

# ***Report to the Council***

**Committee:** Electoral and Community  
Governance Reviews Committee

**Date:** 1 November 2011

**Chairman:** Councillor Chris Whitbread

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## **1. PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCY REVIEWS**

### **Recommendations:**

- (1) That the proposed formal response to the Boundary Commission for England in respect of the review of Parliamentary Constituencies be approved as set out in the Appendix to this report;
  - (2) That a copy of the Council's views be sent to the three local members of Parliament;
  - (3) That the relevant Government Minister be advised ( with copies to the local MPs) about the Council's concerns about the Constituency boundary at Matching Green; and
  - (4) That the action taken by the Committee in authorising the Assistant to the Chief Executive (accompanied by Councillor R.Morgan, the local District member for the Matching area) to attend the Commission's hearing about the review on 31 October 2011 in Colchester and present these views in person be confirmed.
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1. The Boundary Commission for England is currently conducting a review of Parliamentary Constituencies in England. This review arises from recent Government legislation which required the Commission to allocate a precise number of constituencies in England. This number is based on a fixed total of 600 for the whole of the UK, representing a reduction from 650 constituencies at the present time.
2. The Commission must ensure that every constituency has an electorate that is within 5% (plus or minus) of the UK electoral quota of 76,641 electors. The review can take account of a number of other factors but only if the electoral quota and tolerances are not compromised. These factors are as follows:
  - (a) special geographical considerations; size, shape and accessibility of a constituency;
  - (b) local government boundaries;
  - (c) boundaries of existing constituencies; and
  - (d) any local ties which are broken by the new constituencies.

3. The Commission must base the review on registered totals published between 1 December 2010 and 1 February 2011.
4. The total number of Constituencies for England will be 500 which, with two protected constituencies, gives an overall total of 502. The building blocks for the revised constituencies are District Wards (not Parish Council areas) where it is feasible to do so but having regard to the 5% tolerance.
5. The review is presented on a regional basis. Epping Forest District is part of the Eastern Region which currently has 58 constituencies which under the review will be reduced to 56. The Eastern Region is broken down into sub-regions which are counties, Essex being one. There are currently 18 constituencies in Essex and the Commission's proposals would reduce this to 17.

### **Commission's Initial Proposals**

6. The Commission has published initial proposals for consultation purposes. The consultation closes on 5 December 2011 and is open to members of the public, councils, political parties and individual elected members. These initial proposals have the following main features so far as the Epping Forest District is concerned:

#### **(a) Epping Forest Constituency**

The proposals indicate that the current constituency is regarded as too small in electorate terms and with this in mind the District Ward of Lambourne has been added. Other than this the Constituency is unchanged.

#### **(b) Brentwood and Ongar Constituency**

Brentwood and Ongar has lost the District Ward of Lambourne in order to compensate in electorate terms is being re-drawn to include the Orsett Ward of Thurrock Borough; and

#### **(c) Harlow Constituency**

This constituency is also regarded too small in electorate terms by the Commission. With this in mind three wards from Uttlesford District Council have been added.

7. We draw to the Council's attention that the common constituency boundaries between Epping Forest, Harlow and Brentwood are unchanged except in respect of Lambourne.

### **Response to Consultation**

8. We are setting out in the Appendix to this report our proposals for responding to the initial proposals of the Commission. The rationale behind our views is as follows.

(a) we have concentrated our discussions on the 3 constituencies affecting this District and are not commenting on the Eastern Region or the rest of the Essex Sub Region;

(b) the Epping Forest Constituency as amended meets the legal requirements as to the number of electors and by joining Lambourne Ward with the rest of the constituency this creates a logical single unit. We paid particular attention to the fact that Lambourne appears to have strong links with the Theydon Bois area therefore

the choice that the Commission has made seems to us a logical one;

(c) in terms of the Harlow and Brentwood and Ongar Constituencies we have restricted our comments to noting the new configuration of District Wards both within this area and neighbouring Councils. The reason for this is that we think the Council should strongly support the Epping Forest Constituency as now proposed because any weakening of that position will mean changes could be made as a result of representations from any other area. We wish to send a strong message to the Commission that the new Epping Forest Constituency has our firm support;

(d) We were also very pleased to see that the District Wards covering the Parish of North Weald remain in their present parliamentary constituency. There is a history of this area being transferred between different Parliamentary constituencies over the years and we are glad that the initial proposals of the Commission provide continuity.

### **Matching Green**

9. The Council may recall that in previous reports we have submitted proposals regarding an anomalous boundary in Matching Green village. The Parish boundary effectively divided the village in two and took no account of the community links within the village. The Council has already made an order to include all of Matching Green in Matching Parish and this has now been supported by the Local Government Boundary Commission which has made consequential changes to the County Electoral division and District Ward boundaries to align them with a new Parish boundary.
10. This does however leave an anomaly with the Parliamentary boundary which follows the same route. With this in mind we are recommending that strong representations be made to the Commission that this anomaly needs to be put right and the Parliamentary boundary made to follow the other three boundaries in that area. The Returning Officer has suggested to us that if this anomaly is perpetuated a degree of voter confusion can be expected during a Parliamentary election which is likely to be held to concurrently with another local government election. As these would be on different boundaries, it is better, in our view, that this is addressed now and boundaries unified for 2015.
11. We have written to the Parish Councils of Moreton, Bobbingworth & The Lavers and Matching to alert them to the change in the Parliamentary boundary at Matching Green as this would transfer 160 voters from the Brentwood and Ongar Constituency to Harlow Constituency. This would be within the 5% tolerance prescribed in the rules. However, the changes in the Matching Green boundary have taken place after the publication of the electoral registers on which the review is based. We are therefore conscious that it would need a decision to waive the criteria to allow this change to be made. However, the Commission has some discretion to take account of current boundaries provided this does not contradict the electoral quota and we think that it is worth making this point.

## **Public Hearings**

12. Because of the complex situation at Matching Green, we asked the Returning Officer (accompanied by Councillor Morgan) to attend a public hearing on the review which will be held by the Commission in Colchester on 31 October and 1 November 2011. We have asked him to submit our views on the overall review but to draw specific attention to the problem at Matching Green. Although the Council's comments will be conveyed to the Commission in writing we felt that it was quite important that this problem is raised directly with the Commission so that they are fully aware of the situation. We are also recommending that the relevant Government Minister and the local Members of Parliament be informed of the views being expressed

## **Maps**

13. We will be tabling at the Council meeting maps of the three new constituencies. These will also be available to the press and public.

## **The Next Steps**

14. Consultation on the initial proposals is not the final stage in the process. In the New Year the Commission will be publishing responses to the consultation and we plan to look carefully at the representations received and to respond if appropriate. If the Commission is subsequently minded to change its initial proposals there will be further consultation regarding changes. The Commission has to complete this review by 1 October 2013 when it submits its final proposals to the Government. The legislation then requires the Government to make the necessary Orders in order to bring the new constituencies into operation at the next General Election in 2015.
15. We recommend as set out the commencement of this report.