

Written evidence submitted by the Oxford Internet Institute (RPB 32)

Enhancing Boundary Commission Consultations through the Internet

This document outlines some suggested ideas for how consultations on new electoral districts and boundary changes could be enhanced through the internet.

The suggestions have two main aims in particular:

1. To make it easier for interested citizens to find out if and how they are affected by boundary changes
2. To enlarge the absolute number of contributions to the consultations, to make it easier for these citizens to contribute to the process, and to make it easier for the government to interpret their contributions

1 Helping citizens find out if and how they are affected by boundary changes

There are approximately 68,000 people in any given parliamentary constituency, and any boundary change must affect at least two constituencies, meaning that in theory at least around 140,000 people are potentially affected any time a boundary changes. However in practice not all of these people will be substantially affected by the move: many of them will remain within a constituency which is very similar to the one they were in previously. Hence simple lists of constituencies which are affected by potential boundary changes are not necessarily useful for individuals who wish to find out whether or how much they are affected.

We would suggest developing a simple web friendly tool which allows users to do three things:

- Enter their postcode and find which constituency they are in and if that constituency is changing
- If so, to see a clear graphical illustration, based on a map, of how their constituency is changing, and whether they personally will be moved to a different constituency
- Additionally, it may be useful to present summary information about present and proposed constituencies, such as demographics and political makeups, or to show how the 2010 election would have looked in the user's area with the new constituencies.

We note that many constituency finding services already exist, for example that run by the UK's parliament or that used by the civic technology organisation mySociety (see figure 1). Any new service should build on these existing ones where possible.

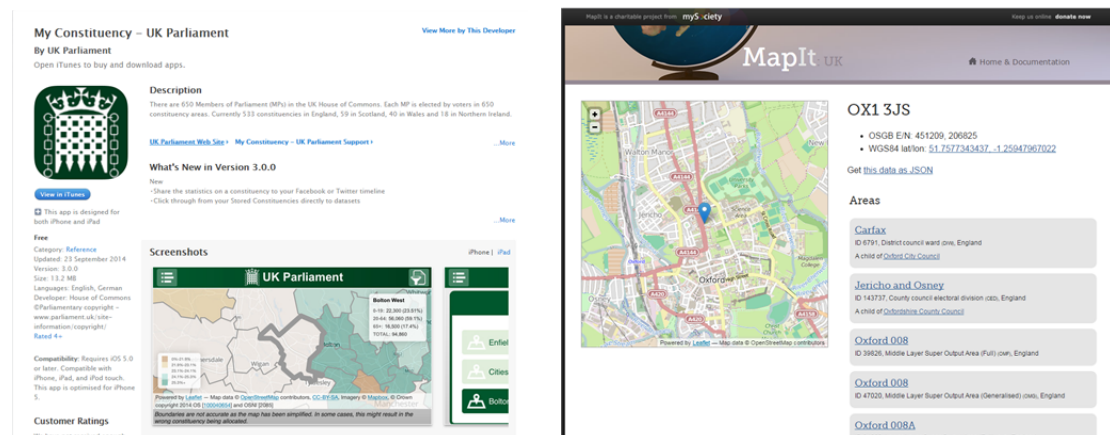


Figure 1: The My Constituency and MapIt services

In terms of development, we would suggest that this service is presented as both a (tablet and mobile friendly) website and as an “API” (application programming interface). API access would allow others to integrate the service into their own website or application.

2 Helping citizens contribute to the consultation process and enlarging the number of consultations

The website could, obviously, also be used as a way of collecting citizen opinions on the boundary change process. The fact that citizens will have already entered their postcodes would allow easy sorting and filtering of consultation responses by specific area. In addition to a free text form which allows users to input specific comments, it could also be useful to have some more standard fixed questions, such as whether the user thinks the boundary changes are a good or bad idea, and perhaps even options to draw new suggested boundaries on the map.

The website itself could be distributed through social media channels, as well as (potentially) embedded into cooperating partner organisations. In this regard, we would highlight in particular the value of local council websites, which are a vital part of the UK government’s online presence (research has suggested that 15% of the public have visited a local council website in the last year, compared to only 3% who have visited the house of commons website¹). If an easy to use API access was created, local councils could with relative ease embed the boundary change consultation application into their own website, or even distribute it with emails to people whose postcodes are in affected areas.

We would highlight that, of course, the responses received would not be from a random sample of inhabitants, and therefore couldn’t be used as a meaningful gauge of public opinion in the area. But a dense concentration of negative opinions in one area could highlight a problem which the boundary commission might investigate further.

¹ Wainer Lusoli, Stephen Ward, and Rachel Gibson. (Re)connecting Politics? Parliament, the Public and the Internet. Parliamentary Affairs (January 2006) 59 (1): 24-42

February 2015