Democrat Group and the Green Party, a joint proposal from the officers and Independent Group, and another from East Chevington, Longhorsley

and Thirston parish councils. The Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, officers/Independents and parish councils all proposed identical Pegswood and Lynemouth wards, each based on parishes of the same name. No significant evidence was received to justify or explain any of the proposed wards.

91 Morpeth Liberal Democrat Branch supported the Liberal Democrats' proposed Ellington with Longhirst and Ulgham wards. The Liberal Democrats opposed a number of the Council's original proposals in this area and put forward alternative proposals for this area. Ulgham Parish Council argued that it would like to retain its links with Widdrington Village. Councillor Baker expressed concerns about two-member wards and proposed alternative arrangements to address this. Thirston Parish Council opposed the Council's original proposal for its area. Lynemouth Parish Council made a representation to the Council (not formally submitted to us), arguing that the existing Lynemouth and Ellington wards should be retained. East Chevington Parish Council also made a submission to the Council, arguing that community identities would be better reflected if the existing arrangements remained in place.

92 We gave careful consideration to the evidence received, but noted that none of the submissions provided strong evidence. We therefore rejected a large number of the proposals on the basis of poor electoral equality and lack of community identity evidence. We considered our own electoral arrangements that reflected, where possible, the limited comments on community identity that we received. It should also be noted that having adopted our own Hartburn ward (discussed in the previous section), given the knock-on effect, we were unable to adopt the Conservative's single-member Netherwitton, Hebron, Meldon, Tritlington & Longhirst ward.

93 In the Ulgham area we noted a number of different proposals, but none of these secured good electoral equality, particularly given the lack of strong community identity evidence received. However, we noted that the Conservatives put forward an alternative two-member Ulgham ward comprising Ulgham and Widdrington Station & Stobswood parishes which would have a variance of 5% by 2009. We considered that this reflected the road links between these two parishes and, to a degree, reflected the indicated links between Ulgham parish and the Widdrington area. We also considered that it secured good electoral equality and therefore adopted it as part of our draft recommendations.

94 We noted that all the groups who submitted borough-wide schemes, with the exception of the Green Party, proposed to retain the existing single-member Lynemouth ward but that it would have a variance of 9% more than the borough average by 2009. Also there was very limited evidence to support this. We noted that a three-member ward could be created by combining the existing Ellington and Lynemouth wards, which would have a variance of 1% more than the borough average by 2009. We visited this area and noted that Ellington & Linton and Lynemouth parishes share good road links. Given this, the good level of electoral equality and the lack persuasive community evidence we adopted this ward in our draft recommendations.

95 The group of parish councils proposed to retain the existing Longhorsley ward and the existing Chevington ward, which would have variances of 15% above and 14% below the borough average respectively by 2009. We note that these proposals were not supported by any evidence of community identities. Therefore, given this

and the high variances of the existing wards, we did not include these wards in our draft recommendations.

96 We noted that the Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and officers/Independents proposed a single-member Longhorsley ward comprising Longhorsley and Thirston parishes. This ward would have a variance equal to the borough average by 2009. In view of this excellent electoral equality, we adopted it as part of our draft recommendations.

97 We explored alternatives to the existing Chevington and in the light of our proposals elsewhere for Ulgham and Lynemouth & Ellington wards, we proposed a two-member Chevington ward comprising East Chevington and Widdrington Village parishes and West Chevington parish ward of Tritlington & West Chevington parish. We noted that there are good road links between these areas and that the ward secured reasonable electoral equality. We did not include Tritlington parish ward of Tritlington & West Chevington parish in this ward in view of comments received from Thirston Parish Council.

98 Our draft recommendations for Ulgham and Longhorsley wards limited the options available for the area around Longhirst, Pegswood and Hebron parishes. We therefore proposed a three-member Pegswood & Hebron ward.

99 At Stage Three the Council objected to our proposals for a three-member Pegswood & Hebron ward, arguing that Pegswood parish would dominate the ward, with the 'rural parishes involved having no effective representation'. It added 'Outside of Morpeth and Ponteland, Pegswood is the largest urbanised area [...] a former mining village it has regenerated significantly in the last few years, but still has a unique character which is very different from the surrounding rural villages'. It argued that Pegswood should be a two-member ward, with the surrounding parishes, including Longhirst, being a single member ward. However, it did acknowledge that 'this is not an ideal solution, but is much more acceptable than the three-member ward'.

100 The Council also objected to proposals to create a three-member Lynemouth & Ellington ward, arguing that 'whilst there are obvious and natural links between the communities, there is strong evidence of separateness, through the development of community groups in both communities, and in the smaller villages of Cresswell and Linton'. It argued that Ellington would dominate the area. However, it also acknowledged that 'the communities do work together on common causes, not the least being over the closure of Ellington pit. Equally, the CELL [...] partnership and ENRGI [...] Regeneration Initiative are other examples of community cohesiveness.

101 The Council highlighted the submissions that argued that Widdrington Village should be in Ulgham ward. It put forward comments on behalf of the Conservative Group who objected to proposals to create a three-member Lynemouth & Ellington ward. The Council's Labour Group expressed support for a three-member Lynemouth & Ellington ward.

102 Widdrington Parish Council objected to proposals to transfer Widdrington Village Parish from Ulgham to Chevington ward, arguing that it should be reunited with Ulgham ward. It highlighted social links between the three parishes stating 'The school for Ulgham ward is at Widdrington station, and has children from all three

parishes [...] the library, doctors, dentists surgery, and community centre for Ulgham ward are all at Widdrington Station. Many clubs and organisations involving residents of all three parishes take place at the community centre. The nearest shops, local garage and post office are at Widdrington Station'. It also outlined the Blue Sky Forest regeneration project as an example of the communities working together.

103 Ulgham Parish Council also objected to proposals to transfer Widdrington Village Parish from Ulgham to Chevington ward, arguing that it should be reunited with Ulgham ward, putting forward similar argument to Widdrington Parish Council. Councillor Grant objected to proposals to transfer Widdrington Village Parish from Ulgham to Chevington ward, arguing that it should be reunited with Ulgham ward. He put forward strong argument outlining the role of the Blue Sky Forest regeneration project, discussed by Widdrington Parish Council. Fourteen local residents all objected to proposals to transfer Widdrington Village Parish from Ulgham to Chevington ward, arguing that it should be reunited with Ulgham ward. They put forward identical letters that outlined similar to those arguments put forward by Widdrington Parish Council.

104 Councillor Baker expressed support for our Lynemouth & Ellington ward, arguing that 'it greatly helps local councillors in their day to day life [as this] new ward will be in exact synchronisation with the newly formed CELL Regeneration Partnership remit'.

105 Thirston Parish Council objected to the proposals for its area, but did not provide any argument or alternative arrangements.

106 We have given careful consideration to the evidence received. We note the objections to our Pegswood & Hebron ward and the concerns that Pegswood may 'dominate' the proposed ward and the requests for a two-member Pegswood ward comprising just Pegswood parish. We have dealt with some of these issues in the section above (paragraph 86 when discussing Meldon parish and Hartburn ward). We acknowledge the concerns about the surrounding rural parishes and that a two-member Pegswood ward would have reasonable electoral equality itself. However, given our decision (described in paragraph 87) to transfer Meldon parish back to Hartburn ward, removing Pegswood from Pegswood & Hebron parish would leave the remaining parishes of Hebron, Longhirst and Tritlington parish ward with too few electors to justify a single councillor. It is not possible to address this without having a significant knock-on effect in the surrounding area and making it very difficult to secure good electoral arrangements with good electoral equality. We therefore propose confirming our Pegswood & Hebron ward as final.

107 We also note the objections to our proposals to transfer Widdrington Village Parish from Ulgham to Chevington ward and the argument that it should be reunited with Ulgham ward. We consider that the respondents have put forward compelling evidence for Widdrington Village parish's links to the remainder of the Ulgham ward. We note the school, shop and other community links that were outlined, as well as the Blue Sky Forest project.

108 Retaining Widdrington parish in Ulgham ward would worsen electoral equality in Ulgham to 11% more electors than the average and in Chevington ward to -14% few electors by 2009. In addition to this, we note that the proposed Chevington ward would have 24% fewer electors than the borough average in 2004. We acknowledge

that this goes somewhat against our attempts to have greater consideration for the 2004 figures (as discussed in paragraph 57 than would usually be the case. However, although this represents a significant worsening of electoral equality, compared to our draft recommendations, we consider that respondents have put forward very strong evidence of community links and we therefore propose adopting this amendment as part of our final recommendations. It is also worth noting that the trigger point for the Electoral Commission to consider future FERs is the presence of any ward with an electoral variance of greater than 30% or 30% of all wards with electoral variances of over 10%.

109 We also note the support and objections to our three-member Lynemouth & Ellington ward. We note the Council's concerns about the potential dominance of Ellington parish, but also note that it considers that such a ward may assist the local regeneration projects. We also note the views of Councillor Baker, who also argues that the proposed ward would facilitate the regeneration. Therefore, although there may be some concerns about the proposed ward, we consider that the advantages, in terms of the communities working together outweigh these. In addition to this, as outlined in our draft recommendations, our proposal secures improved electoral equality. We are therefore confirming our Lynemouth & Ellington ward as final.

110 Finally, we note Thirston Parish Council's comments, but it has put forward no evidence or alternative arrangements. We received no other comments regarding these wards and are therefore confirming the remaining wards as final.

111 Tables 1 and 2 (on pages 9 and 11, respectively) provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our final recommendations for Chevington, Lynemouth & Ellington, Longhorsley, Pegswood & Hebron and Ulgham wards. Our final recommendations are shown on Map 1 accompanying this report.

Morpeth Central, Morpeth Kirkhill, Morpeth North, Morpeth South and Morpeth Stobhill wards

112 Morpeth parish is located in the east of the borough and is divided into five parish wards based on the borough wards. The parish comprises the two-member borough wards of Morpeth Central, Morpeth Kirkhill, Morpeth North, Morpeth South and Morpeth Stobhill. Table 4 (on page 18–19) outlines the existing electoral variances for 2004 and also the variances that the wards are forecast to have by 2009 if the existing arrangements remained in place.

113 During Stage One we received two representations in relation to Morpeth parish. The Council submitted five sets of proposals on behalf of groups including the Council's Conservative Group, Liberal Democrat Group, the Green Party, a joint proposal from the officers and Independent Group (officers/Independents), and another from East Chevington, Longhorsley and Thirston parish councils.

114 The four other groups who submitted borough-wide schemes (not including the Green Party for reasons discussed in paragraph 62) all proposed broadly retaining the existing Morpeth borough wards with a number of different amendments to improve electoral equality or reflect local community identities. The officers/Independents, Liberal Democrats and parish councils proposed to transfer that part of Stobhill Manor housing development in Hepscoth parish and Hebron, Hepscoth & Mitford ward, into Morpeth Stobhill ward. All four groups proposed to

transfer the High Stanners area from Morpeth Central ward into Morpeth Kirkhill ward. Under this proposal, Morpeth Central ward would have a variance of 12% below the borough average by 2009. The Conservatives proposed to retain the current Morpeth Stobhill ward.

115 We gave careful consideration to the evidence received. We noted the lack of strong supporting evidence for any of the proposed wards for Morpeth parish and the relatively poor electoral equality of the proposed Morpeth Central and Morpeth South wards. We also noted the Labour Group's statement that the boundaries of wards in Morpeth parish should be completely reviewed. We considered that the existing ward boundaries could be improved so that they are tied to clear ground features, better reflected the distinct areas of the town and secured good electoral equality. We therefore investigated alternative warding options for Morpeth town area to try to improve electoral equality.

116 As stated in paragraph 78, we adopted the Liberal Democrats', officers/Independents' and parish councils' proposal to transfer the part of Stobhill Manor housing development in Hepscott parish into Morpeth Stobhill ward. We also considered using the railway line as a boundary, but this was not viable, given the poor electoral equality that would result. We noted that under the existing arrangements, the area to the south of the railway line is part of Morpeth Central ward. We therefore proposed retaining this boundary and continuing it west across Shields Road, transferring Low Stobhill into our proposed Morpeth South ward. This ward secured good electoral equality. We acknowledged that ideally, Low Stobhill should be in the same ward as the remainder of the Stobhill area, but given a lack of community identity evidence and a need to improve electoral equality, we adopted this amendment as part of our draft recommendations.

117 We did not consider that the proposals for Morpeth Central ward and Morpeth Kirkhill would reflect communities, with the High Stanners area is separated from Morpeth Kirkhill ward by a very steep hill and green space, which we considered represents a substantial barrier. We examined alternative options that utilised the river, but were unable to identify any viable ward with good electoral equality, using this as a boundary. Having visited the area, we considered that the Allery Banks and Carlisle Park form a clear boundary between the north and south of the town and this would allow for good electoral equality. We therefore used this boundary for our proposed three-member Morpeth North Central ward. We acknowledged the concerns about the creation of three-member ward, but did not consider it possible to create a different warding pattern in this area, without arbitrarily splitting an area of the town centre and transferring to the more rural area to the north.

118 We also adjusted the boundary between Morpeth Kirkhill and Morpeth South wards in order to improve electoral equality.

119 Given the lack of community identity argument and the need to improve the proposed levels of electoral equality, we acknowledged that we had moved away from locally generated proposals. We therefore requested that if local people did not consider that our proposals reflected community identities, we would welcome demonstrable evidence in relation to wards during Stage Three.

120 At Stage Three the Council objected to our proposals for the Morpeth town area. It argued that the area has 'two natural boundaries, the river and the railway line',

adding that 'every effort should be made to use these boundaries'. It also objected to the proposal to include Low Stobhill and Kingswell in Morpeth South ward, arguing that 'the railway line forms a natural and distinctive barrier, and defines the communities', adding that there is a Stobhill Residents Association. The Council also listed a number of other community groups, but did not explain their role, or the interaction between them and the areas that they cover. It also acknowledged that the boundary between Morpeth South and Morpeth Kirkhill wards is 'arbitrary, and could be adjusted without difficulty'. Finally, it argued that reduction of one councillor might enable better electoral equality, but it did not put forward any proposals for new ward boundaries.

121 The Council also put forward comments on behalf of the Conservative Group, who objected to the creation of a three-member ward of Morpeth North Central ward. It also argued that we did not specify our proposals for a Fulbeck ward. The Council's Labour Group also objected to our proposal for Morpeth, in particular the size of the Morpeth North ward. It suggested the creation of a single-member ward in the area and a two-member ward. It also rejected the Council's suggestion that there could be a reduction to nine councillors for the whole of the Morpeth town area.

122 We have given careful consideration to the evidence received. We note the objections to our proposals for the Morpeth town area and in particular the creation of a three-member ward in the north of the town. We also note the argument that we should utilise the river and railway line.

123 In terms of the use of natural features, as stated in our draft recommendations, we considered options to use the river, but were unable to find satisfactory arrangements. In addition to this, having visited the area, we consider that the Allery Banks and Carlisle Park form a clear boundary between the north and south of the town and also allow for good electoral equality. We acknowledge the concerns over our three-member Morpeth Central North ward, but again, have not received any evidence or alternative proposals.

124 The Council's Conservative Group mentioned our rejection of a Fulbeck ward. This would have included the area of housing to the north of Davies Wood and the river Wansbeck (including roads like Badgers Green and Curlew Hill). We considered that this area was a little separated from the town. However, as stated in our draft recommendations, this area alone would have 14% fewer electors than the borough average and we did not consider there to be any evidence to justify this. We considered whether it was possible to transfer any area, for example around the north of Newgate Street or Mitford Road, but considered that this area had better links with the town centre than the Fulbeck area. Therefore, given the poor electoral equality and the lack of evidence of community links we decided to create the three-member Morpeth Central North ward.

125 On balance, given the evidence received and a lack of alternative suggestions, that secure good electoral equality, we are confirming our proposals for a Morpeth Central North ward as final.

126 As stated in paragraph 116 we are confirming the transfer of the Stobhill Manor development to our Morpeth Stobhill ward. We also note the objections to moving away from the railway line for the boundary between Morpeth Stobhill and Morpeth South. While we concur that the railway line forms a strong boundary, as stated in

our draft recommendations, we examined using the railway line as a ward boundary at Stage Two. Given that we are adopting the proposal to transfer Stobhill Manor into Morpeth Stobhill, as the draft recommendations highlighted, the resulting two-member ward would have too many electors (16% more than the borough average by 2009).

127 Although the Council provided some evidence, we do not consider that it provided sufficient evidence of community identity to persuade us to move away from our proposals. However, we do note a small anomaly with the ward boundary for the Morpeth Stobhill ward. We note that transferring Low Stobhill into Morpeth South ward transfers an area with no direct road links to the ward. We therefore propose transferring this back to Morpeth Stobhill ward. This would worsen electoral equality in Morpeth Stobhill from 3% to 8% by 2009, but improve Morpeth South from 6% to 1%. We note the concerns about the Kingswell area, but as stated above, we are unable to transfer this without worsening electoral equality in Morpeth Stobhill to 16%. Indeed, on our visit to the Morpeth area we noted that Shields Road provides access for Kingswell under the railway line towards the town centre and the south of the town. We also note that under the existing arrangements, the area to the south of the railway line is part of Morpeth Central ward. We therefore propose confirming Morpeth Stobhill as final, subject to the minor amendment described above.

128 In the remainder of Morpeth we received no objections to our proposals and note the Council's comments that the boundary between Morpeth Kirkhill and Morpeth South is 'arbitrary'. We acknowledge this comment, but consider that the boundary we proposed provides a reasonable division between the area, while ensuring that electors have good access into their wards. We therefore propose confirming our draft recommendations for Morpeth Kirkhill and Morpeth South as final.

129 Tables 1 and 2 (on pages 9 and 11, respectively) provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our final recommendations for Morpeth Kirkhill, Morpeth North Central, Morpeth South and Morpeth Stobhill wards. Our final recommendations are shown on Map 1 and Map 4 accompanying this report.

Ponteland East, Ponteland North, Ponteland South and Ponteland West wards

130 Ponteland parish is located in the south of the borough and is divided into four parish wards based on borough wards. The parish comprises the two-member borough wards of Ponteland East, Ponteland North, Ponteland South and Ponteland West. Table 4 (on page 18–19) outlines the existing electoral variances for 2004 and also the variances that the wards are forecast to have by 2009 if the existing arrangements remained in place.

131 During Stage One we received one representation in relation to Ponteland parish. The Council submitted five sets of proposals, on behalf of the Council's Conservative Group, Liberal Democrat Groups and the Green Party, a joint proposal from the officers and Independent Group and another from East Chevington, Longhorsley and Thirston parish councils.

132 The Green Party proposed a seven-member Ponteland ward comprising Ponteland parish. The remaining four groups all proposed to retain the existing two-

member Ponteland East, Ponteland South and Ponteland West wards. The Conservatives and Liberal Democrats both proposed to retain the existing Ponteland North ward. While the officers/Independents and parish councils proposed a new Ponteland North ward comprising Ponteland North ward and Whalton parish. Under all four schemes, no ward would vary by more than 9% from the borough average by 2009. We received very limited community identity argument to support these proposals.

133 We gave careful consideration to the evidence received, and while we noted that all the proposals received for Ponteland area attained broad consensus, in light of limited community identity evidence, we explored alternative options to try and improve electoral equality and boundaries. We also noted the comments of the Labour Group that the boundaries for the whole parish should be revisited. We considered that the existing boundaries could be linked to clearer ground features to provide more logical boundaries.

134 Having visited the area, we found that four wards with good electoral equality could be formed based on what we consider are distinct areas of the parish. We therefore proposed a three-member Ponteland North East, three-member Ponteland South, single-member Ponteland West and single-member Ponteland North ward. We considered that these wards secured improved electoral equality and utilised stronger boundaries.

135 At Stage Three the Council objected to our draft recommendations for Ponteland, expressing support for the views of Ponteland Parish Council. It stated that the 'Council recognises and supports the work carried out by Ponteland Parish Council, and other community groups, to try and represent the village as a whole and cohesive unit. The fact that the majority of the current wards incorporate parts of the old village with the newer housing developments has greatly assisted the attempt to portray the village as an entirety'. It added that it 'finds it difficult to understand why the Boundary Committee wish to change the established [...] electoral arrangements, with a massive, and [...] confusing realignment of the wards [...] when minor adjustments to boundaries [would] ensure all wards are within the 10% tolerance requirement'.

136 The Council also put forward comments on behalf of its Conservative Group. The Conservative Group also objected to our proposal for Ponteland, in particular the proposal to create a mix of two- and three-member wards. It argued that the existing wards could be maintained, with only minor amendments to improve electoral equality. It proposed moving a number of properties on Darras Road from Ponteland East to Ponteland North wards. It also proposed transferring electors from High Callerton and Hold House from Ponteland East to Ponteland South ward.

137 Ponteland Liberal Democrats also objected to our draft recommendations for Ponteland, arguing that the existing electoral inequality would be addressed by housing future housing growth. It also objected to our proposals to create a mixture of two- and three-member wards. It stated that the 'development of largely executive housing on the Darras Hall Estate, to the south of the river [...] has led to many residents and visitors having the disconcerting impression of a village divided in two halves'. It added that 'the Parish Council has worked hard to try and represent the village as a whole and cohesive unit. The fact that the majority of the current wards

incorporate parts of the old village with the newer housing developments has greatly assisted the Council’.

138 Ponteland Parish Council objected to our draft recommendations, expressing a preference for the existing electoral arrangements, stating that they ‘recognise the natural affinity of the rural sector of the parish to the remainder of the community’. Councillor Ramsay also objected to our proposals in Ponteland. He objected to the creation of a mixture of two- and three-member wards. He also objected to the impact of the proposed wards on the parish electoral arrangements.

139 We have given careful consideration to the evidence received. We note the general objections to our proposed warding of Ponteland and note that there is only limited community identity evidence. However, we also note the concerns that these wards were originally created to purposely combine the old parts of the town with the new in order to prevent divisions between the different communities.

140 Under our draft recommendations, given the lack of community identity evidence in the Stage One submission we investigated alternative proposals to secure good electoral equality and boundaries. Following our tour of the area we considered it possible to create electoral arrangements that secured good electoral equality without mixing the older part of the town with the newer part. We therefore sought to create stronger ward boundaries, albeit with only minor improvements to electoral equality. We had also noted that the Labour Group recommended a complete review of the boundaries in this area.

141 However, on reflection and in light of the concerns raised by respondents, we acknowledge that these boundaries may not reflect a local desire to avoid separating the old and new areas of the town. We also note the arguments that the existing boundaries could be maintained, with only minor amendments to secure improvements in electoral equality. Therefore, on balance, we propose reverting back to the existing boundaries, subject to two minor amendments proposed by the Conservatives to improve electoral equality. We propose transferring 71 electors on Darras road from Ponteland East to Ponteland North ward and 34 electors from High Callerton and Hold House from Ponteland East to Ponteland South ward. As a result, Ponteland East, Ponteland North, Ponteland South and Ponteland West would have 4%, 6%, 5% and 4% fewer electors than the average by 2009.

142 Tables 1 and 2 (on pages 9 and 11, respectively) provide details of the constituent parts and electoral variances of our final recommendations for Ponteland East, Ponteland North, Ponteland South and Ponteland West wards. Our final recommendations are shown on Map 1, Map 5 and Map 6 accompanying this report.

Conclusions

143 Table 7, below, shows the impact of our final recommendations on electoral equality, comparing them with the current arrangements based on 2004 and 2009 electorate figures.

Table 7: Comparison of current and recommended electoral arrangements

	Current arrangements		Final recommendations	
	2004	2009	2004	2009
Number of councillors	33	33	33	33
Number of wards	20	20	17	17
Average number of electors per councillor	1,178	1,317	1,178	1,317
Number of wards with a variance more than 10% from the average	8	9	3	3
Number of wards with a variance more than 20% from the average	2	2	1	0

144 As shown in Table 7, our final recommendations for Castle Morpeth Borough Council would result in a reduction in the number of wards with an electoral variance of more than 10% from eight to three. By 2009 only three wards are forecast to have an electoral variance of more than 10%. We propose retaining council size of 33 members.

Final recommendation

Castle Morpeth Borough Council should comprise 33 councillors serving 17 wards, as detailed and named in Tables 1 and 2, and illustrated on the large maps accompanying this report.

Parish and town council electoral arrangements

145 As part of a FER the Committee can make recommendations for new electoral arrangements for parishes. Where there is no impact on the Council's electoral arrangements, the Committee will generally be content to put forward for consideration proposals from parish and town councils for changes to parish electoral arrangements in FERs. However, the Boundary Committee will usually wish to see a degree of consensus between the Council and the parish council concerned. Proposals should be supported by evidence, illustrating why changes to parish electoral arrangements are required. The Boundary Committee cannot recommend changes to the external boundaries of parishes as part of a FER.

146 Responsibility for reviewing and implementing changes to the electoral arrangements of existing parishes, outside of an electoral review conducted by the

Boundary Committee, lies with borough councils.² If a borough council wishes to make an Order amending the electoral arrangements of a parish that has been subject to an electoral arrangements Order made by either the Secretary of State or the Electoral Commission within the past five years, the consent of the Commission is required.

147 During Stage One we received proposals for revised parish council electoral arrangements from Wallington Demesne Parish Council. It requested the retention of the existing council size, but given future housing developments and the effect this would have on the allocation of councillors between parish wards, it requested the abolition of its parish wards.

148 In our draft recommendations, we considered it would provide effective and convenient local government and therefore put the Parish Council's proposals forward for consultation. At Stage Three, we received no further comments on these proposals and are therefore confirming them as final.

Final recommendation

Wallington Demesne Parish Council should comprise nine parish councillors, as at present. All nine Councillors should represent the whole parish.

149 When reviewing electoral arrangements, we are required to comply as far as possible with the rules set out in Schedule 11 to the 1972 Act. The Schedule provides that if a parish is to be divided between different borough wards it must also be divided into parish wards, so that each parish ward lies wholly within a single ward of the borough. Accordingly, we propose consequential warding arrangements for the parishes of Hepscoth, Morpeth and Ponteland to reflect the proposed borough wards.

150 The parish of Hepscoth is currently served by seven parish councillors. At Stage One, we received proposals to include part of Hepscoth parish (part of Stobhill Manor housing development) with the remainder of the development in Morpeth Stobhill ward. As a result of our proposed Stannington & Mitford and Morpeth Stobhill wards, we created two new Hepscoth parish wards of Hepscoth parish. We proposed a Hepscoth parish ward based on Hepscoth village and a Hepscoth Stobhill Manor parish ward based on that part of Stobhill Manor housing estate within Hepscoth parish. We allocated parish councillors to each parish ward based on the number of electors in each ward. Under our draft recommendations, Hepscoth Parish Council comprised seven parish councillors, as at present, representing two wards: Hepscoth (returning five councillors) and Hepscoth Stobhill Manor (returning two councillors).

151 At Stage Three, we received a mixture of support and objections to this proposal. However, as described in paragraph 116, given the evidence received and based on our tour of the area, we consider this proposal reflects community identity. We therefore propose adopting it as part of our final recommendations.

² Such reviews must be conducted in accordance with section 17 of the Local Government and Rating Act 1997.

Final recommendation

Hepscott Parish Council should comprise seven parish councillors, as at present, representing two wards: Hepscott (returning five councillors) and Hepscott Stobhill Manor (returning two councillors). The parish ward boundaries should reflect the proposed borough wards in the area, as illustrated and named on Maps 1 and 4.

152 The parish of Morpeth is currently served by 15 councillors representing five parish wards of Central, Kirkhill, North, South and Stobhill, each represented by three town councillors.

153 During Stage One we did not receive any proposals to amend the number or distribution of town councillors or any specific parish warding proposals for Morpeth parish. However, as a result of our draft recommendations for four new borough wards within Morpeth parish (outlined in paragraphs 117 and 118) we amended the town wards in Morpeth parish to reflect our proposals. We allocated town councillors to each town ward based on the number of electors in each ward. Under our draft recommendations, Morpeth Town Council comprised 15 councillors, as at present, representing four wards: Morpeth North Central (returning five councillors), Morpeth Kirkhill (returning three councillors), Morpeth South (returning four councillors) and Morpeth Stobhill (returning three councillors).

154 At Stage Three, we only received limited comments on our proposals for Morpeth. Given the evidence received, we only propose a very minor boundary amendment (outlined in paragraph 127) we propose amending the parish ward boundary to reflect this amendment, given the number of electors involved, we do not propose any amendments to the allocation of parish councillors.

Final recommendation

Morpeth Town Council should comprise 15 councillors, as at present, representing four wards: Morpeth North Central (returning five councillors), Morpeth Kirkhill (returning three councillors), Morpeth South (returning four councillors) and Morpeth Stobhill (returning three councillors). The parish ward boundaries should reflect the proposed borough ward boundaries in the area, as illustrated and named on Maps 1 and 4.

155 The parish of Ponteland is currently served by 12 councillors representing four parish wards of East, North, South and West, each represented by three parish councillors.

156 During Stage One we did not receive any proposals to amend the number or distribution of parish councillors or any specific parish warding proposals. In view of our recommendations for four new borough wards within Ponteland parish (outlined in paragraph 134) we amended the parish wards to reflect our proposed borough ward boundaries. We also allocated parish councillors to each parish ward on the basis of the number of electors in each ward. Under our draft recommendations, Ponteland Parish Council comprised 12 councillors, as at present, representing four wards: Ponteland North (returning two councillors), Ponteland North East (returning four councillors), Ponteland South (returning four councillors) and Ponteland West (returning two councillors).

157 At Stage Three, we received objections to our draft recommendations for Ponteland, both in terms of parish and borough ward arrangements. As stated in paragraph 141 we propose reverting back to the existing arrangements, subject to some minor modifications. These modifications only affect small numbers of electors and therefore we are reverting back to the existing parish arrangements, subject to the two small boundary amendments outlined in paragraph 140.

Final recommendation

Ponteland Parish Council should comprise 12 councillors, as at present, representing four wards: Ponteland North (returning three councillors), Ponteland North East (returning three councillors), Ponteland South (returning three councillors) and Ponteland West (returning three councillors). The parish ward boundaries should reflect the proposed borough ward boundaries in the area, as illustrated and named on Maps 1, 5 and 6.

158 We also note the Council's proposal to divide Belsay parish into two parish wards, but it has provided no argument for why it is proposing this. We therefore do not propose adopting this proposal.

6 What happens next?

159 Having completed our review of electoral arrangements in Castle Morpeth and submitted our final recommendations to the Electoral Commission, we have fulfilled our statutory obligation.³

160 It is now up to the Electoral Commission to decide whether or not to endorse our recommendations, with or without modification, and to implement them by means of an Order. Such an Order will not be made before 26 September 2006, and the Electoral Commission will normally consider all written representation made to them by that date.

161 All further correspondence concerning our recommendations and the matters discussed in this report should be addressed to:

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

Fax: 020 7271 0667

Email: implementation@electoralcommission.org.uk

The contact details above should only be used for implementation purposes.

The full report is available to download at www.boundarycommittee.org.uk.

³ Under the Local Government Act 1992 (as amended by SI No. 2001/3962).

7 Mapping

Final recommendations for Castle Morpeth

162 The following maps illustrate our proposed ward boundaries for Castle Morpeth.

- **Sheet 1, Map 1** illustrates in outline form the proposed wards for Castle Morpeth, including constituent parishes.
- **Sheet 2, Map 2** illustrates the parish of Tritlington and West Chevington.
- **Sheet 3, Map 3** illustrates the parish of Tritlington and West Chevington.
- **Sheet 4, Map 4** illustrates the parish of Morpeth.
- **Sheet 5, Map 5** illustrates the parish of Ponteland.
- **Sheet 6, Map 6** illustrates the parish of Ponteland.

Appendix A

Glossary and abbreviations

AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty)	A landscape whose distinctive character and natural beauty are so outstanding that it is in the nation's interest to safeguard it
Boundary Committee	The Boundary Committee for England is a committee of the Electoral Commission, responsible for undertaking electoral reviews
Constituent areas	The geographical areas that make up any one ward, expressed in parishes or existing wards, or parts of either
Consultation	An opportunity for interested parties to comment and make proposals at key stages during the review
Council size	The number of councillors elected to serve a council
Order (or electoral change Order)	A legal document which implements changes to the electoral arrangements of a local authority
Electoral Commission	An independent body that was set up by the UK Parliament. Its mission is to foster public confidence and participation by promoting integrity, involvement and effectiveness in the democratic process
Electoral equality	A measure of ensuring that every person's vote is of equal worth

Electoral imbalance	Where there is a large difference between the number of electors represented by a councillor and the average for the borough
Electorate	People in the authority who are registered to vote in local government elections
FER (or further electoral review)	A further review of the electoral arrangements of a local authority following significant shifts in the electorate since the last periodic electoral review conducted between 1996 and 2004
Multi-member ward	A ward represented by more than one councillor and usually not more than three councillors
National Park	<p>The 12 National Parks in England and Wales were designated under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949 and will soon be joined by the new designation of the South Downs. The definition of a National Park is:</p> <p>‘An extensive area of beautiful and relatively wild country in which, for the nation's benefit and by appropriate national decision and action:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – the characteristic landscape beauty is strictly preserved; – access and facilities for open-air enjoyment are amply provided; – wildlife and buildings and places of architectural and historic interest are suitably protected; – established farming use is effectively maintained’
Number of electors per councillor	The total number of electors in a local authority divided by the number of councillors

Over-represented	Where there are fewer electors per councillor in a ward than the average the electors can be described as being over-represented
Parish	A specific and defined area of land within a single borough enclosed within a parish boundary. There are over 10,000 parishes in England, which provide the first tier of representation to their local residents
Parish council	A body elected by residents of the parish who are on the electoral register, which serves and represents the area defined by the parish boundaries
Parish electoral arrangements	The total number of parish councillors; the number, names and boundaries of parish wards; and the number of councillors for each ward
Parish ward	A particular area of a parish, defined for electoral, administrative and representational purposes. Eligible electors vote in whichever parish ward they live for candidate or candidates they wish to represent them on the parish council
PER (or periodic electoral review)	A review of the electoral arrangements of all local authorities in England, undertaken periodically. The last programme of PERs was undertaken between 1996 and 2004 by the Boundary Committee for England and its predecessor, the now-defunct Local Government Commission for England

Political management arrangements	The Local Government Act 2000 enabled local authorities to modernise their decision making process. Councils could choose from three broad categories; a directly elected mayor and cabinet, a cabinet with a leader, or a directly elected mayor and council manager. Whichever of the categories it adopted became the new political management structure for the council
Under-represented	Where there are more electors per councillor in a ward than the average the electors can be described as being under-represented
Variance (or electoral variance)	How far the number of electors per councillor in a ward varies in percentage terms from the borough average
Ward	A specific area of a district or borough, defined for electoral, administrative and representational purposes. Eligible electors vote in whichever ward they are registered for the candidate or candidates they wish to represent them on the borough council

Appendix B

Code of practice on written consultation

The Cabinet Office's November 2000 *Code of Practice on Written Consultation* (available at www.cabinet-office.gov.uk/regulation/Consultation/Code.htm), requires all government departments and agencies to adhere to certain criteria, set out below, on the conduct of public consultations. Public bodies, such as the Boundary Committee for England, are encouraged to follow the *Code*.

The *Code of Practice* applies to consultation documents published after 1 January 2001, which should reproduce the criteria, give explanations of any departures, and confirm that the criteria have otherwise been followed.

Table B1: The Boundary Committee for England's compliance with Code criteria

Criteria	Compliance/departure
Timing of consultation should be built into the planning process for a policy (including legislation) or service from the start, so that it has the best prospect of improving the proposals concerned, and so that sufficient time is left for it at each stage.	We comply with this requirement.
It should be clear who is being consulted, about what questions, in what timescale and for what purpose.	We comply with this requirement.
A consultation document should be as simple and concise as possible. It should include a summary, in two pages at most, of the main questions it seeks views on. It should make it as easy as possible for readers to respond, make contact or complain.	We comply with this requirement.
Documents should be made widely available, with the fullest use of electronic means (though not to the exclusion of others), and effectively drawn to the attention of all interested groups and individuals.	We comply with this requirement.
Sufficient time should be allowed for considered responses from all groups with an interest. Twelve weeks should be the standard minimum period for a consultation.	We comply with this requirement.
Responses should be carefully and open-mindedly analysed, and the results made widely available, with an account of the views expressed, and reasons for decisions finally taken.	We comply with this requirement.
Departments should monitor and evaluate consultations, designating a consultation coordinator who will ensure the lessons are disseminated.	We comply with this requirement.