

Parliamentary Constituencies Bill – Commons Committee consideration stage Note on use of ‘sub-ward’ units for constituency reviews in England

The Commission has been asked to give its view on the prospective increased frequency of ward-splitting in the development of proposals and recommendations for new constituencies during future Parliamentary boundary reviews in England, including providing an indication of what would be required to facilitate that.

We currently use wards as the fundamental ‘building block’ from which to construct each constituency and believe this practice should continue. As we have outlined in our published material for previous Reviews, the policy basis for generally seeking to keep wards whole during constituency development derives from an understanding - historically supported by political parties - that wards generally reflect communities of broad common interest in an area, and to split them therefore risks splitting local ties in an area: a factor existing legislation specifically encourages us to avoid. Perhaps less immediately resonant with the general public is that a ward is a unit of electoral administration, and it is therefore helpful to both candidates/parties and electoral administrators if a constituency is, as far as possible, built from units of electoral administration used in other contexts (i.e. local government elections).

The Commission has not completely rejected the splitting of wards in either of the two Reviews conducted since the current rules were introduced in 2011, but, for the reasons set out above, it has set the bar very high for the circumstances in which it was prepared to recommend a split-ward solution. However, with many wards currently exceeding in electorate size the entire span of the currently permitted electorate range of +/-5% from the electoral quota, there have been a number of instances where the Commission has, in previous Reviews, recommended schemes of constituencies where multiple wards have had to move around between constituencies in order to retain wards intact. In such cases, less overall disruption to the existing pattern of constituencies may have been possible if one or more wards in the area had instead been split.

Where the Commission does propose splitting a ward, the first question is what sub-ward unit can we use. Here our criteria are:

- There must be electorate (not just population) data available for that unit, and the boundaries of the sub-ward unit should be coterminous with the external boundary of the ward (census output areas do not meet these criteria);
- The unit must exist across the whole of England (parish council and ward areas do not meet this criterion, as much of England is unparished, in contrast to community council coverage of Wales and Scotland); and
- Ideally, the unit should be one that is already used in the administration of an election.

This leads us to use polling districts. However, as there is currently no central repository of polling district data in England (either electorate figures or digital mapping), on each occasion where we look at the possibility of splitting a ward, this involves a very resource-intensive compiling of electorate data and creation of digital mapping for each individual polling district involved before we can start to analyse the exact numerical consequences of beginning to split wards in the area. This puts a very real practical

limit on the number of occasions on which we can feasibly look in detail at split ward possibilities across England, in the context of very limited time and resources available to a Review.

The solution to this would be to put the collation of polling-district level data on the same footing as that for wards, i.e. boundaries mapped and kept up to date by Ordnance Survey, and electorate data collected centrally by ONS and/or BCE. This would mean that the Commission could start a Review with all the necessary data already in place to allow for split-ward options to be explored immediately and without delay. However, establishment - and subsequent maintenance - of such datasets is not a quick or cheap process. The current process operates in relation to around 7,100 wards in England. Between the 2013 and 2018 Reviews, we arranged for Ordnance Survey to establish a consistent polling district mapping dataset for England. There were nearly 32,000 polling districts (a figure unlikely to be very different now), and it took OS around 18 months to map these, at a total cost of around £232,000. The creation of a counterpart electorate dataset for the polling districts was done by a single, existing BCE staff member (and therefore wrapped into its staff costs) over a corresponding period of time.

Due to the fluid nature of polling districts (they are determined locally, as and when the local authority feels it would be useful, although there must be at least one statutory polling district review every five years), once first created, the polling district mapping dataset needs to be constantly maintained to prevent it becoming increasingly out of date and inaccurate. We did approach the Government at the time, with a request that statutory provision be made to require the results of any polling district review to be sent to BCE/Ordnance Survey, but this was not taken forward, with the result that the dataset was too out of date by the time of the 2018 Review to be of any real use.

For the purpose of this note, we approached Ordnance Survey for an indication of prospective costs and timescale for the production of a new polling district mapset for England (or a refresh of the previous one). There are obviously a number of variables, which we are not in a position to specify currently, such as the extent to which polling districts have actually changed across England since the previous exercise, and the particular quality of input that OS would receive from each of the 314 separate local authorities. With those caveats, OS have given a very broad estimate of costs, being £180,000-£450,000, and estimated the work would take around 12 months (noting that such a large project does not form part of their current planned and agreed programme of work).

In respect of the next scheduled constituencies Review, we intend to meet with the representatives of the Parliamentary parties, prior to commencing substantive work on the Review, to discuss what the Commission's own policies will be for delivery within the parameters of the statutory framework (once that framework is established by Parliament). That meeting will no doubt include discussion of the extent to which the Commission will be prepared to look at splitting wards during the Review. However, as noted above there will be significant practical limits to the number of cases in which the Commission could properly analyse split-ward possibilities within the proposed time constraints of the next Review, unless, prior to the start of that Review:

- Local authorities and their electoral administrators are legally mandated to provide polling district mapping (including the outcome of future polling district reviews) and associated electorate data to BCE/OS/ONS; and
- Additional resources are provided to BCE, to meet the costs of production and subsequent maintenance of digitally mapped polling districts for the whole of England by Ordnance Survey.

OS has indicated a complete polling district level mapping of England would take around 12 months, but BCE would be needing to develop its initial proposals for the next Review during the first half of 2021 in order to meet the overall timetable for delivery of the Review proposed in the Bill. If Parliament and Government were prepared to make available the necessary resources noted above, we could specify that OS prioritise the mapping of the metropolitan council areas, where the largest ward electorate sizes occur (as noted, they were able to complete this element within six months in the previous exercise). Although this would not be a complete solution to facilitate consideration of split ward possibilities across England for our initial proposals, it would likely allow us at that stage to at least consider more split ward possibilities in the areas where such solutions would be most likely to help minimise disruption.

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