

CENTRAL BEDFORDSHIRE COUNCIL

At a meeting of the **GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE** held at Leader's Meeting Room, Ground West, Priory House, Monks Walk, Shefford on Tuesday, 13 November 2012

PRESENT

Cllr P Hollick (Chairman)
Cllr R C Stay (Vice-Chairman)

Cllrs P N Aldis
J G Jamieson
M R Jones
D J Lawrence

Cllrs Mrs J G Lawrence
J Murray
B Saunders
N Warren

Apologies for Absence: Cllrs Mrs G Clarke
K C Matthews

Substitutes: Cllrs Mrs C F Chapman MBE (In place of K C Matthews)
A Shadbolt (In place of Cllr Mrs G Clarke)

Members in Attendance: Cllr D Bowater

Officers in Attendance: Ms D Clarke – Interim Assistant Chief Executive
(People & Organisation)
Mr B Dunleavy – Democratic Services Manager
Mr L Manning – Committee Services Officer

GPC/12/18 **Minutes**

RESOLVED

that the minutes of the meeting of the General Purposes Committee held on 2 August 2012 be confirmed and signed by the Chairman as a correct record.

GPC/12/19 **Members' Interests**

None.

GPC/12/20 **Chairman's Announcements and Communications**

None.

GPC/12/21 Petitions

No petitions were received from members of the public in accordance with the Public Participation Procedure as set out in Annex 2 of Part A4 of the Constitution.

GPC/12/22 Questions, Statements or Deputations

No questions, statements or deputations were received from members of the public in accordance with the Public Participation Procedure as set out in Annex 1 of Part A4 of the Constitution.

GPC/12/23 The 2013 Review of Parliamentary Constituencies - Eastern Region

The Committee considered a report by the Head of Legal and Democratic Services which set out the Boundary Commission for England's revised proposals for the Parliamentary constituencies falling within the Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Sub-Region of the Eastern Region and affecting Central Bedfordshire.

Members were aware that since the publication of the initial proposals in September 2011 there had been two consultation exercises. It was noted that, as a result of the evidence presented, the Boundary Commission had decided to amend its initial proposals and permit an additional eight week period of consultation. There would, however, be no further public hearings and no opportunity to comment on the representations of others.

The meeting of the General Purposes Committee had been called to consider the Boundary Commission's revised proposals and make recommendations to the next meeting of Council on 29 November 2012; the closing date for representations to the Boundary Commission being 10 December 2012. It was further noted that the Boundary Commission would make its final recommendations to the Government by no later than October 2013. The Government would, in turn, present draft legislation to Parliament and the approved changes would be implemented in time for the next general election, currently scheduled to be held in May 2015.

The meeting was aware that that the Boundary Commission's review was being undertaken within certain parameters that had been laid down by Parliament. These included:

- A significant reduction in the number of constituencies in England with those in the Eastern Region being reduced by two to 56;
- A requirement that every constituency, apart from two specified exceptions, must have an electorate no smaller than 72,810 and no larger than 80,473;
- The use of electorate figures that were in the version of the electoral register published on the "review date". The "review date" was defined

as the date two years and ten months before the review was required to report to the Government. For the current, 2013, review this meant the use of electoral registers published on or before 1 December 2010 and that the former Bedfordshire County Council divisions were the building blocks of the proposed constituencies rather than the current wards.

Discussion took place on possible further representations to the Boundary Commission's revised proposals.

A Member referred to the proposed North Bedfordshire constituency which would ring the town and constituency of Bedford. As an alternative to this he suggested that a Bedford North constituency and a Bedford South constituency be introduced along a roughly east-west split based on the river Ouse. Bedford North would take in that part of the town of Bedford and other communities north of the river Ouse whilst Bedford South would take in that part of the town, Kempston and those communities to the south of the river Ouse. He stated that this would create two balanced communities with a blend of urban and rural. Although some concern was expressed during discussion regarding the political advantage (or disadvantage) that could arise for political parties as a result, another Member commented that the suggested amendment was to the benefit of neighbouring local communities. The Committee as a whole expressed support for the proposal subject to it complying with the relevant legislation.

A Member suggested a possible transfer of the proposed South East Bedfordshire division, which included Caddington and Slip End, from the proposed Mid Bedfordshire and Harpenden constituency to the proposed South West Bedfordshire constituency. In response the Democratic Services Manager explained that, to compensate for the increase in the number of electors in South West Bedfordshire arising from the transfer of the South East Bedfordshire division, there would need to be a corresponding reduction in the number of electors through the transfer of a similarly sized and neighbouring electoral division from South West Bedfordshire to Mid Bedfordshire and Harpenden. He stated that, for example, whilst the Flitwick East division was of a suitable size, and could be transferred across from South West Bedfordshire to Mid Bedfordshire and Harpenden, it would result in the splitting of the town. Alternatively, whilst the Toddington division could be transferred from South West Bedfordshire to Mid Bedfordshire and Harpenden, its electoral roll exceeded that of South East Bedfordshire. Following discussion the Member acknowledged that a possible transfer of the proposed South East Bedfordshire division could not take place.

The Committee next considered the linking of Dunstable with some Luton divisions to form the proposed Luton North and Dunstable constituency. Members noted that, in determining its revised proposals, the Boundary Commission had specifically highlighted the fact that Luton was the largest town in the Sub-Region and that its electorate was too large for one constituency and too small for two. Any solution for Luton would, therefore, have a significant impact on surrounding constituencies and needed to be dealt with first. In order to meet the statutory requirement for the size of the constituency electorate, and despite earlier representations by the Council, the Boundary Commission had remained committed to its initial proposal which

would see, for electoral purposes, Dunstable joined with the existing North Luton constituency. In support of this measure the Boundary Commission had referred to the continuous urban development between Luton and Dunstable. The Council's suggested alternative of joining Harpenden with Luton had been rejected, the Boundary Commission referring to the open parkland between the two towns. Whilst remaining dissatisfied with this outcome the Committee felt that, given the Boundary Commission's stance and the numerical constraints imposed on the size of the constituencies, there was no alternative arrangement that could be proposed and that any further request for revision was likely to be counter-productive.

For the remainder of the proposals affecting Central Bedfordshire the Boundary Commission had been persuaded, in the main, by two members of the public. Their representations had, however, addressed many of the concerns raised by the Council and others as they minimised the number of cross-county boundary constituencies. Further, the Central Bedfordshire electorate would continue to be served by four MPs rather than the originally proposed six. As a result the Committee felt that some positive gains had been made.

In conclusion the Democratic Services Manager advised the meeting that, under the terms of the Local Government and Public Health Act 2007, it was his intention to undertake a governance review during 2013 to examine any electoral issues and anomalies within Central Bedfordshire.

RESOLVED

that the Democratic Services Manager undertake an analysis of the electoral impact of the proposed creation of the Bedford North and Bedford South constituencies, as set out in the preamble above, to ensure that the creation of these constituencies would comply with all statutory requirements.

RECOMMENDED TO COUNCIL

that whilst the General Purposes Committee notes the revised proposals for the new Parliamentary constituency boundaries in England it makes the following observations which the Committee wishes the Council to forward to the Boundary Commission for England:

- a) **the Committee remains fully supportive of the proposal put forward by the Leader of the Council in the first consultation to retain the wards in Dunstable in the Parliamentary constituency of South West Bedfordshire. It therefore regrets the outcome of the proposed revised boundary changes, as such affect the town of Dunstable to be joined with the present constituency of Luton North, for the following reasons:**
 - **Dunstable is a market town with its traditions and customs and Luton is an aspiring city with a very different set of traditions and customs;**

- **A market town has more in common with the rural areas of South West Bedfordshire than with Luton. A continuous urban area is itself not a valid argument for joining two disparate communities;**
 - **There is minimal support from the constituents of Dunstable to join with Luton North;**
- b) **the Committee welcomes the revised proposals in that the administrative area of Central Bedfordshire will be served by four Members of Parliament and not six as was originally proposed by the Boundary Commission for England, that there is only one cross-county boundary constituency and that the constituency of Mid Bedfordshire has been retained;**
- c) **the Committee supports the introduction of a Bedford North constituency and a Bedford South constituency to replace the proposed North Bedfordshire and Bedford Parliamentary constituencies (Bedford North taking in that part of the town of Bedford and other communities north of the river Ouse whilst Bedford South would take in that part of Bedford, Kempston and those communities to the south of the river Ouse) subject to the outcome of an analysis of the electoral impact of the two constituencies by the Democratic Services Manager which confirms that their creation would comply with all statutory requirements.**

(Note: The meeting commenced at 5.00 p.m. and concluded at 5.57 p.m.)

Chairman

Dated