

Corporate Plan 2016-17 to 2020-21

Foreword

This, the seventh Corporate Plan and Five-Year Strategy of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England, coincides with a change in the Chair of the Commission and, therefore, provides an opportunity for both retrospective and prospective reflections.

Looking back, the Commission has achieved much since its establishment as an independent entity in 2010. For an organisation of modest size, both budget and staffing, it would have been easy to be distracted by the requirements of establishing a new entity – in terms of governance arrangements, administrative processes and those of audit and review. Whilst all of these aspects have been addressed, and the Commission functions as an effective corporate body, no less importantly we believe that it has established itself as a vehicle for positive change in the sphere of local democracy.

Over the past six years, the Commission has considered and agreed new electoral arrangements for over 100 English local authorities. We have drawn up over 3,000 new wards and electoral divisions to secure electoral fairness involving in excess of 28 million voters. In every review, we have worked closely with local authorities, and local people, to help them recognise the opportunities that are presented through our review work. In so doing, we have sought to promote effective local government and to reflect the changing role of elected members. This new Plan aims to build on this platform and to enable the Commission to continue its role in ways that reflect the interest of voters and the needs of local government in what, we expect, will be a changing environment

The Commission has also acknowledged its own need to exploit every opportunity to become a more efficient and effective body. We realise that we are not immune from the challenges of the whole of the public sector. Accordingly, through a variety of innovations, we have been able to achieve a trebling of outputs whilst reducing our costs by 30 per cent. Importantly, we have not compromised our standards in achieving these significant efficiencies. Instead, they have been secured through embracing new technology to improve consultation and fundamentally re-structuring our back office systems and services. For the future, we believe that there are further opportunities to exploit Geographic Information Systems (GIS) and this Corporate Plan reflects such aspirations.

Looking forward, the Corporate Plan, and its programme of work, is built around voters. Put simply, the plan looks to reduce electoral unfairness in every region of England and at every tier of local government.

In doing so, we recognise that English local government is undergoing fundamental changes that may well accelerate over the next five years and we will need to fashion our work in ways that, whilst discharging our statutory functions, support those changes. That is why we are building capacity in our understanding of the changing local government landscape in order that we can promote effective and convenient local government in a rapidly changing environment.

Looking forward, we believe this Plan, whilst ambitious, is realistic. We anticipate that resources will continue to reduce throughout the period and the Commission will need to explore savings in its processes and ways of working, again whilst not compromising the standards of its work. We have already made a start on this agenda by, amongst other things, considering ways of delivering efficiencies in electorate forecasting, developing our GIS capability and improving the ways we deploy staff and Commissioners. The Commission has a record of delivering more for less, and we will continue in this vein although, of course, the further opportunities to do so become ever more challenging.

Inevitably, despite our careful planning, we will need to be sensitive to external factors that may affect the Commission's work. Whilst the extent and nature of English devolution is unlikely to impact in the early years of the plan, it may do so later. Responses to the financial pressures on local government could also lead to additional work for the Commission as more local authorities seek an electoral review to support their desire to change governance arrangements. During this period, we will also need to reflect on how we approach those local authorities that we have not been reviewed in recent years because their arrangements have not triggered our intervention criteria. In all of these areas, we will brief the Speaker's Committee annually of our detailed plans and our delivery against targets.

The Commission, of course, could not have achieved any of its objectives without substantial assistance and advice. In particular, we want to express our gratitude for the support and guidance that we have received from The Speaker, from Gary Streeter MP and from our representatives in the House of Lords, Lord Harris and the Earl Cathcart. We have also been greatly assisted by the cooperation of the local authorities that we have reviewed, despite the requests that we have made of them.

A final, and more personal, note is to acknowledge the significant contribution of the previous Chair, Max Caller, who stood down on 31 December 2015. His energy and commitment underpin much of what has been achieved over the period since 2010.

Professor Colin Mellors

Introduction

This is the seventh Corporate Plan and five-year strategy of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England. The plan sets out how the Commission intends to achieve its two principal goals over the 2016/17-2020/21 period:

- To provide electoral arrangements that are fair and deliver electoral equality for voters.
- To keep the map of English local government in good repair and work with local authorities to help them deliver effective and convenient local government to citizens.

Achieving the goals

Electoral reviews:

The Commission's primary means of achieving its goals over the course of the plan is to deliver its programme of electoral reviews. An electoral review makes recommendations on the total number of councillors elected to an authority as well as the names, number and boundaries of wards and electoral divisions.

The Corporate Plan aims to redraw ward and electoral division boundaries so that high levels of electoral inequality¹ will affect only around 7% of English local authorities by the end of 2020/21 (See Part One). However, the impact of Individual Elector Registration and other external factors are likely to lead to fluctuations in electoral registers which will require reviews to be programmed throughout the period to tackle electoral unfairness.

In 2010/11, the Commission opened its programme to electoral reviews by request of local authorities. The Commission has subsequently programmed 48 reviews which have primarily been requested for the Commission to consider the total number of councillors elected to an authority. The plan envisages demand for reviews of this kind to continue throughout the five-year period and will help the Commission achieve its aim to help authorities deliver effective and convenient local government.

The Commission has also been asked to consider carrying out electoral reviews where independent inquiries have found poor governance arrangements in some English local authorities. The Commission is on track to complete an electoral review of Birmingham City Council in the coming financial year following the Kerlake review. The Commission will start a review of Rotherham Council in the next financial year and new electoral arrangements for Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council came into effect in May 2015 following an electoral review in the preceding financial year. The Commission will retain capacity to take on additional reviews of this kind throughout the course of this plan to help authorities deliver effective and convenient local government.

Principal Area Boundary Reviews (PABRs):

Since the Commission was established as a stand-alone body in 2010, it has conducted three PABRs which altered the external boundaries of six councils. None of the reviews affected a large number of electors. However, the Commission continues to advise local authorities on the process of large-

¹ High levels of electoral inequality are defined by the Commission as where: more than 30% of a council's wards/divisions having an electoral imbalance of more than 10% from the average ratio for that authority; and/or • one or more wards/divisions with an electoral imbalance of more than 30%; and • the imbalance is unlikely to be corrected by foreseeable changes to the electorate within a reasonable period.

scale boundary changes, including whole-council mergers, for those councils that are considering formalising joint-working relationships as a merger. The review programme set out in this plan includes flexibility to insert PABRs into future years in the event that proposals meet the Commission's long-standing criteria.

Structural reviews:

The Commission can advise the Secretary of State, at his request, on the structure of local government. However, no such requests were forthcoming in the previous Parliament and the Commission did not dedicate any resources to the activity. This plan, which covers the current Parliament, gives the Commission flexibility to include such reviews in later years should new government priorities emerge.

Related alterations:

At the request of local authorities, the Commission can make orders for related alterations to ward and division boundaries as a consequence of Community Governance Reviews of parish and town council electoral arrangements by principal authorities. In the year 2015/16, the Commission determined 5 requests for related alterations. The Corporate Plan commits the Commission to making a decision on every related alteration request in advance of the election at which the change is intended to be implemented.

Part One: Review programme

The programme of electoral reviews set out in this plan will continue to reduce levels of electoral inequality affecting voters in England while responding positively to requests for reviews throughout the period.

The Commission completed 18 electoral reviews in 2014/15. It postponed seven electoral reviews due to be completed in the current year following discussions with the authorities in question. The Commission agreed with the seven authorities that a review to be completed in 2016/17 would allow for electorate forecasts that had a higher chance of delivering long-term accuracy as well as providing time for councillors and staff to consider how best to take advantage of the opportunities inherent in the electoral review process. The programme was therefore altered so that the reviews will be completed in a later year but that the new arrangements implemented at the 2019 elections as originally intended.

The profile of activity has also been affected by the general election held in 2015. The Commission seeks to avoid consultation and publication of recommendations during national election campaigns. The Commission therefore did not carry out consultation activity for much of the March, April and early May period. This accounts for a skewing of activity towards review completions in 2016/17.

The Commission's programme of work is likely to be affected by several notable factors over the course of this plan:

- **Periodic Electoral Review (PER)** – the last PER (a review of all principal English local authorities in a single programme) was completed in 2004. There are around 150 local authorities that have not been reviewed since the previous PER and are also unlikely to meet the Commission's intervention criteria in the medium term: these are primarily metropolitan authorities in the North of England and London boroughs whose wards are large enough to absorb significant changes in the distribution of voters without triggering the Commission's criteria. However, as part of the Commission's responsibility to keep the map of local government in good order and to address electoral inequality (even where it doesn't specifically trigger the criteria), the Commission will seek to include those authorities in the later part of the five-year programme.
- **Requested reviews** – the Commission's discussions with authorities suggests that the demand for reviews is likely to be maintained over the course of the plan. Councils continue to reform the way they commission, manage and deliver services. As part of that process, many authorities are also considering how elected members represent communities and how they should manage the business of the council in the future. Electoral reviews remain a popular way for councils to align their governance and service ambitions.
- **Devolution** – Over the course of this Parliament, English devolution will continue to be delivered. The consequences of deals between government and combined authorities could necessitate electoral, or other, reviews by the Commission and the plan will retain capacity to deliver such reviews where invited.

Table One: electoral reviews 2015/16-2019/20

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
Electoral reviews to reduce electoral inequality	15	21	17	17	17	17
Electoral reviews requested by local authorities	2	8	5	5	5	5
Electoral reviews instigated for both the above reasons	1	2	2	2	2	2
Total electoral reviews planned for completion	18	31	24	24	24	24

Table Two: impact on electoral inequality

	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
No. of local authorities	352	352	352	352	352	352
No. with electoral inequality at start of year	73	67	55	48	41	34
Add new cases of electoral inequality	10	10	10	10	10	10
Deduct cases of electoral inequality resolved through completed reviews	16	23	19	19	19	19
Authorities with electoral inequality at end of year	67	55	46	39	32	25
As a percentage	19%	16%	13%	11%	9%	7%

Part Two: capacity and resources

The Commission continued to reduce its resource requirement in 2015/16 and the plan includes further savings throughout the five-year period.

Since its establishment as a stand-alone body in 2010, the Commission has reduced its budget by £807k (25%). The average cost of a review fell from £177k in 2010/11 to £73k in 2014/15: a reduction of 59%. This reflects a combination of actual savings and efficiencies which have simultaneously allowed the Commission to increase its outputs.

The Commission's resource profile for 2016/17 to 2020/21 envisages further savings and reductions to the cost of a review. Its budget for the current year is £2,137k and savings are planned to maintain this level throughout the life of the Corporate Plan.

Savings and efficiencies and increased capacity will be delivered in the following ways:

- Back office services – the Commission completed its move to new premises in 2014/15 as well as setting up new agreements for its back office services (IT, HR and accounting). Whilst the changes are already delivering considerable savings, further reductions are planned over the course of the plan.
- Review process – improvements to the way the Commission forecasts electorate data, uses commissioner and staff time and programmes reviews (in particular, simultaneous county and district reviews) will deliver savings over the period of this plan.
- Digital by default – the Commission has reduced its dependence on paper over the past five years by establishing a digital consultation platform. Further developments to the Commission's use of GIS are planned to reduce consultation costs further as well as investigating whether big data can play a more substantial (and efficient) part in building initial warding schemes.

Table three: resource profile 2016/17–2020/21

	2015/16	2016/17 – 2020/21
Staff & Commissioners	1,360	1,360
Mapping and printing	176	176
Website and portal	102	102
Back office and business	331	331
Professional	78	78
Depreciation	90	90
Revenue Total	2,137	2,137
Capital	50	50
Total	2,187	2,187

Part three: Key performance indicators (KPI)

	KPI (2015/16)	Target for 2015/16	Projected outturn at Q3	Comment	Target for 2016/17
1	Percentage of local authorities with significant electoral imbalances	12%	19%	The Commission delayed seven reviews which would have been completed in the current year. They will now be completed in 2016/17 to maintain the overall level of output. Electoral registration activity in advance of the general election has also seen fluctuations in local registers which have caused overall imbalances for some authorities.	16%
2	Number of reviews requested by local authorities that are programmed for review	5	3	In the Commission's discussions with the local government community, it learned that some councils which had elections in 2015 were delaying a decision on requesting a review until the new council was elected. Now that the elections have been held, the Commission expects to complete ten requested reviews by the end of 2016/17.	5
3	Aggregate percentage customer satisfaction with review process ²	>70%	75%	The Commission is currently working with internal auditors to devise new ways of measuring customer satisfaction to increase the quantity and quality of data gathered.	>70%
4	Percentage of electoral change orders, following reviews, which come into effect at the election expected when review was first programmed	95%	100%	Despite postponing the start of seven reviews during 2015/16, the Commission still envisages implementing the recommendations of the review at the 2019 elections as originally planned.	95%
5	Average unit cost of reviews	£70,700 (for a district)	£69,400	The postponement of seven reviews has had an impact on unit costs for 2015/16. In addition, the current programme includes several counties which, through scale, increase unit costs. The situation should be rectified in 2016/17 by a fuller programme and the introduction of review process efficiencies as set out in Part One.	£70,000
6	Percentage variance from total budget	<3%	2%	Savings set out in previous plans are set to be delivered in 2015/16.	<3%

² The Commission measures customer satisfaction with how the Commission meets the values set out in its Corporate Plan (namely, its professionalism, independence and impartiality). 'Satisfaction' is defined as the customer providing positive feedback to the Commission's conduct, services, products or publications.

