

MINUTES OF THE DECISIONS OF THE COMMISSIONERS ON THE REVISED PROPOSALS FOR THE NORTH WEST REGION - 18 July 2017

Present

Mr Justice Nicol, Deputy Chair
Neil Pringle, Commissioner
Neil Ward, Lead Assistant Commissioner (North West region)
Nicholas Elliott, QC, Assistant Commissioner (North West region)
Graeme Clarke, Assistant Commissioner (North West region)
Sam Hartley, Secretary to the Commission
Tony Bellringer, Deputy Secretary to the Commission
Tim Bowden, Head of Reviews
Sam Amponsah, Review Manager (North West region)
Alex Newton, Review Officer (North West region)

Apologies were received from David Elvin QC, Commissioner

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

Overview

The Commission had received over 3,000 responses to their initial proposals in this region. The region had been divided into four sub-regions, but the Assistant Commissioners felt it was possible to largely also treat the Wirral distinctly. The region presented a divergent mix of high density urban areas (particularly Merseyside and Manchester) with rural and market towns (much of Lancashire and Cumbria). It contained the smallest existing constituency in England (by electorate), the highest mountains and largest lakes in England, and hard boundaries with Scotland to the north and the Irish Sea to the west.

Nonetheless, the Assistant Commissioners felt they had been able to develop sensible recommendations whilst avoiding splitting wards or crossing into a different region. They had tried to avoid changing existing constituencies where possible - or at least sought to minimise such change - even if that meant that such change as they were recommending had consequentially been focused on some areas more than others. They stressed they had focused on the quality of evidence received, rather than the quantity, though they had tried to take into account the strength of feeling on an issue, where possible.

Cumbria

The Assistant Commissioners felt that constituency review in Cumbria was particularly constrained by the physical geography, with the population largely living around the edge, and some central parts of the county being impassable at some times of year. They had been unconvinced by arguments that Dalston should not go with Carlisle, so recommended keeping the constituency coterminous with the council area. They had been persuaded by

representations that Bootle ward associated most with Whitehaven, so should be included in a 'West Cumbria' constituency.

Lancashire

Lancashire was reducing from 16 existing to 14 constituencies. One of the most contentious issues in the region (and indeed across England) had been the conjoining of Lancaster and Morecambe in the initial proposals, which had generated a 5000-signature petition in opposition to the proposal. However, whilst the two areas no doubt had separate identities, the Assistant Commissioners had not been persuaded of the extent of the alleged difference between them, with many people seemingly living and working between the two, and a long list of local companies and services that served both. However, they did feel that the University area should be included in the urban constituency rather than put in a largely rural north Lancashire constituency. That would require moving a ward out of the urban constituency, and they recommended that should be Bolton and Slyne ward, though the numerical constraints would mean that Halton-with-Aughton ward would need to be brought back in. They did consider alternatives, but did not feel that any were really feasible. The Commissioners were concerned at the odd shape of the recommended constituency, with the appended Halton-with-Aughton ward, and also had concerns that the earlier consultation had produced lots of evidence from those supporting bringing in the university ward, but residents of Halton-with-Aughton would not have had an opportunity to comment on the new recommendations yet. The Assistant Commissioners had not been persuaded that Bulk ward should transfer out of a Lancaster constituency.

The proposed 'North Lancashire' was a geographically large constituency, but the Assistant Commissioners noted the relatively good transport networks, and that it was not the only large rural constituency across England. Its size was a consequence of keeping rural wards with other rural wards – which people often argued in favour of – and as these sparsely populated wards were themselves geographically large, you could not therefore avoid geographically large constituencies as a result. The Assistant Commissioners had not been persuaded by the Conservative counter proposal to include wards from Preston. The Clitheroe and Colne proposed constituency had generated concerns about its size and shape, but a site visit by the Assistant Commissioners revealed that it was actually quite an accessible constituency: Pendle Hill is a major feature, but it had proven easy to drive from end to end of the constituency in about one hour, and communities across the constituency felt very similar. The Assistant Commissioners did recommend renaming it to 'Pendle and Ribble Valley', and taking out Bamber Bridge East (to reunify that with Bamber Bridge West), but otherwise recommended it should be unchanged from the initial proposal. It was noted that the very sensible constituencies around Lancashire mill towns had in part driven the strange shape.

There had been concern expressed about Lytham St Annes, and the Assistant Commissioners' recommendations sought to address those, as well as representations that Fylde council area should be kept together. The

Assistant Commissioners noted that Poulton le Fylde was divided in consequence of their recommendations, but this had been part of the counter-proposals submitted by the Conservative party and individuals in the first consultation and did not seem to have generated any objection in the secondary consultation.

Merseyside (less the Wirral)

Merseyside was reduced from 11 existing to ten constituencies. The Assistant Commissioners agreed with the inclusion of South Ribble wards in Southport, which then avoided having to split Formby. There had been broad support for proposals across Liverpool, with a very low level of response in both written responses and the public hearing held in the city. The Assistant Commissioners did not therefore recommend any further changes to the initial proposals in this sub-region.

Greater Manchester, Wirral, and Cheshire

The Wirral needed to reduce from four existing to three constituencies. The main issue in consultation on this area concerned what should happen to Bebbington. The Assistant Commissioners noted the strong association that was stated to exist between Hoylake and West Kirby. Their recommendation was therefore simply to swap Bebbington with Bromborough: there appeared to be good transport links between the latter and the rest of Birkenhead constituency. They felt it was not possible to also include Eastham ward.

The inclusion of the Chester Villages in the proposed Chester constituency had been strongly supported. The inclusion of Halton Leigh ward with Runcorn seemed to make sense, as it contained the main shopping area and hospital facilities for Runcorn, though the Assistant Commissioners also felt it would be sensible to rename the constituency to 'Widnes and Runcorn'. In consequence there was a need to move a single ward from Warrington South to North in order to meet permitted electorate range: which move was largely driven by the barrier of the Manchester Ship Canal and the need to avoid creating a 'detached ward'.

Greater Manchester was reducing from 27 existing to 25 constituencies, and at least one of these needed to cross a boundary with a neighbouring area. There were a raft of existing constituencies to the west of Greater Manchester that are within the permitted electorate range, but those to the north and east of the area are all predominantly below the permitted range. All the counter proposals received for the area had accepted that the cross-border constituency should be south of Manchester into Cheshire.

The Assistant Commissioners had not been persuaded by the suggested general approach of 'spreading the pain' of change across Greater Manchester, and had instead sought to keep unchanged or cause minimal change in as many places as possible.

There had been counter-proposals to swap a couple of wards between two Bolton constituencies, but this did not work numerically. The Assistant Commissioners accepted the view that Radcliffe should not be split, though this did then necessitate a recommended three-way exchange of wards between constituencies (and some consequential name changes). The Rochdale and Heywood/Middleton areas were particularly difficult to resolve, because of the need to change neighbouring constituencies. There had been broad support for the proposed Littleborough and Saddleworth constituency, but there had also been a concern to keep Saddleworth together, and Royton with Oldham, so the Assistant Commissioners recommended another three-way ward exchange, derived from a counter-proposal (submitted by Jim McMahon MP, and others) that had attracted a lot of support in the secondary consultation. There had been no significant objection to transferring Moston ward from Manchester Central to Oldham (which was necessary because the numbers were otherwise too large in the Central constituency).

The Assistant Commissioners did not feel they could endorse the counter-proposals put forward by Oldham and Tameside councils for constituencies wholly within those council boundaries: the suggestions did not address the significant consequential knock-on effects, not least the disruption that it would cause to the otherwise largely unchanged constituencies to the west of the city. There had been objections to the cross-border constituency between Cheshire and Altrincham, but the Assistant Commissioners felt the most significant concern was keeping Wilmslow together, so they recommended a second cross-border constituency that would combine Wilmslow with Bramhall/Hazel Grove, noting that this also allowed the Poynton area to go back into Macclesfield. They did recommend recognition of Knutsford in the name of the constituency. They had not been persuaded by the Conservative proposal to combine Wilmslow and Cheadle, because this would produce very significant disruption to otherwise largely unchanged constituencies.

Consultation responses had pointed out that where the initial proposals for Weaver Vale and Eddisbury constituencies were a broadly north-south orientation, the physical geography and existing constituencies lay largely east-west. The Assistant Commissioners had been persuaded by counter-proposals put forward by Terry Largin. Although these represented extensive changes from the initial proposals, they believed the recommendations better reflected the travel routes, mix of urban and rural settlements, were closer to the existing constituency composition, and also addressed the concerns expressed in the significant responses about this area.

Commissioners queried the inclusion of Unsworth with Bury, in particular the seemingly sparse communication links, but the Assistant Commissioners reported that there had been specific support for this in the consultation responses. They also confirmed changes recommended in Cheshire were radical compared to initial proposals, but were actually less so when compared to existing constituencies.

Commission deliberations

Commissioners had some concerns about the moving of the University ward back into Lancaster and the consequential effects on other wards, particularly in light of the balance of the written representations received so far from these areas. Commissioners agreed to look further at the key representations provided before making a final decision.

They noted that there may be some concerns expressed about Poulton-le-Fylde being split, but there had been representations from the council and others in line with the recommendations of the Assistant Commissioners.

The Commissioners felt that the Assistant Commissioners had done a thorough job of analysing the evidence and testing different alternatives, seeking always to meet the concerns that had been raised in consultation. Whilst recognising that pain of change was focused in some areas much more than others, particularly around the north and east of Manchester, Commissioners did feel that this was a reasonable approach when taken in the round.

Decision on Lancaster – 19 July

Having looked in detail at the representations received (for instance that from the local MP), Commissioners were not persuaded of the case for the changes recommended by the Assistant Commissioners for the proposed Lancaster and Morecambe constituency, and agreed by subsequent email confirmation that the initial proposal for that constituency should be retained.