

MATTERS ARISING SINCE 21 OCTOBER 2014

Digital Mapping of Polling Districts in England

1. Ordnance Survey have been focused on mapping the most difficult areas as a priority, in essence unparished metropolitan areas, where polling districts are not coterminous with rural parish boundaries (which OS already have digitally mapped).
2. As of the end of May 2015, BCE had received from OS digital mapping of polling districts in London and all six metropolitan counties (Greater Manchester, Merseyside, South Yorkshire, Tyne & Wear, West Midlands, and West Yorkshire). We are currently in the process of verifying the accuracy of this mapping and requesting updates with the relevant local authorities, in order to accurately update the mapping to reflect the May 2015 position, which will be that to be used in the next Review.
3. The Secretariat have a meeting with OS in the morning of 3 June 2015 to review progress and agree the final stages of the mapping process: the Secretariat will therefore update Commissioners verbally with the details from that meeting.

Replacement Geographic Information System (GIS)

4. Following the representations made to Cabinet Office after the last Commission meeting, a dedicated delivery manager has been appointed from the Cabinet Office Digital Transformation team, who has been able to ensure that Cabinet Office and Government Digital Service advice and support has been consistent and timely, to facilitate progress with the technical procurement.
5. The 'Discovery' phase of the procurement – to identify exactly what technical solutions would be appropriate for our specific requirements - formally commenced at the beginning of April, led by Informed Solutions (who have previously themselves provided technical IT solutions to both the Boundary Commission for Scotland and for LGBCE). This has resulted in a detailed technical specification (including functional and architectural requirements), which will form the heart of the next step, which is to actually procure a supplier for such a product.
6. The Discovery phase was also able to give an informed view on the length of time required to build, test and deliver a finished product of the new system, which ranged from two to three months, depending on the particular architectural option we choose to pursue. Taking into account the time required to procure an actual supplier, it is likely to be October or November before we have a new GIS fully in place. This will still be before the new Review staff will be joining us, and delivery may well be sooner, if we are able to utilise an expedited process for procuring a supplier (which is currently being explored).

Triennial Review

7. The Secretary to the Commission formally received the final report of the Cabinet office's Triennial Review of the Parliamentary Boundary Commissions on 26 March 2015. Paper 2015/01 on the agenda of this meeting considers the report and its recommendations (insofar as they require action by the Commission) in further detail.

Political and Constitutional Reform Committee report

8. The House of Commons Political and Constitutional Reform Committee (PCRC) took evidence between September 2014 and January 2015 for their inquiry 'What next on the redrawing of Parliamentary constituency boundaries?', including both oral and

written evidence from all four Parliamentary Boundary Commissions. The PCRC's final report was published in March 2015, and contained the following firm recommendations (most of which would require primary legislation):

- a) The permitted degree of tolerance from the Electoral Quota should be amended to +/-10%, rather than 5% (or, if the increased tolerance were not accepted, then a 'localised' Electoral Quota figure should be used for each nation of the UK, rather than a UK-wide EQ);
- b) Public hearings should not take place at the same time as the initial written consultation period;
- c) Boundary Commissions should consider improved use of new technologies to enhance public participation in reviews (BCE will be doing so in the context of its proposed procurement of a web-based consultation portal for future reviews);
- d) The Government conduct research into potential use of population numbers – rather than electorate numbers – as the base numerical data for future constituency reviews;
- e) Boundary Commissions should be able to take account of local government boundary changes made by order, but not yet implemented at the effective date of the constituency review (the Secretariat believes that we can do so in practice);
- f) The Government consider how to address the disruption caused by the current linkage between the number of UK Parliamentary constituencies in Wales and Northern Ireland and the number of constituencies in their devolved assemblies;
- g) The Government should formally respond to the PCRC recommendations by June 2015, publish a draft Bill in July 2015 for any legislative changes required, and introduce the actual Bill in the autumn, to complete legislative passage by early 2016;
- h) In considering the possible bringing forward to December 2015 of full implementation of Individual Electoral Registration, the Government and Electoral Commission should consider carefully that that will be the register to be used for the 2018 Review (and should consult the Boundary Commissions about the consequences).

Post-election 2015: New Ministers and policy intentions

9. The General Election of 7 May 2015 returned a Conservative majority Government, and in the days following Ministerial appointments were made. The senior Cabinet Office Minister is now Oliver Letwin MP. However, the Cabinet Office Minister most immediately responsible for Constitutional matters will be John Penrose MP, and any legislation needing to be brought forward in relation to Parliamentary constituency reviews will be led by Chris Grayling MP (now Leader of the House of Commons).
10. The Conservative manifesto for the 2015 General election stated in relation to constituency boundary reviews: *"We will address the unfairness of the current Parliamentary boundaries, reduce the number of MPs to 600 to cut the cost of politics and make votes of more equal value. We will implement the boundary reforms that Parliament has already approved and make them apply automatically once the Boundary Commission reports in 2018."* There was no further detail provided in the Queen's Speech of 27 May.
11. As the manifesto extract itself notes, the items in the first sentence have already been enacted, so the only 'new' aspect is having the Boundary Commissions' final recommendations at the end of the next review "apply automatically". On the face of it, this appears to mean removing the current requirement for Parliament itself to actively debate the Commissions' recommendations before they can take effect. As this would require changing the existing primary legislation, such legislation might

also present an opportunity for the Government – were it so minded - to also implement some of the PCRC recommendations (see above), or indeed some changes to the administrative process we have ourselves recommended to improve the delivery of a quality constituency review process. Key policy officials from the Cabinet Office’s Elections Division will be present at the meeting to discuss with Commissioners the Government’s current thinking.

Media Enquiry Handling

12. At the end of the 2013 Review, when the Secretariat scaled down its staffing complement, with the loss of a dedicated Communications Manager who filled the role of Press Officer, the Secretariat reverted to its approach prior to the commencement of the 2013 Review, which was to allow any experienced member of staff to respond to a request for information made by the media.
13. With a new Government now in place and the date for the formal start of the 2018 Review getting closer, media interest is starting to noticeably increase. We have therefore received a request from Cabinet Office to review our procedures for dealing with media enquiries, with a view to bringing them more into line with the Civil Service’s own code. The latter was updated shortly before the election to require specific approval from a Minister’s Office before a civil servant could speak officially to a media representative.
14. It would clearly be inappropriate for BCE Secretariat staff - although civil servants – to have to seek Ministerial authority to speak to the media, given the arms’ length nature of the Commission. A direct parallel arrangement would be a requirement for Secretariat staff to seek approval from the Deputy Chair (or other Commissioner). However, we would suggest that this would be impractical and disproportionate to implement in practice, given both the technical factual nature of most media requests for information, and the limited short-notice accessibility of Commissioners.
15. Our recommended approach would be for the Commission to delegate standing authority to the Secretary to the Commission to take all requests from the media for information in the first instance. The Secretary will respond directly to the enquiry, but may, at their own discretion in the particular circumstances of the case: a) if the matter is particularly sensitive or controversial, agree the wording with the Deputy Chair (or other Commissioner) before responding; or b) if the request is for purely factual technical data (e.g. existing electorate figures or boundary lines), delegate the response to an appropriate other member of Secretariat staff. In the Secretary is unavailable to respond, any Deputy Secretary (if so designated) should fill the role accordingly: other members of Secretariat staff should only deal directly with specific requests for technical and factual data.

Tony Bellringer
Secretary to the Commission