
Subject: REVIEW OF PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY BOUNDARIES

Meeting and Date: Electoral Matters Committee – 17 November 2011

Report of: Louise Cooke, Democratic Services Manager

Classification: Unrestricted

Purpose of the report: The Boundary Commission for England has published its initial proposals for new parliamentary constituencies. The Committee is requested to consider these and alternative proposals for the purpose of formulating a response to the consultation.

Recommendation: To consider the proposals with a view to recommending to Council its response to the consultation, having regard to the statutory framework.

1. Summary

This report seeks to explain the methodology behind the proposals of the Boundary Commission for England for new parliamentary constituencies and identify the options available to the Committee for formulating a response to the consultation.

2. Introduction and Background

- 2.1 As part of the Coalition Agreement, the Government committed itself to “the creation of fewer and more equal sized constituencies”. The Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011 set out the legislative basis for this commitment, reducing the total number of Westminster parliamentary constituencies for the United Kingdom from 650 to 600. For England, this equated to a reduction of 31 constituencies from 533 to 502.
- 2.2 In addition to a reduction in the number of constituencies, the Act also sets minimum (72,810) and maximum (80,473) legal limits for the electorate of each constituency as part of the commitment to more equal sized constituencies. This is based on a + / - 5% range from the electoral quota of 76,641. The electoral quota figure is determined by dividing the total electorate for the United Kingdom minus the electorates for the Isle of Wight (2 constituencies), Orkney and Shetland, and Na h-Eileanan an Iar constituencies by the total number of constituencies minus the 4 constituencies previously mentioned. The resultant figure of 76,641 compares to the current electorate for parliamentary constituencies in England which ranges from 55,077 to 110,924.
- 2.3 While the primary consideration under the Act is that the constituencies have an electorate within the specified range, the Boundary Commission for England (BCE), the independent non-departmental public body which is responsible for reviewing English constituency boundaries, may also give consideration to the following in its deliberations provided that the electorate for a constituency remains within the + / - 5% range of the electoral quota:
- Special geographical considerations, including the size, shape and accessibility of a constituency;

- Local government boundaries as they existed on 6 May 2010;
- Boundaries of existing constituencies;
- Any local ties that would be broken by changes in constituencies; and
- The inconveniences attendant on such changes.

2.4 It is these criteria that the Council will have to be mindful of in its deliberations if it decides to make any recommendations to the BCE contrary to those outlined in the initial proposals.

2.5 The BCE review is due to report to the Government in 2013 on its proposals and must, under the Act, base its calculations on the national electorate total published two years and ten months prior to the date it submits its report. In this case, the base electorate for the review is that as at 1 December 2010. As this is a legislative requirement, any growth in the electorate of a constituency after 1 December 2010 cannot be taken into account, this will be considered at the time of the next review which will be five years after the date of the current review (i.e. 2018). This is also consistent with the new five year fixed term parliaments, which would see elections in 2015 and 2020.

South East England Region

2.6 The initial proposals of the BCE allocate 83 constituencies to the South East England region (modelled on the European election region) which represents a reduction of 1 constituency overall. In practical terms however, as the Act increases the Isle of Wight constituency allocation from 1 to 2, there is a reduction of 2 constituencies throughout the rest of the South East. The BCE proposes that the largest two counties, Hampshire and Kent under the proportional allocation lose a constituency each, reducing the Hampshire, Portsmouth and Southampton sub-region from 18 to 17 constituencies and the Brighton & Hove, East Sussex and Kent & Medway sub-region from 25 to 24 constituencies.

2.7 Currently, only 10 of the 25 existing constituencies have electorates in this sub-region are within + / - 5% of the electoral quota. Of the remaining 15 constituencies, 13 are below the electoral quota and 2 above it.

2.8 While the majority, if not all, counties would in theory be able to be assigned a whole number of constituencies, the variation from the target electoral quota for East Sussex and Brighton & Hove is such that in the view of the BCE the most logical option is to group it into a sub-region with the neighbouring slightly oversized Kent county area.

2.9 In drafting its proposals for new constituencies, the BCE has avoided splitting existing local authority wards into parts. While this makes it more difficult in some cases to group electorates into geographically coherent blocks (i.e. separating urban and rural areas) it does have the advantage of making it easier for MP's, local councillors and constituents in identifying who represents them and administratively in terms of organising polling areas by allowing voters to continue to vote at the location they normally would.

2.10 As the table below illustrates, the electorate of Brighton & Hove is greater than the electoral quota (+ / - 5%) for 2 constituencies but smaller than for 3 constituencies. However, when combined with East Sussex via a third constituency straddling the

two areas (Lewes & Brighton East), it is possible to create a constituency within which quota can be achieved. However, the resultant combined East Sussex electorate area resulted in constituencies on average 4% below the electoral quota, which while within range was not seen as a preferable option.

Area	Electorate	Existing Constituency	Proportional Allocation of Constituency	Proposed Constituency
Brighton & Hove	195,038	3	2.54	-
East Sussex	394,183	5	5.14	-
Combined	589,221	8	7.69	8

- 2.11 The solution for this in the BCE proposals is to create a constituency called 'The Weald' which crosses the county boundary between Kent and East Sussex. The new constituency is composed of elements of the Bexhill & Battle constituency and Wealden constituency in East Sussex and elements of the Tunbridge Wells constituency in Kent.

	Electorate	Existing Constituency	Proportional Allocation of Constituency	Proposed Constituency
Combined East Sussex	589,221	8	7.69	8
Kent & Medway	1,235,505	17	16.12	16
Sub-Region	1,824,726	25	23.81	24

- 2.12 The proposed new Kent constituencies involve changes to all of the existing ones with the exception of Sittingbourne and Sheppey. However, the proposed changes to Ashford, Dartford, Dover, Folkestone & Hythe, Gillingham & Rainham, Gravesham and Rochester involve a change of two or fewer local authority wards. The constituency in effect 'abolished' by the changes is Faversham and Mid Kent which is divided between the new constituencies of Canterbury and Tonbridge.
- 2.13 The difference from the electoral quota ranges from +4.54% in Dover to -4.26% in Chatham & Aylesford, a difference on 6,777 electors between the largest and smallest seat in the county. A significant size bias exists towards East Kent, with 4 of the 6 biggest constituencies being located there and the remaining two (Ashford and Maidstone) have borders with East Kent constituencies.

Proposed Constituency	Constituency Electorate (01/12/2010)	Difference vs. Electoral Quota (Electors)	Difference vs. Electoral Quota (PCT)
Maximum Size	80,473	+3,832	+5.00%
Dover CC	80,283	+3,642	+4.54%

Proposed Constituency	Constituency Electorate (01/12/2010)	Difference vs. Electoral Quota (Electors)	Difference vs. Electoral Quota (PCT)
Ashford CC	80,027	+3,386	+4.23%
Herne Bay CC	78,999	+2,358	+2.98%
Electoral Quota	76,641	+0	+0.00
Canterbury CC	76,155	-486	-0.64%
Maidstone CC	76,020	-621	-0.82%
Folkestone & Hythe CC	75,866	-775	-1.02%
Gravesend CC	75,196	-1,445	-1.92%
Tonbridge CC	75,195	-1,446	-1.92%
Sittingbourne & Sheppey CC	74,796	-1,845	-2.47%
Rochester BC	74,184	-2,457	-3.31%
Tunbridge Wells CC	74,180	-2,461	-3.32%
Margate & Ramsgate CC	74,173	-2,468	-3.33%
Sevenoaks CC	73,888	-2,753	-3.73%
Gillingham & Rainham BC	73,797	-2,844	-3.85%
The Weald CC	73,724	-2,917	-3.96%
Dartford BC	73,622	-3,019	-4.10%
Chatham & Aylesford CC	73,506	-3,135	-4.26%
Minimum Size	72,810	-3,831	-5.00%

- 2.14 The proposed Kent constituencies are set out in greater detail in Appendix 1 of this report.

Dover Constituency

- 2.15 The existing Dover constituency has an electorate of 71,993 and is slightly smaller than the district council area, with the wards of Sandwich and Little Stour & Ashstone forming part of the South Thanet constituency. As the existing constituency is smaller than the electoral floor of 72,810 (5% below the electoral quota) the BCE proposes to add the Shepway District Council wards of Elham & Stelling Minnis (electorate of 1,761) and North East Downs (electorate of 6,529) to the Dover constituency, while the wards of Sandwich (electorate of 5,572) and Little Stour & Ashstone (electorate of 5,397) remain outside of the constituency, going to the Margate & Ramsgate constituency and the Herne Bay constituency respectively.
- 2.16 The proposed new Dover constituency will have a substantially larger electorate of 80,283, making it the largest in Kent at 4.54% higher than the electoral quota target and one of only three constituencies in the county above the electoral quota. Even

with only modest housing growth in the district it is likely that the constituency will have to be adjusted at the next review date to ensure the electorate remains below the maximum of 80,473.

Alternative Proposals

(a) Shepway District Council

2.17 Shepway District Council's Cabinet at its meeting held on 2 November 2011 agreed that the Council respond to the consultation with a recommendation that the Elham & Stelling Minnis Ward (electorate of 1,761) be incorporated back into the Folkestone and Hythe constituency. This would increase the electorate of the Folkestone and Hythe constituency from 75,866 to 77,627.

2.18 The justification for this decision was as follows:

- It provides the most practicable way forward in ensuring the least confusion to the electors in the district;
- It avoids unnecessary transference of electors from existing parliamentary constituency of Folkestone and Hythe to the neighbouring constituency of Dover; and
- The initial proposals from the BCE fail to take account of expected growth in the Hawkinge area within Shepway and the Whitfield area within Dover.

(b) Democratic Audit Boundary Model for South East England

2.19 Democratic Audit is a not-for-profit independent research organisation grant funded by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust and based at the University of Liverpool undertook its own assessment of potential parliamentary constituencies based upon the methodology laid down in the Act. The resultant study offers an alternative model of constituencies that in places is quite different from the BCE proposals.

2.20 Although still reducing the number of constituencies in Kent from 17 to 16 and still retaining the cross-county border straddle constituency with East Sussex, the proposals for East Kent are subtly different.

2.21 The Democratic Audit proposed Dover constituency is smaller than the one advanced by the BCE with an electorate of 77,565 (compared to 80,283) but is more geographically coterminous with the boundaries of the Dover District and sees the addition of the Sandwich Ward to the constituency, bringing all three major towns in the district together in the same constituency. The Little Stour and Ashstone Ward is transferred from the old South Thanet constituency to Democratic Audits proposed new Whitstable constituency, which is largely analogous to the Herne Bay constituency proposed by the BCE.

2.22 Administratively, this is a simplest model as it doesn't involve the transfer of any wards outside of the district into the constituency. The one ward in the district outside of the constituency, Little Stour & Ashstone is currently part of the South Thanet constituency and would not present any undue difficulties in forming arrangements with a neighbouring authority for its electoral administration.

2.23 The Democratic Audit Kent constituencies are set out in greater detail in Appendix 2 of this report.

3. Identification of Options

- 3.1 The BCE launched a public consultation on its initial proposals for the 502 English constituencies on 13 September 2011 and it will run for a twelve-week period ending 5 December 2011.
- 3.2 The Council will therefore have to determine its consultation response, if any, at its meeting held on 30 November 2011 and the Committee will be required to consider what recommendations it wishes to make to it.
- 3.3 Option 1 – To recommend to Council that it makes no response to the consultation by the Boundary Commission for England.
- 3.4 Option 2 – To respond to the consultation in support of the Boundary Commission for England proposals for a new Dover constituency.
- 3.5 Option 3 - To respond to the consultation in support of the Boundary Commission for England proposals for a new Dover constituency but to make different recommendations concerning the Sandwich and Little Stour & Ashstone wards which are outside of the proposed Dover constituency.
- 3.6 Option 4 – To respond to the consultation advancing a different Dover constituency configuration. This may also include making a consultation response concerning the two proposed Shepway District Council wards that would become part of the Dover constituency and/or the two Dover District Council wards currently outside of the Dover constituency.
- 3.7 In addition, the Committee may wish to consider whether the name of the new Dover constituency is a matter that they wish to make recommendations upon as the BCE is required under the Act to specify in its recommendations a name and designation for each proposed constituency.

4. Evaluation of Options

- 4.1 The question of where to draw parliamentary constituency boundaries is complex and fraught with questions of community identity and political advantage. Although the Act sets out a methodology for drawing the constituencies there is no single right answer and even the movement of one or two local authority wards can radically reshape the identity of a constituency. With this in mind, this report does not seek to make any recommendation to Members as to a preferred option but rather intends to highlight possible options and factors that Members should take into consideration in the formulation of any recommendations to the Council.
- 4.2 In evaluating possible options, it is useful to start with the proposals advanced by the BCE. The proposed new Dover constituency is relatively simple and involves minimal changes to the constituency, with the addition of two wards from neighbouring Shepway District Council. Whilst it creates the largest constituency in Kent, and one that would undoubtedly need alteration at the next review, it does meet the legislative requirements for the 2013 review.
- 4.3 However, the BCE proposals for the two Dover District wards outside of the Dover constituency does rather undesirably create two 'orphan wards' in splitting Little Stour & Ashstone (to become part of Herne Bay constituency) and Sandwich (to become part of Margate & Ramsgate constituency), as currently, both wards are part of the South Thanet constituency. An 'orphan ward' is a ward of one local authority which is

in a constituency with no other wards drawn from that local authority and is often unlikely to have strong ties with the rest of the constituency. It is arguable as how strong the geographic, community and access / transportation ties are between Staple and Herne Bay for example.

- 4.4 This situation is also replicated in respect of the two Shepway District Council wards moved into the Dover constituency, which while geographically accessible to the Dover constituency does however raise significant questions about community ties in respect of the Dover constituency for Elham and Hawkinge. However, as currently constructed it is not possible to return both wards to the Folkestone and Hythe constituency without making adjustments to the Ashford constituency. It is however possible to return one Shepway District ward (Elham & Stelling Minnis) to the Folkestone & Hythe constituency and stay within the electoral quota range but this would create a third orphan ward in relation to the Dover district constituencies.
- 4.5 Finally, the BCE proposals would mean that residents of the Dover District would be served by one of three MP's (Herne Bay, Margate & Ramsgate and Dover) and the Dover MP would have to deal with two local authorities (Dover District Council and Shepway District Council).
- 4.6 In contrast, the Democratic Audit alternative proposals produce a more intuitively logical outcome. For the Dover constituency, it would mirror the Dover District Council administrative area far more closely and unify the three main towns of the district in a single constituency. For Sandwich this would be a significant strengthening of its existing community ties to the rest of the district. It would also see both of the Shepway District Council wards form part of the Folkestone and Hythe constituency.
- 4.7 The disadvantage of the Democratic Audit proposals is that the Little Stour & Ashstone ward still remains an orphan ward, unsatisfactorily attached to the Whitstable constituency.
- 4.8 There exist a variety of other potential combinations achievable with only minor adjustments to the BCE proposed constituencies and Members may wish to evaluate other options that result in a more satisfactory outcome in terms of community identity, access / transportation links and administrative ease whilst preserving the primary consideration of an electoral quota.
- 4.9 In respect of the name of the Dover constituency, the guidance issued by the BCE is that the Act provides no guidance in respect of names other than making the BCE responsible for forming recommendations in respect of constituency names. In drafting any recommendations concerning the name of the Dover constituency (or others) the Committee should have regard to:
 - The BCE considers the name should reflect the main population centre(s) contained within the constituency;
 - Where the constituency largely remains unchanged the BCE's policy is that the name be retained unless a suitable alternative name is proposed that generally commands greater support locally than that proposed by the BCE;
 - That compass point names are adopted where there is not a more suitable name. This takes the form of a prefix where the rest of the name refers to the county area or local council (i.e. South Thanet) and a suffix where the rest of the name refers to a population centre (i.e. Barnsley East).

4.10 It should be noted that the Dover constituency has historically, with the exception of the period 1974 to 1983 when it was known as the Dover and Deal constituency, been designated as the Dover constituency.

5. **Resource Implications**

5.1 Any changes to the parliamentary constituency boundaries for the Dover District may have implications for the administration of the election and the resultant costs arising from it. However, at this time it is not possible to quantify what costs, if any, may be arising from changes to the parliamentary constituencies for the Dover District.

6. **Appendices** [not enclosed for the purposes of this report]

Appendix 1 – Proposed Kent constituencies

Appendix 2 – Democratic Audit Kent constituencies

7. **Background Papers**

None.

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