

EAST HERTS COUNCIL

THE COUNCIL – 2 NOVEMBER 2005

REPORT BY CHAIRMAN OF POLICY
DEVELOPMENT SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

10. ELECTORAL COMMISSION CONSULTATION

WARDS AFFECTED: All

'D' RECOMMENDATION - that the attached response be approved for submission to the Electoral Commission.

1.0 Purpose/Summary of Report

1.1 This report summarises a consultation document issued by the Electoral Commission and offers a draft response at Appendix 'B10' (pages 151 - 153).

2.0 Contribution to the Council's Corporate Objectives

2.1 There are no direct links with the Council's Corporate Objectives. However the Council has a responsibility to influence the national debate regarding electoral reviews to ensure that the needs of local electors are represented.

3.0 Background

3.1 With the conclusion of its recent Periodic Electoral Review (PER) programme, the Electoral Commission has decided to undertake an evaluation of the policies and processes used to guide PERs in England. The evaluation includes seeking the views of a wide range of stakeholders, including local authorities.

3.2 A consultation document was therefore sent to this Council in September 2005 and circulated to all Members with an invitation to meet and discuss the document on 5 October 2005.

4.0 Response to the Electoral Commission

4.1 Ten Members attended the meeting, which was chaired by Cllr J O Ranger. The Electoral Commission's Director of Boundary Review gave a short presentation and took questions from Members.

4.2 Members discussed in turn each of the 14 questions contained in the consultation document. These are listed at Appendix 'A10' (pages 149 - 150).

4.3 Members reached unanimous agreement on each of the recommended responses as now appear at Appendix 'B10' (pages 151 - 153).

4.4 Following this evening's discussion, the Council's response will be sent to the Electoral Commission.

4.5 Members who are unable to attend, or members of the public, may send their views separately by noon on 25 November 2005 to:

The Electoral Commission
Attention: PER evaluation
Planning and Development Team
Trevelyan House
Great Peter Street
London SW1P 2HW

4.6 By summer 2006, the Commission will publish its proposals. Soon afterwards it will issue The Boundary Committee for England with new guidance for carrying out electoral reviews.

5.0 Consultation

5.1 The consultation document was sent to all Members for comment. Ten attended a discussion meeting and further debate is invited at this meeting.

5.2 A twelve week consultation of all other stakeholders is being undertaken by the Electoral Commission.

6.0 Legal Implications

6.1 None.

7.0 Financial Implications

7.1 None.

8.0 Human Resource Implications

8.1 None.

9.0 Risk Management Implications

9.1 None.

Background Papers

The full consultation document was supplied to all members and is available from the Electoral Commission's website at www.electoralcommission.org.uk

Contact Member: Cllr J O Ranger, Chairman of Policy Development Scrutiny Committee

Contact Officer: Jackie Sayers, Scrutiny Officer. Ext 1612

Consultation Questions

Q1 Are the three criteria: 1. having regard to identities and interests of communities, 2. effective and convenient local government, and 3. having a duty to achieve equality of representation, the most appropriate factors for determining electoral boundaries?

- Should all of the criteria be given equal weight?
- Is it appropriate to start, as the Commission does, with electoral equality or should there be a different approach?
- If a greater weight were given to community identity, would a higher level of electoral inequality be acceptable?

Q2 What evidence can the Commission use to understand community identity?

- Can community identity be recognised through the location of public facilities to identify the cores of communities?
- Should the Commission adopt this approach in its consideration of community identity?
- If it did, are there other public facilities that could be used and easily provided as evidence?

Q3 How far is it reasonable for the Commission to depart from electoral equality in reaching its decisions?

- Should this figure be higher or lower than the measure used of no more than 10% greater or lesser than the average number of electors per councillor for the whole area?
- Should the figure vary between different areas?

Q4 What evidence can the Commission use to indicate effective and convenient local government?

- How far do you agree with how we interpret effective and convenient local government for the purpose of defining electoral areas?
- Are there benefits in seeking a high degree of matching between boundaries (co-terminosity), especially in two-tier areas?
- Should the Commission set such a target for co-terminosity?
- Should the Commission set such a target for parish boundaries in district wards?

Q5 Are the criteria the Commission uses to decide when to undertake FERs – 30% of wards with a variance in excess of 10%, or one ward with a variance of over 30% – appropriate?

- Should the Commission invite requests from councils for a FER?
- What justification should the Commission require for reviews undertaken on grounds other than electoral equality?

Q6 Should the Commission make plans for another programme of PERs?

- What approach should the Commission take to the timing of another PER

<p>and the scheduling of reviews within it?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What factors should be taken into account when scheduling reviews?
<p>Q7 Should the Commission aim to review two-tier areas – districts and counties – simultaneously or overlap the county review with that of the districts?</p>
<p>Q8 Should the Commission maintain its current approach to determine council size or give more specific guidance, such as a formula or banding scheme, linked to councils’ electorate size and functions?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What evidence should be expected from respondents to argue the case for council size? • Would comparative information, such as indicators of the broad council size norms linked to electorate size, provide councils as well as the Commission with some guidance in considering proposals?
<p>Q9 Should the Commission continue to expect all local authorities to provide five-year electorate forecasts?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can the Commission support local authorities to provide better electorate forecasts with some guidance? If so, what form should any guidance take?
<p>Q10 Should the Commission be prescriptive about the number of councillors per ward or division throughout an area, such as having one councillor per ward or division?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Should the number of councillors for wards in metropolitan districts be as flexible as in other areas and should the Commission seek to change the legislation? • Should the Commission continue to set a maximum of three councillors for all electoral areas?
<p>Q11 Should the Commission make any changes to the length and nature of the stages of a PER?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would there be value in considering council size ahead of Stage One?
<p>Q12 What can the Commission do to make people more aware of, and get involved in, electoral reviews and the proposals being made?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Would more proactive local publicity stimulate more interest at appropriate stages and more informed responses?
<p>Q13 Should the name of a ward be open to change without the need for a review by The Boundary Committee for England?</p>
<p>Q14 Are there any other changes that the Commission could make to enhance the process for conducting electoral reviews?</p>



East Herts Council

Response to Periodic Electoral Review Consultation

October 2005

Introduction

East Herts Council welcomes this opportunity to contribute our views on the electoral review process. We are especially grateful to Archie Gall, Director for Boundary Review, for visiting us when we met to formulate our response.

For the purposes of this consultation we found it necessary to assume that there will be no change to the political structure, and in another forum would stress the need to settle the uncertainty on this issue.

We also agreed that at any future review we would start from the premise that our council could expect to increase from 50 Members to 55. There is already a pressure here to increase the number of councillors in our towns, but not the villages. Any agenda for reducing the number of councillors would be robustly challenged.

Finally, it is also important to say that this council's district is 100% parished. This naturally influences our views, particularly on matters such as community identity.

Cllr Mike Carver
Leader East Herts Council

Responses

Question 1

Community identity should have a greater importance than equality of numbers. We would be prepared to see a variation of up to 20% in electoral inequality.

Question 2

A sense of community is easy to identify in our villages and some of our town community centres have brought communities together. Community identity in the towns is affected by newly built additions; the older core of

the towns feel separate from the newer fringes which also build up their own identity.

In most cases we would find it difficult to cite public facilities as evidence of a discrete community.

Question 3

As at question 1, we feel that it is reasonable for the Commission to depart from electoral equality by up to 20%. This figure may vary between areas and there needs to be scope for local assessment of this.

Question 4

We agree that it is essential to seek a high degree of matching between boundaries. Ours is a two tier area – or three tier including our town and parish councils. We feel it is essential that elections are co-ordinated, starting at the parish level.

Question 5

We agree that it is appropriate to decide to undertake a further electoral review under the given criteria.

Whilst we agree that the Commission should invite requests for an FER, we also suggest that councils be given the option to carry out a self assessment.

Question 6

We do not want to see another programme of PERs. Rather we would prefer a rolling programme and this would include self assessment.

Question 7

A review in two tier areas should allow for the county review to be completed shortly after the district one; within a maximum of 12 months.

Question 8

Whilst the scatter graph of electors per councillor reveals a clear need for some rationalisation, we would not wish to see an over prescriptive approach by the Commission. Certainly councils will need guidance, especially if conducting a self assessment, but this should not be formulaic or rigid.

Question 9

We agree that all councils should continue to provide five-year forecasts, but suggest that the information provided by councils to the regional planning body be used.

Question 10

We would not wish to see the Commission being prescriptive about the number of councillors per ward. This is a matter for local solutions, although we would agree that a maximum of three councillors per ward is correct.

Question 11

Setting the size of the council should be a first step: in our own case we would start from the premise that our council could expect to increase from 50 Members to 55. The rest of the review process should then be shortened and this could be helped by the use of self assessment and a rolling programme.

Question 12

The question of public engagement is complex. However, for the purposes of this question we do not think that ideas such as a travelling roadshow would be cost-effective. With sufficient notice, we would offer space within our community magazine and many councils would probably do the same.

Question 13

We agree that changing the name of a ward should be initiated and progressed locally. However, there is a role for the Electoral Commission to give final approval of any name chosen.

Question 14

We have no additional suggestions beyond that of introducing self assessment.