

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

1. This paper proposes a communication strategy for the Boundary Commission for England, the primary aim of which is to ensure that stakeholder expectations are managed in order to contribute to a successful review process. As well as seeking broad views on the communication strategy the paper also makes a number of specific recommendations for consideration by Members (see the “Key Recommendations” section at the foot of this document).
2. The purpose of the communication strategy is to help the Commission achieve its key objectives of successful completion of the boundary review, following the new rules set out in the proposed PVSC Bill, and to ensure that the Commission’s independence and impartiality are fully recognised.
3. The next review, as outlined in the Bill, poses a new and much greater communication challenge than previous reviews. This is due to the following factors:
 - The reduction in the number of constituencies and their equalisation will result in new constituencies which are larger (in general) and which cross more local government boundaries than ever before and may divide more local communities than previously. The reaction to such a degree of change may be negative.
 - The political atmosphere under which this review will be conducted, given that the enabling legislation for the review has formed such a central part of the coalition Government’s early agenda and has been the subject of such involved debate in Parliament, means the work of the Boundary Commission will continue to come under close political and media scrutiny.
 - The system of consultation has changed with the removal of the well-understood local inquiry process. Expectations at the time of writing are for this to be replaced by some form of public hearing to be conducted during the representation period.
 - The rules governing what constitutes a valid representation will be more rigid and there will be less flexibility for those making counter proposals. People may expect to be able to make their objections and proposals on wider criteria than the rules allow.
4. This strategy outlines how the Commission can meet the communication challenges that the new review process brings by:
 - Considering stakeholders and how their expectations can be managed and risks reduced;
 - Reviewing past approaches to Commission communications; and

- Proposing what communication messages and channels are needed for the next review.

Objectives

5. The communications strategy will, among other things, deliver the following:
 - A clear, consistent and coherent message to our stakeholders
 - Activities to mitigate the risk of reputation damage by ensuring that the message delivered by local and national media is the Commission's, rather than that of political parties or other interested stakeholders
 - Activities to lessen the risk of challenge to the Commission on the basis of the conduct of the consultations to be carried out
 - A joined-up approach to communicating with all stakeholders
 - A consistent approach for staff and Members to take in dealing with stakeholders.

Understanding stakeholders

6. For the Commission's communications to be a success, a good understanding of stakeholders is essential, including an understanding of their interest in and likely influence on the review, the potential risks that they might pose to the review and what kind of engagement and monitoring of their views and activities is needed.
7. An outline analysis of the main stakeholders is presented at Appendix A for Members' information and reference. But in brief, we propose the Commission's main stakeholders can be considered to comprise the following groups:
 - The general public
 - The media
 - Political groups
 - Members of Parliament
 - Government departments and associated bodies
 - Academia and experts.

Review of communications for previous reviews

8. The Commission's previous communication with stakeholders involved a straightforward approach of providing information at set times and keeping direct engagement with stakeholders to a minimum. These reviews were largely conducted against a backdrop of reasonably well-understood rules with few substantive changes, if any, to arrangements for previous reviews.

Channels	Audience	Purpose	Style/format	Comments
Booklet (user's guide)	All, but primarily the public	Provide a comprehensive guide to BCE and review process	Printed hard copy Electronic version placed on website	Being updated for new review No formal evaluation based on user feedback
Newsletter	MPs Political parties LAs	Update and inform stakeholders on specific methodology, process	Printed copies sent to mail list Put on website Some sent electronically	Indirect feedback indicates that parties and LAs find them useful. Mixed reaction from MPs who have more erratic ways of accessing their information.
News releases	MPs, Political Parties, LAs, Public and Media	Announce provisional (and revised) recommendations, the consultation period and procedures for viewing proposed and revised recommendations and how to make representations	Printed hard copy Electronic copy placed on web site Via news distribution service/adverts	No formal evaluation of effectiveness. Involves lots of detailed information. One hit approach to getting story out into the media.
Public notices	All	To announce the provisional (and revised recommendations) and where to access the documentation	Via paid for adverts in local newspapers as required by statute	No formal evaluation of effectiveness. Detailed information provided at set periods based on assumption of public reading national papers. Previous legislation prescribed use of public notices – 2010 Act removes this.
BCE website	Public and others	Standard information	Standard static website, no	Limited web statistics available, little traffic

		(about us, contact us, publications etc) Repository for viewing electoral and GIS data	interactivity or web forms, no social media or registration	and retention.
Enquiry line	Public and others	Answer enquiries about BCE and consultations	Email address and helpline	Managed by team informally. Little data on levels or types of enquiries, though specific review area enquiries were dealt with by the review teams and general enquiries by the Admin team.

Communications for the next review

9. The communication approach taken in previous reviews was entirely suited for the task in hand. However, the factors described earlier in this paper suggest a different approach will be required in many areas of the Commission’s communication activity:

- The communications environment has changed considerably, with the internet penetrating into the every day life of citizens and the rapid take-up of social media. We need to take into account the diverse communication landscape if we want to get our messages to the right audience at the right time otherwise we risk missing key groups and being seen as not being inclusive.
- The media has undergone a transformation too with the internet used more and more as a key communication channel. The internet also plays a significant role in politics with parties campaigning online and voters being able to access more data directly (poll data). It is vital that we take account of this in our planning.
- The major changes proposed by the Bill will impact on how Commission conducts the review of parliamentary boundaries. This will require more even more active management of stakeholders’ expectations and a more pro-active approach to getting key Commission messages out to media and politicians.

10. The table below highlights the key messages we need to deliver to our stakeholders and the best way of disseminating them and provides an overview of the key communications approaches needed.

Stakeholders	Key messages	Purpose	Media/channel	Comments
Public	Role of BCE and what it does	Ensure people understand what BCE does and	Website / Booklet (with press release)	This is information that won’t change

		doesn't do		much but needs to be presented simply, have all the information likely to be needed.
Public	Getting involved: what you need to know and how you can participate	To alert public to start and end of the consultation process, where they can get information, how they can make a valid representation. Ensuring that they understand the constraints the Act puts on the BCE	Booklet, Website alerts, Media campaign (advertising)	Timing of messages critical.
Media	Consultation about boundaries is happening Key facts about how it works and we are happy to explain and discuss how it works	Engage with media about consultation process, ensuring they understand key stages and the independence of BCE. We are approachable	News releases (to be reviewed) Social media Targeted alerts Briefings for interested national and local journalists	Timings critical Existing style of news release may be too detailed Monitoring of local and national media to decide if and when we need to get a message out
Political groups	What the BCE is doing (consulting on methodology; starting a review, etc) Key information,	Ensuring that they understand (and communicate to others) the constraints the Act puts on the	Newsletter Alerts (via website registration)	Need a registration process for newsletter and alerts. Review current mail list.

	<p>at key stages that they need to know</p> <p>How to make a representation</p>	<p>BCE</p> <p>Keep parties, MPs and Local Authorities informed and up to date with key stages of BCE reviews.</p> <p>We are sharing key information with them (data, representations) Show that we are listening to their views</p>		<p>Newsletter content will need to be accessible on website and content searchable</p>
MPs	<p>As for political groups</p> <p>This is what is happening in MPs area</p> <p>How to make a representation</p>	<p>As above</p> <p>Ensuring that they understand (and communicate to others) the constraints the Act puts on the BCE</p>	<p>Newsletter and alerts but more tailored with direct communications</p>	<p>Need to find out their preferences for communication formats.</p> <p>Close monitoring and tailor specific messages as required</p>
Government	<p>What BCE is doing and how it might affect other government departments</p> <p>How to communicate with BCE</p>	<p>Keep them in the loop and encourage them to keep us up to date with their activities that could affect us</p>	<p>Regular meetings</p> <p>Regular phone calls with key policy leads</p> <p>Newsletter</p> <p>Website alerts</p>	<p>This is mainly ongoing stakeholder management</p>
Academia	<p>What BCE does, its role</p> <p>How it does the reviews</p>	<p>Keep informed</p>	<p>Booklet/website</p> <p>Alerts</p> <p>Direct contact</p>	<p>Monitoring as no direct engagement needed</p>

	Data we use to do boundary reviews		with key academics Invite to give talks – staff seminars	
--	------------------------------------	--	---	--

“Look and feel”

11. More broadly, the start of a new review presents an ideal time to consider a general refresh of the Commission’s branding, together with the appearance of its publications and website. Options are currently being explored by the Secretariat, and it should be possible to achieve an update of the Commission’s branding without significant expense – something which needs to be carefully guarded against, not least in the current financial climate. The Commission will have an editorial style guide so that consistency is achieved across all communications.

Website

12. The BCE website has a central role in getting messages to key stakeholders and being a key medium through which to conduct the consultation. We are currently working with the Cabinet Office web team to transfer the website from MoJ and to ensure that the new site will be fit for the purposes described above.

Evaluation and user feedback

13. Evaluation and user feedback should be routinely carried out for all communications. Regular review of the effectiveness of communication will help the Commission keep its communications relevant and therefore help achieve its objectives.

Key recommendations

14. General comments from Members on the above strategy would be greatly welcomed. In addition, views are requested from Members on the following specific issues:

Approval of key messages

15. It is proposed that the Commission’s key messages for this review are:

- The Commission is an independent and impartial professional organisation
- The Commission has been given a job to do by Parliament, with the rules agreed by Parliament (stress *not* government) and it will ensure that it applies the rules in a fair and transparent manner
- The Commission will carry out its consultation in an open and accessible way, within the rules as laid down by the appropriate Act of Parliament.

Reconsidering our current approach to public notices

16. Prior to the detail of the Bill emerging, it was provisionally decided to place a public notice in the national dailies and one in the national Sundays with detailed information at the start of the first and second consultation period. (Members will be aware that the Bill does not prescribe the use of public notices as part of the consultation process, though the Commission is of course at liberty to choose this course of action should it wish.)
17. Relying on placing a public notice in national newspapers is a very expensive approach – current provision in the Secretariat’s budget for these public notices is £2,009,500 out of a total expected budget for the review of circa £6,194,000 – and one that carries a high risk of the Commission not actually reaching its target audience (the general public). The national papers have limited reach with their print circulation falling and their readership no longer representative of the general public. We should consider a broader media campaign to advertise the Commission’s recommendations that uses other communication channels – many of which are free platforms and therefore provide better value for money.

Reconsider style and distribution of news release

18. We propose that we re-consider our strategy for the news releases which are distributed upon the release of the Commission’s recommendations. We need to ensure that releases go as far as possible to encourage an editor to run with the story, and subsequently to capture the interest of the reader and to convey the key messages. Desk research of other public sector organisations suggests that industry-standard news releases are one to two pages in length, and carry the organisation’s key message and purposes of the particular release. It is essential that the key facts previously included with our news releases (for example, constituency make-up by ward, electorate figures, places to view recommendations) are readily available in both paper and electronic format; however we propose the news release is not the place for this data. Such releases will vary in content depending on the stage of the review and purpose of them.
19. Following views from Members, the Secretariat will prepare a full communications project plan and prepare a further detailed stakeholder engagement strategy based on the overall strategy outlined above.

STAKEHOLDERS

1. As noted in the main body of the attached paper, for the Commission's communications to be a success, a good understanding of stakeholders is essential. We propose that the Commission's main stakeholders can be considered to comprise the following groups:
 - The general public
 - The media
 - Political groups
 - Members of Parliament
 - Government departments and associated bodies
 - Academia and experts.
2. The following sections outline a number of key observations on each of these groups.

General public

3. The general public, when taken as individuals (rather than as part of wider interest group or political party) may initially have a low level of interest in the review process but will need to be monitored during review period as media stories drive up interest.
4. Local community groups and leaders will have a higher interest in reviews and are likely to want to participate in consultation. Their influence is low to medium.
5. To put the public's interest in the review in context, there were 40,000 representations and petitions for the 4th review and around 83,000 (29,000 representations plus 54,000 signatures) for the 5th review. Members of the public that participated in the previous reviews are likely to want to participate in consultation for new review and of course may react negatively to changes. There will also be members of the public who will want to, or be more able to, participate in the consultation for the first time either because they are more likely to use websites for consultation, had not been not able or willing to attend local enquiries or places of deposit previously or will be more aware of review consultation due to targeted communications and increased media publicity.

Media

6. The national press will have a major influence on other stakeholders, such as the public, as well as being influenced by briefings from political parties. They have a high interest and high influence which could impact on the Commission's work and they will need to be closely monitored and actively engaged as the situation requires.

7. Local media are likely to have a high interest in this review at key points. Although this is a national review, the story of MPs and parties “losing” and “gaining” seats is a local one. Some significant daily regional newspapers (Evening Standard, Western Morning News, Manchester Evening News etc) have already and will continue to carry this story. The quality and tone of the briefings and press releases the Commission issues will be key to their carrying our message rather than that of local political parties or activists. Additionally there is an increasing amount of local independent media and community websites and blogs with some influence over local coverage.
8. Local and regional broadcasters, mainly local news, will have medium to high interest and influence, which could change to high influence depending on local MPs and community leaders. Experience of recent local government reviews in some areas of England suggests that regional programmes such as BBC’s Politics Show will cover the review. We should be pro-active in ensuring that the Commission’s message is covered by the local media, rather than allowing local political parties to take the lead.
9. National broadcasters, mainly political programmes, could broadly be said to have a medium impact but fluctuating interest; if stories escalate from other media then there is a potential for interest to become higher and the Commission could consider offers to participate in such programmes if appropriate.
10. Websites and social media, mainly political websites, blogs, BBC and key news sources have a medium interest but high influence as information can be disseminated rapidly and is almost impossible to remove once published. More and more members of the public depend on these sources for their information and will use social media to communicate with each other and news organisations. These particular stakeholders can be considered to form a “new” group which did not exist during the last review, but they are a significant audience which need active monitoring and active engagement plan. The Commission should pursue active participation on appropriate social media.
11. Influential journalists and political commentators tend to have a following as effective users of social media and can get a story circulating very quickly. They have a high interest and high influence and monitoring those that are likely to give unfavourable media coverage will be important.

Political groups

12. The main national parties (the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats) are key stakeholders and have one of the highest interest and influence on the forthcoming review. The central parties are mainly interested in the overall strategic picture of new boundaries. The Commission has at least one meeting planned with all three parties but should consider more active engagement as the parties have a key influence on the approaches taken by the local parties participating in consultation. We need the parties to cascade the right messages about the review process down through to local constituencies – most importantly about the constraints the legislation agreed by Parliament imposes on the Commission and the consequent restrictions on potential

patterns of the constituencies. The parties need to feel reassured that the Commission is listening to them and undertaking its task fairly and transparently.

13. Local parties, including some smaller or local/independent/single issue parties, will have a high interest in the forthcoming review and will have a high influence during the consultation phase of our review. The changes in the way representations are made to the Commission will impact on local parties who during past reviews have taken an active role in coordinating representations. Detecting which particular recommendations are going to attract media and public attention will be an important way of monitoring them.
14. Local councils and councillors have close ties with their local parties and MPs and will be active participants in the review. They have high interest and medium to high influence.
15. Pressure groups will usually be based on geographic or single issues and will have a high interest but potentially low to medium influence.

Members of Parliament

16. Members of Parliament have a very high interest in boundary reviews – the reviews will potentially affect them by “removing” their seat or making changes that will be perceived to affect the outcome of the next election. Potentially they will have a high influence on the review. It cannot be assumed that they will necessarily follow the party line. Although the Commission never considers the political implications of its recommendations it will be vital to monitor MPs’ reactions and make sure the Commission gets its key messages to this group in order to manage their expectations. Because of the planned timings of the review, much of this engagement will need to be done before the House rises on 19 July 2011.

Government

17. There are several government departments and organisations that the Commission works closely with and depends on their cooperation when conducting its work, such as the other three Commissions, Ordnance Survey, Office of National Statistics, and Local Authorities (including election officers). They have medium interest and medium influence on the reviews. Most of the government departments involved in constitutional reform will not have a major influence or interest in BCE once the Bill as become an Act. Nevertheless the Commission will need to maintain open and trusted relationships with partners and policy leads.

Academia and experts

18. There is a wide range of academics and experts that have a high interest in BCE but varied influence. The Commission should be aware of what key reports are being published and what public/media debates they appear in. The Commission should also be alive to the fact that often academics will be employed by political parties during the review in order to provide advice.