

MINUTES OF THE DECISIONS OF THE COMMISSIONERS ON THE REVISED PROPOSALS FOR THE NORTH EAST REGION - 17 July 2017

Present

Mr Justice Nicol, Deputy Chair
David Elvin QC, Commissioner
Neil Pringle, Commissioner
Eileen Brady, Lead Assistant Commissioner (North East region)
Adele Baumgardt, Assistant Commissioner (North East region)
Sam Hartley, Secretary to the Commission
Tony Bellringer, Deputy Secretary to the Commission
Tim Bowden, Head of Reviews
Donna Smith, Review Manager (North East region)
Kevin Gaye, Review Officer (North East region)

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

Overview

There was a proportionately very significant reduction of four constituencies in the region, from 29 existing constituencies to 25 under the statutory redistribution. The Commission had received around 1400 representations in response to consultation, around 1000 of those in response to the initial proposals, with the remainder coming in the secondary consultation.

Northumberland

The Assistant Commissioners felt Northumberland could be treated as a sub-region of its own, containing three constituencies all within the county boundary. They recommended a 'Hexham and Cramlington' constituency, which would also contain Ponteland, although they noted that Cramlington itself was starting to get more urban and near the coast. They also recommended a 'Berwick and Morpeth' constituency, which would avoid a major split of Ashington, but again noted that Chopington would be a reasonably urban area in an otherwise very rural constituency.

Newcastle, Gateshead, Tyneside, Sunderland, and County Durham

The Assistant Commissioners stated that their recommended 'Newcastle upon Tyne North West' was somewhat consequential on what they had done with Northumberland, but was also a little closer to reflecting the Newcastle City Council boundaries than the initial proposals had been. Their recommended 'Blaydon' constituency recognised that the river Tyne needs to be crossed somewhere, but avoided a 'Tyne Bridge' constituency that historically had proven a very unpopular suggestion. The Commissioners considered it was important to emphasise in the consultation that revised proposals try and address concerns that have been raised previously, but do

create issues of their own and are untested, so we welcome responses on such previously untested proposals particularly.

South of the Tyne, the Assistant Commissioners had considered carefully what justification there may be for a splitting of wards to allow for amendment of the boundary between 'Jarrow' and 'South Shields' constituencies. However, ultimately they did not feel there was either compelling reasons to do so, or that the proposed split would be a good one, as it would lie right through the middle of a housing estate.

Around Durham, the Assistant Commissioners had visited the area and felt that Framwelgate and Newton Hall did not appear to have a strong affinity to the main city area of Durham. There was significant discussion of the wards around Durham itself, going west and south west of the city, and Commissioners ultimately agreed with the Assistant Commissioners' recommendations, again noting that whilst imperfect, this was being largely driven by the statutory requirement on electorate numbers. The Commissioners recognised that it was likely to be unpopular to associate the City of Durham and coastal areas to the east in a single constituency, as they were likely to be very different in nature and communities, but it had proven impossible to find a better alternative that would fit satisfactorily with surrounding constituencies. They did agree a modification of the proposed constituency name to 'City of Durham and Easington'.

The Assistant Commissioners' recommended 'Billingham and Sedgefield' constituency would reunite the Billingham wards in a single constituency. Commissioners noted this did again bring together dissimilar areas and communities: the largely rural area around Sedgefield with the heavily industrialised Billingham area. Commissioners noted this was being done to directly address previous strong representations seeking to keep Billingham together, so the consultation should again ask for specific views on the revised proposals in this area.

In the initial proposals consultation, there had been significant opposition to splitting Barnard Castle, so the Assistant Commissioners were now recommending a 'Bishop Auckland' constituency that would resolve this, and more closely reflect existing constituency boundaries.

Cleveland and Darlington

The proposed 'Darlington' constituency had attracted widespread support in earlier consultation, so the Assistant Commissioners therefore recommended that be left as in the initial proposals.

The Assistant Commissioners recommended bringing Stockton and Yarm together in one constituency, which Commissioners felt made sense. The Assistant Commissioners noted particular opposition had been to splitting Middlesbrough across the three constituencies suggested in the initial proposals: their revised recommendations would see it being split between only two instead. The Assistant Commissioners also noted some opposition in

consultation responses to Redcar being associated with Middlesbrough, hence they had revised the proposals here, to keep Redcar with East Cleveland instead.

Commissioner deliberations

Overall, Commissioners noted that many of the recommended revisions produced constituencies that were untested, and may well prove unpopular, but recognised that these had been the best attempt to address the issues that had been raised in the first two consultation stages.

The Commissioners noted that some particular issues had arisen seemingly in light of having to address representations about keeping Billingham together, and considered whether the cost of meeting these concerns was too high for those in other areas? They felt that the real difficulty is that to try and resolve those areas where there are continuing contentious issues, the consequential effect is to create conflict with contrary statements which have been clearly set out in evidence in the consultation. They therefore considered that the best overall solution was that recommended and accepted all the Assistant Commissioners' recommendations for the region, including the change of constituency name to 'City of Durham and Easington'.

Commissioners agreed that the approach should be to be upfront in the new consultation about the difficulties in configuring this region in a satisfactory way, and particularly invite comments and suggested alternatives for the problematic areas. They considered it was important to communicate both: a) that it would be unrealistic in this final consultation stage to go 'right back to the drawing board'; and b) recognise that it was difficult if not impossible to find solutions that would resolve all the issues raised in the consultation because many of the potential solutions simply transferred the difficulties to other parts of the region. The consultation should highlight that the Commission feel that these revised proposals do represent an improvement generally on the initial proposals viewed as a whole, even if there were still a number of imperfections that could not be eliminated.

The revised proposals report should make it clear how the revisions have sought to make improvements in respect of the statutory factors (e.g. alignment with local authority boundaries), whilst also recognising that new proposals are not without their problems.