



Review Officer (North Hertfordshire)
Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE)
PO Box 133
Blyth
NE24 9FE

8 January 2023

Dear Sir / Madam,

I am writing to express my views on the proposals that the LGBCE has put forward for a new pattern of wards for North Hertfordshire, on which you are currently consulting (the closing date being tomorrow, 9 January 2023).

Background

I submitted a response to your previous consultation phase in August 2022. The following text is copied from that response as it is still valid.

I am writing in a personal capacity and all views expressed are entirely my own. However, it is appropriate I should give some relevant background about myself.

I have lived in Hitchin (in North Hertfordshire) since 1993 and have had involvement with elections in North Hertfordshire at various times during that period. Between 2006 and 2010 I stood (unsuccessfully) as a candidate in local elections for the Green Party of England and Wales and was its election agent for the entire district for most of that period. I was not a member of any political party between 2011 and late 2019, although still followed the activities of the local councils as a member of the public and a trustee of a charity operating across the district. Since late 2019 I have been a member of the Labour Party and in 2021 and 2022 was election agent (for both Labour Party and Labour and Co-operative Party candidates) for the wards and county divisions in North Hertfordshire that overlapped with Hitchin & Harpenden and Stevenage constituencies (as well as for one county division in Letchworth in 2021).

I would reiterate that the consultation response I am making here is not on behalf of any of the organisations with which I currently am, or have been, associated.

Principles that I consider to be important

In my previous consultation response I set out a number of principles that I considered should be followed for good local government. These were:

1. The total number of councillors should be an odd number, if possible.
2. As far as possible, urban wards should have 2 or 3 members.
3. Rural wards should ideally have 2 members, but in some cases 1 member would be more appropriate if the size of the ward would be too large.
4. Wards should, as far as possible, avoid combining an urban area and a rural area given the different needs of the communities.

My previous consultation response explains the rationale for these views.

I have judged the proposals against these, as well as considering whether the proposals seem reasonable generally.

I would likely be opposed to any change following the consultation that moved from complying with these principles to not complying with them.

Views on the LGBCE proposal

I have read the LGBCE's full report ("your report") and, where it is helpful to do so, inspected the associated interactive map on the website. I have also read the consultation response submitted by North Herts Council.

Number of councillors

I support the proposal that there should be 51 councillors as that satisfies my Principle 1.

Names of the wards

I am generally content with the proposed names for the wards although if significant changes are made to boundaries in response to the consultation then it should of course be checked by the LGBCE that they remain appropriate. In response to your specific question in paragraph 64 of your report, I prefer the name "Baldock West" to "Baldock Town".

Naming of wards is not a matter I feel strongly about generally and I am open to other suggestions made by other consultees if the LGBCE considers them justified. For example, the alternative suggestions for ward names put forward by North Herts Council in its consultation response seem reasonable to me.

Variances in electoral equality

I consider a definition of -10% to +10% representing 'good electoral equality' to be reasonable. I consider it tolerable that (as mentioned in paragraph 22 of your report) there is one ward that very slightly does not have 'good electoral equality'. In my view it would be acceptable for there to be another ward (or even two wards) that were slightly outside 'good electoral equality' if it were necessary to address the key issue I note below. However, otherwise I consider that you should continue to aim for 'good electoral equality' when considering changes following the consultation responses.

Royston

I support the proposals for the North Herts Council district wards in Royston. I comment later on the proposals for the Royston Town Council parish wards.

North-east parishes and Baldock

I have significant concerns about the proposal for a 3-member ward of Ashwell and Weston. I note that the electorate is projected to grow from 3,844 in 2024 to 6,797 in 2028. As I understand it, most of the new residences will be similar in nature to, and close to, the town of Baldock (effectively an expansion of the town). As I mention in my Principle 4 above, I am opposed to combining an urban and a rural area. I also consider wards that are large geographically to be undesirable as it is harder for councillors to service these wards (with this view underpinning part of my Principle 3 above). I therefore hope that the LGBCE will reconsider this and be able to come up with an alternative that does not result in a large combined urban and rural ward.

In this regard, I note that in paragraph 53 of your report you state that you are concerned about creating parish wards of the parish councils of Bygrave and Clothall that, for a while, will have insufficient electors to be viable. I agree that this is undesirable in principle. However, I would note that while Bygrave seeks to elect 5 parish councillors¹, only one individual stood for election in 2019² and only four did so in 2015³; these were all therefore elected uncontested. From inspecting the Parish Council minutes on its website, it appears that Bygrave Parish Council has even struggled to co-opt parish councillors outside elections to make up the numbers. Meanwhile, Clothall has a twice-yearly parish meeting⁴ and does not currently have an elected parish council. As far as I can tell no-one in Bygrave or Clothall parishes has cast a vote for a parish councillor at the ballot box for many years. In my view creating a temporarily undesirable parish ward structure (if that is how it is regarded by the LGBCE) is unlikely in practice to significantly impact the democratic operations of either parish and should be accepted as a tolerable solution given the significant resulting benefit to democracy of improving the warding arrangements in Baldock and the rural areas to the east, which should benefit most of the residents in these parishes.

I am open minded as to the best solution here, but one that would end up with the current proposed Baldock East ward combining with the planned new developments to create a 2-member ward and the remaining rural areas in the proposed Ashwell and Weston ward to comprise a 2-member ward (or, if good electoral equality can be achieved, two 1-member wards) would be far preferable to what is currently proposed. I am happy to support the way forward proposed by North Herts Council in its consultation responses amongst any other options that would achieve the desired result.

I support the proposals for Ermine ward, although would be open to your option of transferring Kelshall parish to the Ashwell and Weston ward (mentioned in paragraph 57 of your report) if it were necessary to resolve the issue above. Otherwise I agree it is best to leave it in Ermine ward.

¹ See the 2019 notice of election: https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/northherts-cms/files/Notice%20of%20Election%20-%20Election%20of%20Parish%20Councillors%20-%2002%20May%202019_0.pdf

² See <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/northherts-cms/files/Bygrave%20-%20Notice%20of%20Uncontested%20Election.pdf>

³ See <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/northherts-cms/files/Bygrave.pdf>

⁴ For the area known as 'Clothall with Luffenhall'

I support the proposals for Baldock West ward, although would be open to the boundaries dividing Baldock West and Baldock East wards changing if it enabled the issue identified above to be resolved. I note that the proposed Baldock West ward has significant negative electoral equality (-8%) so this could accommodate more residences if a resulting 2-member Baldock East ward would otherwise be too large.

Letchworth

I support the proposals for the Letchworth wards. They meet all my principles and I consider that they segment the different communities within the town as well as can be expected in a boundary review.

However, I also consider the suggestion by North Herts Council in its consultation response (to transfer 12 electors living in the area north of Wilbury Road between the Pix Brook and Stotfold Road from the proposed Letchworth Grange ward to the proposed Letchworth Wilbury ward) to have merit and support it.

South-west parishes

I note that the arguments I made above for accepting non-standard parish warding arrangements for Bygrave and Clothall parishes do not apply to Graveley parish; at its last parish election in 2019, 8 candidates contested 5 seats on its parish council⁵. I therefore can more readily accept that it is temporarily undesirable to create a parish ward with a small number of electors in this parish. Consequently, as I have not been able to come up with an alternative, I support the proposal for Great Ashby ward (despite it not encompassing the expected new developments), as I do the proposals for the other six south-west parish wards.

It is good to see that there are no proposed 3-member wards in these rural areas. I also support, as you have done, prioritising achieving good electoral equality in 2-member wards over giving parishes their own 1-member ward where that would not be the case.

Hitchin

I support the proposals for the Hitchin wards. They meet all my principles and I consider that they segment the different communities within the town as well as can be expected in a boundary review.

⁵ See <https://www.north-herts.gov.uk/sites/default/files/Graveley%20Parish.pdf>

As I live close to the area and know it well, I was interested to read the suggestion put forward by a consultee in paragraph 124 that the Wilbury industrial estate better fits in Hitchin Walsworth ward than Hitchin Bearton ward. I would disagree with that. That area has its own distinct character and in my view would fit no better in one ward than the other; residents will often travel through Hitchin Bearton ward into Hitchin town centre and often travel through Hitchin Walsworth ward when travelling in the direction of Letchworth. I note that the LGBCE does not proposing moving this area, but wished to comment in case anyone else raises this point again during this phase of the consultation: my view is that the LGBCE should be neutral on its location. This appears to be the conclusion that the LGBCE has reached in paragraph 135.

In paragraph 139, you invited views on whether more of the Bancroft area should be brought into Hitchin Priory ward. In my view it would be reasonable for the sides of the roads of Bancroft and Hermitage Road that are in Hitchin Bearton ward to be transferred to Hitchin Priory ward as many of the residences here are flats above shops and therefore are closer in nature to other residences in the town centre of Hitchin Priory ward. However, I do not consider it likely that residents in these properties would feel strongly about it. In addition, I note that to move any residences from Hitchin Bearton ward into Hitchin Priory ward would move both projected electoral variances in 2028 away from 0%. In my view it is therefore better to leave the ward boundaries in this part of Hitchin unchanged. I would be opposed to Whinbush Road (or any of the roads off it) moving into Hitchin Priory ward as these roads are quite similar to other roads in Hitchin Bearton ward and in my view are more naturally linked with the rest of Hitchin Bearton ward.

Royston Town Council

Most of my focus has been on the District Council ward boundaries. I have not investigated the proposed parish council ward boundaries for Royston. Perhaps I should not comment on these as I do not live in the town and am therefore not a stakeholder. However, I would remark that it seems odd to me to have a mixture of large (3-5 member) and small (1 member) parish wards. If other consultation responses express dissatisfaction with the proposals and lead you to review the proposed Royston Town Council ward boundaries, I would suggest aiming to ensure that each parish ward in Royston has at least three parish councillors, for better balance.

Yours faithfully,

[Submitted electronically and therefore not physically signed]

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of the sender.

North Hertfordshire District Council

Personal Details:

Name:

E-mail:

Postcode:

Organisation Name:

Comment text:

My response to the consultation on the proposed boundaries for North Hertfordshire Council is in the form of a letter in the attached PDF document.

Uploaded Documents:

Download (https://consultation.lgbce.org.uk/download_document?file=draft%2F1673221862_LGCBCE+response+20230108.pdf)