

BCE/2012/Meetings With Assistant Commissioners

The meetings of the Commission held in the 2nd floor meeting room, Cabinet Office, 35 Great Smith Street, London, SW1P 3BQ, from Monday 23 July to Thursday 26 July 2012.

Present for every meeting:-

The Hon. Mr Justice Sales	Deputy Chairman
David Elvin QC	Commissioner
Neil Pringle	Commissioner
Simon James	Secretary to the Commission
Tony Bellringer	Secretariat
Bob Farrance	“
Sam Hartley	“
Glenn Reed (except 23 July)	“

The presence of the Assessors from Ordnance Survey and the Statistics Authority was not required at any of the meetings.

1. London region – Monday 23 July 2012 at 10:00am

Also present for the meeting:-

Judith Farbey QC	Assistant Commissioner (London region - Lead)
Guy Roots QC	Assistant Commissioner (London region)
Nicole Smith	Assistant Commissioner (London region)
Gerald Tessier	Secretariat

- 1.1 The Assistant Commissioners (ACs) for the London region gave an overview of the main issues in the region and explained their conclusions.
- 1.2 Members agreed with the recommendation of the ACs that dividing the region into two sub-regions, north and south of the River Thames, with one constituency crossing the river, allowed for the best overall arrangement of constituencies in the region. Members were grateful for the ACs' careful examination of the issue where that constituency should be located and found convincing their assessment that a constituency crossing the river at Richmond would be most appropriate.
- 1.3 Members were persuaded that the ACs' recommendation for a constituency that crosses the River Lee between Bow and Stratford struck a better balance between the statutory factors than either the initial proposal to cross between Chingford and Edmonton, or the other alternative to cross the river between Tower Hamlets and Newham.
- 1.4 Members were also persuaded by the evidence and reasoning set out by the ACs in relation to the City of London, in favour of linking the City of London with the City of Westminster rather than with Islington, as in the initial proposals.
- 1.5 Members accepted the ACs' recommendations in full and thanked them for their report.

2. South East region – Monday 23 July 2012 at 12:00 noon

Also present at the meeting:-

Howard Simmons	Assistant Commissioner (South East region - Lead)
Colin Byrne	Assistant Commissioner (South East region)
Nicholas Griffin QC	Assistant Commissioner (South East region)
Katy Budge	Secretariat

- 2.1 The ACs for the South East region gave an overview of the main issues in the region and explained their conclusions.
- 2.2 Members were persuaded that, despite some support for separate sub-regions of Berkshire and Surrey, the ACs' recommendation to combine the two in a sub-region was preferable, as it allowed for revised proposals in Surrey which better reflected the existing constituency arrangements.
- 2.3 On the other hand, although the recommendations for Guildford and Mole Valley involved some departure from existing constituency arrangements, Members endorsed the assessment of the ACs that this was justified because the revised proposals better reflected local government boundaries and local ties, as reflected in the evidence presented.
- 2.4 Members were grateful to the ACs for their careful consideration of the issues in relation to the area in and around Brighton and Hove and Lewes. They were persuaded that the ACs' solution, linking the east of Brighton with part of the Seahaven area along the south coast, struck a better balance between the statutory factors than the initial proposals.
- 2.5 Members noted the difficulties the ACs had had to grapple with to arrive at a suitable arrangement of constituencies in the area in and around Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton. In the light of the evidence and reasoning presented by them, Members were satisfied that their recommendations for the area as a whole better reflected the statutory factors than did the initial proposals. They agreed with the ACs' assessment that a counter-proposal to split the Baffins ward in Portsmouth should not be accepted.
- 2.6 Members asked the ACs about the evidence on which their recommendations were made in the Canterbury area and in particular, about the links between Blean Forest and Canterbury, the nature of Whitstable and the transport links across the area which had led to the recommendation to exchange the Tankerton and Blean Forest wards, thereby reconfiguring the Canterbury constituency. Members were satisfied with the reasons given, but requested that the ACs provide a little more by way of explanation of the evidence on which they had based their recommendations in their report.
- 2.7 Members accepted the ACs' recommendations in full and thanked them for their report.

3. Eastern region – Tuesday 24 July 2012 at 10.00am

Also present for the meeting:-

Len Jackson	Assistant Commissioner (Eastern region - Lead)
Heather Peck	Assistant Commissioner (Eastern region)
Jeremy Rintoul	Assistant Commissioner (Eastern region)
Gerald Tessier	Secretariat

- 3.1 The ACs for the Eastern region gave an overview of the main issues in the region and explained their conclusions.
- 3.2 Members, in particular, were persuaded by the ACs' recommendations for Leigh and Southend, recognising that the initial proposals for those areas provoked substantial opposition. Members were satisfied that their recommendations for Leigh and Southend, and the other consequential changes in the surrounding area, reflected the evidence provided to the ACs regarding local ties.
- 3.3 Members also found the ACs' recommendation to retain the initial proposal to link Luton North with Dunstable convincing, despite recognising that there was force in the opposing views presented in this area. They considered that the recommendations made by the ACs for Luton and Bedfordshire better reflected the statutory factors to be taken into account.
- 3.4 Members accepted the ACs' recommendations in full and thanked them for their report.

4. North West region – Tuesday 24 July 2012 at 12:00 noon

Also present at the meeting:-

Mark Savill	Assistant Commissioner (North West region - Lead)
Nicholas Elliott QC	Assistant Commissioner (North West region)
Neil Ward	Assistant Commissioner (North West region)
Katy Budge	Secretariat

- 4.1 The ACs for the North West region gave an overview of the main issues in the region and explained their conclusions.
- 4.2 Members accepted the evidence the ACs had set out and their conclusion that the initial proposals for the Mersey Banks constituency were not satisfactory. They found the revisions the ACs had made to the initial proposals to accommodate the changes they recommended in relation to the Mersey Banks constituency to be persuasive. Members noted in that regard the consequential difficulties faced by the ACs in finding a solution to the issues regarding the City of Chester and surrounding villages and they agreed with the way in which the ACs had resolved those difficulties. Members concurred with their view that it was not necessary to split wards in Cheshire in order to come to an acceptable solution.

- 4.3 Members were also persuaded by the reasoning underlying the ACs' recommendation to cross the Manchester/Lancashire boundary between Bolton North and Darwen, as an adjustment to the initial proposals, in terms of improvements both to the constituencies in Greater Manchester and to those in east Lancashire.
- 4.4 Whilst Members acknowledged the difficulties that were faced by the ACs in making recommendations for revisions to their constituencies in east Lancashire, particularly relating to Pendle, Ribble Valley, Burnley and Hyndburn, they were satisfied that their recommendations for revisions in these areas struck a better balance between the statutory factors than the initial proposals.
- 4.5 Members accepted the ACs' recommendations in full and thanked them for their report.

5. North East region – Tuesday 24 July 2012 at 2:00pm

Also present at the meeting:-

Clive Lewis QC	Assistant Commissioner (North East region - Lead)
Francis Plowden	Assistant Commissioner (North East region)
Michael Rawlinson QC	Assistant Commissioner (North East region)
Mia Spreadbury	Secretariat

- 5.1 The ACs for the North East region gave an overview of the main issues in the region and explained their conclusions.
- 5.2 Although the ACs had made recommendations affecting the great majority of the initial proposals for the North East, Members were satisfied on the evidence and reasoning they had set out that their recommendations struck a better overall balance between the statutory factors than the initial proposals.
- 5.3 In particular, Members noted the challenges posed by the constituencies around Berwick and Morpeth, Blyth and Ashington, and Hexham and considered that the ACs had arrived at a sensible and reasonable set of recommendations in relation to them.
- 5.4 Members noted that the ACs had included the ward of Blackhalls in their recommended Hartlepool constituency instead of the Billingham North ward. Notwithstanding significant objections to this proposal, Members were satisfied this was appropriate, as it would avoid the breaking of ties between Billingham North and the rest of the town of Billingham and allowed for other changes to the initial proposals which the ACs and Members considered would better reflect the statutory criteria in the region overall.
- 5.5 Members also noted that there were counter-proposals that aimed to include the five wards that are traditionally seen as constituting Wallsend being included within one constituency. Despite recognising that there was some force in those counter-proposals, they were persuaded by the reasoning of the ACs that, having regard to the needs for an appropriate arrangement of constituencies in the region as a whole, they should not be accepted. Members were grateful to the ACs for their careful consideration of this issue.

5.6 Members accepted the ACs' recommendations in full and thanked them for their report.

6. West Midlands region – Wednesday 25 July 2012 at 10:00am

Also present at the meeting:-

Craig Howell Williams QC	Assistant Commissioner (West Midlands region - Lead)
Keith Budgen	Assistant Commissioner (West Midlands region)
Linda Lee	Assistant Commissioner (West Midlands region)
Mia Spreadbury	Secretariat

6.1 The ACs for the West Midlands region gave an overview of the main issues in the region and explained their conclusions.

6.2 The ACs confirmed that they had endorsed the Commission's use of the three sub-regions as in the initial proposals. As Members considered that the wording on this was ambiguous, the Lead AC agreed to clarify the drafting of this part of the report.

6.3 Members acknowledged the challenges posed in relation to securing a satisfactory arrangement of constituencies in and around Birmingham. They were grateful to the ACs for their careful consideration of the evidence in relation to this. In the light of that, they were persuaded that the revisions the ACs had recommended in the area – notably regarding Sutton Coldfield – provided the best overall solution. Members considered that the arrangement recommended by the ACs had the considerable benefit of retaining a significant number of existing constituencies in a broadly similar form. As part of the recommended arrangement for Birmingham, the Castle Bromwich ward had been included in the renamed Birmingham Erdington and Castle Bromwich constituency. Members noted that forceful objections were made to this, but considered that the ACs had carefully examined the evidence and arguments and they were satisfied that the solution the ACs had arrived at was the best and most appropriate in the circumstances. Members agreed with them that any proposal that did not include the Shard End ward in Meriden would have a wider impact and would lead to less satisfactory changes elsewhere.

6.4 Members noted that the ACs were able to accommodate many of the views regarding the town of Bilston, and were satisfied that their revised proposals in relation to this were a significant improvement on the initial proposals.

6.5 In addition, Members noted the careful consideration given by the ACs to the counter-proposals made regarding Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent. They were pleased that the ACs had been able to come forward with recommendations which avoided dividing the town of Burslem in Stoke-on-Trent and minimised the disruption to Newcastle-under-Lyme, while also ensuring the Staffordshire Moorlands constituency remained coterminous with the Staffordshire Moorlands District Council boundary.

6.6 Members accepted the ACs' recommendations in full and thanked them for their report.

7. Yorkshire and Humber region – Wednesday 25 July 2012 at 12:00 noon

Also present at the meeting:-

Alan McQuillan (via telephone)	Assistant Commissioner (Yorkshire and Humber region – Lead)
Stephen Wooler	Assistant Commissioner (Yorkshire and Humber region)
Gerald Tessier	Secretariat

Apologies were received from Peter Edmondson

- 7.1 The ACs for the Yorkshire and Humber region gave an overview of the main issues in the region and explained their conclusions.
- 7.2 Members noted the careful consideration the ACs had given to the issue whether to split wards in West and South Yorkshire, in and around Leeds and Sheffield. Having carefully considered the issue themselves in the light of the ACs' report and the representations made to them about this, Members were satisfied that there were no exceptional and compelling circumstances that would justify splitting wards in either area, and they endorsed the ACs' conclusion to that effect. They considered that the arrangement of constituencies recommended by the ACs was sensible and reasonable, without any need to resort to splitting wards.
- 7.3 Members were also persuaded by the merits of the ACs' revisions to the initial sub-regional approach, and to the constituencies in North Yorkshire and Humberside. They considered that the ACs had arrived at a better solution for Humberside than the initial proposals, reflecting the evidence received regarding local ties in and around the City of Kingston upon Hull and allowing for the retention of more existing constituencies in East Yorkshire.
- 7.4 Members accepted the ACs' recommendations in full and thanked them for their report.

8. East Midlands region – Wednesday 25 July 2012 at 2:00pm

Also present at the meeting:-

Douglas Edwards QC	Assistant Commissioner (East Midlands region - Lead)
David Riddle	Assistant Commissioner (East Midlands region)
Paul Kernaghan	Assistant Commissioner (East Midlands region)
Katy Budge	Secretariat

- 8.1 The ACs for the East Midlands region gave an overview of the main issues in the region and explained their conclusions.
- 8.2 Members endorsed the ACs' recommendations in relation to the proposed sub-regions. They noted that a counter-proposal to include Derbyshire in the Northamptonshire, Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire sub-region would result in more constituencies

that crossed county boundaries and more disruption to the existing constituency arrangements.

- 8.3 They were also grateful for the careful consideration the ACs had given to the initial proposals for the two cross-county constituencies of Coalville and Keyworth, and Daventry. Whilst Members recognised the strength of feeling shown by respondents on this issue, they endorsed the ACs' recommendations not to revise the boundaries of these constituencies, having regard to the lack of alternative arrangements that would better reflect the statutory factors.
- 8.4 Members noted the balanced judgement of the ACs in relation to the City of Derby. They agreed with their recommendation to retain an east/west split of the city, as opposed to a north/south split.
- 8.5 Members accepted the ACs' recommendations in full and thanked them for their report.

9. South West region – Thursday 26 July 2012 at 11:30am

Also present at the meeting:-

David Archer	Assistant Commissioner (South West region - Lead)
Colin Wilson	Assistant Commissioner (South West region)
Jim Daniell	Assistant Commissioner (South West region)
Katy Budge	Secretariat

- 9.1 The ACs for the South West region gave an overview of the main issues in the region and explained their conclusions.
- 9.2 In particular, Members were persuaded by the evidence and reasoning set out by the ACs that there were exceptional and compelling circumstances that justified splitting two wards in Gloucester and Tewkesbury, in order to produce a solution that provided adequate recognition for very strong local ties within Gloucester itself. Members acknowledged the strength of adverse feeling to the initial proposals for Gloucester and the Forest of Dean and the force of the arguments presented against them. They were grateful both to the ACs for the careful and thorough consideration they had given this issue and to those respondents who had made well-argued counter-proposals which addressed it.
- 9.3 A particular issue arose in relation to the exact boundary to be adopted for the splitting of Westgate ward in Gloucester. Members agreed that they should draw specific attention to this issue during the consultation on the revised proposals in case anyone wished to make representations about it. Members decided to adopt in their revised proposals the boundary recommended by the ACs, in order to ensure direct access from the Hempstead area of Westgate ward in Gloucester to the remainder of its constituency covering the Forest of Dean (that they renamed West Gloucestershire) and a rather clearer geographical boundary between constituencies, although this involved a small departure from using a boundary based on polling district boundaries. The revised proposal as adopted was in line with the Commission's published policy of seeking to avoid constituencies with detached parts and was consistent with the

reasoning of the ACs in relation to other parts of their recommendations (for example, in their reasons for rejecting a counter-proposal to link the Gloucester ward of Quedgeley Severn Vale to the Forest of Dean).

- 9.4 Members were also grateful for the careful consideration the ACs had given to the representations made regarding the initial proposals for Plymouth and central and south Devon. They noted that it had not proved possible to include the ward of Moor View in a Plymouth city constituency, but considered that the changes recommended by the ACs had the benefit that it was now included in a constituency more centred on Plymouth than under the initial proposals. In the light of the ACs' examination, Members endorsed the revisions to the constituencies covering these areas that the ACs recommended.
- 9.5 Similarly, Members were satisfied that the recommendations made by the ACs for revisions to the initial proposals for constituencies covering South Gloucestershire, and north and central Somerset, resulted in an overall arrangement that better reflected the statutory factors
- 9.5 Members accepted the ACs' recommendations in full and thanked them for their report.

10. Designations – Thursday 26 July 2012 at 2.00pm

Also present at the meeting:-

Gerald Tessier	Secretariat
Katy Budge	“
Mia Spreadbury	“

- 10.1 Having agreed the recommendations for revised constituencies, including the names of those revised constituencies, Members considered constituency designations. As there had been very little evidence received during the consultation on the question of designations, ACs had not in general made any recommendations with regard to the designation of constituencies. Nevertheless the Commission was required to propose a designation for each constituency.
- 10.2 Members noted their policy on designations, set out in paragraph 45 of the *Guide*, which stated that:
- “The BCE considers that, as a general principle, where constituencies contain more than a small rural element they should normally be designated as county constituencies. In other cases they should be designated as borough constituencies.”*
- 10.3 The Secretariat had prepared for Members a list of all of the 502 constituencies that had been recommended to, and subsequently endorsed by, the Commission, and appended provisional designations to this list. Where relevant, every provisional designation for a revised constituency had been informed by that of the existing

constituency or the initial proposal to which the revised constituency could be said to most closely relate (or in some cases, to which the revised constituency was identical).

- 10.4 Members noted the provisional list of designations and the methodology that had been used to prepare it. Using the concept of “electoral density” (that is, the electorate of a constituency divided by the area of that constituency) they gave special consideration to three cases where it could be seen that a designation had been given to a constituency different from that given to the great majority of those with similar electorate densities. After considering maps of the proposals, they concluded that whilst the constituencies of Darlington and Peterborough had provisionally been designated as borough constituencies (BCs), they should be designated instead as county constituencies (CCs) as this would be in line with the Commission’s policy as stated in the *Guide*. Members also considered the constituency of Hartlepool and agreed with its provisional designation as a BC. Finally, Members noted that a representation in relation to designations had been received in respect of Dartford, and that the provisional allocation of CC to Dartford was consistent with the representation made.
- 10.5 Subject to the change in designation for the constituencies of Darlington and Peterborough, the Commission confirmed the provisional list of designations for all 502 constituencies that formed the revised proposals.

APPENDIX TO PAPER 7 - FEEDBACK ON THE REVIEW PROCESS FROM ASSISTANT COMMISSIONERS

(The following consolidates the views provided by each AC team in their individual sessions).

Public Hearings

1. In general, the ACs had found the public hearings process to be valuable, giving the hearing Chairman a real sense of who was speaking with heart and feeling on matters such as local ties, and who was perhaps more artificially trying to construct a case. It was felt to have given the Chair a good opportunity to probe in more detail and clarify evidence that was presented. Whilst some ACs felt that being able to attend the hearings and identify most of the key issues from that process meant it was possible to hit the ground running with the written evidence when it came, others felt that they had heard little in the public hearings that had not also been set out in the written representations.
2. Some ACs felt that the flood of information that they were confronted with - in the lead hearing particularly - did not really allow them to absorb and respond to it particularly effectively at the hearing itself, particularly when trying to control proceedings as a Chair at the same time: in this regard they felt it would have been more helpful to receive the initial written submissions first, and only conduct the public hearings after a period of time to absorb and familiarise themselves with the contents of those written representations. Others felt it might have been sufficient to simply allow more time between the start of the consultation period and the start of the public hearings. However, it was noted that the legislation placed strict constraints on the ordering of the different elements of the consultation, including the amount of time between the start of the written consultation and the start of the hearings, and the fact that the hearings must conclude before the close of the written consultation.
3. In relation to the 'lead hearing' approach, this was generally thought to be useful in helping to 'set the scene' for the region as a whole and providing a sighting on what were likely to be the main issues in the region, though again there were some concerns about the significant quantity and detail of information the ACs were presented with in the first hearing: it was really only at the subsequent hearings that the detail could be properly considered and explored. Some ACs said it would have been helpful if the qualifying Parliamentary parties had set out their counter-proposals in advance of the hearings (and that this should be a requirement rather than a request), as they had found the parties' written representations particularly helpful. However, the ACs noted the practical difficulties for the parties of being able to do this in the limited time between publication of the initial proposals and the hearings.
4. Other suggestions by some ACs relating to lead hearings were for a separate day just for the political party counter-proposals (noting the statutory limit on the number of hearings in each region), and for the lead hearing to be held in a location which was not a "regional centre" and therefore not in itself one likely to be the subject of many localised representations during the hearing.
5. Some of the venue choices had not been optimal, particularly in terms of their location, and it was suggested that the promotion of the events could have been better,

with a few hearings very poorly attended, although it was noted that the logistical lead times meant that venues had to have been selected well before the initial consultation period began and areas of greatest contention could be reliably identified.

6. Some ACs felt it might have been helpful to have all ACs attend all the hearings in their region (recognising the additional costs that would be associated with that), whilst others felt the attendance of a non-lead AC at just one of the hearings was probably enough, preferably one of the hearings in the particular part of the region on which their work would be focusing, if such a clear division of labour was possible within a region.
7. The hearings were felt to be about the right length, although some thought that there should be a stronger presumption on the hearings closing down earlier if there was a very low attendance.

Presentation of evidence to Assistant Commissioners

8. Most ACs felt that the categorisation of the written evidence when it is presented to the ACs by the Secretariat could be improved for the future. There was limited useful indexing, which made it difficult to work with. Division of the material by sub-region would have been a good start, but it would have been most useful to be able to see representations on a proposed constituency-by-proposed constituency basis. However, some ACs said that they had found it most helpful to read each representation page-by-page, as this had given them a feel for the genuine underlying issues and attitudes, especially from members of the public.
9. The database of representations online could also have been more user-friendly, with better accessibility to search for representation in terms of their categorisation and other references: it had been difficult to locate individual representations. The design needed to allow for more sophisticated searching: improved scanning and tagging technology may be able to improve both aspects here.
10. Production of maps and overlays had been extremely useful in the process, but many ACs would have liked to have had maps and ward lists of existing constituencies provided to them at the very start of their work, with ward names actually written on the maps. They suggested that both existing constituencies with ward lists, and those for the initial proposals would be essential for a future review. Some ACs had also preferred the smaller scale maps (including at A3 size) for the sub-regions, where possible; though it was noted that the Secretariat had been flexible and had usually been able to provide different specific approaches to mapping depending on the preferences of the AC teams. It would also have been helpful if more mapping of the counter-proposals could have been provided.
11. The timing of some ACs' consideration of some of the representations had not been ideal, with some significant counter-proposals only being brought to their attention relatively late in the day. Huddle, the online collaboration tool used by the Secretariat to share information with ACs, had often seemed a clunky way of working, though the limitations of the Cabinet Office's IT system on providing a smoother system were noted.

Composition of Assistant Commissioner teams

12. The general view of ACs was that having three in a team was the right number and worked very well. It allowed them to divide the workload and to concentrate on specific areas, and also facilitated the questioning of each other's rationale.
13. There was a feeling that there was a good dynamic and mix of skill sets and abilities; this was particularly striking in those teams which contained a combination of lawyers and non-lawyers.
14. Some ACs considered it was an advantage to work on an area in which one lived, as the individual would benefit from having a good local knowledge, although it was acknowledged that this could also be perceived as a disadvantage, because an AC could have a vested interest in an area, or preconceptions which were not based on the evidence submitted as part of the review.

Support and Guidance to Assistant Commissioners

15. ACs generally thanked the Secretariat for its effective and professional support.
16. Some would have appreciated more guidance about the expected format of their final report. They understood why a report from the previous review had been circulated, as there was no precedent produced under the new procedures, but on balance considered that it had not been helpful. The general guidance in terms of report length of "one page per constituency" had been useful to them.
17. With regard to the guideline number of days that it was thought would be needed to undertake the task, ACs thought that a "one size fits all" approach was not helpful and that some easier areas might require less time, while more complicated areas might require longer: 30 days should therefore not be fixed across every team.

Other issues

18. Some ACs felt that the qualifying Parliamentary political parties often made assertions in the representations that were not backed up by evidence. In such cases the AC team had found it difficult to attach too much weight to this evidence during their deliberations.
19. Some said it would be useful if there was a better dove-tailing of changes to local authority boundaries with reviews of constituency boundaries, so that the latter were based on the latest boundaries. However, it was noted that local authority boundaries were set by a different Commission and was a continuous process, whereas the timing of Parliamentary boundary reviews was set by the legislation.
20. ACs thought it would be helpful if respondents to the consultation could be guided to all respond by reference to either existing constituencies or constituencies as configured in the initial proposals, rather than the mix that had been experienced, which was often confusing and hard to follow.

21. Some Lead ACs thought it would be beneficial for them to have had some direct responsibility for the budget for their whole team's work (that is, the budget for their own time and that of the two other ACs in their team), although they accepted that this would have required different support mechanisms within the Secretariat.
22. Finally, some thought that the Commission could have been more pro-active in engaging the various media outlets and that greater press focus should be a consideration for future reviews, whilst noting that coverage was ultimately a matter for the media itself and that the Commission was operating against the context of a Government-wide moratorium on advertising and communication spending.