

Proposed new parliamentary constituencies - implications for local government

Purpose of report

For discussion and direction.

Summary

On 13 September, the Boundary Commission for England launched a 12-week consultation on its initial proposals for new Parliamentary constituency boundaries in England. The consultation will include a series of public hearings across the country. The equivalent Welsh report is due later this month.

This report summarises the key implications of the initial proposals for local government.

Recommendation

That Executive discusses the implications of the initial proposals and agrees how they wish to respond.

Action

LG Group officers to action.

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Background

1. On 13 September, the Boundary Commission for England launched a 12-week consultation on its initial proposals for new Parliamentary constituency boundaries in England. The consultation will include a series of public hearings across the country. The equivalent Welsh report is due later this month.
2. The key requirements underpinning the 2013 review are:
 - 2.1 reducing the total number of MPs to 600 (for England this means a reduction from 533 to 502) and
 - 2.2 equalisation - ensuring that each constituency contains a similar number of registered electors (no more than 5 per cent more or less than the current electoral quota of 76,641).
3. The only exception in England is the Isle of Wight, which will have two constituencies. The Commission was also asked to take account of appropriate local authority boundaries, existing constituency boundaries and geographical/historical connections.

The issue

4. In its initial proposals, the Commission has respected existing euro constituency boundaries (the "regions"). It has also chosen to use existing ward boundaries as the main building blocks for its analysis. However this means that previously solid boundary lines (counties) are crossed where necessary.
5. The Commission's approach was to look at the sub-regions within any region. In a limited number of cases, a county was classified as a sub region, but in most cases the equalisation requirement means that sub-regional units cover more than one county.
6. The combined impact of the equalisation requirement and the reduction of seats means that in England only 77 constituencies have the same proposed boundaries. Only 44 per cent of the new proposed constituencies are contained within one local authority.

Proposals for each region

North East

7. The North East - the only region besides London with all unitary authorities - has been allocated 26 constituencies.
8. All the existing seats in the region will change, no authority will be in full alignment with its constituency. No seat in North Tyneside, and only one in Newcastle's, falls purely within the authority boundaries. A cross-county seat covers west Durham and west Northumberland. The creation of unitary authorities for Northumberland and Durham mean a number of seats fall wholly within new local authority boundaries although not along previous district boundaries.
9. The region demonstrates the tension between "natural" and local authority boundaries when deciding how to model the new constituencies. The Commission having decided not to have any constituencies crossing the River Tyne through the urban conurbation was forced to develop a more radical breaking of local authority boundaries.

Yorkshire and the Humber

10. Yorkshire and the Humber have been allocated 50 constituencies (a reduction of four), of which five remain unchanged.
11. The region demonstrates the tough logic of the equalisation. It had been widely assumed by those who had modelled possible outcomes that North Yorkshire would remain unchanged as all the existing constituencies were within the allowable variation. In fact significant changes occurred because of "misfit" in the adjacent areas.
12. In two districts – Scarborough and Craven - district and parliamentary boundaries still coincide but only one unitary has fully aligned boundaries. There are no changes in Doncaster. Old county boundaries are also crossed - North Riding into South and West and East Riding with Lincolnshire.

North West

13. The North West has been allocated 68 constituencies (a reduction of seven). Seven of the existing constituencies would remain unchanged.
14. Cumbria remains intact as a county with its five constituencies entirely within the county. However there is not alignment with districts, although one district - Copeland is fully subsumed within one constituency. All other county

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boundaries are crossed. St Helens is the only authority where its two constituencies are contained within authority boundaries.

West Midlands

15. The West Midlands has been allocated 54 constituencies (a reduction of five), ten of which would maintain existing boundaries.
16. The old Staffordshire county boundaries remain intact - but only Staffordshire Moorlands constituency coincides with district authority boundaries. All other county boundaries are crossed and elsewhere only Coventry has aligned constituencies (three). All other metropolitan boroughs in the West Midlands have at least two constituencies which cross borough boundaries - five in the case of Sandwell.

East Midlands

17. The East Midlands has been allocated 44 constituencies (a reduction of two). Of these ten remain unchanged.
18. No unitary in the region has aligned boundaries, and some county borders - Leicestershire with both Nottinghamshire and Northamptonshire - are crossed. Chesterfield constituency has been slightly increased in size and now covers the whole local authority area. In Bassetlaw, Erewash and North East Derbyshire the constituency and the authority are aligned, whilst both Northampton seats are within authority boundaries. The proposed changes in Lincolnshire are relatively modest.

Eastern

19. Eastern Region has been allocated 56 constituencies (a reduction of two), nine of which would be unchanged.
20. Not one local authority is in full alignment with constituency boundaries. Perhaps the most extreme is in Central Bedfordshire where only one of five seats is wholly within the boundaries, and three cross into Hertfordshire.

London

21. London has been allocated 68 constituencies (a reduction of five), four of which would remain unchanged.
22. Only 30 of the 68 constituencies are purely in one authority. 37 contain parts of two authorities and one - Islington and City - covers the City of London and parts of both Islington and Camden. There are two London boroughs whose

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boundaries are aligned with constituencies – Tower Hamlets, which remains unchanged and Bromley. One constituency - Richmond and Twickenham - crosses the River Thames, whilst Chingford and Edmonton crosses the River Lee.

South East

23. The South East has been allocated 83 constituencies (a reduction of one). 18 of the existing constituencies remain unchanged.
24. Population growth means this region has the least changes, with 23 existing constituencies having two or fewer wards changed. Only one unitary - the Isle of Wight with its guaranteed increase to 2 seats - has alignment. There is limited crossing of county borders (one East Sussex/Kent seat) and some alignment at district level (Epsom and Ewell, and West Oxfordshire). Neither the Prime Minister nor the Leader of the Opposition face any changes in their respective constituencies.

South West

25. The South West has been allocated 53 constituencies (a reduction of two). 14 existing constituencies would remain unchanged.
26. County boundaries are crossed, with Cornwall/Devon creating the most press interest. However Bristol now is aligned with its four constituencies, and North Somerset and Swindon with each of their two constituencies. Gloucestershire has only very limited change. At district level there is alignment in South Somerset and North Devon.

Summary of changes in England

27. Under the current proposals, nine top tier authorities and twelve districts will be fully aligned with their constituencies. In many areas, constituencies will fall wholly within one authority, and in others there will be near alignment but this does change the electoral map.
28. It is clear that in preparing their proposals, the Electoral Commission was not anti-alignment. It was simply that in their brief, alignment was a desirable outcome but equalisation a necessary one. To illustrate, Norfolk was grouped with Suffolk for the review. The county boundary was crossed because with an electorate of 651,119 Norfolk was slightly too large to have eight of the largest seats (maximum 643,784) and slightly too small to have nine of the smallest. (655,290 minimum population required).
29. The second reason for the low level of alignment was the use of existing ward boundaries as the basic building blocks for the new constituencies. In many

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parts of the country the number of registered voters in any given ward is greater than the allowable variation in constituency size. This has led to a significant number of constituencies with so called “orphan” wards. In one authority all but one ward falls into this category.

30. There is now a review every five years. With a maximum size of parliament now set, and a growing electorate, we must assume that even the current proposed limited alignment will be very short lived.

Implications for Local Government and the LG Group

31. These proposals effectively disconnect local government and parliamentary boundaries. Local government boundaries will no longer be the key factor in Party political organisation. For the Conservatives, and for Labour in particular, Constituency Associations or Constituency Parties are the core organisational unit, often owning property or employing staff. The Liberal Democrats have more flexible structures, but consider for instance Islington South and Finsbury, a key target for them during most of the last decade, where the proposed new constituency covers the City of London, most of the old Islington South and two wards covering old Holborn in Camden.
32. As there is a two year window before the new boundaries are finalised we can assume that most party energy will be focused on this and viewed through this prism. Within parties, discussion about and focus on local government could be further marginalised and moved aside to separate forums
33. Whilst local government might hope that MPs would concentrate more on national agendas, MPs whose constituencies cross local authority boundaries could view the resulting variations in services as anomalous, and become advocates of more standardised provision. MPs who face radically changed constituencies (especially if their seat is deemed marginal) may become ultra active in their new constituencies as they try to establish a presence.
34. Whilst there always have been constituencies that were not fully aligned with authorities, until now these were the exception. Under these proposals, the majority of constituencies will fall into this category. This non-alignment will cover not just local authorities but other elements of local public services such as health and police. Given the almost default mentality of Whitehall that larger units of government are better, we may well face future parliaments in which many more MPs take this view because of the additional complexities they will face interacting with more than one local authority, health authority, police and crime commissioner and so on.

Opportunities and implications for the LGA

35. With a combination of squeezes on party spend, and the non alignment of party and local government structures, it is likely that the LGA political groups will increase in importance. We should consider how to reposition the party groups to respond to this. At the same time the Annual LG Group conference is likely to become even more important as the only event providing the space for political focus on local government.

Conclusion and next steps

36. Parliament has agreed a limited window for consultation, finishing in early December, and twenty seven assistant commissioners have been appointed to handle the consultation process. The commission will then release its final recommendations, which are subject to parliamentary approval.
37. We await the publication of the Welsh boundary review. However given the significant reduction in Welsh MPs, and with a similar framework for the review, similar challenges are likely to be faced in Wales.