



Boundary Commission for England (BCE)

Minutes of meeting with political party representatives

26 November 2020, virtual meeting

Attendees

Boundary Commission for England

- Mr Justice Lane (Deputy Chair)
- Sarah Hamilton (BCE Commissioner)
- Colin Byrne (BCE Commissioner)
- Tim Bowden (BCE Secretary to the Commission)
- Tony Bellringer (BCE Deputy Secretary to the Commission)
- Wotey Tannah (BCE Head of Corporate Services)

Political parties

- Roger Pratt CBE, Conservative Party (Boundary Review Director)
- Lord (Robert) Hayward, Conservative Party
- Tom Adams, Labour Party (Acting Director of Data & Targeting)
- David Evans, Labour Party (General Secretary of the Labour Party)
- Dave McCobb, Liberal Democrat Party (Deputy Director - Campaigns & Elections)
- Mark Pack, Liberal Democrat Party (Party President)
- Chris Williams, Green Party (Head of Elections and Field Operations);
- Steve Harris, Green Party (Election Agent, Brighton & Hove)
- Dr Julian Lewis MP, Independent

Introduction

1. Following personal introductions, the Deputy Chair explained that the purpose of the meeting was to address the questions on the Commission's proposed policies for the 2023 Review that had been raised by the political parties and circulated to them all in advance of the meeting. Those questions had been grouped by broad theme (which formed the headings below), for ease of discussion. In some cases,

the Commission was still finalising its detailed policy and would welcome the views of the political parties before a final decision was taken.

General update from the Commission

2. It was noted that at the same time of meeting the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill 2020-21 was concluding its passage in Parliament.

Timetabling of the review

3. The timetable of this review will follow a slightly different approach to previous reviews that commenced in 2011 and 2016, largely due to a reduced overall timescale as prescribed in the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill 2020-21. The Bill would require the Commission to hold the public hearings during the secondary consultation. It was stressed that these dates were indicative and could change, but the timetable for the Review is planned as follows, (dealing with all English regions at the same time):

January 2021	Formally launch the 2023 Review with announcement of the relevant figures (number of constituencies for each part of the UK, the electoral quota figure)
Spring 2021	Publication of the 'Guide to Review' containing the BCE's policies and procedures for the review.
June-August 2021	Publication of the initial proposals and the Commission will hold an eight-week consultation period.
March/April 2022	Publish responses from the initial proposals and hold six-week 'secondary consultation', including public hearings.
September/October 2022	Publication of the revised proposals and hold four-week consultation.
June 2023	Submit its final report and recommendations to the Speaker of the House of Commons.

4. It was noted that the political parties asked where possible for the Commission to avoid holding public hearings at the same time as other Boundary Commissions. While this harmonisation will be considered where possible, ultimately each Commission is a separate body, who are able to regulate their own proceedings and timetables. Secondly, the political parties asked the Commission to be mindful of when it commenced the secondary consultation given some local authorities

would be preparing for local government elections in May 2022. The Commission agreed to consider this matter as it formulates plans for the secondary consultation, including locations of public hearings, in due course.

Distribution of information and publicity

5. As in the 2018 Review, the Commission will again be providing MPs with copies of its proposals slightly in advance of the general publication under embargo. The specific arrangements for distribution will be shared closer to the time.
6. The Commission will again be focusing on digital communication for this review. All the information will be made available on the Commission’s consultation website. Notwithstanding, the Commission intended to produce some limited hardcopy materials, strictly where it considered it necessary. Current planning assumptions were:

Recipient	Hard copy material provided (at both initial and revised proposals stages)
Individual MP for current English constituency (x533)	1x proposals narrative booklet for their region, plus 1x A3 map only of any proposed constituency that contains a part of that MP’s current constituency, plus link to all proposals on BCE website
Public ‘place of deposit’ in each proposed English constituency (number of constituencies to be determined)	1x proposals narrative booklet for that region, plus 1x A3 map only of that proposed constituency, plus 1x A0 map of all proposed constituencies in that region.
Political party national headquarters	For each of the nine regions of England: 3x proposals narrative booklet for the region; 3x A0 map of all proposed constituencies in that region; 3x A3 map of every proposed constituency in that region.
House of Commons and House of Lords Libraries	For each of the nine regions of England: 1x proposals narrative booklet for the region; 1x A0 map of all proposed constituencies in that region; 1x A3 map of every proposed constituency in that region.

7. The political parties offered to assist with the mechanics of getting copies of proposals distributed to MPs (e.g. in booking a room in Parliament for the Commission to distribute physical copies).

8. The Commission confirmed it would publish GIS spatial data for its proposals during the course of the 2023 Review. However, the Commission would not publish shape files of counter proposals it received but encouraged the political parties to generate shape files of their own counter proposals and share them with each other. The political parties asked if the Commission would consider setting up an official level IT meeting to specifically discuss spatial data. The Commission agreed to consider this further.
9. The Commission outlined its intention that it would publish representations received on the initial proposals at the same time it launches the secondary consultation. The political parties asked if the Commission would consider publishing the representations earlier. The Commission agreed to consider this point further, but did outline potential administrative challenges and that the purpose of the secondary consultation is consultation on representations received during the initial stage.

English Regions

10. The Commission confirmed it would not be consulting on the use of the English regions, given the very significant support for using them during the 2013 and 2018 Reviews. The Commission would therefore be running the review on the basis of nine separate regions, and accordingly would publish the distribution of constituencies to each region. The political parties agreed with the use of the nine regions.

Electorate data and prospective wards

11. The Commission outlined that the Office of National Statistics intended on publishing the electorate data for the 2023 Review on 5 January 2021. It noted that in cases of prospective wards, the Commission was aware that some local authorities had not currently been able to produce this data. The Commission stated it was working with the relevant local authorities to produce this data and would provide information to the political parties on those local authorities with prospective wards.
12. The Commission confirmed it would be publishing polling district data for the 2023 Review, however, it did not have spatial mapping to accompany the electorate data. It outlined its intention to publish this data at the same time as publishing the initial proposals. The political parties asked if the Commission would consider publishing it earlier, and the Commission agreed to consider this point, subject to when it has a complete set of polling district data for England.

Ward Splitting

13. The Commission noted that it had increased its appetite at the 2018 Review to be more open to the prospect of splitting wards in England, although considered wards should largely be the default building blocks for constituencies. It considered that the policy it adopted at the 2018 Review provided a good basis for considering ward splits. This policy was that wards should be split on the basis of a) where all the possible 'whole ward' options in an area would significantly cut across local ties; or b) where splitting a single ward may prevent a significant 'domino effect' of otherwise unnecessary change to a chain of constituencies in order to meet the electorate totals requirement. In cases where a ward was to be split, the Commission confirmed it would do so using polling districts given they are the recognised sub-ward unit of electoral administration.
14. The political parties encouraged the Commission to have a more flexible approach to considering ward splits, with suggestions that included: a) a reasoned basis for splitting a ward being 'if the statutory factors would be better met' (e.g. if it helped maintain alignment with local authority or existing constituency boundaries) might be a better criteria than the current formulation; b) splitting of wards resulted in practice in any event, due to new local government wards being implemented after new constituencies (built from old wards) were implemented; and c) there was a general preference for a ward to be split if it avoided otherwise having to combine wards from different local authorities in one constituency, or combining very urban wards with outlying rural wards.
15. The Commission noted the views of political parties and agreed to further consider its approach to ward splitting, and would publish its policy in the Guide to the Review.

Assistant Commissioners

16. The Commission confirmed that it would be using Assistant Commissioners again for this review, although most likely fewer than last time. As at previous reviews, selection would be on merit following an open public competition: previous Assistant Commissioners would not be automatically re-appointed, but would be eligible to apply in an open competition with other candidates.

Public hearings

17. The Commission outlined that the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill would require the Commission to hold public hearings during the secondary consultation. It outlined that on this basis the Commission would publish the details of the quantity and location of public hearings after the conclusion of the initial proposals consultation. The political parties supported this approach.

18. As in previous reviews the Commission will reserve slots at the lead hearings for political parties. The political parties supported the arrangements as in previous reviews for the advance booking of speaking slots at hearings.

19. The Commission confirmed that the oral evidence at hearings will take the same format as the 2018 Review and will be non-confrontational again, i.e. generally questions to a speaker should be for clarification and put through the hearing Chair, not made directly to those making representations.

Other considerations

20. The Commission outlined, as per its normal approach, that it will look to keep to a minimum the number of 'orphan wards'. However, the Commission clearly must balance its consideration of 'orphan wards' alongside the statutory factors it must have regard to, including the statutory overriding precedence of the electoral quota tolerance rule.