



## Constituency boundaries: the Sixth General Review in Northern Ireland

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The *Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011* made provision for the number of constituencies to be reduced to 600.

The four Parliamentary Boundary Commissions announced the commencement of the sixth general review of Parliamentary constituencies (also known as the 2013 review) on 4 March 2011. The Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland announced on the same day that Northern Ireland would have 16 constituencies, a reduction of 2. No constituencies are exempt from the new requirement for constituencies to be within 5% of the electoral quota.

The Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland published its initial proposals on 13 September 2011. Revised proposals were published on 16 October 2012.

Following the *Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013* receiving Royal Assent on 31 January 2013, the date of the next boundary review has been postponed until after the next general election, due in 2015. The Boundary Commissions have therefore ceased working on the 2013 Review.

This Note gives details of the 2013 review in Northern Ireland, its progress and the consultation process. It should be read in conjunction with Library Standard Note 6070, [Initial proposals for new constituency boundaries: Northern Ireland](#) which looks at the extent to which the proposed constituencies can be identified with existing seats and which existing constituencies would be most affected by the proposals.

For general background to the Sixth Review see SN 5929, [Constituency boundaries: the Sixth General Review](#) and for details in Wales and Scotland see SN 6226 [Constituency boundaries: the Sixth General Review in Wales](#) and SN 6227 [Constituency boundaries: the Sixth General Review in Scotland](#).

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## 1 Background

The four Parliamentary Boundary Commissions announced the commencement of the Sixth Periodical Review (the 2013 Review) on 4 March 2011. The Boundary Commissions agreed, for the purposes of the Sixth Review, that the total UK electorate was 45,678,175 which gave an electoral quota for the whole of the UK of 76,641. This means that every constituency in Great Britain, apart from the specific exceptions given to four island constituencies in the *Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011*, must have an electorate no smaller than 72,810 and no larger than 80,473. There are no exempt seats in Northern Ireland.

The Act gave the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland the power to recommend constituencies in a slightly broader range (70,583 to 80,473) if it thought this was necessary. The conditions that need to be met to allow the Commission to use this power, are where the average electorate of Northern Ireland constituencies exceeds a certain threshold and the 5% requirement “unreasonably impairs” it from taking relevant factors into account or from developing its proposals within the set time frame (see [Initial proposals for new constituency boundaries: Northern Ireland](#) SN 6070 for more detail).

The *Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011* made no alteration to the link between UK Parliamentary constituencies and constituencies for the Northern Ireland Assembly. This means that when the Sixth Review is implemented in Northern Ireland there will be a subsequent reduction in the number of seats and hence MLAs in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

## 2 Initial recommendations

The Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland issued a press release on 4 March 2011 which stated that Northern Ireland would have 16 constituencies, 2 fewer than at present.<sup>1</sup> The initial recommendations for the proposed 16 seats were published on 13 September 2011.<sup>2</sup>

The Boundary Commission has stated that it had modelled a number of options for Northern Ireland, beginning variously in the northwest, the south west, the south and Belfast, but that regardless of the starting point the pattern of proposed seats was similar.<sup>3</sup>

Belfast has a theoretical entitlement to 3.2 seats compared with its current allocation of four seats. The Commission considered retaining four constituencies but to meet the statutory electorate requirements these four seats would “all have required substantial extensions of the Belfast constituency boundaries into adjacent rural areas and settlements outside the city”.<sup>4</sup> Instead Belfast has been allocated three seats. Following on from this decision the methodology used by the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland was explained as follows:

3. As a result of this preliminary work, the Commission concluded that the starting point for the review should be Belfast and that the first constituency to be delineated in a 3-seat Belfast configuration should be Belfast North. There are two reasons for this: (i)

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<sup>1</sup> Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland, [16 constituencies for Northern Ireland](#), press release 4 March 2011

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.boundarycommission.org.uk/index/current-review/provisional-proposals.htm>

<sup>3</sup> Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland, [Provisional Proposals Report: Sixth Periodical Review of Parliamentary Constituencies](#), September 2011, p8

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

the geographical layout of the city around Belfast Lough argues against combining elements of Belfast North with Belfast East, which means that the process should begin with one of these two; (ii) the existing electorate of Belfast North is closest to the quota.

4. After the delineation of 3 constituencies in Belfast, the Commission proceeded to delineate constituencies in immediately adjacent areas and then to work in a northerly and anti clockwise direction, beginning with South Antrim.<sup>5</sup>

In its progress report of January 2012 the Commission stated that:

Irrespective of starting point and direction of travel, the models produced a similar overall pattern with a reduction of one seat west of the River Bann and one seat east of the river, either in Belfast or among the adjacent constituencies.<sup>6</sup>

### Summary of proposals

Of the existing 18 seats in Northern Ireland nine would recognisably continue with only incremental adjustments (the Commission defined this as the transfer of 7 or fewer electoral wards).<sup>7</sup> Liz Benson, Secretary to the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland, expanded on this in her opening statement on behalf of the Commission at each public hearing:

Nine of the existing constituencies continue with only incremental adjustments. Newry and Armagh and South Down required the movement of only one ward. Lagan Valley required the movement of only two wards and Belfast North, Upper Bann and Foyle required the movement of three wards. North Down, Fermanagh and South Tyrone and South Antrim required relatively small adjustments of five or six wards.<sup>8</sup>

Belfast is allocated 3 seats (the theoretical entitlement is to 3.2 seats) instead of the existing 4. Again Liz Benson expanded on this in her opening statement at the public hearings:

To maintain a four-constituency Belfast would require substantial extensions of the existing Belfast constituency boundaries into surrounding rural areas and settlements, and the import of some 22 wards. So the Commission proposes three constituencies for Belfast with the transfer of 12 wards to the adjacent constituency of Strangford; six from Belfast South and six from Belfast East.<sup>9</sup>

The Mid Ulster constituency is abolished and the wards of the existing seat are redistributed to the proposed seats of Glenshane and Mid Tyrone.

All the proposed seats fall within the UK quota range and the Commission did not need to use powers granted to it in the *Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011* which allowed it to define constituencies with electorates which vary by more than 5% from the UK quota.

Only one local government ward has been divided between seats in Northern Ireland, Derryagh, which is split between the proposed Belfast West and Lagan Valley constituencies. This continues the current situation; the northern part of the ward (Lagmore

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland, *Sixth Review of Parliamentary Constituencies Progress Report January 2012*, laid before Parliament 24 January 2012, para 6

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, para 9

<sup>8</sup> Transcripts of each public hearing are available on the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland web site at <http://www.boundarycommission.org.uk/index/current-review/transcripts.htm> (accessed 13 February 2012)

<sup>9</sup> Ibid

townland) is in the existing Belfast West seat and the southern part of the ward (Derraghy townland) is in the existing Lagan Valley constituency.

### **3 Initial consultation**

The provisions for public consultations and hearings following the publication of the Boundary Commissions' initial proposals are set out in Section 12 of the *Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011*. There have been a number of changes to the procedure used for public consultations at previous boundary reviews.

The initial consultation lasts for 12 weeks from the date of publication of the initial recommendations and written representations can be made in this period. Public hearings are also held during this time, each hearing lasting no more than 2 days. The Boundary Commissions for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are able to hold at least 2 and no more than 5 hearings; the Boundary Commission for England is able to hold at least 2 and no more than 5 hearings in each region.

In Northern Ireland the initial consultation period of 12 weeks ran from the date of the publication of the initial recommendations, 13 September 2011, to 2 December 2011.

Three public hearings were held in October 2011. The Commission held them in the areas most affected by the initial proposals, Belfast, Omagh and Ballymena.<sup>10</sup> Each hearing was scheduled to be two days but none of them lasted longer than one day. A total of 12 people made representations,<sup>11</sup> 3 in Belfast, 4 in Omagh and 5 in Ballymena.

Of the 12 representations, 9 were from people with a declared allegiance to one of the Northern Ireland political parties. One representation was on behalf of Omagh District Council and one from the Mayor of Ballymena. The last was from an individual with no declared allegiance.

The Commission received 38 written representations "mainly from political parties, political analysts and community groups".<sup>12</sup>

All the written representations and the transcripts to the public hearings were published on the Boundary Commission's website on 31 January 2012.<sup>13</sup>

### **4 Secondary consultation**

The publication of the written representations and the transcripts to the public hearings triggered the secondary consultation. The secondary consultation ran for four weeks from the 31 January 2012 and closed on 27 February 2012 and was an opportunity for people to comment on the published representations received so far. The Commission's press release said:

Our original proposals generated comment on a number of issues, including the number of seats proposed for Belfast and the configuration of the Antrim constituencies and the new western constituencies.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, para 12

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, para13

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, para13

<sup>13</sup> Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland, [Boundary Commission announces further public consultation](#), press release 31 January 2012

This is a further important opportunity for the public to have their say. We want to hear their views on the representations we have received so far, to help us decide whether we should change our original proposals.<sup>14</sup>

Following the second consultation the Commission considered all the representations made and decided whether any recommendations should be revised.

## 5 Revised recommendations

Revised recommendations were published on 16 October 2012.<sup>15</sup> There was a further 8 week consultation period for written representations on these proposals which closed on 10 December 2012.

Of the 16 constituencies recommended in the Commission's initial proposals nine remain unaltered: Belfast North, Belfast South West, Foyle, Glenshane, Lagan Valley, Newry and Armagh, North Down, South Down, and Upper Bann.

One ward has been transferred from the proposed Strangford constituency to the proposed Belfast South East constituency (Upper Braniel).

The proposed North Antrim constituency has been renamed Coleraine and North Antrim and the revised seat has been reduced by one ward (Carnlough), which has been transferred to the revised East Antrim seat.

Two pairs of seats have seen more extensive exchanges of wards between them, in Antrim and in the West.

In the Commission's initial proposals the recommended Mid Antrim seat included the areas of Ballymena, Larne and Carrickfergus. The proposed South Antrim constituency included Antrim, Ballyclare, Greenisland and some northern wards of Newtonabbey.

In the revised proposals the Mid Antrim seat has been named East Antrim. The wards covering Ballymena, Ahoghill, Galgorm, along with the wards of Grange, Kells and Glenwhirry have been transferred from the initially proposed Mid Antrim seat to the revised South Antrim seat.

The northern wards of Newtonabbey (Ballynure, Mossley, Carnmoney, Burnthill, Ballyduff, Monkstown), the two wards covering Ballyclare, and the wards of Greenisland, Gortalee and Knockagh have been transferred from the initially proposed South Antrim seat to the revised East Antrim seat.

In the West the revisions have been along the border between the proposed Fermanagh and South Tyrone seat and the proposed Mid Tyrone seat. The wards to the north of Dungannon (Altmore, Donaghmore, Coalisland North, Coalisland South, Coalisland West and Newmills, Washing Bay) have been transferred from the proposed Mid Tyrone seat to the revised Fermanagh and South Tyrone seat. The wards further to the west (Drumquin, Dromore, Trillick, Fintona, Newtownsaville, Sixmilecross) have been transferred from the proposed Fermanagh and South Tyrone seat to the revised Mid Tyrone seat.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland, [Boundary Commission consults on revised constituencies](#), press release 16 October 2012

## 6 Final recommendations and Order in Council

The final recommendations were due to be submitted in a report to the Secretary of State by 1 October 2013.

After the Government has received the final reports of the Boundary Commissions these were to be laid before Parliament with a draft Order in Council giving effect to the recommendations. The Government may not modify the recommendations of any of the Parliamentary Boundary Commissions, unless it has been expressly requested to do so (in writing and with reasons) by the relevant Parliamentary Boundary Commission.

The draft Order has to be approved by both Houses of Parliament for the new boundaries to come in to operation. If the draft Order in Council is debated but not approved, the Government may then amend the draft and lay an amended draft before Parliament for approval.

Once the draft Order in Council has been approved by Parliament, the Government is required to submit it to be made by Her Majesty in Council. After the Order in Council has been made, the new constituencies take effect at a next general election.

Any by-elections held in the meantime have to be held on the basis of the old (existing) constituencies.

The validity of an Order in Council, once made, may not be called into question in any legal proceedings.

The Deputy Prime Minister announced on 6 August 2012 that plans to reform the House Lords were to be dropped and that the Liberal Democrats will not vote to approve the Order implementing the recommendations of the Boundary Commissions. Mr Clegg subsequently made a statement to the House of Commons on 3 September 2012.<sup>16</sup> In response to an intervention by Bernard Jenkin MP, Mr Clegg said;

On boundaries, we are, I suppose, strictly speaking, adhering to the coalition agreement, unlike on Lords reform...The hon. Gentleman is right to say that, because the primary legislation is still on the statute book, there is nothing in my power to stop the work of the boundary commissions, but I have made it clear that, since I think I reasonably believe that the constitutional reform package was exactly that—a package—and since this is the first time that either of the coalition parties has been unable to deliver on a major coalition agreement commitment, it is therefore right to rebalance things and not to proceed with an unbalanced package.<sup>17</sup>

Mr Clegg later added

As I have explained, the primary legislation is as it is, and no one is proposing that we repeal it. My own view—I have made this perfectly public—is that it would be better not to complete the outstanding stages of the Boundary Commission investigations because the end result is now a foregone conclusion, but if that is what is felt necessary then a vote will be held and the boundary changes will not go through before 2015.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> [HC Deb 3 September 2012 c35](#)

<sup>17</sup> [HC Deb 3 September 2012 c39](#)

<sup>18</sup> [HC Deb 3 September 2012 c43](#)

The Boundary Commissions therefore had to continue with their work, in the absence of any statutory requirement to desist, and, as the Deputy Prime Minister noted in his statement on 3 September 2012, there was ‘no agreement within Government to repeal that primary legislation’.<sup>19</sup>

During the passage of the *Electoral Registration and Administration Bill 2012-13*, which made provision for a legislative framework for the introduction of a new system of individual electoral registration (IER) under which electors will be registered individually instead of by household, an amendment was tabled which would amend the timing of the 2013 review.

The *Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013* therefore amends the *Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986* and delays the boundary review by one electoral cycle. It requires that the Boundary Commissions conduct a review after the 2015 general election and submit reports in 2018.<sup>20</sup> The Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland therefore announced all work on the 2013 Review would cease.<sup>21</sup>

Following the cessation of the 2013 Review no Orders will be laid before the current Parliament. Instead an Order will be laid after the Boundary Commission reports due in the autumn of 2018.

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<sup>19</sup> HC Deb 3 September 2012 c47

<sup>20</sup> See Library SN05929 [HConstituency boundaries: the Sixth General Review](#) and Standard Note SN06359 [Electoral Registration and Administration Bill 2012-13: progress of the Bill](#) for more details

<sup>21</sup> Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland, [News](#), 31 January 2013