



Boundary Commission for England (BCE)
Minutes of meeting on 25 February 2016 with political party representatives
35 Great Smith Street, London

Attendees

Political Parties	BCE
Roger Pratt CBE (Conservative, Boundary Review Director)	Mrs Justice Patterson (Deputy Chair)
Lord Hayward OBE (Conservative)	David Elvin QC (Commissioner)
Greg Cook MBE (Labour, Head of Political Strategy)	Neil Pringle (Commissioner)
John Stolliday (Labour, Head of Constitutional Unit)	Sam Hartley (Secretary to the Commission)
Hilary Stephenson (Liberal Democrat, Director of Elections)	Tony Bellringer (Deputy Secretary to the Commission)
Simon Drage (Liberal Democrat, Seat Strategy & Intelligence Officer)	
Douglas Carswell MP (UKIP)	
Mark Reckless (UKIP)	
Louise Venn (Green, Party Development Manager)	

Introduction

1. Following personal introductions, the Deputy Chair explained that the purpose of the meeting was to address the questions on the BCE's proposed policies for the forthcoming review that had been raised by the parties and circulated to them all in advance of the meeting. Those questions had been grouped by broad theme (which formed the headings below), for ease of discussion. In some cases, the BCE was still finalising its detailed policy and would welcome the views of the parties before a final decision was taken.

Timetabling of the review

2. The current intention was that the review would follow the same broad timetable as the previous review that commenced in 2011. It was stressed that these dates were indicative and could change, but the timetable would generally be:

24 February 2016	The 2018 review had formally launched, with announcement of the relevant figures (number of constituencies for each part of the UK, the electoral quota figure and the minimum and maximum permitted constituency electorates).
Summer 2016	Publication of the 'Guide to the review'



	containing BCE's policies and procedures for the review.
September – December 2016	12-week consultation on BCE's initial proposals. The aim was to publish in between summer recess and the party conference season.
March/April 2017	Four-week secondary consultation (on responses received to initial consultation).
October – December 2017	Eight-week consultation on BCEs revised proposals.
September 2018	Publication of final report and recommendations to Government.

3. The BCE would not be publishing notice of any changes it planned to make following the revised proposals consultation, as it was not felt that the legislation permitted such publication.

4. It was confirmed that each Boundary Commission was required to submit its own report to Government in September 2018, but these were subsequently combined into one Statutory Instrument for debate in Parliament.

5. The four Boundary Commissions did liaise before and during the Review, and harmonising the timetable between them was one thing that they could aim for, but they were ultimately separate bodies, and could regulate their own proceedings and timetables.

Distribution of information

6. BCE confirmed that proposals would again be sent to MPs slightly in advance of general publication under embargo, but exact details – such as how far in advance and specific arrangements for distribution – were still being considered.

7. The BCE planned to have a strong focus on digital communications for this review, as this both reflected modern preferences for information distribution and consumption, and would produce significant savings in the overall costs of the review. There would continue to be some hard copy material provided, but this would be limited to that which the BCE felt was strictly necessary, as follows (again it was stressed that these were the current plans/assumptions):

Recipient	Hard copy material provided (at both initial and revised proposals stages)
Individual MP for current English constituency (x533)	1x proposals narrative booklet for their region, plus 1x A3 map <u>only</u> of any proposed constituency that contains a part of that MP's current constituency, plus link to all proposals on BCE website.
Public 'place of deposit' in each proposed English constituency (x501 minimum)	1x proposals narrative booklet for that region, plus 1x A3 map <u>only</u> of that proposed constituency, plus 1x A0 map of all proposed constituencies in that region.
Political party national headquarters	For <u>each</u> of the nine regions of



	England: 1x proposals narrative booklet for the region; 1x A0 map of all proposed constituencies in that region; 1x A3 map of <u>every</u> proposed constituency in that region.
House of Commons and House of Lords Libraries	For each of the nine regions of England: 1x proposals narrative booklet for the region; 1x A0 map of all proposed constituencies in that region; 1x A3 map of <u>every</u> proposed constituency in that region.

8. The parties offered to assist with the mechanics of getting copies of proposals distributed to MPs (e.g. in booking a Parliamentary room for the BCE to distribute physical copies).

9. BCE confirmed that the general format of proposals maps and booklets will be similar to the 2013 review.

10. There was some discussion of the development of the BCE's planned online consultation portal, via which the BCE proposals (and copies of representations received) would be published, and it was hoped most responses would be received. It may be possible to involve a small number of representatives from the political parties in user testing as part of the development process.

11. BCE would not itself draw up and publish shape files of counter proposals it received during consultation, but encouraged parties to generate shape files of their own counter proposals and share them with each other. The BCE also asked the parties to assist in promoting awareness of the BCE's social media channels, and also particularly encourage use of the BCE's online portal to submit responses once the consultation began.

12. The BCE would not be republishing representations received during the 2013 review, as they did not form evidence to be taken into account at this review.

English regions policy

13. BCE confirmed that it would not be consulting on use of the English regions, as it had done so for the previous review, given the very significant support following that consultation and the absence of any relevant changes which might warrant a further consultation. It would therefore be running the review on the basis of nine separate regions, and accordingly had published the distribution of constituencies to each region on 24 February.

14. The BCE's initial view was that although not all five parties were a 'qualifying political party' with a right to speak in every region, in practice it proposed to allocate a special speaking slot at the lead hearing in every region to each of the five parties, in order that they could each clearly set out their overall view for that region. All parties were content with this approach. The parties felt a published timetable of speakers for each hearing would be useful, as would be advance notification of the BCE's policy on early closure of public hearings.

Ward-splitting policy



15. The BCE was very conscious of the criticism generated from the last review, when it had a very restrictive approach to splitting of wards. It therefore proposed to be more open to the possibility of ward splitting at this review, although wards would remain the default building block of constituencies, and whole wards would be used as very much the ideal.

16. If wards were to be split, BCE proposed to use polling districts as a recognised sub-ward unit of electoral administration. It did not propose to consider splitting a polling district. Polling district electorate data would be made available on BCE's website, but only alongside the published initial proposals.

17. The parties supported the approach of keeping ward-splitting to a minimum, and encouraged the development by BCE of some specific published criteria for the circumstances in which it would be prepared to consider splitting a ward, in order to avoid a potential deluge of split-ward counter-proposals.

18. The BCE confirmed that the local boundaries it was obliged to have regard to under the legislation are those that were in place as at 7 May 2015: the Commission's current view was that it was generally not possible to take account of re-warding subsequent to that date.

Assistant Commissioners

19. The BCE confirmed that it would be using Assistant Commissioners again for this review, though most likely fewer than last time. As at the last review, selection would be on merit following an open public competition: previous Assistant Commissioners would not be automatically re-appointed, but would be eligible to apply in competition with other candidates.

Public hearings

20. BCE would publish in the Guide to the Review the number of hearings to be held in each region, but it was likely to be similar to the last review.

21. The details of hearing locations, dates and procedure would be published alongside the initial proposals: the parties asked if the dates and locations could be released earlier, and the BCE agreed to consider this. BCE confirmed it would seek to avoid date clashes for the lead hearings in each region, where each national party would be invited to set out their view for the whole region. It could not speak for the other Commissions on avoiding clashes with their hearings.

22. The parties supported the previous arrangements for the advance booking of speaking slots at hearings, and supported the BCE's view that 15 minutes had in practice seemed too long for most people at the last review. The parties again requested that BCE be clear about what their policy on early closure of a hearing would be.

23. BCE confirmed that the style of oral evidence at hearings would most likely be non-confrontational again, i.e. generally questions to a speaker should be for clarification and put through the hearing Chair, not made directly to those making representations.



24. Transcripts would be made of the hearings as previously, although the parties also encouraged the use of modern technology such as video in the recording and publishing of hearing evidence.

Applying the statutory factors

25. The BCE confirmed that the interpretation and application of the statutory provisions would be as for the 2013 review, as no legislative changes had been made beyond the five-year postponement of the process.

26. It was confirmed that the review cannot take into account population rather than electorate figures. Whilst recognising the current debate around the full implementation of Individual Electoral Registration (IER), it was also confirmed that the legislation does not allow the review to take account of any electorate figures other than those published at the time prescribed in the legislation.

27. The parties asked if the BCE would be working with areas smaller than a region in developing schemes. BCE stated that its exact policy would be in the Guide, but it would most likely break down regions into smaller 'sub-region' units for practical manageability, where possible given the constraints of the statutory factors. The parties gave support to such an approach.

Relevance of 2013 work

28. Although the parties noted that the Commissions in Scotland and Wales planned to use their revised proposals from the 2013 review as a starting point for the new review, BCE confirmed that it would not be doing so, as it considered this a fresh review, with – for example – a differing number of constituencies in some regions and different permitted electorate range across the whole country compared to the equivalent figures in the 2013 review. However, BCE recognised the strength of feeling on some issues that had been demonstrated in earlier reviews, and would be cognisant of that in developing its initial proposals.

29. Although the parties felt there was a precedent from previous completed reviews of looking back at evidence submitted from previous reviews on matters such as local ties, BCE confirmed that whilst it would not ignore previously expressed strength of feeling on proposals from previous reviews if they still fit with new numerical requirements, it would not reuse nor cite evidence from 2013 review per se.

Impact of Individual Electoral Registration

30. It was confirmed that the legislation requires BCE to use figures as published in December 2015, and BCE had taken that figure from the official ONS source, as published on 24 February.

31. Subject to final statement of its position in the Guide, the BCE would most likely not take into account future changes to electorate figures, unless there were competing viable proposals, evenly balanced in respect of other relevant factors, in which case the BCE may take into account proven (as opposed to projected) significant change.