

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

Present

Mr Justice Nicol, Deputy Chair
David Elvin QC, Commissioner
Neil Pringle, Commissioner
Margaret Gilmore, Lead Assistant Commissioner (West Midlands region)
David Latham, Assistant Commissioner (West Midlands region)
Sam Hartley, Secretary to the Commission
Tony Bellringer, Deputy Secretary to the Commission
Tim Bowden, Head of Reviews
Gerald Tessier, Review Manager (West Midlands region)
Malak Hayek, Review Officer (West Midlands region)

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

Overview

The West Midlands was experiencing the second largest regional decrease in the number of constituencies, so significant changes were likely.

The areas from the initial proposals that had given rise to the most significant concerns were:

- Stoke on Trent
- Telford and surrounding area
- Birmingham – though many responses had supported the initial proposals
- Solihull
- Coventry
- Leamington Spa and Warwick

Over 2,000 representations had been received across the two consultations: these included over 30 valid and invalid counter-proposals.

The Assistant Commissioners' recommendations would reduce the number of electors moving constituency from 29% in initial proposals down to 19% (though Commissioners noted this was not in itself a statutory factor, and therefore consequential, rather than a driver for the recommendations, which the Assistant Commissioners confirmed).

The Assistant Commissioners were recommending six constituencies remain unchanged from initial proposals, with 47 recommended for adjustment.

Warwickshire, Coventry, Solihull, and Birmingham

In the east of region, only one of the nine constituencies is currently within the permitted electorate change. A strong (and near-unanimous) negative

reaction had been received in relation to the splitting of Leamington Spa from Warwick. The Assistant Commissioners' impression from the public hearing in the area was that there was indeed a lot of unity between the two towns. The only responses that supported the split were two individuals that supported it only as a by-product of seeking to achieve a particular outcome elsewhere in the region. There were also objections to the proposed Evesham and South Warwickshire cross-county constituency, and general opposition to splitting Stratford-on-Avon council between four constituencies.

The Assistant Commissioners noted that remodelling to bring Leamington Spa and Warwick together again has a significant ripple effect, which goes right up to the borders of Birmingham. The political party responses had all been firmly of the view that Leamington Spa and Warwick should be kept together, but took different approaches to how to recast the area. Lib Dem and Green proposals would unite Kenilworth with Coventry, bringing together University areas. Conservative proposals would deliver fewer changes to existing constituencies in this part of the region. There had been differing proposals from the Labour party nationally and locally, but both approaches would be quite disruptive around Coventry and Solihull particularly.

In the Solihull area, there was opposition to splitting the borough into three constituencies, although counter-proposals split the existing Meriden constituency between as many as four council areas. There was also particular opposition to including a Birmingham ward (Sheldon) and a Stratford ward (Tanworth-in-Arden) in different proposed Solihull constituencies. The Assistant Commissioners therefore recommended that it would be appropriate to establish two constituencies in Solihull, both wholly contained within the council's boundaries, which would require some tweaking of wards.

Only three of the existing constituencies in Birmingham are within permitted electorate limits, and a number of the initial proposals crossed council boundaries. Despite this, there was strong support for the initial proposals, particularly from Labour (the national party and local MPs). However, there was also some significant local opposition in specific areas, particularly where the proposed Birmingham constituencies crossed into neighbouring council areas. A number of responses proposed bringing Selly Oak and Edgbaston wards together in one constituency, as these both had very strong connections to the University. There was also a strong campaign to not put Pheasey Park Farm ward into a Birmingham constituency.

Accommodating all these changes created significant ripple effects, which had caused the Assistant Commissioners and staff to look afresh at the whole area. Commissioners were concerned to make sure a minimal change option had been looked at. Assistant Commissioners confirmed that their recommendations would see less change to existing constituencies than the initial proposals, though there would be significant change from initial proposals in spite of some significant support being received for those. Their recommendations would see the existing Perry Barr constituency split between neighbouring ones, but a Hall Green re-emerging. The Assistant

Commissioners acknowledged that there were still difficulties with their recommendations (e.g. two Birmingham wards going into non-Birmingham constituencies), but felt that overall the recommendations were an improvement on the initial proposals.

Herefordshire, Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin, Worcestershire, and West Midlands metropolitan county area (excl Coventry and Solihull)

None of the existing Black Country constituencies are within the permitted electorate range – all are well below the minimum. There had been some significant opposition to the initial proposals in this area, e.g. from Sandwell Council, with concerns about the number of constituencies split between different councils. This was the area where Assistant Commissioners felt they needed to put a stop to the ripple effect, though this would require splitting some wards. The Assistant Commissioners did visit the areas and felt the splits they were recommending would be acceptable. Specifically, they recommended three wards be split. Commissioners clarified that the north of the boundary proposed to split Brierley Hill ward ran through an industrial area (largely disused). The proposed split in St Paul's ward was again almost wholly through an industrial estate (albeit more active), and along a dual carriageway. The proposed split in Greets Green and Lyng ward was more troublesome, as it did appear to go significantly through residential areas.

The initial proposals in Shropshire were largely supported, though there had been some discussion about particular wards that should be in Telford, with a difference of view between the Labour and Conservative party representations. Ultimately, the Assistant Commissioners recommended no change to the initial proposals here. There had also been concerns about the inclusion of Much Wenlock in the proposed Bridgnorth, Wellington and the Wrekin constituency. Assistant Commissioners were therefore recommending the ward be transferred into Ludlow and Leominster constituency because of the commercial links. They acknowledged that this left Broseley fairly isolated, but including it also in a Ludlow constituency would consequentially require a significant ripple effect across Shropshire, which would be undesirable.

In Herefordshire there had been broad support for Hereford and South Herefordshire, but some objections to Ludlow and Leominster, and Malvern and Ledbury.

Worcestershire saw mostly support in the north, and opposition in the south, particularly about: the cross-county constituency proposal; division of Wychavon between five councils; and the composition of the Worcester constituency (although there had been a divergence of views in responses on the latter). There was some specific discussion of the wards to be included in Bromsgrove and Redditch constituencies. Under the Assistant Commissioners' recommendations, Wychavon would now be split across three constituencies, rather than five.

Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent

In Staffordshire, the Assistant Commissioners did not see a justification to support counter-proposals that would have a constituency cross from Staffordshire to Shropshire. They felt three constituencies could fairly be retained from initial proposals. There had been opposition to the proposals around Tamworth and Lichfield, centred on Whittington and Streethay, with a difference of opinion between the Conservative and Labour party responses. The Assistant Commissioners considered carefully the possibility of splitting a ward, to put just Streethay itself into Lichfield, but ultimately did not feel there were exceptional and compelling reasons to do so. There had been objections to West Staffs, though support for Newcastle-under-Lyme and Stoke North and South. However, there had also been opposition for Newcastle-under-Lyme being divided. The Assistant Commissioners therefore recommended putting Kidsgrove with north Stoke, consequential changes to Newcastle-under-Lyme, and expansion of Stoke South to include Stone, with Eccleshall also moving into Stafford.

Commissioner deliberation

Commissioners were conscious that securing desirable changes outside Birmingham necessitated significant changes in Birmingham itself. They were not minded to support the Streethay split-ward suggestion. They felt there was a largely binary choice between slightly tweaking the initial proposals (which would not satisfy some of the major objection areas), or the more radical change to initial proposals recommended by the Assistant Commissioners, which would address these major identified issues, but would also change Birmingham significantly from initial proposals that had seen significant support.

Overall, the Commissioners agreed the recommendations from the Assistant Commissioners, not approving the split ward suggestion for Streethay, but agreeing those in the three Dudley and Sandwell wards.

They agreed the revised proposals report should spend some time focused on why Birmingham was being significantly changed from the initial proposals, including: benefits to specific areas of Birmingham; need to consider benefits to the region as a whole; and further describing the nature and strength of the evidence that had been submitted in support of the initial proposals.