

Minutes of the second meeting of 2020 of the Boundary Commission for England, held virtually on 11 September 2020

Attendees:

Mr Justice Peter Lane (Deputy Chair)
Sarah Hamilton (Commissioner)
Colin Byrne (Commissioner)
Tim Bowden (BCE Secretary)
Tony Bellringer (BCE Deputy Secretary)
Wotey Tannoh (BCE Secretariat)
Glenn Reed (BCE Secretariat) first 30 minutes
Roger Winter (BCE Secretariat, and minutes)

Agenda:

1. Welcome and minutes of the last meeting

- 1.1. Mr Justice Lane welcomed everyone to the meeting, including new staff Mr Bowden, recently appointed as Secretary to the Commission, and Mrs Tannoh, who will shortly be joining the Commission as Head of Corporate Services. He also thanked Mr Reed for giving up part of his annual leave to attend the meeting.
- 1.2. Mr Justice Lane thanked his predecessor, Sir Andrew Nicol, who had led the Commission during the 2018 Review. Mr Justice Lane said that he was pleased to have been appointed Deputy Chair and was looking forward to the challenge of the 2023 Review of constituencies.
- 1.3. The minutes of the first Commission meeting of 2020, held on 21 February 2020 were discussed and minor errors were corrected. Subject to these corrections, the minutes were approved.
- 1.4. Under matters arising, Mr Winter described the proof of concept work that had been carried out between February and June this year by Informed Solutions, to explore the possible creation of a tool for an Automated Scheme Generation. The conclusion of this work was that while such a tool would be technically possible, it would create more schemes than the Commission could practicably analyse and could not be delivered within the resources available. The findings report produced by Informed Solutions will be published alongside these minutes.

2. Draft Annual Report 2019/2020 - Paper 1

- 2.1. Mr Bellringer introduced the paper. One minor correction was approved. It was agreed the Secretariat will prepare a draft foreword for Mr Justice Lane to consider. After the foreword has been agreed the Secretariat will take the necessary steps to publish the 2019/20 annual report on the Commission website.

3. Preparing for the next Review - Paper 2

3.1. Mr Bowden introduced the paper.

Staffing and recruitment

3.2. Interviews are being carried out this week and next, for a Review Manager, nine Review Officers, and an Admin Officer, with a view to offering roles to successful candidates on 18 September. It is hoped that at least some of the induction process for new staff will be able to take place in person, albeit in a Covid-19 secure manner.

Finance

3.3. The Commission's Spending Review 2020 budget bid is broadly similar to that requested and approved for the 2018 review.

Accommodation

3.4. The Secretariat will be based at 35 Great Smith Street for the upcoming review. However, Cabinet Office Estates are not able to commit to the Commission remaining there for the entire duration of the review, in light of their continuing work on the future estate planning. Use of a dedicated meeting room at 35 Great Smith Street is currently under negotiation.

3.5. The current Covid-19 restrictions mean that eight of the 24 desks in the nominated space are currently available for use, so a combination of working from home and a rota for office-based working will be required for the foreseeable future. Such a system will take account of staff preferences and business requirements.

3.6. Mr Bowden informed Commissioners that the Cabinet Office had issued detailed guidance relating to Covid-19, homeworking and returning to the work-place. He assured Commissioners that the Secretariat would follow the guidance issued by the Cabinet Office. As part of this guidance he outlined that staff are required to carry out a Health & Safety assessment of their home workstation and discuss any additional equipment requirements with their line manager. For Review staff, this could include a larger monitor, to facilitate working on maps.

Parliamentary Constituencies Bill 2019-21

3.7. The Parliamentary Constituencies Bill is proceeding through the House of Lords, and is currently at committee stage. Royal Assent for the Bill is anticipated later this year. Were this to slip to 2021, this could raise questions of constitutional propriety. The Secretary agreed to speak with the Cabinet Office sponsor team to clarify potential issues of constitutional propriety. After receiving this advice, the Secretary will consider if further clarification is required from the Speaker of the House of Commons' representative.

3.8. Members asked whether or not the Bill excluded the possibility of public hearings occurring virtually, this to take account both of the Covid-19 pandemic, and to improve

engagement with the process. The Secretariat will seek advice on this matter with the Cabinet Office for future discussion.

- 3.9. It was agreed that the Secretariat will prepare a paper on the changes in the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill for Commissioners and to keep Commissioners updated on the progress of the Bill.

Electorate data

- 3.10. The Secretariat is currently gathering electorate data from local authorities at both ward and polling district levels based on electoral registers on 2 March 2020, as prescribed in the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill.
- 3.11. Mr Bowden explained the current map of polling districts is not up to date and the Commission does not have the resource to produce an updated map of polling districts, so a dual approach is being considered. Firstly, metropolitan areas and London boroughs could be asked to provide up to date polling district maps, as these are the areas where a ward split is most likely to be considered (based on ward splits in the 2018 Review). Secondly, any other authorities where ward splits are actively considered will be asked to provide mapping data on a case by case basis. Commissioners identified the need to agree their policy on ward splits for the forthcoming review and that this matter was to be included on the agenda at a policy development session.

Technology

- 3.12. The procurement exercise for the Geographical Information System (GIS) to support delivery of the next review is currently underway. The evaluation of potential suppliers will be carried out by the Secretariat, with support from Crown Commercial Service, on 24 September.
- 3.13. The next procurement exercise, for a consultation website, will be started as soon as possible after the mapping support procurement exercise is concluded.

Timetable

- 3.14. Mr Bowden outlined the timetable presented to Commissioners, highlighting the current timeframes for the statutory consultation periods. He was investigating whether it would be possible to hold the secondary consultation period during the autumn/winter of 2021 rather than spring 2022. He also explained that changing the timetable would require consideration of whether public hearings could be held in the later part of 2021.
- 3.15. Commissioners asked the timetable to be refined to show when their input will be required for the review. The Secretariat agreed to include this in future versions of the timetable.

Risk register

- 3.16. Mr Bowden introduced the risk register. Members asked that an item on the risks presented to the delivery of the review by Covid-19 be added for future iterations of the register. The risk register was approved.

Highlight report

- 3.17. Mr Bowden introduced the report and advised that it will be updated monthly between now and the beginning of the review, and fortnightly thereafter. The highlight report was approved.

4. Introductory discussion on policies for the 2023 Review

- 4.1. The Secretariat will arrange an informal meeting to discuss Commission policies during the upcoming review, to take place on 23 October 2020, time and venue to be confirmed. In advance of that meeting, the Secretariat will circulate 'lessons learned' papers produced following the conclusion of the 2018 review, to inform Commission deliberations on policies for the 2023 review.
- 4.2. Commissioners agreed to meet with qualifying political parties to outline the Commission's policies for the review. The Secretariat will investigate if this meeting can take place on either 25 or 26 November. Mr Byrne asked if it would be appropriate to consult relevant academics on review policies. The Secretariat agreed to consider the appropriateness and feasibility of this.

5. Any other business

- 5.1. The next full Commission meeting will take place on 7 December 2020, time and venue to be confirmed.