



**Minutes of the first meeting of 2020 of the Boundary Commission for England, held in
35 Great Smith Street on 21 February 2020**

Attendees:

Mr Justice Andrew Nicol (Deputy Chair)
Sarah Hamilton (Commissioner)
Colin Byrne (Commissioner)
Tony Bellringer (BCE Acting Secretary)
Glenn Reed (BCE Secretariat, and minutes)
Roger Winter (BCE Secretariat)

Agenda

1. Management review of the 2018 Review (Paper 2020/1)

1.1 Mr Bellringer introduced the paper, which covered all substantive aspects of the 2018 review.

1.2 Members thought that the 2018 Review had run much more smoothly than the discontinued 2013 Review and that there appeared to be a closer engagement between Commissioners and the Secretariat. Mr Justice Nicol said that the innovation of each Commissioner taking the lead for a number of regions had been very successful, as the task was too large for a single person to undertake effectively. The division of the regions had worked well and he urged that the same procedure be adopted for the next review.

Staff - structure, recruitment and retention

1.3 Mr Bellringer said that for the next review, the staffing numbers in the Secretariat would be about the same, but the team structure was proposed to be somewhat different: as at the 2018 review, there would be a Secretary at Senior Civil Service level, with two band A members of staff filling the roles of head of reviews and a corporate head. The key difference would be that, instead of there being five teams, each consisting of a review manager and review officer and most covering two regions, there would instead be three review manager-led teams covering on average three regions each, with one review officer dedicated to each region.

1.4 Although it was clearly communicated to applicants that those appointed were expected to commit to the duration of the Review, this was unenforceable and a significant number of key staff had left the Secretariat during the 2018 Review. It was queried whether the BCE could appoint graduate entrants who might be more inclined to stay for the full two years, and this would be investigated further.

IT - procurement and delivery

1.5 It was considered that the software had worked well, and it was noted that the consultation portal had won an industry award. Some 86% of all representations were received via the portal, against an expectation of just 50% when the portal was being designed.

Assistant Commissioners - numbers, recruitment and role

1.6 The task for assistant commissioners (ACs) had been different to the 2013 Review. Members considered that the ACs had benefited from the Secretariat providing ACs with a detailed breakdown of the potentially contentious areas in each region, as this had allowed them to focus their attention on the key issues. Also, Members welcomed the policy of ACs presenting their suggested revised proposals to the whole Commission, with assistance from the Secretariat. This had helped to crystallise the role of the ACs in providing their independent recommendations. The relationships between ACs and the Secretariat had worked well, and it was considered that the drafting of the revised proposals by the Secretariat rather than ACs themselves, but with their input, had enhanced consistency and should continue at the next review.

1.7 It was felt that the number of ACs to be appointed was about right (mostly two per region, although some of the larger regions had three) but that there may be a case to call on additional help in a large or contentious region. Prior to the 2013 Review, a panel of ACs was appointed, from which individuals were used to assist on specific counties. However, this meant that the majority of those on the panel were never used. Members agreed in principle that it would be useful to have spare capacity if necessary and that there should be a slightly larger reserve list of successful candidates.

Communications - strategy and delivery

1.8 It was considered that the communications strategy had been a success and that the right decisions had been made in order to bring information about the Review to the widest possible audience.

1.9 Mr Byrne suggested that at the next review there should be further consideration on how to reach out and inform groups in the population who might otherwise not be “captured” in a similar communications strategy. To improve awareness of the review process, it might be worth exploring whether a mailshot could be sent to every household in England providing basic information about the Review (similar to a candidates election address), delivered by local authorities but funded by BCE.

Public hearings - number, locations and delivery

1.10 It was considered that the planning and conduct of the public hearings had been a success, although the point was reiterated that having to hold them in weeks 5-10 of the

initial proposals consultations was far from ideal. As they had to be planned and accommodation booked some months in advance, the Commission did not have the benefit of knowing what the issues and contentious areas would be, and this undoubtedly had an impact on the cost effectiveness of some of the hearings.

1.11 Mr Byrne suggested that at the next review there could be a live-stream channel which would allow those interested to watch in real time and to ask questions via a live access feed. It was also suggested that public hearings could be conducted at weekends, although there would inevitably be staffing implications if this were to be the case.

2. Outline plan and preparations for the next review - (paper 2020/2)

2.1 Members considered the paper and concluded that a new Secretary to the Commission needed to be in post by no later than September 2020. Assuming a commencement date in February 2021, the Secretariat would need to work quickly with Cabinet Office DATT to procure the IT systems that would be necessary to conduct a review, and that staff would also need to be recruited to start in late autumn/early winter. However, it was not yet known where the Secretariat would be physically located, and if it were to be away from central London, this would have to be factored into the recruitment process. Decisions on where to hold public hearings and their arranging would also need to commence very early in the review process.

2.2 Mr Justice Nicol confirmed that he would not be seeking renewal of his appointment with the Commission in March 2020, as he was planning to retire from the judiciary during the following year, and he considered that his successor would most usefully therefore be appointed to be in place for the start of the review, and hold office throughout the process.

2.3 Mr Byrne asked about progress with his enquiry about a study to examine the feasibility of initially machine-generating all possible and legally valid initial proposals. Mr Bellringer confirmed that he had ascertained that such a study could be undertaken within the £10k procurement limit for a statement of work. There was insufficient funding for this in the current financial year, but the Commission could look to have the work done and paid for early in the 2020/2021 financial year.