

UK COMMISSIONS' ANNUAL MEETING: 2018

Purpose

1. This paper provides a report of the annual meeting of the UK commissions held on 1–2 November in Edinburgh and considers arrangements for future meetings.

Discussion

2. The Commission discussed its approach to the 2018 meeting in Paper LGBCS Paper 2444. A summary note of the 2018 meeting is at Appendix A. This is intended for internal use only (notes are not generally provided by host Commissions to attendees). Feedback received suggests that people felt the meeting went well. Copies of the presentations by Professor Pattie, University of Sheffield, and Sam Hartley, BCE, have been circulated to Commissioners separately.
3. Two specific action points arose. The first related to a coordinated approach by Parliamentary Commissions to set out views on future legislative change to their Chair who is the Speaker of the House of Commons. This will be progressed by BCS.
4. The second action point committed Commissions to agreeing a way forward with regard to future annual meetings by Spring 2019 and this is discussed further below.

Future meetings

5. The acting Secretary of the Boundary Commission for England, Tony Bellringer, raised the question of the arrangements for future meetings including hosting and costs. BCE are due to host in 2019 but as they, along with all other Parliamentary Commissions, are not expected to be in review mode they will have limited staff resource and limited budget availability. BCE raised two questions: first the value of the meetings – do participants find them worthwhile and could the benefits be maximised by different logistical arrangements eg how often they are held and who should attend in terms of numbers and mix of Commissioners and staff? Second, if they are considered worthwhile how best should they be paid for?
6. Traditionally hosting rotates between the 4 countries. Unlike Wales and Scotland where there are shared Secretariats, in England LGBCE and BCE operate entirely separately and alternate hosting ie each hosts once every 8 years. Costs picked up by the host nation/organisation cover venue hire for dinner and meeting and costs for the dinner and refreshments during the meeting including lunch. Costs incurred by LGBCS in 2018 are set out in Appendix B.
7. The Secretary to the Welsh Commissions spoke at the meeting in favour of continued meetings. This was endorsed by LGBCE whose Chair has submitted views which are included in Appendix C. BCNI also appeared to recognise the value in continuing not least because of their lack of continuity at Secretariat level. That said, the issues raised by BCE need to be considered as the question of the annual meetings and how to maximise the benefit from them is a perennial one. The cost issues for BCE and the fact they are due to host while not in review mode bring these into particular focus for 2019.

8. The principal benefit from the meeting would appear to be the opportunity to discuss review approaches and progress, and the wider political context within which each Commission works, within a fairly informal structure. The dinner and meeting both allow opportunity to engage with counterparts from across the UK and this strengthens relationships and helps provide support and challenge. However, it could be argued that there is less to be gained by local government and parliamentary commissions interacting and this is perhaps felt more keenly in England where there is no joint Secretariat function. That said, LGBCS seem to recognise learning across Commissions, and all Commissions do share some common challenges and these include effective consultation and engagement, technical challenges, use of GIS and IT. Structuring the agenda around those common themes may improve the relevance for all.

Next steps

9. Assuming the Commission sees value in continuing to attend or host an annual meeting there are options to be considered:
 - a. BCE and LGBCS could co-host and share the cost between their two commissions which might solve the immediate challenge for BCE
 - b. The event could be run as a conference with delegates being invoiced for attendance to include dinner, accommodation and the meeting. This would mean each Commission would pay its own way and contribute more if more representatives attended.
 - c. The current arrangements could continue but on a bi-annual basis
 - d. The hosting schedule could be altered so BCE host when the Parliamentary Commissions are in review mode (essentially three out of every 5 years)
 - e. The event could become a meeting only with no dinner and accommodation arranged by the host – if any attendees required to stay overnight in order to make the meeting then this would be met under normal travel and subsistence rules.
10. Aside from the annual meeting of UK Commissions LGBCS has seen a benefit in bilateral meetings with other Commissions. In 2017 a Commissioner and 2 members of the Secretariat visited LGBCS to discuss their approach to reviews and in particular rolling reviews. Secretariat members visited LDBCW/BCW in 2018 to discuss organisational issues as well as approach to reviews. Such discussions might usefully continue on an ad hoc basis outwith the annual meeting schedule or be formalised into a regular meeting between the three local government commissions.
11. Another issue to consider is how to engage with other Scottish electoral interests. It was helpful at the UK dinner to have guests from Scottish Government, Ordnance Survey and the Electoral Management Board. A representative from the Electoral Commission had been due to attend but had to cancel. The Commission may want to think about how relationships with those bodies are maintained and strengthened and whether a regular meeting with these and others would be of benefit. At present Commissioners meet Cosla and Solace on an ad hoc basis and the Secretariat meet the Electoral Commission's Scottish Political Parties Panel regularly as well as the Association

of Electoral Administrators and the Scottish Assessors Association's Electoral Registration Committee.

Conclusion

The Commission is invited to consider the future of its participation in annual commission meetings, in particular the value of the meetings, their cost-effectiveness and any proposals for change. The Secretariat would then propose to share LGBCS views with the other Commissions and offer to collate opinions with a view to agreeing a way forward for 2019 by next April.

Secretariat
November 2018

**Note of UK Boundary Commissions Meeting
1/2 November 2018 (Edinburgh)**

Edinburgh Castle tour (1 November)

1. The annual meeting began with a tour of Edinburgh Castle attended by 11 people (5 Commissioners and 6 secretariat members, including 2 from the Scottish secretariat). The tour was led by a guide from Historic Environment Scotland and was well-received by attendees who valued both the opportunity to see the Castle and learn something of Scottish history as well as begin informal networking with colleagues.

Dinner (1 November)

2. The dinner was hosted formally by Lord Mathews, BCS Deputy Chair who welcomed guests and thanked staff and commissioners who were attending their last UK meeting. The Cabinet Secretary for Government Business and Constitutional Relations was a guest of LGBCS and spoke at the start of the event, something that was appreciated by attendees. All UK commissions were represented at the dinner and guests included the Cabinet Secretary, the Convenor of Electoral Management Board, the Scottish Development manager for Ordnance Survey, officials from the Office of the Secretary of State for Scotland and Scottish Government,. Seating was arranged to ensure a mix of jurisdictions and guests to facilitate discussions.

Meeting (2 November)

The formal meeting was chaired by Ronnie Hinds, LGBCS Chair.

Summary updates from the Commissions are set out below

Local Democracy and Boundary Commission for Wales – Owen Watkin

- Currently reviewing all 22 principal authorities;
- Local Authorities are providing ward boundary schemes and looking at reducing councillor numbers. This is driven by younger more proactive administrations. The Commission's formula gradually reduces the number of councillors.
- Also looking at Community Reviews. These are based on 735 community councils, formerly parish councils. The communities vary in size and do not cover the whole of Wales.
- Examining the impact of proposals regarding the National Assembly: which consider extending the electoral franchise so it is similar to Scotland's and re-naming the National Assembly to Parliament.
- New Secretary has been appointed and will take up post early January 2019;
- Secretariat have new IT supplier, moved from Welsh Government to Students Awards Agency;
- Awarded Investors in People exceptional rating;
- Thanks to Steve Halsall as he looks forward to retirement in January 2019.

Local Government Boundary Commission for England – Colin Mellors

- New Secretary of State appointed but there appears to be little appetite for significant change to the structure of local government in England due to focus on Brexit;

- Due to financial challenges, there is an implicit move to minimise councillors from a council perspective. One council has gone bankrupt and others are merging, resulting in added workload.
- 4 new Commissioners have been appointed.
- The Commission are changing their style of engagement with councils, trying to get councils to actively engage in the review process rather than acquiesce.
- Secretariat have moved offices in central London
- Large governance burden for an organisation of LGBCS's size
- 37 Reviews (4.5 million electors) undertaken this year, normally 20. Both periodic (currently focussed on London) and requests, including Council mergers.
- The Commission is considering the merit of single and multi-member wards (trying to find out how people feel about them);

LGBCS provided further information on their rolling programme in response to questions and offered to discuss further with the Secretariat.

Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland – Sue Walker

- The new Islands Act: protects the constituency of na h-Eileanan an Iar (Western Isles); for the Scottish Parliamentary elections; provides flexibility to use 1 or 2 member wards where they are comprised wholly or partly of an inhabited island; requires the Commission to conduct a review of the 6 authorities which contain inhabited islands “as soon as practicable” and introduces the Shetland mapping requirement. The Commission intends to review the 3 authorities comprised solely of islands first (Orkney, Shetland, Western Isles)
- Electoral Reform Bill imminent (early in 2019) – may introduce a number of innovations around elections issues as well as some minor technical changes. These may include: flexibility for Commission to conduct rolling reviews; flexibility for 2 or 5 member wards; changes to the Parliamentary process for implementing our reviews; change name of LGBCS to “Boundaries Scotland” (not confirmed)
- The Commission is considering carry out next set of local government reviews according to a “rolling reviews” timetable;
- Scottish Parliament – due to uncertainty over electoral reform, the Commission decided not to conduct review for the next election in 2021 but has legislative requirement to report by 2022. The Commission expects this requirement to be amended to report in 2024 or 2025;
- Commissioners – Ailsa Henderson appointed as Deputy Chair. 2 new Commissioners to be appointed.
- The Commission’s website is currently being updated.
- The Commission is trialling new online meeting papers, following LGBCS example.

Boundary Commission for Scotland – Paula Sharp

Negatives

- political uncertainty from beginning to end did not help and may have impacted on the level of engagement;

- Public hearings – better placed later in the process, 5 for Scotland is at least one too few. Commission are considering whether informal session prior to public hearings may be beneficial, or if there is a way to use technology to avoid people having to travel;
- frustrated that so many responses highlighted concerns out-with our remit.
- introduction of new local government wards in May 2017 caused confusion with respect to legislation and what the commission could consider;
- requirements for four commissions to submit to 3 Secretaries of State or Cabinet Ministers, made the end game less smooth than hoped for;

Positives

- on time, worked imaginatively within the review constraints and produced credible proposals that as far as possible took account of public responses;
- Exceeded the numbers of responses received at the equivalent stages in the 6th Review. If recommendations are not implemented, Commission is left with a legislative requirement to report by 2023, a year after the next scheduled election.
- Recorded thanks and appreciation for colleagues in the other commissions and BCE in particular – their lead on management of the portal contract; liaison with APS and willingness to share advice received from Cabinet Office was greatly appreciated.

Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland – Sarah Havlin

- Revised Proposals published in January 2018. Initial Proposals had received significant opposition as they had taken Belfast from 4 to 3 constituencies (Belfast has had 4 constituencies since 1920s). Revised Proposals which had 4 Belfast constituencies received significant opposition from Sinn Fein. 14,000 responses mostly petitions or standard letters. Opposition focused on perceived political impact of proposals.
- Final Report – recommended 4 Belfast seats, less disruptive to boundaries elsewhere.
- Media accusations on independence of Commission. Did not engage on this. Will consider better ways of managing media for next review.
- Secretariat staff not retained, Commission is concerned that expertise will be lost.
- Recommend 1 day Public Hearings
- Also thanks to Bill Smith for his service to the Commission;

Boundary Commission for Wales – Steve Halsall

- All 29 new constituencies in Wales.
- Little involvement from political parties who maybe previously mobilised attendees at public hearings.
- Portal was considered a success, 4,500 responses to initial proposals. 170 responses to Revised Proposals.
- Ongoing issue re the primacy of the Welsh language name of the constituencies

Boundary Commission for England – Tony Bellringer

Political uncertainty thought to have led to less interest in Review

Positives:

- Commissioners were more directly involved. Lead Commissioner was appointed for each region.
- Improved induction for Assistant Commissioners
- Social Media, advertising and media liaison
- Consultation Portal – 92% responses
- Listened to feedback. 56% of initial proposals changed for Revised Proposals
- 37,000 responses

Lessons learned:

- earlier recruitment of some Secretariat staff would have helped.
- Dedicated Press Officer was very useful
- Perhaps too many Assistant Commissioners
- Loss of staff knowledge for next review.

Parliamentary Discussion/ QA

- The Commissions noted the uncertainty over whether the 2018 Review will be implemented;
- If not adopted for next election, boundaries based on 22 year old data.
- The Commissions agreed to consider writing to Speaker, Chair of Commissions, with suggestions/ comments. Possible suggestions are:
 - Joint letter from 4 Commissions
 - Completing review in 5 year cycle rather than squeezed in to 2.5 years would allow some commissions without a shared secretariat arrangement to retain staff knowledge;
 - Consider changes to legislation. Greater flexibility than 5% electoral quota. Change to statutory rules regarding hearings.
- Impact of any letter prior to Brexit may be limited.

Guest Speaker

Professor Charles Pattie, University of Sheffield

“Communities of interest, or no interest in the community: the challenge of delimiting local communities”

- See slides

Communications and engagement – lessons from the BCE 2018 Review – Sam Hartley

- See slides

AOB

- Boundary Commission for England scheduled to host next meeting in 2019 but will be in abeyance, so may find it hard to justify cost of hosting the event.
- Other Commissions felt UK Commissions meetings were valuable, reasons included professional development of commissioners, and the benefit to new commissioners.
- Suggestion for each Commission to pay own dinner costs on expenses

Actions

- Agree plans and date for next UK Commission meetings by end of Spring 2019. Secretaries to liaise.
- 4 UK Parliamentary Commissions to consider joint letter to Speaker with suggestions for future reviews. Secretaries to liaise.

DRAFT

**COST SUMMARY FOR ANNUAL UK BOUNDARY COMMISSIONS MEETING,
NOVEMBER 2018**

| SHARED COSTS | | | |
|--|------------------------------|------------------------|--------------|
| Item | Participants | Cost per person | Total |
| Tour of Edinburgh Castle | 11 | £0 | £0 |
| Dinner including room hire | 29 | £62.40 | £1810 |
| Meeting including room hire, lunch and coffees | 25 (including guest speaker) | £56 | £1400 |
| Travel expenses guest speaker | 1 | Tbc ¹ | Tbc |
| | | Total cost | £3210 |
| | | LGBCS share | £1605 |

| LGBCS-ONLY COSTS | | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Commissioner accommodation | 1 | £99 | £99 |
| Commissioner fees | 3 (2 claims received to date) | tbc | £967.75 ² |
| Commissioner t&s | 2 | | £75.50 ³ |
| Secretariat t&s (50%) | 1 | £10.59 | £10.59 |
| | | LGBCS - only | £1053.84 |

| | |
|--------------|-----------------|
| TOTAL | £2658.80 |
|--------------|-----------------|

The overall total will be finalised once pending claims have been submitted.

Costs tend to be higher as hosts because of a higher level of attendance from Commissioners and Secretariat than would be the case when the meeting is elsewhere although this is offset by higher travel and subsistence costs when the meeting is in London, Cardiff or Belfast.

It did not prove possible to find suitable accommodation offering dinner, accommodation and meeting room provision which would probably have been more cost effective than use of 2 hotels.

¹ Claim not yet received – expected to be approximately £150

² this figure is not finalised pending receipt of final commissioner claim

³ this figure is not finalised pending receipt of final commissioner claim

VIEWS FROM LGBCE ON FUTURE ARRANGEMENTS

Email from Chair of LGBCE, Colin Mellors to Ronnie Hinds, 6 November 2018

Dear Ronnie

First, and most important, thanks again to you and Isabel's team for organising such a successful meeting on Thursday and Friday. It was excellent.

At the end of the meeting, the issue of future meetings was raised and you invited views from the various Commissions. Here are the views of LGBCE.

We do, of course, understand the concerns expressed by Tony, both the issue of cost and the value of such meetings for parliamentary commissions during their 'fallow' periods. However, we feel that it is important to distinguish these two matters and our own view is that there is considerable merit in such occasions and that it would be difficult to regain momentum once lost. Accordingly, we would wish them to continue.

We feel that the prime purpose of such meetings is to share ideas, intelligence, and concerns, both across equivalent Commissions and between those focusing parliamentary and local government boundaries. Today's meeting provided several examples of helpful 'read across' which it would be sad to lose.

We feel that it is unduly restrictive to view the value of such meetings in a simple 'transactional' manner, ie specific outputs that can be applied to current activity. Rather, they help shape and stimulate our broader understanding about matters of common concern. Certainly, on every occasion that I have attended, I have taken away some thoughts that have informed how we approach reviewsas well as a handful of more 'transactional' bi-lateral actions.

I light-heartedly referred to 'structured gossip' (others might describe it as intelligence sharing) but, however it is termed, I would not underestimate its value. I reckon that there is a positive Rol from such meetings

Whilst recognising the point about 'fallow periods' for parliamentary commissions, I fear that gearing frequency solely to these needs is to overlook the fact that three of the local government commissions have more continuing business patterns and, in some ways, may well become busier going forward. One suggestion might be for the local government commissions (who have on-going work programmes) to get together each year and to be joined by the parliamentary ones when the latter are 'in session'.

The point that was raised about the large number of new commissioners/chair/CExec in next few months is not unimportant.

A simple, and pragmatic, solution would be for each Commission to fund its own participation including the dinner. This would have the advantage of: avoiding the lumpiness of expenditure when it is anyone's turn to 'host', mean that each Commission decides how many attend and picks up the appropriate bill, allows

parliamentary commissions to have minimal participation in fallow years. The act of hosting is essentially to organise location and local (political) input. (The one this year was excellent)

I think that references to 'Daily Mail tests' are slightly disingenuous. Sharing thinking about how we approach reviews feels pretty core business to me and I would be amazed if we could not defend this very robustly. Also, as with this year and last year in Cardiff, it helps with the collective positioning of boundary work with ministers.....pretty important I think.

At the same time, we might get even more value by a bit of agenda tweaking, eg, we could easily do circulated updates with our discussions focused around one or two themes each year. Similarly, we would be happy to look at the precise time in the year that would be most appropriate to get together,

Finally, and more specifically, it would help Tony, we would be happy to work with him to organise the next meeting jointly.

I hope that these thoughts are helpful. It might be sensible, once you have collected the various thoughts to organise a short telecon so that we can decide how to move forward.

Best wishes
Colin

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Professor Colin Mellors