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House of Commons  
London, SW1A 0AA

Our reference: MC2020/04831

By email

19 May 2020

Dear William,

## **INTRODUCTION OF THE PARLIAMENTARY CONSTITUENCIES BILL**

I am writing to inform you that the Parliamentary Constituencies Bill was introduced in the House of Commons today, ahead of Second Reading in due course. This follows my written ministerial statement of 24 March setting out the Government's policy position on boundary reviews. Since that statement, the Government has engaged with parliamentary parties and electoral administrators over the technical measures in the Bill.

The main purpose of this legislation is to deliver the Government's manifesto commitment to "ensure we have updated and equal parliamentary boundaries", and to do so on the basis of 650 constituencies. The Bill will strengthen the UK's democracy, ensuring that each elector's vote carries the same weight and that, by keeping the current number of parliamentary constituencies (650), MPs are equipped to represent the UK's growing population and to handle additional work previously covered by MEPs. Parliamentary boundaries are now significantly out of date - based on data that up to 20 years old, and disregards significant changes in demographics, house building and migration over the past two decades.

The Bill amends the existing legislation governing parliamentary constituencies and boundary reviews, making a number of changes to the timing and process for future reviews and returning the number of constituencies to 650. The Bill removes the obligation to implement the 2018 boundary review (based on 600 constituencies); makes provision for boundary reviews to take place every eight years; and condenses the timetable for the next review by three months. We have incorporated cross-party feedback from political parties on improving the Boundary Commissions' review process. The Government has also taken into account

representations from the former Political and Constitutional Reform Committee and from the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee.

In future, the recommendations resulting from a boundary review will be implemented automatically by an Order in Council. This will bring greater certainty that the proposals of the independent Boundary Commissions will be brought into effect, and that this will happen without delay. Parliament, of course, remains sovereign and can amend the primary legislation providing the parameters for these reviews as it sees fit.

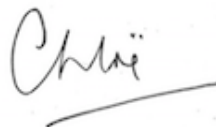
The Government is not proposing to change existing legislation, passed under the Coalition Government, in respect of the electoral quota tolerance level of +/- 5%, or the limited exceptions to the rules applying that tolerance level, including the number of protected constituencies. Equal and updated boundaries will ensure parity of representation within and across each constituent nation in the United Kingdom.

Keeping the British public safe in the challenging context of Covid-19 is our top priority, but it is nonetheless important that the Government continues to plan for the future and to progress essential and time-critical legislation such as this. Without this Bill, the Government will be legally required to give effect to the recommendations of the 2018 boundary review, which is based on 600 constituencies. The next boundary review, due to start early next year, would also automatically proceed on the basis of 600 constituencies.

Further details on the measures in the Bill are provided in the attached policy summary.

I hope that you and the Committee will join me in supporting this legislation. If you would like to discuss any aspect of the Bill please contact my office at [pschloesmith@cabinetoffice.gov.uk](mailto:pschloesmith@cabinetoffice.gov.uk), who will arrange a suitable time for a call with me and my officials.

**Yours ever,**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chloe', with a horizontal line underneath.

**Chloe Smith MP**



### Parliamentary Constituencies Bill - Fact Sheet

#### What does the Bill do?

The Bill amends the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 governing parliamentary constituencies and boundary reviews and makes provision in respect of:

- the number of parliamentary constituencies;
- the rules governing the setting of the boundaries of parliamentary constituencies;
- the conduct of boundary reviews by the Boundary Commissions; and
- the process for bringing the Boundary Commissions' recommendations into effect.

There were two Acts amending parliamentary constituencies legislation during the Coalition Government; these provided for equal constituencies based on a House of Commons with 600 seats. A boundary review was then undertaken (reporting in 2018) but, to date, the recommendations of that review have not been implemented.

#### Why is the Bill needed?

The existing parliamentary constituencies in England are based on data from 2000; those in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are based on data from 2001-2003. In effect, the current constituencies reflect how the UK population was at the beginning of the century. This disregards significant changes in demographics, house building and geographical migration.

As a result of previous legislation and the length of time since a boundary review has been implemented, the size of constituency electorates varies significantly across parliamentary constituencies.

The combined effect of this amending legislation and the retained elements of the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 will allow the Government to meet one of its 2019 Manifesto commitments - to "ensure we have updated and equal parliamentary boundaries, making sure that every vote counts the same – a cornerstone of democracy" - and, importantly, to do so on the basis of 650 constituencies.

The measures in the Bill follow and build upon the written statement of 24 March 2020, *Update: Strengthening Democracy* (HCWS183 and HLWS179), in which the Government set out its policy position in relation to the boundaries of parliamentary constituencies.

#### What changes are made by the Bill?

##### Number of parliamentary constituencies

The Bill provides for the number of parliamentary constituencies to remain at 650. This is a change in policy from that enacted under the Coalition Government.

As a consequence of retaining 650 constituencies, the Bill removes the statutory duty on the Government to implement the 2018 boundary review recommendations (which was based on



600 seats), and the requirement under the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011 to make arrangements to review the reduction in the number of constituencies to 600 by 30 November 2020.

### Timing of boundary reviews

The Bill provides for the next boundary review, due to begin in early 2021, to be carried out on the basis of 650 constituencies, and to report before 1 July 2023. Thereafter, the length of time between boundary reviews is extended from 5 to 8 years. This is intended to provide a reasonable balance between updating boundaries and avoiding excessive disruption.

### Boundary review process

The Bill provides for the boundary review that is due to report before 1 July in 2023 to take place within the slightly shortened time frame of 2 years and 7 months (rather than the current 2 years and 10 months). The Bill enables this by making changes to the timings of the three stages to the publicity and consultation process at the next boundary review. In future, after the next boundary review, reviews will revert to taking place over the period of 2 years and 10 months. The Bill also changes the timing of public hearings for the next and subsequent boundary reviews so that the public hearings will be held during the secondary consultation period (instead of during the initial consultation period). These reforms are based on feedback from political parties through the Parliamentary Parties Panel.<sup>1</sup>

### Local government boundaries

The Bill makes provision for Boundary Commissions to be able to take into account local government boundaries that are in place on the “review date” (the formal start of the review), as well as any such boundaries that are set out in provisions of legislation, but where those provisions have not yet come into force fully for the purposes of a local election by the review date. The practical effect of this is to allow the Boundary Commissions to take account of more up-to-date local government boundaries than previously, helping them (where possible) to align parliamentary and ward boundaries – to minimise the potential for administrative inconvenience for councils, councillors and MPs, and public confusion.

### Implementation of boundary review reports

The Bill makes provision for how boundary recommendations come into effect following a boundary review. In future, the Boundary Commissions will submit their final reports to the Speaker of the House of Commons (who is the Chair of the Boundary Commissions). The Bill also provides that the draft Order in Council giving effect to recommendations will no longer be subject to any parliamentary procedure or approval before being made. This will bring greater certainty that the proposals of the independent Boundary Commissions will be brought into effect, and that this will happen without delay.

### Consequential changes

The Bill also makes a number of consequential amendments, in particular amending section 33(3)(a) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The constituencies of the Northern Ireland Assembly are the same as those of the UK Parliament. The amendments in the Bill provide that the automatic changes to the constituencies of the Northern Ireland Assembly (as a result of UK Parliamentary constituency changes) will only take place from the first Assembly election whose notice of election is published at least six months after the parliamentary constituency

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<sup>1</sup> The Parliamentary Parties Panel includes representatives of each parliamentary party with two or more sitting MPs. It was established by the Electoral Commission to provide political parties with an opportunity to raise relevant issues with the Electoral Commission.



changes comes into force (i.e. the first Assembly election to take place after 6 months and 25 days from the date the constituencies come into force).

There would be an exception to this if, during the 6 month and 25 day period, the UK Parliament was dissolved prior to a parliamentary general election to which the new constituencies apply. In this event, the new constituencies would be applied to the Northern Ireland Assembly from the date of the UK general election. The provision is designed to minimise any potential impact of future constituency changes that coincide with Northern Ireland Assembly elections.

### **Who carries out reviews of UK Parliamentary constituencies?**

UK parliamentary constituency boundary reviews are carried out by the independent Boundary Commissions for England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, under the parameters set out in primary legislation.

Further detail on the Commissions and the review process can be found on their websites:

[www.boundarycommissionforengland.independent.gov.uk](http://www.boundarycommissionforengland.independent.gov.uk)

[www.bcomm-wales.gov.uk](http://www.bcomm-wales.gov.uk)

[www.bcomm-scotland.independent.gov.uk](http://www.bcomm-scotland.independent.gov.uk)

[www.boundarycommission.org.uk](http://www.boundarycommission.org.uk)