

# PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT

Second Delegated Legislation Committee

DRAFT WARRINGTON (ELECTORAL CHANGES)  
ORDER 2016

*Tuesday 2 February 2016*

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**The Committee consisted of the following Members:**

*Chair:* MR NIGEL EVANS

- |                                                              |                                                              |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| † Bridgen, Andrew ( <i>North West Leicestershire</i> ) (Con) | † Mowat, David ( <i>Warrington South</i> ) (Con)             |
| † Chalk, Alex ( <i>Cheltenham</i> ) (Con)                    | † Murray, Mrs Sheryll ( <i>South East Cornwall</i> ) (Con)   |
| † Cleverly, James ( <i>Braintree</i> ) (Con)                 | † Rimmer, Marie ( <i>St Helens South and Whiston</i> ) (Lab) |
| † David, Wayne ( <i>Caerphilly</i> ) (Lab)                   | † Stevenson, John ( <i>Carlisle</i> ) (Con)                  |
| Fovargue, Yvonne ( <i>Makerfield</i> ) (Lab)                 | † Streeter, Mr Gary ( <i>South West Devon</i> ) (Con)        |
| † Garnier, Mark ( <i>Wyre Forest</i> ) (Con)                 | † Twigg, Derek ( <i>Halton</i> ) (Lab)                       |
| † Jones, Helen ( <i>Warrington North</i> ) (Lab)             |                                                              |
| † Kirby, Simon ( <i>Brighton, Kemptown</i> ) (Con)           | Marek Kubala, <i>Committee Clerk</i>                         |
| † McGinn, Conor ( <i>St Helens North</i> ) (Lab)             |                                                              |
| † Malthouse, Kit ( <i>North West Hampshire</i> ) (Con)       | † <b>attended the Committee</b>                              |

## Second Delegated Legislation Committee

Tuesday 2 February 2016

[MR NIGEL EVANS *in the Chair*]

### Draft Warrington (Electoral Changes) Order 2016

2.30 pm

**David Mowat** (Warrington South) (Con): I beg to move,

That the Committee has considered the draft Warrington (Electoral Changes) Order 2016.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I apologise to Members who probably think that they have better things to do on a Tuesday afternoon than talk about boundary changes in my constituency, but there are issues here. We all complain about boundaries, and although I recognise that the Boundary Commission has a tough job, it is right that it is accountable, and if it is not accountable to Parliament, what is Parliament for?

Before I go on to explain the issue, I point out that one of the by-products of the review in Warrington is a ballot paper, which I hold up for the Committee to see, that is likely to have on it 50 names, from which, three months from now, we will ask electors to choose 12. I will pass the paper around, so that colleagues can see it. I shall explain how and why that has happened, and why it is not satisfactory.

Boundary reviews can be emotional. This is not a party issue; the review covered two constituencies, mine and that of the hon. Member for Warrington North. My constituency is south of the ship canal. Warrington council is Labour-dominated: 42 of the 57 seats are Labour, and only five Tory. The area that we are talking mostly about today is south of the ship canal, where eleven out of 12 seats are Conservative or, in most cases, Liberal Democrat. So this is not about party politics; it is about what is right. I will talk about why we had to have the review—the starting point—the process that was followed, the result and the consequences, and the action that I hope the commission's representative will take to sort the matter out at least in the short term.

As I said, the starting point is the two constituencies of Warrington North and Warrington South. The unitary council has 57 councillors spread over 22 wards. Equally significantly, there are 17 parish councils in Warrington, many of them very ancient. The parish council boundaries were, as one would expect and as is normal, aligned with the ward boundaries. Broadly speaking then, parish councillors are within wards or, as in certain instances, wards are within parishes, but the boundaries are aligned and there is no patchwork.

Although Warrington is a new town, there are a number of villages to the north and south with their own characteristics and identities. Lymm in Cheshire is a large village, with perhaps 10,000 people. To give a little historical perspective, a village called Thelwall was founded in 923 by Alfred the Great's son. I do not think

that Alfred the Great, or his son, should have too much bearing on how we draw our boundaries, but I make the point that these are ancient communities, and we are not just talking about how to divide up a town into different areas.

We needed the review because the town has grown—the 57 councillors need to become 58—and over time the ward boundaries have got out of kilter. That triggered a review under the Electoral Commission criteria. It started in May 2015, with the aim of putting in place new boundaries for the unitary and parish councils by 2016—that is, by the time of the elections coming up in three months, which will be the last in Warrington until 2020, as a result of their being all-out elections.

Everybody was happy that there should be a review and the criteria for such reviews are set out in the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009. Members who might not be familiar with that Act might like to know that it establishes three criteria. First, the boundaries should be within 10% of each other. Secondly, they should maintain community identity. Thirdly, they should be a mechanism for convenient and effective local government. As for which is the most important, the Act says that there should be the “best balance” between them. That implies that they are all relevant and it is not necessarily right to focus on one rather than on all three together.

The council put in a submission to start the process of reviewing how to get 58 councillors, how to maintain a better split between the wards and how to ensure that the parish boundaries continued to be aligned to the ward boundaries. The submission had support from all three major parties on the council. I think it is accepted that it maintained the integrity of the villages, but it is also true that it did not totally meet the 10% rule. Two of the 22 wards would have had a percentage slightly different from the 10% de minimus that the Act sets out.

We then went into the process and the Boundary Commission followed its normal procedure. In my view and that of many of us involved in the process, it ignored all but the quantitative criterion—that is, it ignored the two qualitative criteria of the need for community identity and for convenient and effective local government. As a consequence, it came up with a proposal that is better than the council's in terms of the quantitative criterion, but not greatly so. In the commission's proposal, two of the 22 wards are also outside the plus or minus 10%, although it is also fair to say that the delta is lower. If that was the only criterion, the Boundary Commission's submission would have been better.

The cost of getting that balance of plus or minus 10% slightly better has been extremely heavy in terms of its impact on the community and on the quality of governance, particularly south of the ship canal. I contend that the review, to all intents and purposes, used only one of the three criteria and is therefore arguably illegal under the 2009 Act. I want to talk about a couple of the issues. The first comes under the second criterion, that is, the impact on local communities. I mentioned earlier that there are a patchwork of villages surrounding the town, and the way that the boundaries have been reset rolls those villages back into the town. Lymm and Thelwall have been combined, as have Walton and Stockton Heath, Hatton and Appleton and Grappenhall and Appleton Thorn. This is a minor point, but the commission did not even rename any of the wards to acknowledge

the continuing existence of some of those villages, which would have been a very small thing to give away, even if it had wanted to maintain the arithmetic of what it put together.

The third criterion is effective local governance, and at the start of the process, all parties had alignment between the parishes and the wards. If someone was a parish councillor for a ward, they would know who their borough councillors were, and so on. At the end of this process, there is no alignment. For example, Grappenhall parish council is now in three unitary wards of Appleton, Lymm and Grappenhall. Stockton Heath parish council is now in three unitary wards of Grappenhall, Appleton and Stockton Heath. There is no alignment between unitary borough council wards and the parish council wards, many of which have been there for more than 100 years. Similar issues exist in other councils, such as Walton and Appleton.

That is not the end of the problems. The next issue is the ward sizes that were determined in the Boundary Commission's review. In Stockton Heath, it was determined that the ward would be made up of two sub-wards, one with 12 members and one with three members. In Appleton, it was three sub-wards, one with 10, one with one and one with two. No parish council in the whole of Warrington has been exempt from having ward sizes of fewer than six members. Many members of the Committee will have been councillors in their careers and will know that if a ward has 12 members, it is difficult to divvy up the work. A councillor must ask, "Do I do that or does he do that? Who is in charge of reviewing that?" That is what they are faced with in Stockton Heath—in Appleton it is 10—and in every parish in Warrington there are at least six members. It is hard to claim that that represents an adequate response to the third criteria of effective local governance.

Then we come to elections. If we have a 12-member ward, it is not hard to predict that the ballot paper could potentially have 50 names on it and we will be asking electors to select 12 names from those 50. That would be no mean feat, leaving aside the environmental issues of the size of the ballot paper and the need to stuff it into an envelope. It will cause problems, because people will put 13 crosses instead of 12. I said 50 names, but it could be 40, depending on how many candidates each of the major parties puts up. But it is a risk and—unless it was an attempt to get into the "Guinness World Records" book—it could potentially make Warrington in these elections resemble something out of a banana republic. In fact, I do not think many banana republics would have ballot papers with 50 names on them, from which electors had to choose 12—I may be wrong. I certainly do not think—although other hon. Members may wish to correct me—that any other part of the UK has ever held an election with a ballot paper of up to, or possibly more than, 50 names from which 12 must be selected.

**Andrew Bridgen** (North West Leicestershire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a case for Warrington on the ludicrous solution that the Boundary Commission has come up with. My council had experience of working with the commission in 2014 to change the ward boundaries in north-west Leicestershire, and we went the other way and now have 38 single-seat wards, which is far more satisfactory for the electorate and for by-elections. We

are having a by-election at the moment and, with just 1,000 or 1,100 houses in a ward, it can be done cheaply. It would be very expensive to replace an existing councillor in a 12-seat ward.

**David Mowat:** That is a good point. I had not considered the by-election point, but I agree with my hon. Friend.

It is fair to say that I am talking about parish elections. It may be that the commission makes the point that it is possible for the council to fix the boundaries by performing a local community governance review. Indeed, that is what would normally happen—the council would do that, realign the boundaries, make the parishes fit the unitary system and all would be well. The unique aspect of what has happened in Warrington is that there is no time for that to happen before the all-out elections in May. That process would take, given the statutory consultation periods required, between nine and 12 months. It cannot happen before May. I do not think the Boundary Commission intended for that to be the case, because its initial response was that that remedy was available to the council. The problem is that the remedy is not available to the council in time for the elections in May and, as a consequence, we will have the absurdity of the ballot paper that I have described.

In summary, we have two issues of substance here. First, the criteria used for the unitary review did not properly take into account the qualitative requirements of the 2009 Act in terms of community cohesion or effective local governance. As a result, there was a mishmash and an unsatisfactory answer, particularly south of the Manchester ship canal. Secondly, an unintended consequence of the non-alignment with the parish and unitary boundaries, along with an inability to fix it in time for the all-out elections that are coming up, has led to an absurd situation.

That brings the Electoral Commission into disrepute, as well as the Government: people do not understand what the commission is, and think that it is the Government, and they blame me because I am representative of the Government, as they think that it is something to do with me. All in all, that is unsatisfactory, so I would request that the commissioner withdraw the measure. I understand that there is no power to alter the order, but it should be withdrawn and resubmitted in three months' time. We should go ahead with elections on the old boundaries, and we would have time to fix the absurdity of the ballot paper before the next all-out elections.

I look forward to hearing the response from my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon, who speaks on behalf of the commissioners, but in the meantime I should like to ask him a number of questions. Did anyone from the Boundary Commission visit the south of Warrington as part of the review, particularly the villages concerned, or was the whole thing done by someone in Millbank with a GPS system, a map and a photocopier? We have asked for clarification on that, but we have not received it. Does he agree that the 2009 Act stipulates three criteria, with a requirement to find the best balance between them? The review focuses purely on one quantitative criterion, which is potentially illegal under the Act. How many similar reviews of boundaries made no changes whatsoever between the draft and the final version? A point made to me by a number of councillors was that it was unusual not to have any changes to a boundary change review between

[David Mowat]

the draft and the final version, but that was the case here and even meant renaming unitary wards to ensure that village names did not die out.

Does my hon. Friend consider that 10 or 12-member wards represent best practice in this country or anywhere else, and does he further consider that having ballot papers with up to 50 names is an acceptable way to hold elections? Pre-empting his response, given that it is not, is that not a failure under the third criterion in the 2009 Act? I shall conclude by requesting that the order is withdrawn and resubmitted after the election, enabling us to have a proper election on boundaries that are accepted. We should fix this mess after that has happened.

2.48 pm

**Helen Jones** (Warrington North) (Lab): I do not wish to detain the Committee long. The hon. Member for Warrington South made the case, as is quite right, about what has happened in Warrington South, but I gently want to point out that there are two constituencies in Warrington. In Warrington North, although we did not get everything that we wanted from the Boundary Commission, we are reasonably happy about going ahead with this. The hon. Gentleman's case seems to be based on what is happening in the parishes, rather than in the borough wards.

In my constituency, parish boundaries have crossed borough ward boundaries for a considerable period, and villages have been put together in one ward. That is inevitable in a growing town. I live in the village of Culcheth, but the ward is Culcheth, Glazebury and Croft—all distinct communities. The Burtonwood and Westbrook Parish Council crosses two distinct borough wards. There is a Westbrook ward, a Burtonwood and Winwick ward, and a separate Winwick parish council. They do not align with the boundaries. The ancient community of Risley is now part of the Birchwood ward in Warrington. The north of the town has been in that position for some time. There has been no meltdown and we have managed to live with it quite easily.

I looked at some of the comments made in my local paper about the new boundaries. The leader of the Liberal Democrats basically said that he did not quite understand that the Boundary Commission meant what it said when it told him that there was only a 10% tolerance either way. The Conservative leader in the area does not like his ward of Hatton, Stretton and Walton being abolished. That is a fair point. None of us would like that, but it does not mean that the boundaries are not right. Equally, there have been complaints about Lymm being separated into two wards, but it is a growing area and my understanding is that if its boundaries are not dealt with this time, it will shortly exceed the level of tolerance again and there will have to be yet another boundary review.

Most of the submissions to the Boundary Commission's draft proposal came from that one area of Warrington—south of the ship canal. I understand that people are aggrieved but it is not a problem for the whole borough. In fact, 100 of the 144 submissions made came from that area alone. It is arguable that the change does not reflect communities. I agree with the hon. Gentleman about that and that is precisely what the Government will achieve when they rejig parliamentary boundaries; numbers will trump everything else.

Although the hon. Gentleman has a fair point about the parish wards and the number of people who will be on the ballot paper, by itself that point is not sufficient to postpone borough elections. It is, as he rightly said, fixable—not in the next few months, but over time. Yet, if the proposals are withdrawn today, we are faced with two options: either councillors will be elected on the old wards for a year and then we will have another all-out election, which seems to be a costly and expensive way of dealing with the problem; or, we postpone the elections this year, people do not get a chance to vote, and we have all-out elections the following year, which seems to be an overreaction to the problem we face.

Although the hon. Gentleman has rightly made a case for his area, there is a whole other area of Warrington that has new boundaries and is happy to live with them, even if bits of the proposals are not what we would have wanted. We would not necessarily have wanted the changes between wards in my constituency but our general view is that we need to go ahead and get these elections done. The problems with the parishes can be dealt with afterwards but they should not postpone new boundaries for borough elections.

2.54 pm

**Mr Gary Streeter** (South West Devon) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your distinguished and experienced chairmanship, Mr Evans.

I apologise to the Committee that it will take me about 12 minutes to put on the record the background and process surrounding Warrington. The Local Government Boundary Commission for England is independent of the Government and reports to the Speaker's Committee on which I serve, which is why I am responding to the powerful speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South. I commend him for his diligence in raising this issue in Parliament. As we all know, he has a reputation for being a real fighter for his constituents in this House, and he has demonstrated that in earnest today. It was also good to hear from his neighbour, the hon. Member for Warrington North, who made some very helpful points.

It might help if I gave the Committee some of the background to this matter. The commission carried out its electoral review of Warrington Borough Council to correct the high levels of electoral imbalances between local wards, which is what it is charged to do under statute. Several of Warrington's wards currently have over 10% more or fewer voters living in them than the average for the borough. For example, the three councillors elected to Fairfield and Howley ward represent well over 10,000 voters, whereas the three councillors for Penketh and Cuerdley—I hope Members will forgive my pronunciation—represent just under 7,000.

That pattern of imbalances was identified by the commission in the council's electoral register for 2014 and is repeated across large parts of the borough. In fact, nine of Warrington's 22 wards—41% of them—have significantly more or fewer voters than the average for the borough. The levels of variance across the borough comfortably breach the commission's long-standing threshold for triggering a review. The situation means that the value of a person's vote in council elections varies to a considerable degree depending on where they live in Warrington.

The commission's programme of electoral reviews is targeted towards authorities with the highest levels of electoral variance between wards or electoral divisions in all 352 English local authorities. Warrington was included in the programme on that basis. The review followed the commission's well-established electoral review process.

First, the commission asked for evidence from the council about the total number of councillors who should be elected to the council in the future. Warrington Borough Council put forward a case to increase the number of councillors serving the borough by one. The commission analysed the council's case under three broad headings: first, how the council takes decisions and conducts its business; secondly, how those decisions and decision makers are scrutinised; and thirdly, the representative role of councillors in the community. The commission concluded in May 2015 that an increase of one councillor was justified—that is quite unusual around the country at the moment—and therefore proceeded with the review on the basis of 58 councillors being elected to the authority. There was little contention in the early parts of the electoral review.

In May 2015, the commission started to consider new ward boundaries for the borough. It held a public consultation over 10 weeks to ask the council, local organisations and members of the public to put forward ideas for new ward boundaries. After considering the proposals put forward during the consultation, the commission drew up draft recommendations for new boundaries, which it published in August.

In the north of the borough, the commission's draft recommendations were largely based on the proposals put to it by the council during consultation, with some minor tweaks. Unfortunately, the submissions received in the south of the borough—largely below the canal—simply did not work within the formula that the law requires. Accordingly, the commission drew its own pattern of wards for the southern tranche. In particular, the council's proposal for the Lymm area of Warrington would have left that ward with an electoral variance of 19%. The ward would have included more than 500 electors too many to deliver electoral equality.

The commission is flexible in the way that it interprets electoral equality. It recognises that achieving boundaries where each councillor represents exactly, or near to exactly, the same number of voters is likely to lead to perverse outcomes. That is why it will routinely accept variances of up to around 10% and, in exceptional circumstances, more, where there is compelling evidence in relation to community identities or geographic features. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South made great play of the issue of variance in Lymm ward, where 19% variance was considered by the commission to be simply too high.

That flexibility is evident in the review of Warrington, where the recommendations allow for two wards with variances of 10% as they reflect community ties and logical boundaries. However, the commission still has a statutory duty, as my hon. Friend rightly said, as set out in the Local Democracy, Economic Development and Construction Act 2009, to ensure that each councillor represents roughly the same number of voters. As I said, the commission considered that a variance of 19% would not meet its statutory criteria. There simply was not sufficient community, geographic or local government

grounds for allowing such a high level of inequality, even though the commission looked hard, deep and long to see if it could find such supporting reasons.

As a result, the commission sought an alternative pattern of wards and concluded that Lymm should have two borough wards, rather than one. By having two wards, electoral equality could be achieved. As is the case in nearly every boundary review, delivering electoral fairness for Lymm had a knock-on effect on surrounding areas. In order to build a pattern of wards, the commission divided parishes in south Warrington between borough wards. Of particular interest was its decision to divide Appleton parish council and Stockton Heath parish council, both of which were mentioned by my hon. Friend.

The commission's adherence to its statutory criteria for ward boundaries had a consequential impact on the electoral arrangements of the parishes in question, namely the parish wards to which local parish councillors are elected and the number of parish councillors elected to each ward. Legislation is clear on the procedure when a parish is divided between wards: the commission must abolish the existing parish electoral arrangements and redraw parish ward boundaries so that they match the district or borough ward boundary. In short, no parish ward can cross borough ward boundaries. Therefore, the commission, in its draft recommendations, abolished the electoral arrangements for the two parishes and redrew them so that they matched the proposed ward boundaries. It then consulted on those new arrangements over eight weeks in the summer and autumn.

While the consultation yielded opposition to the proposals, the process did not identify alternative arrangements that would meet the statutory criteria that the commission must follow. Although parishes and others argued eloquently in favour of retaining ward boundaries that matched parish boundaries, they were unable to produce a solution that solved the problem of electoral equality in Lymm while delivering an overall warding pattern for Warrington that balanced the criteria. In fact, the most popular solution put to the commission would have unwound its entire scheme in the north of the borough, which, as the hon. Member for Warrington North confirmed, was broadly supported locally, without setting out how it might be redrawn.

Nevertheless, and in the absence of workable propositions, the commission investigated an alternative pattern of wards for the southern part of the borough as it recognised the strength of feeling about the proposals. Unfortunately, despite its best efforts, the only way it could deliver a scheme that avoided the division of local parishes was to build a ward or a series of wards that straddled the Manchester ship canal, but it did not believe that crossing such a strong and identifiable boundary would support its obligation to promote effective local government.

The commission considered all 144 responses to its consultation on draft recommendations and, in the absence of a coherent solution, it did not feel able to amend the recommendations. That is why the draft order under consideration today includes the proposals relating to Appleton and Stockton Heath Parish Councils. The consequential proposals for new parish wards follow the letter of the law. No parish ward boundary crosses a borough ward and the existing arrangements are abolished.

[Mr Gary Streeter]

The commission accepts the well made arguments against its ward boundary proposals. However, it must not only consider local views, but come up with alternatives that can be implemented. In the case of ward boundaries for southern Warrington, it did not believe that any of the alternative proposals would be a better balance to its statutory criteria than the draft recommendations. Similarly, no alternative arguments for parish electoral arrangements were put forward that specifically took into account the changes that had to be implemented by the ward boundary proposals. That is why the commission simply proposed the parish warding arrangements that it was obliged by law to make.

In terms of process, procedure and the legal framework in which it operates, the commission has fulfilled its obligations. However, it accepts that the new parish arrangements leave parish wards that elect several parish councillors next to wards that elect only one or two. That is inelegant to say the least and the commission will look to learn lessons from the review for future purposes. However, it would like to suggest a potential solutions to the issues raised.

Warrington Borough Council may hold a community governance review immediately following elections in May this year. Such a review could look at the lopsided nature of the parish arrangements, which is the source of contention here, and recommend new arrangements that provide for a better spread of parish councillors. To implement the outcome of the review—new parish wards—it must then make a local order, which can specify a year of election.

The council could therefore recommend that new parish arrangements come into force in 2017. There could be an election in 2017 on those new parish boundaries that the review might recommend and the council could hold the next elections in 2020 to bring them back into line with the borough council elections. That seems to be at least a partial solution to meet my hon. Friend's fierce advocacy on that point.

There are a couple of caveats. First, the council would need to seek the commission's consent to change the parish electoral arrangements in that way. However, the commission has already indicated that it will not unreasonably withhold consent. Secondly, an additional election for the parish councils in question is required. Nevertheless, it offers a more immediate solution to the problem.

My hon. Friend asked me a number of questions. He asked whether the commission visited Warrington. Yes, it did. Staff and/or commissioners visited Warrington on four occasions during the review, and the commission staff and the lead commissioner toured Warrington to see first-hand the areas of contention and assess the potential boundaries on the ground.

There are three criteria in the 2009 Act, and the commission considered all three carefully when coming up with its proposals, which I hope I have explained. Similar reviews have resulted in no changes between the draft and the commission's final order—South Buckingham and Milton Keynes are two examples that spring immediately to mind. It is accepted that the parish council arrangements for voting in the next election in the two wards in question are far from ideal, but a partial solution has been suggested. The unfortunate

ballot paper that my hon. Friend circulated will be used for just 12 months, and after that we will be back on track. It can then coincide with the elections for the rest of the area.

In conclusion, my hon. Friend made some important points, but sadly the commission cannot withdraw the order without starting the process all over again. That would leave the variances in place for another four years, which is simply unacceptable. The electoral arrangements for all 163,000 voters in Warrington are contingent on the draft order, which will deliver electoral fairness for the long term. As a courtesy to the House, the commission held back from making the order, despite the fact that it completed the process under the negative resolution procedure. Given the proximity of the forthcoming local elections and the partial solution I just mentioned, the commission hopes to be able to make the order shortly so the new, fair electoral arrangements can be implemented for the whole borough.

3.7 pm

**Wayne David** (Caerphilly) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. I am afraid I have never visited Warrington, but after this afternoon's discussion I feel that I know the town intimately.

In my experience, it is always best for there to be a natural consensus on such boundary changes, and it is sad that we do not appear to have one here. My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North made a powerful argument, but I am also aware of what the local press in Warrington is saying. Let me quote two examples. The chairman of the local Liberal Democrats said he is concerned because:

"Faceless bureaucrats sitting in their ivory tower in London surrounded by maps and tables have completely ignored the views of people."

The leader of the Conservative group, ward councillor Paul Kennedy, said:

"I am very disappointed for the residents of Hatton, Stretton and Walton that from May 2016 they will no longer be represented by their own designated borough councillor"—

I think that is probably him—

"and I, and they, are rightly concerned that there is not even recognition of the three parish names in the new ward patterns."

Quite seriously, it is unfortunate that they feel as strongly as they do. I believe that those views are genuinely held.

I am encouraged by what the hon. Member for South West Devon said. There has been genuine widespread consultation, which is very important. I note what was said about the long ballot papers, but they are for parish councils, rather than the borough council. In my experience, other parts of the country have equally long parish council lists—in Wales, community council lists. It is not desirable, but as the hon. Gentleman said, it is a short-term measure while the issue is being addressed. That is important. Given that a consultation has taken place, and given that the legislation is clearly being adhered to, on balance the Opposition will support these recommendations.

3.9pm

**David Mowat**: I will not detain the Committee for long. I have a couple of points in response. The hon. Member for Warrington North rightly said that there was not a major issue on her patch, although an aspect

of one, and there was no meltdown. I concede there is no meltdown but that does not make it right. There will be no meltdown in Warrington South but that does not make it right, either.

I listened carefully to the arguments made by the representative of the commissioners. I have two points on that. There is a tendency, which was evident in his response, to use the word “statutory” in connection with the quantitative requirements of the Act, plus or minus 10%. In fact, the word “statutory” also applies to the qualitative parts of the Act, which are the communities and the local governance.

My hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon mentioned a partial solution. I am sure the people of Warrington will be relieved to hear that the boundary commissioners do not intend unreasonably to withhold consent to a Boundary Commission review subsequent to the election. It might be said that that is the least they

could do. It is not a partial solution just for a year, because there are all-out elections and those last four years.

Finally, the Opposition spokesman is right that the thrust of what I have said applies to parishes and the ballot paper. I make the point to colleagues, though, that when there is a unitary not a district council, which tends to be a higher level council, parishes are important and have a part to play. We should not just act as though they are not important or, if we do think that, we should abolish them.

On those grounds, I will sit down content.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That the Committee has considered the draft Warrington (Electoral Changes) Order 2016.

3.12 pm

*Committee rose.*

