

BOUNDARY COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND

Minutes of the meeting held in room G/19, 1 Horse Guards Road, London, SW1A 2HQ on Friday 1 November 2013 at 10.30am.

Present:-

The Hon. Mr Justice Sales	Deputy Chairman
Mr D Elvin QC	Commissioner
Mr N Pringle	“
Mr A Bellringer	Secretary
Mr G Reed	Secretariat
Mr G Tessier	“

The presence of the Assessors from Ordnance Survey and the Statistics Authority was not required at the meeting.

1. MINUTES OF THE MEETING HELD ON 18 DECEMBER 2012

1.1 The minutes of the previous meeting were approved by the Commission and signed by the Deputy Chairman on 27 February 2013.

2. MATTERS ARISING SINCE 18 DECEMBER 2012 (BCE/2013/Paper 1)

2.1 Members noted Paper 1.

Formal closure of 2013 Review

2.2 Members wished to formally record their thanks to Mr Farrance, a former Secretary to the Commission, and Mr Rudall, both of whom were retiring after more than 20 years' service each in the Secretariat.

Investigation of a possible secretariat merger with the Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE)

2.3 The Commission expressed its disappointment that the proposed merger of the Secretariats of the BCE and the LGCBE was unlikely to be deliverable prior to the start of the next review of Parliamentary constituencies. It had been hoped that BCE staff in the short term would have been seconded to the LGBCE, with both organisations benefitting from this arrangement, and the Commission regretted that this would not now happen.

2.4 The Secretary said that the LGCBE had not, in principle, changed its view that there should be a merger, but that it was unlikely to happen before the completion of this Commission's 2018 review of constituencies. The main reasons for the delay appeared to be that the LGBCE was accountable to Parliament via the Speaker's Committee,

rather than to a government department and had already agreed its next five year programme of ward boundary reviews. The LGCBE were not prepared to disrupt that review programme to accommodate Parliamentary constituency reviews, and it was also unlikely that the Department for Communities and Local Government, which was keen to see local government boundary reviews progressed, would be sympathetic to a merger if it impacted upon local reviews. Mr Pringle noted that one of the main drivers for a merger had been the synergies of having common IT/Geographic Information System (GIS) solutions that would benefit both organisations. Members agreed that a merger was unlikely in the short to medium term, but that work should continue on exploring options for a merger of the Secretariats in the longer term.

- 2.5 It was agreed that the Deputy Chairman would write to the Speaker and the Cabinet Office (The Deputy Prime Minister) to inform them of the latest developments and that this would be copied to Max Caller, Chairman of the LGCBE, who had expressed his support for a merger. The letter would also suggest that the sponsoring bodies of the two organisations might wish to continue to co-operate with each other and explore further options about a merger before the LGBCE commits to its next 5 year review, highlighting the potential synergies, particularly with regard to IT and the GIS, and the potential benefits to the public purse.
- 2.6 The Commission agreed that the LGBCE should still be invited to provide input into the BCE's procurement of a new GIS, though in the absence of formal merger the final specification must necessarily reflect the Commission's priorities.

Members' terms of office

- 2.7 The terms of office of all three appointed Members were due to expire within the next year. The appointment of full Commissioners is handled by the sponsor team within Cabinet Office, who have recently indicated that they wished to consider Mr Elvin and Mr Pringle at the same time for possible reappointment (although their terms of office expire in January 2014 and June 2014 respectively). In response to the sponsor team's request, the Deputy Chairman and Secretary to the Commission had provided assessments of those Members' suitability for reappointment. Notification of a decision on reappointment is awaited, although Members expressed the view that it was important for the Commission to have some degree of continuity.
- 2.8 Mr Justice Sales' current term of office expires in June 2014, but the sponsor team have not yet given an indication of when they propose to address the position of Deputy Chairman.

New Junior Minister in Cabinet Office

- 2.9 Members noted that following the Government reshuffle the Cabinet Office Junior Minister with responsibility for constitutional policy is Greg Clark MP. The Deputy Prime Minister continues to have senior responsibility within Cabinet.

Individual Electoral Registration (IER)

- 2.10 Further to the information about IER contained in Paper 1, the complete national test of the data matching process of the electoral registers against Department for Work

and Pensions data, which was carried out in the summer of 2013, was deemed a success with 78% of electors matched. This means that most electors will not need to actively apply under IER unless their circumstances change (e.g. they move house), and that the risk of a large drop in the register during transition is therefore significantly reduced.

- 2.11 Mr Tessier reported that there was, however, a wide variation in some areas. For example, in the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea, only 48% of the data matched, and in the Manchester Central ward – a ward with high student numbers and considerable social mobility – the figure was as low as 25%. Everyone who is not matched will be removed from the register before the register that will be used for the 2018 review is published.

Annual Meeting of UK Boundary Commissions

- 2.12 Members considered that the annual meetings of the Local Government and Parliamentary Boundary Commissions from across the UK remained worthwhile. However, their view was that the agendas might be condensed to half a day and that the group dinner the evening before could be discontinued. Members agreed on the principle of international cooperation, but they did not consider that the establishment of a distinct international forum was practical. The session on joint Secretariat arrangements would provide an opportunity to speak to the other parts of the UK about practical experiences of managing a joint Secretariat arrangement.

Triennial Review of UK Parliamentary Boundary Commissions

- 2.13 Members noted that Triennial Reviews of the Boundary Commissions were due to start early in 2014, probably in January. The Secretary understood that the reviews for Advisory Non-Departmental Public Bodies (NDPBs) were relatively light touch in nature. He agreed to provide Members with a table showing what Cabinet Office guidance suggested NDPBs should be doing in terms of corporate governance, and where the BCE complied or took a different approach. Any recommendations for change that were agreed by Commissioners as a result would be put in place before the commencement of the Triennial Review.

3. 2013 ELECTORATES (BCE/2013/Paper 2)

- 3.1 The 2013 electoral register was published on 16 October 2012 in England (except London) and Wales, due to the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) Elections which were held on 15 November 2012. In London, Northern Ireland and Scotland, where PCC Elections were not held, the 2013 electoral register was published as usual on 1 December 2012. Members noted the figures in Paper 2.
- 3.2 England's electorate had increased to 38,837,344. If these new figures were being used for a review, under the statutory distribution formula England would have been allocated 499 constituencies (excluding the two Isle of Wight constituencies), instead of 500 as in the 2013 review and Scotland would be allocated 51 constituencies (excluding the two Island constituencies), instead of 50. In regional terms, it would have been the South West region to lose the constituency. It was noted that such an allocation might cause significant further change in the creation of constituencies at

the next review, as so many of the 2013 revised recommendations constituencies were near the upper level of tolerance.

- 3.3 In England, using the 2013 electoral register figures, just 192 (36%) of the 533 existing constituencies had an electorate within 5% of the electoral quota. The largest constituency continued to be Isle of Wight CC (111,109); the smallest constituency continued to be Wirral West CC (55,145). The second largest constituency was now Manchester Central BC (92,334).
- 3.4 The Secretariat had also calculated that, of the revised proposals published in October 2012, 59 constituencies (9.87%) would now already have an electorate that was more than 5% from the electoral quota. The highest electorate would have been 84,513 (Canterbury and Faversham CC), 9.06% above the electoral quota. The lowest electorate would have been 71,142 (Plymouth Sutton BC), 8.20% below the electoral quota. This illustrates the drift that can occur in electorate terms in a very short period of time.

4. INVESTIGATION INTO GEOGRAPHICAL UNITS BELOW WARDS (BCE/2013/Paper 3)

- 4.1 Members considered in detail Paper 3 which explored the options for the adoption of a level of geography at the sub-ward level and the issues that arose.
- 4.2 They considered that the fundamental question was whether a lower level of geography was necessary for the whole of England, or whether there was a partial solution that could be adopted, possibly only in the major urban areas. Although it was considered that the use of wards as the fundamental building block for constituencies would still be the default position of the Commission, it had been the Commission's intention that interested parties should be given the opportunity to come up with their own solutions for constituencies on-line. This would be very difficult to do if there was not a level of geography below ward level that could be used.
- 4.3 If the Commission were to use a more fine-grained approach below ward level it was accepted that would have to be rolled out across the whole country at the same time. To create sub-ward geographies in certain areas as and when they were required would be very labour intensive and it would not be practical to determine in advance where the pressure points might be. It might also give force to an argument that the Commission was not treating the whole of the country equally if they employed a lower level of geography in some areas and leave the Commission vulnerable to challenge.
- 4.4 In view of these considerations, Members reaffirmed that they would maintain as their policy a strong preference for the use of wards as the building blocks for constituencies, but they would also use and provide a more fine-grained level of geography for the whole of the England. In considering the various options that had been explored in Paper 3 they decided that polling districts provided the only realistic solution.
- 4.5 The Secretariat had already been working with Ordnance Survey (OS) to explore how polling districts could be mapped. Engaging OS to create suitable mapping for the

whole of England would involve considerable costs. The Secretariat had sought indicative costs from OS following this exploratory work, but at this very early stage it was not possible to gauge how many local authorities had digital shapes files for polling districts or of the degree of confidence in their quality, which based on experience was likely to vary considerably. To this end, the Secretariat was sending out a questionnaire to all local authorities in England in order to understand more fully the scale of the issue.

- 4.6 Despite the uncertainties, OS had provided an initial ballpark figure of £180k - £200K. Although this was not a dissimilar figure to the total cost for mapping products from OS during the cancelled 2013 review, the Commission's budget for OS consultancy and for mapping for the current and two successive financial years was only in the region of £35K. Extra funding would therefore need to be sought from the sponsor department. It was also noted that, once the dataset had been created, it would be necessary for it to be updated annually to take account of ward and polling district boundary reviews.
- 4.7 Members asked the Secretary to prepare a paper for the Cabinet Office Project Board (see paragraph 5.1) explaining the Commission's decision to use polling district data to assist in the creation of constituencies at the next review and to make the case for additional funding to commence in the current financial year. They also asked the Secretariat to obtain more detailed costs from OS once the results of the questionnaire were known, and for them to provide some assurance about how secure the estimate provided was.
- 4.8 As previously noted by Members, irrespective of whether polling districts were used, they would require a new GIS as the current system was very old and was no longer being supported. They noted that OS had considerable experience of working with GIS solutions and that it considered that ArcGIS was a more powerful tool than some of the other products available and that it recommended that this was the system the Commission might wish to adopt. The design of the specification for a new GIS, its procurement and testing would be a highly technical exercise. Members therefore decided that some external GIS expertise might be needed to assist the Secretariat and that there should continue to be close liaison with OS. Furthermore, the LGBCE currently had a different GIS solution (MapInfo). It was considered highly desirable for someone from the LGBCE to be involved in the Commission's procurement of a new GIS, especially in view of a possible future merger of the two Secretariats.

5. OTHER BUSINESS

- 5.1 The Secretary explained that a Project Board has been established comprising Ciaran Martin, Head of Constitution Group in the Cabinet Office, Alex Thomas, Head of Elections and Parliament Division, and the Deputy Chairman. The Secretary would report to the Board on latest developments. The purpose of the Board was to provide enhanced liaison between the Commission and the sponsor department and to allow it senior oversight of the Commission's preparations for the next review. The first meeting of the board would be in early December 2013 and would consider the request for extra resources to develop polling district mapping.

- 5.2 Members noted that the Secretariat was currently preparing for the next review of constituencies and that the full-time complement of the Secretariat was reducing, by January 2014, to 2.2 members of staff, including the Secretary. The Deputy Chairman considered it essential that there was no further diminution of staffing levels.
- 5.3 The date of the next meeting would be determined at a later stage.