

The
Local Government
Boundary Commission
for England



Corporate plan

2012-13 to 2016-17

Electoral equality

Effective and convenient local government

HC 203

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Foreword

This is the third 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 aims:

Objective One: To provide electoral arrangements for English local authorities that are fair and deliver electoral equality for voters.

Objective Two: 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.

The Commission's last Corporate Plan provided details of how it intended to increase outputs, widen the scope of its work and use its unique powers to help English local authorities meet the considerable challenges they face.

The plan for 2012/13 to 2016/17 sets out how the Commission is delivering those aims, exceeding them in a number of aspects, and outlines its plans to continue to deliver its objectives against a funding profile that reduces over the course of the five years.

The plan's five sections each describe an element of the Commission's work.

Section One describes how the Commission is delivering its statutory obligation to deliver electoral equality for voters in English local elections through its programme of electoral reviews and reducing the proportion of authorities which have significant levels of electoral inequality.

Section Two shows how the Commission is using its unique powers, in addition to the Commission's regulatory responsibilities, to respond to requests from local authorities who believe the Commission can use its powers to help them deliver better local government to citizens. The plan outlines how the Commission can adapt its programme to meet demand, for example, from councils who wish to consider the number of councillors representing the authority or the pattern of wards or divisions and elections in them.

Section Three explains how the Commission is increasing outputs against a reducing five-year funding profile. By introducing new review procedures and delivering specific savings, the Commission aims to increase productivity against a budget that is reducing in real terms over the lifetime of the plan.

Section Four gives details of how the Commission is increasing its productivity, developing constructive relationships with local authorities and using its corporate capacity to deliver the plan in an efficient and professional way.

Section Five illustrates how the Commission measures its performance against its objectives. Our key performance indicators are designed around the Commission's aims and ambitions: to reduce electoral inequality for voters, to respond to the needs of local authorities and to reduce costs.

Our work: an overview

Our objectives:

To provide boundary arrangements for English local authorities 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.

Our core activities:

We are responsible for conducting three types of review of local government:

Electoral Reviews – Reviews of the internal electoral arrangements of local authorities: the number of councillors, names, number and boundaries of wards and electoral divisions. Electoral reviews are initiated primarily to improve electoral equality but can also be carried out by request, for example, to address council size (the total number of councillors elected to a local authority) or provide for single-member wards or divisions.

Principal Area Boundary Reviews (PABRs) – Reviews of the external boundaries of local authorities, intended to reflect community identities and to promote effective and convenient local government. Reviews of this nature range from addressing minor boundary anomalies that hinder effective service delivery to a few houses to whole-council mergers.

Structural Reviews - Advising the Secretary of State, at his request, on the structure of local government in an area following proposals from local authorities to change from two-tier to unitary local government. The Government has indicated that it has no current plans to seek our advice on structural reviews and, as such, they do not form part of this five-year strategy.

Related alterations and GLA boundaries - We are also responsible, at the request of local authorities, for making orders for related alterations to ward and division boundaries as a consequence of community governance reviews conducted by them, and for reviewing and implementing changes to the constituencies of the Greater London Assembly.

Our values:

Independent – We are not part of Government and our decisions are not influenced by party political considerations.

Impartial – Our decisions are based on evidence and reason.

Professional – We strive for the highest standards in how we operate and how we work with the public, local authorities and other key partners.

Section One: electoral equality

Objective One: To provide electoral arrangements for English local authorities that are fair and deliver electoral equality for voters.

Electoral equality, each elector having a vote of equal weight in his or her local authority's elections, is a fundamental democratic principle. Where electoral data show significant levels of electoral inequality¹ within a council area, the Commission will consider intervening to review that authority's electoral arrangements. The changes recommended by the Commission as a result of an electoral review aim to ensure that the value of any elector's vote, in local elections, will be roughly the same regardless of where they live in that area.

In 2012/13, significant levels of electoral inequality will affect 24% of English local authorities with development and the movement of electors causing approximately a further 3% of authorities to display significant imbalances and cross the Commission's threshold for intervention each year. The Commission's five-year plan will reduce those levels of inequality to 16%.

Since publication of the Commission's 2011/12 Corporate Plan, there has been a net increase of 32 local authorities which crossed the Commission's threshold for intervention as a result of electoral inequality. Eleven met the criteria for review because of changes in the electoral register over the course of the year which have caused imbalances, three more than projected in the Commission's last Corporate Plan. Twenty-one did so because of changes made by the Commission in how it calculates significant levels of electoral inequality (see below). In total, the two factors described above have added 7% to the proportion of local authorities displaying significant levels of electoral inequality projected in the Commission's last Corporate Plan.

By reducing levels of electoral inequality for local authorities across England in the way set out in the Corporate Plan, the Commission seeks to minimise the need for a Periodic Electoral Review (PER)².

Table One illustrates progress made on the aims set out in the Commission's previous Corporate Plan as well as giving details of the planned work programme for 2012/13 in relation to reducing electoral inequality for English local government.

Table three sets out the details of the intended work programme over the five-year period of the plan and includes details of reviews the Commission will carry out not just to reduce electoral inequality but to help local authorities deliver effective and convenient local government (see **Section Two**).

¹ The Commission's criteria for significant electoral inequality are where 30% or more of wards/divisions vary in their ratio of electors: members by 10% or more from the average for the authority, and/or it has one or more wards/divisions with a variance in this ratio of 30% or more, and the imbalance is unlikely to be corrected by population change within a reasonable period. In 2011/12, the Commission simplified how it calculates its threshold for intervention. It had used a rounding technique which discounted wards or divisions just outside the 10% (or 30%) threshold. The Commission adopted a more straightforward reckoning prompted by its consideration of the National Audit Office *Value for Money* study in 2011. The new technique brings 21 more local authorities within the criteria for intervention than the Commission's projection for 2011/12 in its last Corporate Plan.

² PER - an England-wide programme of electoral reviews affecting every principal local authority. The last PER was conducted between 1996 and 2004, by the Local Government Commission for England and the Boundary Committee for England.

Future demand

The Commission is not able to predict exactly how many local authorities will breach the threshold for electoral inequality in any given year but makes a projection from previous years. Our new procedures (see **Section Four**) allow us to adapt our work programme to switch focus between our regulatory role and our role as facilitator, to meet changing circumstances and priorities.

In the later years, the Commission's planning could be affected by external factors. For example, the introduction of Individual Electoral Registration could cause the Commission to reassess priorities if local authorities' electoral registers (which form the basis of the Commission's assessment of electoral equality and electorate forecasts) were to fluctuate. Similarly, evolution of the localism agenda and other policy developments could generate additional demand. Large scale boundary reviews, mergers and structural reviews do not form part of the Commission's priorities but the Commission would reassess this if need be.

Table one shows progress made on the aims set out in the last Corporate Plan as well as giving details of the proposed programme of electoral reviews for 2012/13. Each of the local authorities listed has levels of electoral inequality that meet the threshold for the Commission's intervention in line with **objective one**: to deliver electoral equality for voters.

Table One: reducing electoral inequality

	Objectives set for 2011/12	Outcomes 2011/12	Objectives for 2012/13
<p>Electoral reviews of areas with significant electoral imbalances</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ We will complete reviews of Rugby, West Lindsey, Swindon, Daventry, Hartlepool, Staffordshire, Rushmoor, Broxbourne, Surrey, Buckinghamshire, Cumbria³, Hart, Co Durham and Oxfordshire. ■ We will commence reviews in 14 local authority areas. ■ We will publish new technical guidance to introduce faster, proportionate and more flexible electoral review processes. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reviews completed for Rugby, West Lindsey, Swindon, Daventry, Hartlepool, Staffordshire, Rushmoor, Broxbourne, Surrey, Buckinghamshire, Hart, Co Durham and Oxfordshire. ■ Reviews commenced in 17 local authority areas to tackle electoral inequality. ■ New technical guidance for electoral reviews and PABRs published. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ We will complete reviews for Cumbria, Slough, Derbyshire, Purbeck, Somerset, Swale, Northamptonshire, Rushcliffe, Tonbridge and Malling, Boston and Arun. ■ We will commence reviews in 18 local authority areas to tackle electoral inequality.

³ Electoral review of Cumbria will be completed in early 2012/13.

Section Two: effective and convenient local government

Objective Two: 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.

For local authorities who wish to explore the possibility of changing their electoral arrangements (for example to change the number of councillors elected to the authority or to move to a pattern of single-member wards or divisions), the Commission is the only body with the powers to assist. In the Corporate Plan, the Commission is making capacity available in our work programme to meet requests for reviews at a rate that exceeds the target set in 2011/12.

In response to its consultation in December 2010, the Commission received 37 expressions of interest from local authorities who believed they might benefit from a review. In its two-year programme, the Commission has included 20 reviews which will be carried out at the request of the authority (some of which also meet the Commission's criteria for intervention owing to high levels of electoral imbalances).

Not all initial expressions of interest will result in an authority's being included in the Commission's two-year work programme. Some authorities have expressed a wish to alter their electoral cycle in addition to an electoral review to consider their wider electoral arrangements. Up to January 2012, changes to electoral cycles could only take place once every four years which limited authorities' ability to approach the Commission for a review. Similarly, local authorities will not be included in the programme if they are a district within a county which is already being reviewed, or a county where districts are being reviewed, because the Commission seeks to achieve, as far as possible, coterminosity between district wards and county electoral divisions. Some councils, after exploring the electoral review process with the Commission, will decide there is no strong political consensus or likely public support for change and withdraw their request. Of the remaining 17 expressions of interest in a review, ten have not been included in the current two year programme for reasons set out above. The Commission will consider including the remaining seven in its programme for 2013/14.

The Commission cannot be sure how many requests for reviews it will receive each year. Whilst the Commission has been able to influence demand through publicising to the local government community the option of requesting a review, proposed legislative changes and continuing resource pressures on local authorities mean that councils are likely to continue to approach the Commission for reviews during the course of the five-year strategy.

In particular, legislation had previously dictated that local authorities had an opportunity only once every four years to opt to move to a different cycle of elections. However, the Localism Act 2011 lifts this restriction so that councils could opt to move to a new electoral cycle at a time of their choosing. From our conversations with local authorities, we believe that that removal of the restriction will mean an increase in the numbers of local authorities coming forward with requests for electoral reviews.

Over the course of the five-year plan, the Commission has committed to including seven reviews each year on request. It will exceed that number in both 2011/12 and 2012/13. Given that the Commission will reach its capacity to deliver reviews during 2011/12, and continue at this level for the remainder of the five-year plan, it will need to balance its statutory commitment to deliver electoral equality with requests as it develops its future work programme.

Principal area boundary reviews

In its last Corporate Plan, the Commission also stated its intention to make the possibility of principal area boundary reviews (PABRs) available to local authorities in England. Few PABRs - reviews of the external boundaries of local authorities - have been conducted since 1992. Between 1992 and 2007, legislation dictated that only the Secretary of State could initiate such reviews.

As proposed in its previous Corporate Plan, the Commission published technical guidance on PABRs in May 2011. It has now completed its first review following a formal request from two local authorities.

The Commission has also analysed a backlog of 83 requests for reviews to its predecessor bodies and, during 2011/12, it has actively pursued 27 possible reviews with the authorities involved.

Three main factors account for the reduction from 83 to 27. First, every PABR involves at least two local authorities and the Commission's current guidance (agreed with the Department for Communities and Local Government, which would implement any review recommendations) requires agreement from both or all affected authorities for a review to proceed. Despite the Commission's efforts, and its direct discussions with councils, very few authorities have been able to reach consensus to pursue a PABR.

Secondly, the Commission ruled out the possibility of pursuing a large number of historical requests where it did not believe there was a reasonable chance of meeting its obligation to deliver effective and convenient government while reflecting the interests and identities of local communities. The Commission also ruled out a number of requests where it did not believe a proposal was likely to gain support from the public or local authorities. For example, historic requests from members of the public to abolish their own council seemed unlikely to gain support from the local authority involved.

Thirdly, in the case of large scale boundary reviews, such as mergers, the Commission's guidance advises authorities that they would be required to demonstrate public support for a change. In the case of one proposed merger, the local authorities in question were unable to generate the level of public support they had set themselves before asking for a review to proceed.

In 2011/12, the Commission has started three PABRs in response to requests from local authorities. One of these reviews has been completed and the other two are scheduled to end early in 2012/13. Councils will be able to request a PABR for the duration of the five-year plan. The Commission will seek to respond to new requests in a positive and timely way. However, discussions with local authorities suggest that such reviews are not a high priority for them in the current economic climate. In the meantime, high levels of requests for electoral reviews mean that the Commission can deliver a work programme at full capacity.

In its Corporate Plan for 2011/12 onwards, the Commission made a commitment to carry out seven electoral reviews at the request of local authorities and to create capacity in its programme. The Commission added this focus to its work programme in response to demand from local authorities to examine their council size, provide for single-member wards or for any other reason that would help them, and the Commission, achieve **objective two**: to work with local authorities to help them deliver effective and convenient local government.

Table two illustrates how the Commission has delivered, and exceeded, the commitment made in its last corporate plan to undertake seven reviews on request in 2011/12 and 2012/13.

Table Two: Reviews on request

	Objectives set for 2011/12	Outcomes 2011/12	Objectives for 2012/13
<p>Reviews included in the programme on request</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ We will commence reviews in seven local authority areas in direct response to requests from authorities. ■ We will complete the single-member ward review of Gloucestershire. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reviews commenced on request for Derbyshire, Warwick, Rushcliffe, Boston, Arun, Milton Keynes, Lancaster, Bromsgrove, Hambleton, Vale of White Horse, South Oxfordshire and Gedling⁴. ■ Review completed for Gloucestershire. ■ PABRs commenced in Stevenage/East Hertfordshire and Northumberland/Gateshead. ■ PABR completed for Welwyn Hatfield/St Albans. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ We will complete reviews for Derbyshire, Rushcliffe, Boston, and Arun. ■ We will commence 9 electoral reviews on request. ■ We will complete the PABRs for Stevenage/East Hertfordshire and Northumberland/Gateshead.

⁴ Derbyshire, Rushcliffe, Boston, Arun, Milton Keynes, Lancaster and Hambleton are all reviews which have been requested by local authorities which also meet the Commission's criteria for intervention on the grounds of electoral inequality.

Table three collates the Commission’s intentions for review activity over the five-year plan. It includes reviews carried out to reduce electoral inequality as well as listing its intentions for carrying out reviews on request.

The figures listed in **Table three** below assume – for planning purposes – that each electoral review will be last between 52 and 62 weeks. In practice, reviews will be carried out under the Commission’s new flexible review procedures. The Commission’s procedures mean that some reviews, which require only minimal changes to electoral arrangements and no significant change in council size, can be completed in less than a year. In that case, the Commission would expect to complete more reviews in 2012/13 than stated below and, consequently, fewer in 2013/14, a ‘smoother’ profile of review completions than suggested below.

Review programme 2011/12 – 2016/17

Objective 1 - electoral inequality	11/12	12/13	13/14	14/15	15/16	16/17
No. of local authorities	352	352	352	352	352	352
No. with electoral inequality at start of year	88	85	84	72	67	62
Add new cases of inequality (projected from the average of last 5 years)	10	10	10	10	10	10
Deduct cases resolved - reviews planned for completion	13	11	22 ⁷	15	15	15
No. with electoral inequality at end of year	85	84	72	67	62	57
As a %	24%	24%	20%	19%	18%	16%
Objective 2 - effective and convenient local government⁵	2	6	16	7	7	7
Deduct cases where authorities both meet the criteria for intervention and have requested a review ⁶	0	4	7	-	-	-
Total reviews planned for completion	15	13	31	22	22	22

⁵ Reviews undertaken on request (electoral reviews and PABRs).

⁶ The Commission has prioritised requests for electoral reviews from local authorities which also meet the criteria for intervention. Such reviews contribute to both of the Commission’s primary objectives.

⁷ As explained above, it is likely that some reviews shown to be completed in 2013/14 will finish in the preceding year.

Section Three: Resources

The Commission will make efficiency savings of 2.5% in the first four years of the five-year plan as well as absorbing all inflationary pressures. If inflation is taken into account (at 2.5%), this plan will deliver compound savings over four years of approximately 22%.

Throughout 2011/12, the Commission has analysed the cost drivers associated with reviews. It has established an average unit cost of £125k for each electoral review in 2011/12, which includes staff costs, overheads, mapping services, printing, travel and subsistence and Commissioner fees. With better understanding of the pressures and drivers behind each review, the Commission can more effectively reduce costs further over the course of the five-year plan.

Savings plans are focused on the elements which have the biggest impact on unit cost:

- Services/accommodation/overheads – The Commission is negotiating to share in savings achieved by the Local Government Group with its provider of back-office services.
- Mapping – The Commission is negotiating with its supplier to reduce the costs of its Service Level Agreement.
- Printing – The Commission will carry out a procurement exercise in 2012/13 to provide printing services to build on savings made in 2011/12.
- Staff time – the Commission's new procedures can reduce staff time spent on review.

The Corporate Plan and associated strategy sets a challenging resource profile for the Commission up to 2016/17. If savings are not achieved at the rate set out in **Table four**, there will be a direct impact on staffing, and prospectively outputs.

Table four: resources profile 2012/13 - 2016/17

	2011/12 (£000)	2012/13 (£000)	2013/14 (£000)	2014/15 (£000)	2015/16⁸ (£000)	2016/17⁸ (£000)
Staff (including commissioners)	1,360	1,295	1,295	1,260	1,225	1,225
Rent, rates and service charges	620	620	600	600	600	600
Mapping and printing	350	350	325	315	300	300
Other costs (travel, professional costs etc)	303	302	283	265	254	254
Revenue Total	2,633	2,567	2,503	2,440	2,379	2,379
Capital	50	50	50	50	50	50
Total	2,683	2,617	2,553	2,490	2,429	2,429

⁸ In submitting future versions of its financial plans, the Commission is mindful of the need to reconsider spending assumptions in the light of the scenario set out at the Autumn Statement 2011 and annex A of Budget 2012.

Section Four: corporate capacity

In its first year of operation, the Commission completed 12 electoral reviews with a budget of just under £3m. In the later years of this plan, we aim to deliver 80% more reviews within a reduced budget profile. There are a number of ways in which we will seek to maximise productivity to achieve our aims, within some limits to capacity.

Commissioners

The Commission consists of a Chair supported by five Commissioners. Each review is assigned a lead Commissioner who is the focal point of the relationship with the local authority and plays a key role in developing proposals for each local authority before a collective decision is taken by the Commission. As the Commission's work programme has expanded, there has been no parallel increase in Commissioner numbers. This will limit capacity to increase the work programme further in later years of the plan.

Staff

The Commission is altering its staff structure, within the overall funding envelope, to ensure that the correct mix of skills is deployed to meet the programme challenge.

Review capacity

In its last Corporate Plan, the Commission made a commitment to review all policies and procedures and publish new technical guidance to govern the conduct of its work. The aim of the policy review was to ensure that the review process is flexible and proportionate so that the Commission could increase its overall productivity, and reduce burdens on local authorities.

After consulting every local authority in England, new guidance was published in early 2011/12 and all reviews are now being carried out under new procedures. The new policies have introduced flexible timetables for reviews which mean that some will be completed in less than a year. Increased flexibility in the programme has assisted the Commission in increasing capacity in overall terms.

By categorising reviews in this way, the Commission has been able to expand its capacity to undertake reviews and will start 24 reviews in 2012/13 (compared to 14 completed in 2010/11).

The Commission is also reviewing its internal end-to-end procedures with a view to identifying efficiencies, widening the skills of individual staff and increasing overall productivity. It has identified the need to strengthen staff ownership of individual reviews, and the management of the programme as a whole. This will be not only heavier than in the past, but also more complicated, as LGBCE seeks increasingly to respond to requests and to balance reviews by request and those induced by the intervention criteria.

Resource capacity

For 2010/11, the National Audit Office estimated the unit cost an electoral review to be approximately £206k. In 2011/12, the Commission established the average unit cost of a review to be £125k primarily as a result of insignificantly increased review activity. Its savings plans aim to reduce this figure by further reducing some staff time spent on reviews through new processes, by negotiating new agreements with its back-office service provider and by reducing costs for mapping and printing.

If the Commission accounts for future savings, it estimates that it can carry out approximately 20-23 electoral reviews in each year in line with the planning assumptions set out in **Table three**.

Reputation and relationships

The Commission will shortly agree a new External Relations Strategy. The plan will seek to improve the ways the Commission engages with the public and with local networks, and make it easier for people to contribute to a review, as well as managing relationships with local authorities.

By engaging with the leadership of local authorities six months in advance of the formal start of a review, as it has begun to do, the Commission will be able to advise authorities of the details of the electoral review procedure, enabling a more efficient review process overall.

Risk

The Commission's corporate risk register has developed over 2011/12 and combines both operational and strategic risks. Responsibility for monitoring, updating and taking action on risks is shared across the Commission's senior management team, and reviewed by the Commission's Audit Committee.

Section Five: performance

Table Five sets out a series of measures the Commission uses to assess the outputs and the outcomes of the review programme throughout the strategy. Our Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) reflect our two core objectives set out in the plan: to deliver electoral equality in English local government ; and to facilitate electoral and boundary changes that promote effective and convenient local government in England.

Table Five: performance

Key Performance Indicator (KPI)	Target 2011/12	Output 2011/12	Comments	Target 2012/13
1 Percentage of local authorities with significant electoral imbalances	17%	24%	The Commission is on track to complete 15 reviews in 2011/12 as set out in its previous Corporate Plan. However, 24 more authorities exceeded the threshold for intervention than predicted which means the target for 2011/12 will not be met (see Section One).	24%
2 Number of local authorities requesting reviews that are programmed for review at 1 April 2012	7	14	Nine reviews are scheduled to begin in 2012/13 which were requested by local authorities.	7
3 Aggregate percentage customer satisfaction with review processes ⁹ .	>70%	63% (at 1 February 2012)	The Commission's customer satisfaction analysis is based on a questionnaire distributed following the completion of a review.	<70%
4 Percentage of electoral change orders which, following reviews by the Commission, come into effect at the election expected when the review was first programmed.	95%	100% - full year estimate	The Commission has so far laid nine draft orders in Parliament during 2011/12 all of which will be implemented at the election expected when the review was first programmed. A further five draft orders are scheduled to be laid before April 2012 which are all expected to be implemented in time for their scheduled elections.	95%
5 Average unit costs of reviews.	New indicator	£125k - full year estimate	Savings in 2011/12 have been achieved primarily due to productivity improvements. Further savings are expected to be achieved in 2012/13 onwards by addressing individual elements of the unit cost as set out in Section Three .	<£125k
6 Percentage variance from total budget	Less than 3%	3.5% - full year estimate	The Commission's work programme means activity is concentrated in quarters two and three in 2011/12 which means that it is on track to achieve its outturn at less than 3% from total budget.	<3%

⁹ Based on the LGBCE opinion survey which is despatched to everyone who took part in a review and is available to all visitors to the Commission's website. 'Satisfaction' is defined as the description of the Commission's conduct, products or publications as "very good" or "quite good". The indicator is the number of respondents answering in that way as a percentage of the total number of respondents (including those answering in neutral terms). This replicates standard practice as represented in the OGC's best practice guidance.

The Commission

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England (LGBCE) comprises a Chair and five Commissioners:

Max Caller CBE – Chair
Professor Colin Mellors – Deputy Chair
Dr Peter Knight CBE DL
Sir Tony Redmond
Dr Colin Sinclair CBE
Professor Paul Wiles CB

Chief Executive: Alan Cogbill
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