

TRING TOWN COUNCIL - 20 FEBRUARY 2006
RESPONSE TO DRAFT RECOMMENDATIONS OF
BOUNDARY COMMITTEE FOR DACORUM, NOVEMBER 2005

REPORT BY COUNCILLORS MRS HEARN AND JAMESON
ON BEHALF OF CONSERVATIVE GROUP

Summary and Conclusions

1. We recommend the Council:-
 - i) To oppose the proposal to combine Aldbury and Wigginton with Tring East (paras 2-13).
 - ii) To oppose changes in Borough Ward boundaries within Tring (paras 14-17).
 - iii) To support the creation of a separate Town Council ward for New Mill and Bulbourne (paras 18-22).
 - iv) To send copies of the Council's response to Dacorum Borough Council, Aldbury and Wigginton Parish Councils, New Mill Community Association, Bulbourne Residents' Association and the editors of the Gazette and the Bucks Herald.

Aldbury, Wigginton and Tring East

2. The Boundary Committee's report endorses (para. 118) the Council's proposal of 18 July that these two one-member wards should be combined into a two-member ward, on the grounds that this will achieve a better measure of electoral equality. But the report acknowledges, both in the Executive Summary and in para. 139, that the Committee found their decision on this issue to be "a difficult judgement between the statutory criteria" (para. 3 below) and welcomed "local views, backed up by demonstrable evidence" during the consultation period ending on 6 March before they prepared their final recommendations.

3. The key issue is the weight to be attached to each of the 3 statutory criteria (para. 5 of the report) which refer to the need to:
 - i) reflect the identities and interests of the local communities;
 - ii) secure effective and convenient local government; and
 - iii) achieve equality of representation

Neither in legislation nor in subsequent guidance is more weight given to one of these criteria than to the others. And in their unanimous response in November 2005 to the Electoral Commission's consultation on Periodic Electoral Reviews the Council said "The current view of the Commission is correct insofar as there has to be an element of reconciliation between the criteria".

4. The Electoral Commission expects the Boundary Committee's recommendations "to provide for high levels of electoral quality, with variances normally well below 10%" (para. 60). The Committee argue (Table 4 of the Report) that with the current electoral arrangements and 52 councillors the electorate of Aldbury and Wigginton fell 9% short of the Borough average in 2004 and would fall short by 11-12% in 2009 with their proposal for 51 councillors. Hence their proposal to combine the ward with Tring East.
5. The forecasting of the size of electorates is not an exact science. In their report in 1998 the Committee forecast that "electoral equality in Aldbury and Wigginton is projected to deteriorate so that it would have 12% fewer electors per councillor than average in 2001". Despite this, the Committee then recommended, because of arguments similar to those set out in paras. 7-12 below, that Aldbury and Wigginton should remain a separate ward. In the event the shortfall was only 6% in 2001 and still less than 10% in 2004, justifying the recommendation in 1998 for no change.
6. In forecasting the 11-12% shortfall in 2009 the Committee accepted the Borough Council's estimate that the electorate of Aldbury and Wigginton would decline from 1862 in 2004 to 1847 in 2009. The estimate for 2009 takes no account, as the Committee acknowledged in a letter of 19 December to Councillor Jameson, of a very recent planning application to build a number of houses on the disused Chiltern Water site at Toms Hill in Aldbury. If approved, this might add a further 10-20 electors. An addition of only 20 or so to the estimate of 1847

in 2009 would reduce the shortfall to below 10%. On numbers alone the Committee's argument is not conclusive.

7. There are other, even more compelling, reasons to reject their recommendation. First, the Committee claim (para. 116) that since "a large part of Tring East ward is already rural in nature" a union with Aldbury and Wigginton would not be "wholly inappropriate". In fact barely 5% of the Tring East electors live outside the wholly urban majority of the ward in the triangle bounded by Brook Street, Grove Road and Station Road.
8. The Committee also endorse the assertion (para. 113) that "the parish boundaries to both Aldbury and Wigginton are currently intertwined with Tring East". Sheet 4 of the Committee's own map shows that there is no "intertwining" of Tring and Aldbury, which are clearly separated by the open country between Tring Station and Pendley Manor, and very little of Tring and Wigginton - only in fact in Chesham Road where 5 houses are in Tring and the rest in Wigginton. Hastoe, less than a mile from Tring, and in the same parish, is wholly separate from Wigginton.
9. The Committee have not taken any account of the greater difficulty of representing scattered rural communities like Aldbury and Wigginton, which cover many square miles. But they acknowledge, in their letter of 19 December to Councillor Jameson, that "if we are given evidence that representing larger rural areas does not allow for convenient and effective local government or represent community identity (the first and second of their three criteria quoted in para. 3 above) we will consider it". They go on to draw attention to the Commission's "Guidance and Procedural Advice for Periodical Electoral Reviews", which refers (para. 3-35) to "the difficulty that councillors experience in adequately representing the interests of electors in rural wards, which often have poor transport linksprovision should therefore be made for an element of over-representation in such areas". (This is of course true of representation at Westminster).
10. In their response in November 2005 to the Commission's consultation document, referred to in para. 3 above, the Council acknowledged that there might be rural areas in which "a single councillor represents 10% less than the ideal number of people The area may be large in size and include areas of green belt and outstanding natural beauty. The infrastructure such as roads and public transport may be inadequate. The councillor is likely to face issues such as planning and transport and perhaps a lack of affordable housing". There could hardly be a

better description of Aldbury and Wigginton! Some electors in both villages live 5 miles by road from the centre of Tring, and there is a very limited bus service between the three communities. The Commission go on to say (para. 3.37 of the "Guidance") "We accept that attempts simply to even out the numbers between urban and rural areas can result in increasing the size of already very large rural wards". This is the case for maintaining separate representation for Aldbury and Wigginton.

11. The Committee add (para. 67) that they recommend the combination of the two wards "because this was locally proposed". It was in fact proposed only by the majority of this Council. The minority of the Council, Dacorum Borough Council (without a vote), Aldbury and Wigginton Parish Councils (unanimously in each case) and 172 electors of Tring East and the two villages expressed strong opposition. Of the two electors who wrote to the Committee, one, Mr Standen, opposed the proposal. The other, Mr Harris (a member of the majority of this Council although in his email of 3 August last he merely described himself as "a resedent (sic) of Tring East") supported the proposal only on the grounds that he "feels at a disadvantage to other wards because I only have one councillor to represent me while most other wards have two or more" - an argument in principle against single member wards rather than in favour of the combination proposed here.

12. Finally, in a two-member ward Tring East (2060 electors in 2009) would have nearly twice the electorate of Wigginton (1150) and three times that of Aldbury (700), and would therefore be the dominant partner. Unlike their predecessor in 1998, the Committee appear to have given no weight to the first of the three statutory criteria quoted in para. 3 above. It is amplified in para. 7 of Appendix C to the Commission's guidance, referred to in para. 9 above, which says that pointers to a sense of community might include "the presence of active social clubs or residents' associations which draw their membership from a clearly defined area; also, if the area is parished the existence of an active parish council". Aldbury and Wigginton both fully meet these conditions. They have active local societies and sports clubs with membership almost entirely drawn from one village or the other, whereas Tring East's electors normally belong to Tring-wide bodies of this kind. Each of the two villages has a pre-school, a primary school, a parish church and an active parish council. As Wigginton Parish Council put it in their letter of 26 July (of which, unaccountably, the Committee said they had no record - this has now been remedied) about the proposed merger:-

"Wigginton objects strongly to this proposal. Although close to the town of Tring, the villages of Aldbury and Wigginton are both distinct communities set within large rural parishes. The electors of Aldbury and Wigginton share many common concerns that reflect life in a rural environment. The essentially rural nature of the existing ward was recognised in the last Boundary Review in 1998. It would be completely illogical to subsume it within a larger ward also containing a large part of the town of Tring. Wigginton Parish Council believes that Aldbury and Wigginton and Tring East should remain as they are, i.e. as separate electoral wards".

13. Even the Committee's numerical case for the merger is questionable. On all other counts the case against it is overwhelming. We conclude that the Council should inform the Committee that, on the evidence, they now oppose the proposal.

Boundaries between Tring Wards

14. The Committee endorse (para 118), on grounds of electoral equality, this Council's proposals that:-
 - i) 20 electors in Albany Terrace, a continuation of Grove Road, and in the low even numbers of Grove Road itself (nos. 10-16 and the Manse) should be transferred from Tring East to Tring Central.
 - ii) About 100 electors in Dunsley Place, London Road, Mansion Drive and the High Street east of Bank Alley, including Crown Rose Court, should be transferred from Tring West to Tring East.
 - iii) About 100 electors in Fantail Road and 37-67 Christchurch Road should be transferred from Tring West to Tring Central.
15. None of these proposals makes sense in relation to the Commission's view (paras 3.41 and 3.42 of their guidance) that "ward boundaries should be easily identifiable on the groundand should be capable of being mapped where large, permanent, topographical features are used as ward boundaries, the line should normally be drawn down the centre". It was for this reason that in 1998 the Committee decided to transfer Albany Terrace etc. (14(i) above) from Tring Central to Tring East and Dunsley Place etc. (14 (ii) above) from Tring East to Tring West.

16. In more detail, the first proposal would artificially divide Albany Terrace and the low even numbers of Grove Road from the rest of the even numbers and from houses immediately opposite in Grove Road. The second would lose the major physical boundary of London Road between Tring East and Tring West. Likewise the third change would lose the strong physical boundary of Christchurch Road which, along its whole length, separates Tring West from Tring Central. Even the supporters of the proposal acknowledge that it was "difficult" and "breaches what is currently a natural boundary". They indicate that they would be satisfied if instead the Committee "considered it appropriate to have inequality of representation" (para. 114).
17. These arguments outweigh those of electoral equality; and we recommend the Council to withdraw their previous backing for the three proposals, which have attracted no support from the general public.

Town Council Wards : New Mill

18. The Council, and subsequently the Committee, rejected the proposal to create a new one-member Town Council ward of New Mill and Bulbourne, leaving 4 members for Bunstrux. New Mill and Bunstrux would continue, under this proposal, to form a 2-member Tring Central ward of Dacorum Council.
19. The Committee said of this proposal (para. 130) that it was "not supported by compelling evidence". But they noted in their Executive Summary that their decision on Tring Town Wards called for "difficult judgements between our statutory criteria" and that they "would welcome local views, backed up by demonstrable evidence". They urged "local people, including the Borough Council, to write to us with supporting evidence".
20. There are two main arguments for this proposal. First, as we said in July, New Mill has a largely separate identity from the rest of Tring, both historically and currently. It has its own community centre, polling station, pensioners' group and youth club, as well as access to the canal. Bulbourne, over 2 miles by road from the centre of Tring, has a flourishing residents' association and its own public house.

21. Second, there is evidence of strong public support for (and, the Town Council's majority apart, virtually no opposition to) the proposal. A sample oral survey in the area in July showed that 90 per cent of those canvassed wanted a separate ward for New Mill and Bulbourne. In a further more comprehensive survey in August, which called for a written response, 82% of those who replied supported the proposal, 6% were against and 12% were undecided. Typical comments were "I would welcome New Mill becoming a ward Tring Town is well looked after but New Mill gets forgotten", "I believe it would be an excellent idea to have a councillor to devote time to issues such as traffic at the roundabout, the canal and the road surface", and "We should have our own town councillor for New Mill and Bulbourne".

22. The Council are therefore recommended to support the proposal for a separate one-member ward for New Mill and Bulbourne. As Table 7 of the Committee's report shows, its electorate of 700 by 2009 would be close to the Town average of 750 per councillor, a difference justified by the more scattered nature of the proposed new ward.