

Minutes of the first meeting of 2021 of the Boundary Commission for England, held on 8 February 2021

Mr Justice Peter Lane (Deputy Chair)
Sarah Hamilton (Commissioner)
Colin Byrne (Commissioner)
Tim Bowden (Secretary to the Commission)
Tony Bellringer (Secretariat)
Wotey Tannoh (Secretariat)
Daniel McKeon (Secretariat)
Glenn Reed (Secretariat, item five)
Roger Winter (Secretariat, item five)
Matthew Gutteridge (Secretariat, item five)

1. Welcome and minutes of the last meeting

1.1 The draft minutes of the Commission meeting on the 7th of December 2020 were agreed by members of the Commission.

2. Review Programme Update

Staffing

2.1 Commissioners noted that the Business Manager post had been recently accepted, making the last vacant post within the Corporate Team now filled.

Budget

2.2 Mr Bowden noted that early indications were that the Commissions forecasted budget for 2021-22 should be in alignment with its original bid as part of the spending review.

Accommodation

2.3 Work for the heating cooling system in the Boundary Commission Office will take place in March over a period of 8 weeks. This in turn means a return to the Commission's main office will be possible by May at the latest. Alternative accommodation will be provided for staff to use while maintenance work is carried out, dependent on Covid-19 restrictions allowing.

Electorate Data

2.4 The Commission noted that the collection and verification of electorate data has gone well and has almost reached a point of completion. As of the date of the meeting only 5 local authorities with prospective wards had not provided the data. Mr Bowden noted that if this electorate data is not received by the end of February, there will be the potential to cause a delay in the development of initial proposals. The Secretariat was continuing to work with the relevant local authorities to ensure that the data was provided

Technology

2.5 The Geographic Information System (GIS) is working soundly and is currently being used by Review Officers and Managers in the creation of prospective regions.

2.6 Work upon the tender for an interactive consultation portal going live in June 2021 is underway. Suppliers for this system have been identified. The Secretariat will need time to work with the supplier to build and test the required system.. The Secretariat hopes to have awarded a contract for the work by the end of February.

Impact of COVID-19

2.7 Subject to COVID-19 restrictions, the Commission agreed it would prefer to meet in person when it discusses the details of the initial proposals.

2.8 The Secretariat is exploring how COVID-19 will affect the processes for publication of key documents and the quality assurance of materials. Mr Bowden noted the effect COVID-19 and social distancing will have on the distribution of proposals to Members of Parliament under embargo in June 2021. The Secretariat is looking at multiple options to mitigate this.

2.9 The Commission agreed to engage with parliamentary authorities, and asked the Secretariat to draft a letter for Deputy Chair Mr Justice Peter Lane to send to the Speaker and Leader of the House of Commons, and view the best way to get information to MP's under Coronavirus restrictions.

2.11 Commissioner Mr Byrne noted that the Commission's Risk Register does not include COVID-19 as its own defined point. Mr Bowden noted this was covered in other items of the register but given its significance it will be added as a standalone risk.

3. Guide to 2023 Review

3.1 Commissioners discussed the draft guide and identified additional amendments to be made. A new draft will be circulated to members of the Commission via correspondence.

4. Complaints Policy

4.1 Commissioners agreed with the complaints policy which had been updated ahead of the 2023 Review.

5. Regional Presentations by Review Managers

5.1 Commissioners were provided with a graphical representation of the Regions, with an indication of the county and constituency entitlements of each area individually.

5.2 Commissioners discussed the optimum sub-regions and pairing of sub-regions where appropriate, as well as the likely hotspots which had been identified by Review Managers and Review Officers.

6. Any other business and date of next meeting

6.1 Mr Bowden made Commissioners aware that he had been approached by Mr Matt Rodda MP (Reading East) for a briefing on the process of a boundary review. Mr Bowden also updated Commissioners on how it could obtain legal advice, if needed.

6.2 It was agreed that the next meeting of the Commission should be held on the 22nd of March 2021.