

What say will voters have in redrawing of the electoral map?

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By democraticaudit

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*The government's contentious legislation to reduce the number of MPs and introduce a new system for drawing parliamentary boundaries was passed in February 2011. It set out an ambitious timetable for final recommendations to be voted on by the House of Commons in October 2013, which required some fast work by the [Boundary Commission for England \(BCE\)](#) in particular, which has 502 new constituencies to design. **Lewis Baston** argues that the forthcoming Boundary Review won't receive enough voter input to guarantee true legitimacy.*

The BCE staff has been hard at work all spring and summer and the Commission publishes its eagerly-awaited 'initial proposals' next Tuesday, 13 September 2011. Recommendations for [Scotland](#) and [Northern Ireland](#) will also be published this autumn, while those for [Wales](#) are held up until January 2012.

The English Commission's proposals will be acutely controversial. Before now, constituencies have always been contained within a single county (except for a few cases of very small counties like Rutland). The new rules will require some constituencies to cross long-established county borders, with a particularly unpopular hybrid between Devon and Cornwall, and several other straddle seats for example in Dorset, Leicestershire, Herefordshire and Northumberland.

Because they impose rigid restrictions on the allowed size of 596 of the 600 new constituencies, the new rules will result in some strange proposals in major urban areas as well.

The Commission will have a choice between two undesirable options in places such as Leeds, Stockport, Wakefield and Birmingham where there are very large local authority wards (wards are the traditional building blocks for parliamentary constituencies). The choice is between splitting wards between constituencies, or creating some constituencies that will not reflect any recognisable community of interest and will spill across local authority boundaries.

[When I looked at this in June](#) I thought that the Commission might allow some ward splits to make it easier to form seats that make sense on the ground. However, the BCE seems to be strongly opposed to splitting wards and it seems likely that it will avoid doing so, even at the cost of creating some contorted boundary lines.

The new rules also restrict the opportunities for public comment on the outcome. The previous procedure involved public inquiries for all but the most innocuous proposals, while this time there will be no inquiries. The initial proposals will be open to public consultation for 12 weeks from 13 September 2011. This is not a lot of time to absorb a complex set of proposals covering the whole of England. It is also not long for local people, groups and even MPs to devise alternative proposals.

The new more restrictive rules mean that it is quite possible to come up with an idea for your area which makes perfect sense in itself, but is completely impossible because it would force another constituency outside the allowed limits for size. The level of technical skill and work required to make allowable alternative representations may be too much for non-experts to manage without assistance.

The government conceded during the Bill's parliamentary progress that there would be a number of public 'hearings'



during the consultation period. The BCE has announced its [timetable](#) of hearings for October and November 2011. The hearing for Truro will no doubt be particularly interesting given the unpopularity of the 'Devonwall' constituency.

There will be another very short period – 4 weeks – in spring 2012 in which people will have the opportunity to comment on other evidence submitted to the Commission, which will be the only occasion on which the main parties' plans will be subjected to any public scrutiny.

The BCE has no choice about the law under which it works, and it plans to try hard to make the process as accessible as possible, through the hearings, a special website and a web form through which representations for and against the proposals can be made. But the short timetable and the restrictive rules imposed by the government will make it difficult for the public to make its wishes known during this boundary review.

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