

## **Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy**

*Making digital democracy a reality:* [www.consultation.lgbce.org.uk](http://www.consultation.lgbce.org.uk)

Submission by the Local Government Boundary Commission for England

### **Introduction**

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England has built an award-winning digital platform to increase citizen participation in the democratic process.

In particular, the Commission's online consultation portal has radically changed the way councils' electoral arrangements are devised by improving the reach, scope and quality of local input into the boundary-drawing process.

### **Who we are**

The Local Government Boundary Commission for England is an independent body which is responsible for drawing up electoral arrangements for England's 352 local authorities.

The Commission also has a responsibility for advising on the structure of local government and boundaries between principal local authorities.

Find out more at: [www.lgbce.org.uk/about-us](http://www.lgbce.org.uk/about-us).

### **What we do: electoral reviews**

The Commission's main activity is to conduct electoral reviews of local authorities. An electoral review determines the democratic arrangements of a council, namely:

- The total number of councillors elected to the local authority.
- The boundaries of the council's wards.
- The number of councillors elected to represent each ward.
- The names of all wards.

Throughout the electoral review process, the Commission seeks to engage local people and organisations in the process of setting electoral arrangements and drawing up boundaries.

One of the key statutory criteria governing the conduct of electoral reviews is to draw boundaries that – as far as possible – reflect the interests and identities of local communities. As local people know their area best, the Commission holds at least two phases of public consultation to generate community ideas for electoral arrangements.

The Commission believes that local knowledge is invaluable in providing intelligence about strong boundaries, local issues and community information that will help it draw up electoral arrangements that meet its statutory requirement.

Furthermore, the Commission is committed to the principle that the best electoral reviews are those where local people and groups have played a part in the process, where boundaries really mean something to local people and genuinely reflect community interactions.

Find out more: [www.lgbce.org.uk/about-us/about-reviews](http://www.lgbce.org.uk/about-us/about-reviews).

### **Pre-digital public consultation**

Before moving to a digital consultation platform, the Commission carried out public consultation which relied largely on paper-based materials. The approach meant limitations to the scope and user-friendliness of the process.

In conducting consultations, the Commission despatched large maps of recommendations to local authorities and some local organisations as well as displaying mapping in pdf format on its website. Respondents to consultation were invited to inform the Commission in writing of their views on new ward or electoral division boundaries or to comment on the Commission's recommendations.

Feedback on the Commission's approach and its own analysis highlighted several areas for potential improvement in the way consultation was conducted. For example, pdf maps (which were up to 100MB) were difficult for users to download, interrogate and print. This proved to be a barrier to engaging in the consultation process.

Respondents to consultation were expected to provide a detailed description and argument about their alternative proposals for electoral arrangements. Describing a pattern of wards in words alone is complex and time-consuming and could potentially leave room for doubt in interpreting submissions.

The costs of producing mapping are also high. For many local authority areas, printing maps at A0 size is the only option for providing ground detail which is sufficient for consultation purposes. The limited quantity of mapping produced and distributed, by definition, limited the scope of consultation.

Paper based consultations also require high levels of administration within the Commission to log, respond to, scan and publish results. Similarly, by publishing maps and other materials on paper, the Commission's

accompanying report and guidance to consultees were not always integrated in way that guided people through the process effectively.

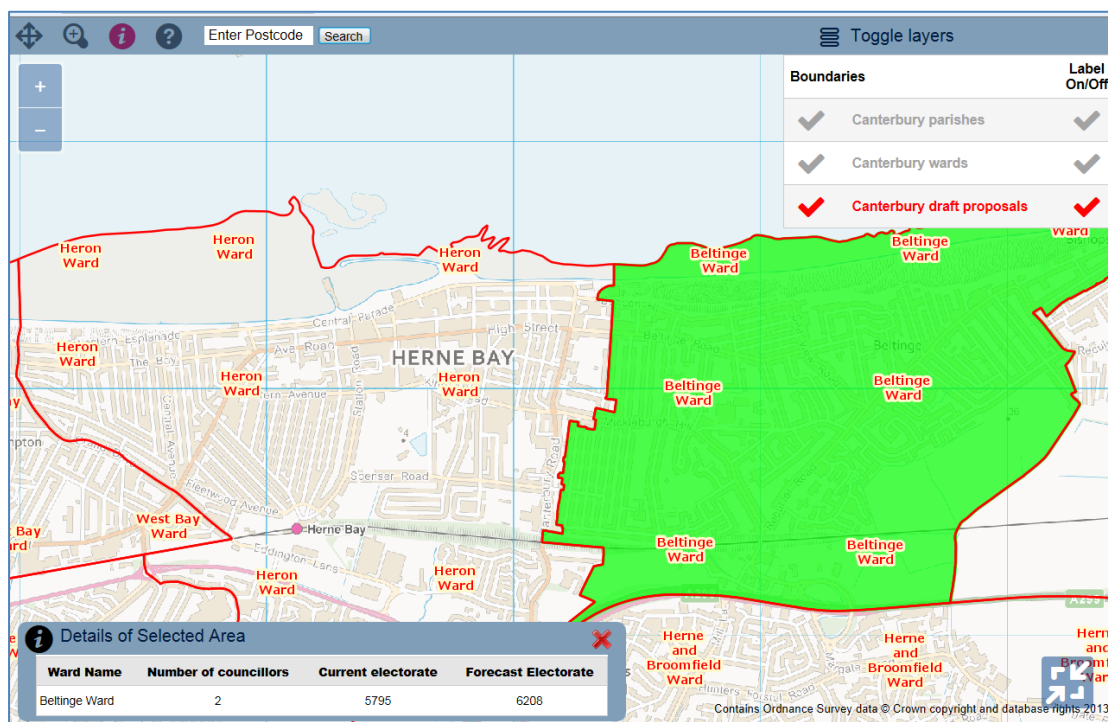
### ‘Digital by default’ public consultation

In 2011/12, the Commission began work with UK SME, Informed Solutions, to design a consultation platform which would move the Commission’s public engagement to an online environment to increase the reach of its activity and to encourage high quality feedback.

The consultation portal was designed to make the consultation process as user-friendly and intuitive as possible for local people and to encourage them to participate in the electoral review process which would ultimately affect their access to democracy.

First, the Commission streamed its mapping on to its specialist consultation portal which allowed users to find their area, zoom and pan around the map to find areas of interest and opt to view current boundaries or proposals which had been put forward by the Commission for consultation. Interface with the user was designed to be similar to well-known mapping applications with which the public would already be familiar.

Mapping is clearer than on the previous pdf arrangement. Users and potential respondents can zoom in to street-level detail, choose which combination of boundaries they wish to view and see information about proposals for their area such as the number of councillors proposed for each ward and the number of voters in each area.



Streamed online mapping allows members of the public to zoom, pan, search and interrogate proposals during consultation. Click [here](#) to explore the Commission’s streamed mapping.

The Commission then developed the portal so that respondents to consultation could draw their own boundaries or whole wards and highlight specific areas of interest. Those proposals could then be sent directly to the Commission with any further information respondents wish to provide (e.g. written comments, attached documents etc).

Drawing tools allow visitors to the website to draw a pattern of wards for their area using simple tools that will be familiar to anyone who has used other mapping software online as shown below.

The screenshot shows a web-based mapping tool interface. At the top left, there is a circular icon with a red pin and the text "Draw on map". Below this, there are three tool descriptions:

- Marker Tool** - click to drop a single point marker onto the map. To view a guidance video on adding a point click [here](#)
- Line tool** - click to start drawing a line on the map. Click to add each new point then double click to finish. To view a guidance video on adding a line click [here](#)
- Polygon tool** - click to start drawing a shape on the map. Click to add each new point then double click to finish. To view a guidance video on adding a shape click [here](#)

Below the tool descriptions, the subject of the consultation is "Subject: Electoral review for York". A toolbar contains various icons for drawing and editing, including a hand, a square, a pin, a line, a polygon, a delete, a refresh, a zoom, and a "Toggle layers" button. The main map area shows a street map of York with three proposed wards highlighted in different colors:


- 1: My proposed Guildhall ward** (orange)
- 2: My proposed Fishergate ward** (purple)
- 3: My proposed Micklegate ward** (green)


At the bottom of the map, there is a copyright notice: "Contains Ordnance Survey Data © Crown copyright and database rights 2013".

**Users can draw their own proposed pattern of wards for the Commission to consider during consultation.**

Alternatively, respondents can simply draw their preferred boundaries if they do not wish to submit proposals for complete wards. The tool is ideal for putting forward minor boundary changes to recommendations to capture ultra-local evidence that can lead to stronger recommendations overall.



 Draw on map

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Subject: Electoral review for Suffolk Coastal District



If respondents wish simply to highlight points of interest, for example, where local amenities in the local authority area lie or other specific information which the Commission should take into account, a 'flag' tool allows users to pinpoint the area in question and for text to be added which is then considered by the Commission.

The portal is highly configurable and pages can be altered to reflect subtle changes in process or timescale as well as drawing particular attention to controversial parts of recommendations where necessary.

Submissions are stored securely where they are automatically logged, responded to and filed. Each consultation has its own page with all relevant guidance and area-specific information to guide users through the process. Each page also has a simple back-end function which allows staff to manage and update pages with minimal training and time resource.

In the past year, the Commission has made further improvements to the portal to reflect the changing ways in which citizens use digital communications. The site is now tablet-friendly to reflect analytics that showed non-PC, hand-held

devices were becoming an increasingly popular way of accessing the site. In addition an LGBCE 'app' is now available so potential respondents are only ever a single click away from the consultation process.

## **Outputs**

In August 2014, the Commission and its partner in delivering the portal, Informed Solutions, won the national Nominet IT award for digital innovation in public services. See here for details: [www.theguardian.com/media-network/nominet-partner-zone/nominet-internet-awards-2014-winners](http://www.theguardian.com/media-network/nominet-partner-zone/nominet-internet-awards-2014-winners).

Since the establishment of the consultation portal, responses to consultation have increased by over 100% for some comparable electoral reviews.

Feedback from the Commission's customer surveys reveal improved satisfaction with the consultation process overall.

The Commission has been able to reduce its printing and publication costs by 30% within 18 months of the portal going live despite a demonstrable improvement in the service.

Back-office administration of responses to consultation have reduced as the portal actively manages, responds to and files submissions in a secure and Commission-specific way.

The portal allows users to be only one click away from taking part in a consultation process that will affect their access to democracy. By integrating the site with the Commission's social and traditional media platforms, the portal provides a one-stop-shop approach to consultation where there is less chance of potential respondents failing to complete the process.

## **Conclusion**

The Commission's consultation portal is an example of digital democracy in action. It replaces a bureaucratic process of public consultation with a user-friendly service that aims to be as intuitive as other online applications available to the public in their daily lives.

The portal has demonstrably increased public engagement whilst also delivering efficiencies to the public purse. It allows the Commission to carry out public consultations which are designed primarily with members of the public in mind rather than the needs of the organisation.

As GIS technology continues to evolve, the Commission aims to make further improvements to the service over the coming years to ensure that citizens can have an even greater say over the design of their democratic arrangements.

The portal can be found at: [www.consultation.lgbce.org.uk](http://www.consultation.lgbce.org.uk).