

MINUTES OF THE DECISIONS OF THE COMMISSIONERS ON THE REVISED PROPOSALS FOR THE SOUTH EAST REGION - 11 July 2017

Present

Mr Justice Nicol, Deputy Chair
David Elvin QC, Commissioner
Neil Pringle, Commissioner
Colin Byrne, Lead Assistant Commissioner (South East region)
Stephen Lawes, Assistant Commissioner (South East region)
Sam Hartley, Secretary to the Commission
Tony Bellringer, Deputy Secretary to the Commission
Tim Bowden, Head of Reviews
Roger Winter, Review Manager (South East region)
Bibi Burahee, Review Officer (South East region)

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

Overview

The region had an allocation of 83 seats: a net reduction of one from the existing. Consultation on the initial proposals had not indicated any big cross-regional issues, but there were a number of 'hot-spots and pinch points', mainly due to the electorate size of urban areas often being too big for one constituency, but not enough for two, resulting in having to take in part of rural hinterland. The public hearings had mostly been relatively poorly attended, though Brighton in particular was busy, and there had been some good evidence and counter-proposals received in both oral and written evidence. The recommendations of the Assistant Commissioners would increase to 20 the number of constituencies unchanged from existing (compared to 15 in the initial proposals).

Berkshire

In Berkshire, the most difficult areas were in Reading (in relation to the detached Mapledurham ward and the splitting of the lower Early area), Slough (Chalvey ward proposed to transfer to Windsor), and also Aldermaston (placed with Wokingham, rather than Reading/Newbury). The Liberal Democrat counter proposals seemed to the Assistant Commissioners to be unnecessarily extensive and disproportionate in the amount of change they proposed. Rob Wilson's counter proposals solved the Mapledurham issue by bringing in Basildon ward, whilst Aaron Fear did this and also brought in Bucklebury (as well as Maiden Erlegh). The Assistant Commissioners were balanced between these two proposals, but ultimately recommended the Aaron Fear approach, as they felt it produced a better alignment with the local authority boundaries. They noted that the initial proposals consultation had produced some opposition to the possibility of including Basildon (claiming it had better ties to Newbury), and that the suggestion of including Bucklebury has not been tested in consultation yet. The Assistant Commissioners noted

that including Bucklebury was numerically necessary in order to allow the Aldermaston and Maiden Erlegh adjustments.

The Windsor constituency was the driver behind the inclusion of Chalvey, as the former needs to gain electors, but it had been clear from consultation that Chalvey is widely considered part of the civic heart of Slough. A number of counter-proposals had suggested taking wards out of Bracknell instead – particularly Bullbrook or Crowthorne wards. There had been a more radical proposal for the county (from the Pirate Party) which included taking wards from Surrey: the Assistant Commissioners felt that overall this was unnecessarily disruptive, but did make them think that a reasonable solution might be to take the single ward of Windlesham from Surrey Heath, as its character seemed very similar to Windsor (certainly more so than Chalvey or the Bracknell wards). Commissioners agreed there appeared a clear case for Chalvey to go back into Slough, but questioned what the best consequential alternative ward to include in Windsor would be.

Surrey

The main consultation concerns in Surrey had focused on relatively small moves of suburban areas (e.g. Chertsey and Byfleet). The Conservative proposals seemed reasonably sensible to the Assistant Commissioners, restoring a number of these areas, although it did leave a boundary between Runnymede and Esher & Walton that splits Hersham. However, overall the Assistant Commissioners felt that it did produce a generally much improved solution and therefore recommended it.

Brighton & Hove, East Sussex, Kent, and Medway

The City of Brighton and Hove is simply too big for two constituencies and too small for three. Despite being a single city, there are also historically strong separate identities of Hove and Brighton. The initial proposals had generated significant opposition to a proposed North Brighton that cut across the generally north/south directions of travel in the city, and didn't leave that constituency with any connection to the seafront. There had also been some opposition to taking the easternmost constituency so far east. One proposal received had been to extend Hove west to take in Eastbrook ward, but a site visit convinced the Assistant Commissioners that that ward was much more connected to the rest of Shoreham, plus it would involve a succession of knock-on effects into West Sussex. There had been strong opposition to the initial proposal to place Hove Park in Brighton North. The Assistant Commissioners therefore recommended effectively recreating the existing Hove and Pavilion constituencies, but with Regency ward transferring to Hove, and Moolescomb and Bevendean transferring to Pavilion.

This left the easternmost constituency to resolve, where the two fundamental options from consultation were to extend further along the coastal strip east, or to extend instead north east to take in Lewes and surrounds. The Assistant Commissioners felt the problem with the latter approach was the county town and rural nature of Lewes and surrounds, which was very different to eastern

Brighton (and would also create a very long north-south East Sussex constituency going from the coast around Lewes and right up to the north of East Sussex). The problem with the east coastway alternative would be that it would leave technically detached wards east of Newhaven, unless a north Newhaven ward is split to add in the road connection between the two parts, which they therefore recommended. Commissioners noted that the ward of Newhaven Denton and Meeching did take in some rather different-looking north and south parts of Newhaven.

In East Sussex, there had been opposition to the proposed Lewes and Uckfield constituency, focused on how big and unwieldy it appeared. John Bryant's counter-proposal appeared to Assistant Commissioners to address both this and the equally unwieldy High Weald proposed constituency, giving rather more compact constituencies, and getting closer to a restored Bexhill and Battle. They therefore recommended this, with the slight amendment of excluding Ticehurst (due to their recommended split Newhaven ward).

A lot of representations had been received in north Kent and Medway. The Conservative proposal to restore Higham ward to Gravesham constituency appeared sensible, so Assistant Commissioners recommended it. Lordswood and Capstone ward had generated both opposition and support, but they recommended retention of the initial proposal here, due to the difficulty of producing a suitable alternative that did not cause significant consequential disruption to neighbouring constituencies. The Assistant Commissioners recommended adoption of the Conservative proposals to restore Ash and New Ash ward to Sevenoaks. They also recommended, based on the proposals put forward by John Bryant: a Tunbridge Wells and Crowborough constituency; a Tonbridge constituency (slightly adjusted); and his proposed Mid Kent (but with Ticehurst included).

In east Kent, the main issue raised in consultation responses had been whether Sandwich is more connected to Dover or Ramsgate. It had seemed a balanced argument, but the Assistant Commissioners felt the stronger modern evidence pointed to connections going north east. The Conservative party proposal had taken this approach, and also resolved the difficulties in allocating Westgate satisfactorily in Margate, although it did leave problems with the rural wards west of Sandwich, and included a Whitstable ward with the Canterbury constituency. Aaron Fear's proposal was similar, but slightly more problematic, so the Assistant Commissioners ultimately recommended the Conservative approach.

Buckinghamshire

In Buckinghamshire, Milton Keynes growth was the key issue, particularly when combined with the difficult geography of the region boundaries in this area. The Assistant Commissioners had actively considered cross-regional counter proposals, discussing those with the Assistant Commissioner teams in the relevant regions, but had concluded with those other Assistant Commissioner teams that the cross-regional proposals would not provide a benefit to those regions (and in some cases would introduce more difficulties).

The Assistant Commissioners recommended Woolverton should be retained in Milton Keynes, with Tattenhoe instead transferring to Buckingham, due to historic and civic connections of the former with Milton Keynes, whereas the latter is new housing expansion and has a clearer road connection to Buckingham. They noted the representations that Wing should better be with Buckingham, but were not persuaded by the evidence put forward, so recommended retaining the initial proposals except for the specified Milton Keynes exchange of wards.

Hampshire, Portsmouth, and Southampton

The reduction of one constituency in Hampshire had caused a number of difficulties. There had been opposition to extending New Forest East so far north, so the Assistant Commissioners recommended instead taking Chilworth, Nursling and Rownhams ward to the north east, extending slightly over the top of Southampton (this ward appeared to have links to Totton wards already in the New Forest East constituency, albeit probably not to the New Forest itself). The Assistant Commissioners looked carefully at how to deal with concerns raised from villages south of Andover and Winchester, and issues raised about Church Crookham, but all the proposed alternatives raised problems that appeared to them to be just as problematic (if not worse), so they recommended retaining the initial proposals in these areas.

In Portsmouth, there had been arguments both ways as to which constituencies Baffins and Nelson wards should go into, but the Assistant Commissioners were persuaded from the evidence that Baffins looked primarily south and Nelson looked primarily east, so recommended these amendments should be made to the initial proposals.

In Southampton, the main concern had been where the Itchen should be crossed. The Assistant Commissioners had been persuaded by evidence submitted and their own site visit that there were good crossings in the south, but not good ones further north in city. They also felt a good case had been made for keeping the Flowers estate and university-connected wards together, so recommended the initial proposals should be retained.

Isle of Wight

In the Isle of Wight, there had been support for initial proposals generally. The Assistant Commissioners had not been persuaded by a suggestion to use a north/south split. However, they did agree with the evidence put forward that Wootton Bridge should be transferred to the East constituency, and therefore recommended this sole amendment to the initial proposals in this area

Oxfordshire

In Oxfordshire, a key issue was the significant growth in the Bicester area, but the Assistant Commissioners felt that nobody had provided a satisfactory alternative to the initial proposals. A radical recasting of Oxfordshire – as some had proposed - was not persuasive in the Assistant Commissioners'

view, as it had not been supported by reasoning beyond the mathematical distribution of electors. They felt the Liberal Democrat proposal to include rural wards east of Oxford in the city constituency was not persuasive, having examined the area on a site visit. Aaron Fear's proposal reorientated wards to the west of Oxford with Abingdon, to form a western constituency extending further north, but connected by the A38 spine. The Assistant Commissioners therefore recommended the Aaron Fear proposal, amended to include Jericho in the Oxford East constituency, given there appeared to be clear connections of that ward with the city centre.

West Sussex

In West Sussex, the only significant point of contention concerned which wards should be included in Crawley and Horsham. The Assistant Commissioners noted there was both support for the initial proposals and an alternative proposed in the consultation responses, but were not persuaded that the suggested alternative would improve upon the initial proposals, and therefore recommended retention of the latter.

Commission deliberations

Commissioners were persuaded by the case to reinclude Chalvey in Slough. They were conscious that including Windlesham with Windsor was not something that had yet been tested, but revised proposal consultation would give an opportunity to consider any further views.. In Reading, there were more difficult issues. They were persuaded by the case to include Basildon (to allow Mapledurham's return), but less convinced of the case to also include Bucklebury. However, they agreed to accept the Assistant Commissioners' recommendation and specifically seek views on the impact of extending Reading into the rural hinterland versus the opportunity it allowed to address the Maiden Erlegh and Aldermaston difficulties. Commissioners agreed to adopt the Assistant Commissioners' recommendations for Surrey, noting that it did unfortunately leave Hersham split.

In Brighton, the Commissioners considered very carefully whether the case for a split ward was sufficiently compelling. They were convinced that the east coast extension option was preferable to combining Lewes and rural surrounds with east Brighton. They noted that it was possible to keep whole wards, albeit that putting Newhaven Valley ward in a Lewes constituency split Newhaven and placed some of its civic buildings in the Lewes constituency. However, they felt this was preferable to having a split ward, for which there did not seem to be a truly compelling case. The Commissioners considered that splitting a ward in these circumstances primarily to provide a tidy geographic boundary would be inconsistent with the approach they had taken to splitting wards elsewhere.

Commissioners accepted the recommendations for East Sussex and Kent, though asked for further thinking on the unwieldy proposed name of 'North East Kent Coastal' for the constituency largely based on Thanet.

Commissioners agreed the recommendations for Buckinghamshire. In Hampshire, they debated the recommendations for an amended New Forest East particularly the wrap around New Forest East proposal, but ultimately concluded there was no better solution and agreed to accept the recommendation here, as well as those for Southampton and Portsmouth. They agreed the recommendations for the Isle of Wight, Oxfordshire, and West Sussex.

Further discussion on 17 July

Commissioners reviewed the alternative suggestions that Assistant Commissioners had come back with in relation to the recommended 'North East Kent Coastal' name. The two new suggestions were 'East Thanet and Sandwich' or 'North Foreland and Sandwich'. Commissioners agreed to endorse the former of these, as this would generally be more recognisable, and was similar to the existing constituency name, whilst reflecting the primary change from that existing constituency (the addition of the Sandwich area).