

MINUTES OF THE DECISIONS OF THE COMMISSIONERS ON THE REVISED PROPOSALS FOR THE EASTERN REGION - 10 July 2017

Present

Mr Justice Nicol, Deputy Chair
David Elvin QC, Commissioner
Neil Pringle, Commissioner
Sarah Hamilton, Lead Assistant Commissioner (Eastern region)
Laura Jane Smallwood, Assistant Commissioner (Eastern region)
Sam Hartley, Secretary to the Commission
Tony Bellringer, Deputy Secretary to the Commission
Tim Bowden, Head of Reviews
Glenn Reed, Review Manager (Eastern region)
Aarti Soba, Review Officer (Eastern region)

The Assistant Commissioners presented the evidence and their recommendations to the Commissioners.

Overview

The Assistant Commissioners were recommending 32 constituencies remain unchanged from initial proposals, with a further four changing in name only. Just over 2,000 responses had been received across the two consultation periods. Most campaigns had focused on the cross-county constituencies, or the composition of constituencies in Essex.

The Assistant Commissioners noted that it was practically a necessity to combine at least two of Cambridgeshire, Norfolk and Hertfordshire. There had been explicit recognition and support of this from the Labour and Green parties, and some of the general public. There had been some proposals for split wards and/or cross-region approaches, but the Assistant Commissioners had seen no compelling reasons to recommend these.

Biggest issues from the initial proposals had been: the proposed cross-county constituency between Hertfordshire and Cambridgeshire; the configuration of Norwich; Brentwood and Ongar; Castle Point; and the wards south of Watford.

Bedfordshire

Conservative counter-proposal to include Kempston Rural in Bedford had seen reasonable support from respondents, with evidence of urban growth into the ward, and strong use of urban services by people in the ward. By contrast, the initial proposal of Elstow and Stewartby had mixed support/opposition, with fairly strong suggestion that it should instead go into more rural Mid Beds constituency. The latter would require another ward to move out of Mid Beds. The Assistant Commissioners recommended Aspley and Woburn should stay in SW Beds, and Barton-le-Clay should move to Mid Beds. The Commissioners quizzed the Assistant Commissioners on road links

between Barton-le-Clay and Mid Beds, and the extent to which a largely very rural Kempston Rural would be an improvement on Elstow and Stewartby to be included in Bedford.

Conservative, Labour and Lib Dem national parties all supported proposal for Luton North and Houghton, although there were other representations that Houghton would be better combined with Dunstable. However, the latter responses had given very little actual evidence, so the Assistant Commissioners recommended retaining the initial proposal, with a name change to include 'Regis'. The Commissioners noted the opposition to the inclusion of rural Caddington with the urban south of Luton, but could not see a reasonable alternative that did not cause significant consequential disruption: Luton's electorate was too big for one constituency, and too small for two that could be wholly contained in the urban area.

Cambridgeshire and Hertfordshire

The main national political parties had all agreed with the proposed cross-county constituency between NE Herts and South Cambs, but there was some local opposition, including Heidi Allen MP. Although the Assistant Commissioners had carefully considered the latter, they felt it was far too disruptive to recommend. Their site visit had indicated the three S Cambs wards seemed to have more linkage to Royston than Cambridge, and indeed Meldreth should also be included due to its connections with Melbourn. The Assistant Commissioners also recommended a name change to 'Royston and Letchworth'. There had been opposition to the inclusion of Milton ward in the proposed Cambridge constituency, which a site visit seemed to endorse, so the Assistant Commissioners recommended it move to the SE Cambs constituency, with Teversham consequentially transferring to the S Cambs constituency. The Commissioners noted that Cambridge's Science Park would no longer be in the Cambridge constituency if Milton ward was not included. The Assistant Commissioners recommended a name change of Huntingdon to 'Huntingdon and St Neots', recognising the size and significance of the latter.

Hertfordshire had been largely uncontentious, with one exception being Watford and Hertsmere, in particular concerning Carpenders Park ward, with significant opposition to moving it from Watford to Hertsmere. The Assistant Commissioners' site visit demonstrated quite clearly that it should stay with Watford, but the numerical requirements of the legislation meant that another ward would need to come out of Watford constituency instead. An alternative suggestion to transfer South Oxhey ward instead would seem to present the same issues, so the Assistant Commissioners instead recommended transferring Woodside ward to St Albans. This consequentially required some compensating transfer out of St Albans, and Assistant Commissioners therefore recommended London Colney ward transfer to Hertsmere.

The main national parties had all agreed with the inclusion of the Littleport wards in a cross-county constituency between Hertfordshire and Norfolk. There had been some counter-proposals, but the Assistant Commissioners

did not feel there was sufficient justification to recommend these. They did recommend a name change of the constituency to 'Thetford and Downham Market'. There had been some negative response to the initial proposals for the composition of Norwich South, but the Assistant Commissioners could not identify a better proposal.

Essex

In Essex, there had been some opposition to the proposed North East Essex constituency, with a strong feeling that Jaywick should be included with Clacton. An alternative had been proposed, that Little Clacton and Weeley should instead be included in North East Essex, which the Assistant Commissioners recommended. There had been significant representations against the proposed Brentwood and Ongar, as the boundary went through Brentwood rail station, and Warley ward as a whole was felt to be central to Brentwood. Following a site visit to the area, the Assistant Commissioners agreed that Warley ward and Herongate, Ingrave and West Horndon ward should be included in Brentwood constituency. This would then need something to come out of Brentwood constituency, and the Assistant Commissioners recommended the Liberal Democrat counter-proposal for this area. The Labour party had supported the Lib Dem alternative here, feeling they were an improvement on the initial proposals, albeit still 'imperfect'. There had been significant opposition to transferring Victoria and St James wards from Castle Point to Southend. The Assistant Commissioners felt this view had been supported by their site visit, but there were very few alternative options, given the geography preventing movement south or east, and the significant consequential disruption that would occur going north. They therefore felt they could not recommend a change of composition here, but did recommend a name change to 'Hadley and Southend West'.

The national Labour and Liberal Democrat parties had supported the initial proposals for Suffolk, but there had been opposition to the inclusion of the 'orphan' Babergh ward of Pinewood in Ipswich, suggesting Castle Hill or Whitehouse instead (with supporting evidence of Ipswich residents working on Whitehouse industrial estate, and links between Castle Hill and St Margaret's), although these wards were also stated to have strong links with Whitton to the north). On balance, the Assistant Commissioners recommended leaving Pinewood out of Ipswich and including Castle Hill instead. Returning Pinewood to South Suffolk required some other adjustments to be made, and the Assistant Commissioners recommended adopting the Conservative counter-proposals in this regard.

Commissioner deliberations

Commissioners were minded to take a different view on which ward to take into Ipswich instead of Pinewood, favouring Whitehouse over Castle Hill, given the latter's associations north with Whitton. They determined to consider the evidence in more detail and make a decision later.

Commissioners discussed at length the case to take Milton out of Cambridge, but determined ultimately to accept the Assistant Commissioners' recommendation, whilst highlighting the difficult decision here for consultation. They agreed a similar position on the recommended inclusion of Kempston Rural ward in the proposed Bedford constituency.

Commissioners agreed the recommended move of Carpenders Park back to Watford, and the consequential sequence of ward swaps that ended with London Colney, though they recognised that this did create a number of orphan wards.

In Essex, Commissioners recognised the complexities of the south of the county particularly, but felt the Assistant Commissioners had recommended improvements to the proposals in this area, and adopted them, with the sole amendment of re-ordering a recommended constituency name to 'Southend West and Hadleigh'.

In all other respects, the Commissioners agreed the recommendations of the Assistant Commissioners.

Follow-up Commissioner discussion on 17 July

The Secretariat team provided some further information about the Ipswich wards in question. The Assistant Commissioners had driven through Whitehouse, Whitton and Castle Hill ward. The Assistant Commissioners had felt all three would generally be considered 'Ipswich' rather than more rural Suffolk. Whitehouse had a fairly strong industrial feel, and seemed less residential than the other two (though there is a more residential area in the south of the ward). Whitton and Castle Hill felt very similar, though housing stock in Whitton was a little more recent than Castle Hill. Castle Hill felt more like the centre of Ipswich than Whitton. On this basis, Commissioners agreed to endorse the Assistant Commissioners recommendation – to include Castle Hill ward in Ipswich – but again flag this up as finely balanced, and something on which views were specifically welcomed in consultation.