

MINUTES OF THE DECISIONS OF THE COMMISSIONERS ON THE REVISED PROPOSALS FOR THE SOUTH WEST REGION - 17 July 2017

Present

Mr Justice Nicol, Deputy Chair
Neil Pringle, Commissioner
Anita Bickerdike, Lead Assistant Commissioner (South West region)
Catherine Elliott, Assistant Commissioner (South West region)
Sam Hartley, Secretary to the Commission
Tony Bellringer, Deputy Secretary to the Commission
Tim Bowden, Head of Reviews
Gerald Tessier, Review Manager (South West region)
Malak Hayek, Review Officer (South West region)

Apologies were received from David Elvin QC, Commissioner

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

Overview

There needed to be a reduction of two constituencies from the 55 existing to 53. The Commission had received over 2000 consultation responses, just over 1500 of those in first consultation (on the initial proposals). These responses had included over 40 valid and invalid counter-proposals. There had been a relatively high level of acceptance of the initial proposals – resulting in the Assistant Commissioners recommending 28 constituencies unchanged from initial proposals, and a further five that were name change recommendations only. A number of name changes were being recommended, primarily to give increased recognition to main towns in the suggested constituencies.

Bath and North East Somerset, and Somerset

There had been no significant opposition to - and general support for – the initial proposals in this area. There had been some concerns about the naming of the Yeovil constituency, so the Assistant Commissioners recommended a change to ‘Yeovil and South Somerset’.

Bournemouth, Dorset, Poole and Wiltshire

Most of the changes Assistant Commissioners were recommending were in and around Bournemouth. They had been faced with some tricky decisions about what to do with Chickerell and Wareham. Ultimately they were recommending just transferring Chickerell and Chesil Bank ward to South Dorset, and just Lydden Vale and Blackmore wards to West Dorset.

The Assistant Commissioners had not been persuaded by representations in respect of changes for Devizes and Chippenham, although they agreed with

the view that all three Corsham wards should be brought together in one constituency. They did not agree with the 'Chippenham and Trowbridge' constituency that had been suggested in response to consultation, as the main transport route between them would go out of the constituency (through Melkesham).

Bristol

Although there had been general support for the proposals in this area, the Assistant Commissioners considered a number of alternative options for configuring Bristol constituencies, including that put forward by a former local MP, Stephen Williams. However, they had determined not to recommend any alternative approach, as they felt each gave rise to more significant issues than they solved, so were not an improvement on the initial proposals.

Cornwall, Devon, Isles of Scilly, Plymouth and Torbay

The Assistant Commissioners recommended moving St Loyes ward into the Exeter constituency, which there had been a balanced view about in the consultation, but a site visit supported the view that it had a closer connection to the city than Topsham did. The Commissioners noted that Topsham ward did come all the way into part of Exeter at Countess Wear, but the bulk of the ward did appear to have less of a strong connection to the city than St Loyes did.

Although there was recognition of the strength of feeling in relation to a cross-border constituency between Cornwall and Devon, there had been no viable alternative put forward in consultation responses that would satisfy the legislative electorate requirements. That being the case, there had been a general recognition that the crossing should be in the north of the counties rather than the south. It was noted that the only possible alternative to a crossing of the border that could allow whole constituencies for Cornwall would be to transfer the Isles of Scilly to another county, but the Assistant Commissioners felt this would not be at all appropriate. The Assistant Commissioners had considered representations about including the 'china clay wards' with St Austell, and their recommendations would transfer most of those wards: it had not been possible to recommend transferring all of them, again because of the numerical constraints.

The Assistant Commissioner had also considered transferring Chudleigh ward into a central Devon constituency, but this would then necessitate a number of consequential ward shifts, which they did not consider appropriate, so they determined not to recommend such a transfer.

Gloucestershire and South Gloucestershire

In Gloucestershire, there had been significant opposition to splitting Springbank ward from a Cheltenham constituency. The Assistant Commissioners visited the area, which supported that view, so they recommended Springbank be retained in Cheltenham, which would leave the

latter as a constituency unchanged from its existing form. As a result of this, there was a need to find another link between the otherwise separated parts of the proposed Tewkesbury constituency, so the Assistant Commissioners recommended splitting the Coombe Hill ward. They felt this met the Commission's 'compelling reasons' test, as it would allow Springbank's retention in Cheltenham, prevented an otherwise 'domino effect' of changes southwards, and allowed less shifting of electors generally from their existing constituencies in the area. The Commissioners examined how compelling these reasons were, noting that this ward split also facilitated the return of the Quedgley wards to Gloucester. They also noted that this split was suggested in some of the consultation responses. Consequentially, around Gloucester only Elmbridge ward would need to be moved, rather than multiple wards, so there would be significantly less disruption. There had been a lot of support for renaming 'West Gloucestershire' to 'Forest of Dean', which the Assistant Commissioners recommended.

Following a site visit in the area, the Assistant Commissioners recommended a different composition of wards be transferred into the Cotswolds. This would then allow Minchinhampton and Nailsworth to be included with Stroud, which there had consultation responses in favour of.

North Somerset, and Swindon

There had been general support and very little opposition to the initial proposals in these areas. The Assistant Commissioners had again considered the few counter proposals put forward, but were not recommending them on the basis of their causing unnecessary disruption to surrounding areas.

Commissioners' deliberations

Commissioners noted the need to be careful in describing the extent of the connections of Topsham ward with Exeter, given the clear proximity of the ward to the city, although they endorsed the view that its connections appeared less strong than those of St Loyes ward.

On the split ward recommendation, the Commissioners considered carefully, and were persuaded that there were compelling reasons, not limited to solving the issue with Springbank, but facilitating a number of positive adjustments well beyond. They agreed that there was no realistically sensible alternative to having a cross-county constituency between Cornwall and Devon, given the numerical requirement of the legislation and the proximity of the Isles of Scilly to Cornwall compared to any other alternative.

The Commissioners therefore agreed with all the recommendations of the Assistant Commissioners.