**Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland**

**2023 Parliamentary Boundary Review, Secondary Consultation**

**Public Hearing, Clayton Hotel, Belfast**

**2nd March 2022**

**District Judge Steven Keown (Chair of the Public Hearing):**

Good morning everyone, good morning to everybody in the room. We may have some people attending via the video link later on in the day but I don’t believe there is anybody that I need to say hello to on the video link at the moment. You are all very welcome. Let me take this opportunity to confirm that our technology is running smoothly, happy enough? I will check whenever somebody comes onto the video link that they can hear and see us in-person, and vice versa, but there’s no requirement to do that at the moment.

It is now shortly after 11amand I formally declare this public hearing open. My name is Steven Keown and I have been appointed by the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland to chair this hearing about its Initial Proposals for Parliamentary constituencies in Northern Ireland. I’m a District Judge sitting in the Magistrates’ Court. I’m currently assigned to Fermanagh, sitting in Enniskillen, and I’m delighted to be here. I am independent of the Commission, and my role is to chair this hearing, in line with the legislation – I am not required to subsequently make any recommendations to the Commission relating to the proposals.

I am assisted here today by members of the Commission Secretariat, including the Secretary to the Commission, Heather McKinley, who is sitting beside me. I am also grateful to our AV team who are managing the technical side of the hearing.

The Parliamentary Constituencies Act (as amended) sets out a number of duties relating to my role – but in particular, it notes that it is for the Chair to determine the procedure that is to govern the hearing and ensure its effective operation, in line with the legislation.

The Act requires the Commission to hold a number of public hearings during the secondary consultation period. The relevant legislation states that that ‘the public hearings in Northern Ireland shall be concerned with proposals for Northern Ireland, and shall between them cover the whole of Northern Ireland.’ Public hearings are therefore intended to provide an opportunity to make representations about any of the Commission’s initial proposals, and to present or comment on any alternative proposals.

If you have a view on the Commission’s proposals, this is your opportunity to be heard. I would however highlight that in making their initial proposals, the Commission was constrained by the rules set out in the legislation and so any alternative proposals put forward should also comply with those rules.

It is important to note that representations about any or all proposed constituencies can be made at any of the three public hearings in Northern Ireland that have been scheduled as part of the 2023 Boundary Review. You may therefore attend any of the public hearings and make a representation about any constituency in Northern Ireland.

The legislation requires me to make you aware of how written representations may also be made during the secondary consultation period. In addition to the public hearings, the secondary consultation period provides an opportunity to submit further written representations with respect to the representations from the initial consultation period. These are available on the Commission’s website. Written representations made during the secondary consultation can therefore support or challenge the representations made by others during the initial consultation.

Written representations must be received by the Commission by the close of the secondary consultation period on 23rd March – details about how to submit your representation are available on the Commission’s website, or please do speak to any of the Secretariat staff here today. The Commission will take both written representations, and those made at the public hearings, into account as it moves through the review process.

The legislation also requires that the hearing should begin with an explanation of the proposals about the hearing is concerned. I would now ask the Secretary to the Boundary Commission, Heather McKinley, to make a brief presentation of the Boundary Commission’s Initial Proposals.

**Heather McKinley (Secretary to the Boundary Commission):**

Thank you. Good morning everyone. My name is Heather McKinley and I’m the Secretary to the Boundary Commission. Myself and the Secretariat team are responsible for supporting the Boundary Commissioners in delivering the 2023 Parliamentary Boundary Review, and my team and I are here today to support the Chair in carrying out his role.

As we have heard then, the Parliamentary Constituencies Act (as amended) requires that each public hearing should begin with an explanation of the proposals about which the hearing is concerned, so I’ll briefly run through those now.

The Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland is an independent and impartial public body responsible for reviewing Parliamentary Constituency Boundaries in Northern Ireland on the basis of rules established by Parliament. These rules are set out in the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986, amended most recently by the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 2020.

As set out in the 2020 Act, all four UK Commissions are required to submit a final report with recommendations to the Speaker of the House of Commons by the 1st July 2023. The 2020 Act also stipulates 650 seats across the UK, with Northern Ireland retaining its 18 seats for the 2023 Review.

This review commenced in January 2021 with the publication of the electoral data as at March 2020, which is the base data which must be used. The Commission published its initial proposals on 20th October 2021 and the eight week initial consultation period ended on the 15th December.

The representations received during the initial consultation period were then published on the Commission’s website in line with its statutory duties. The secondary consultation period then commenced on the 9th February, it will last for six weeks and close on the 23rd March.

There are a number of statutory rules which the Commission must follow in making its recommendations. Rule 2 specifies that each constituency must be within 5% of the electoral quota, that is between 69,724 electors, and 77,062 electors.

Rule 5 specifies other factors which the Commission may take into account if, and to such extent as, they think fit. These factors are: special geographical considerations, including in particular the size, shape and accessibility of a constituency; local government boundaries, i.e. ward boundaries, which exist or are prospective on the review date; the boundaries of existing constituencies; any local ties that would be broken by changes in constituencies; and the inconveniences attendant on such changes.

Rule 7 only applies to Northern Ireland. Where the Commission feels that having to apply Rule 2 would unreasonably impair its ability to take into account the factors set out in Rule 5, or to submit a report on time, Rule 7 can be applied, and one or more constituencies can be recommended which fall slightly outside the Rule 2 range, in accordance with a prescribed formula. For the 2023 Review, this means that the Commission could propose one or more constituencies of between 68,314 electors and 77,062 electors.

The last enacted Parliamentary Boundary Review was in 2008. In formulating its initial proposals the Commission noted that 11 of the 18 extant constituencies’ electorates fall outside that Rule 2 statutory range. For example, East Antrim has the smallest electorate at 64,907 electors, and Upper Bann has the largest electorate at 83,028 electors. Changes to the existing constituencies are therefore required.

It was also noted that the existing Parliamentary constituencies are those established in 2008, but that the existing local government boundaries (or wards) date from 2012. It is therefore the case that the boundaries of the current wards do not completely align with the boundaries of the existing constituencies. There are 56 wards which currently straddle two or more existing constituencies.

The Commission’s initial proposals are displayed on screen here, on an interactive map which you may have seen, and which the Commission published as part of its initial consultation resources. All 18 of the Commission’s proposed constituencies fall within the Rule 2 range. In making their initial proposals, the Commission did not consider itself to be unreasonably impaired and therefore has not relied on Rule 7 in any of these proposed constituencies.

In considering the Rule 5 factors, the Commission considered that the boundaries of existing constituencies and wards, being clear and certain, provided an appropriate starting point for its work. Wards are well-defined and well-understood units and the Commission therefore considered them to be the default building block for constituencies. In developing its initial proposals, the Commission was also mindful of undue disruption to existing constituency boundaries. In considering those existing ward boundaries to be the default building block for constituencies, the Commission sought to address the misalignment of the 56 wards that are currently split, by moving each of them wholly into a single constituency where the Commission was satisfied that it was appropriate to do so. Being mindful of undue disruption to existing constituency boundaries, the Commission was satisfied that it was appropriate for 54 of these split wards to be aligned wholly into one of the constituencies in which it was already partially located.

In addition, the Commission also took into consideration special geographic considerations, and understands that the factors of local ties and inconvenience will be informed by the consultation process.

Finally, the Commission is also required to recommend a name and designation, either county or borough, for each of the proposed constituencies. The Commission considered that in two of the 18 constituencies, the proposed changes mean that the existing name is no longer appropriate. The other 16 constituencies retain their current names. Four constituencies have been designated as borough constituencies, with the remaining 14 designated as county constituencies.

So this is an explanation of the proposals published by the Commission at the initial consultation stage. The Commission welcomed the representations it received relating to those proposals, and as we’ve heard, is now partway through the secondary consultation period during which of course, further reps can be submitted both via these public hearings and also in writing. Thank you.

**District Judge Steven Keown (Chair of the Public Hearing):**

Thank you, Heather. As we have already indicated, the public hearings for the 2023 Boundary Review are being held in a hybrid format, allowing for representations to be made both in-person, and via video link. Today’s hearing is planned to take place across three sessions:

* 11am to 1pm;
* 2pm to 4pm; and
* 5pm to 7pm.

I can vary that timetable and I will take into account the attendance today and the demand for opportunities to speak. I may adjourn any of those sessions early, if appropriate, or consider allowing them to run on to ensure all those who wish to speak have an opportunity to do so.

After the end of the secondary consultation period, the Act requires the Commission to publish the record of each public hearing. Therefore, all contributions to the hearing (both in-person and virtual) will be recorded, and to ensure accuracy, participants may be asked to repeat what they have said. The transcript will include the name of the speaker and organisation represented (if any).

I will not be able to hear representations about issues outside the scope of this hearing, such as the possible impact of the Commission’s proposals on future election results or the Rules contained within the legislation.

A number of people have registered to speak in advance, and have been given an indicative timeslot. If you have not registered to speak in advance, but wish to make a representation, you should indicate this to the Commission staff during the adjournment, who will seek to offer you a suitable speaking slot, and it doesn’t appear that there will be any difficulty in accommodating anybody.

Those making a representation in-person will be called up to the table at the front in turn. Please begin by:

* speaking into the microphone;
* stating your name; and
* whether you are speaking as an individual or on behalf of an organisation, and if so, the name of the organisation.

Those making a representation virtually will be asked to unmute themselves when called upon and are also asked to state the same information for the purposes of the recording.

If you have requested that the Commission team display any supporting materials on our screens relating to your representation, whether delivered in the room or online, we will cue those up for you at the appropriate time with the assistance of the AV staff - otherwise the Commission’s proposals map will be put back up on the screen as you speak.

At the end of each representation, there will be an opportunity for questions from other attendees to be put to speakers through myself. I would ask anyone wishing to pose a question to raise their hand (either in-person in the room, visibly on camera or using the electronic feature on Zoom) and wait until they have been called upon, before speaking. I would ask everyone to be courteous in their questions, bearing in mind that this is not intended to be a cross-examination. I may also put questions or points for clarification to speakers myself.

During the course of the hearing, please feel free to approach any of the Secretariat staff with any queries that you may have and they will be pleased to help you or to draw the matter to my attention. If attending virtually, please use the chat function to raise any issues with our technical support team.

Shortly we’ll move onto the speakers. I don’t think there’s any need to pause in the hearing in order to move onto that. Depending on the number of speakers, we may have to ask some of you to wait until the next session to speak - again, I don’t think that should arise, but if so, I would ask you please to be flexible. I would also note that we have requested that representations be of a duration no longer than 15 minutes but again, the Chair has flexibility and there is clearly scope to ensure everybody has an opportunity to speak fully during each of the sessions today.

Now, I believe the first person who is tabled to speak is Colin McGrath, MLA, on behalf of the SDLP. And I would ask Colin to come forward please.

**Colin McGrath MLA (SDLP):**

Thank you very much indeed, Chair. It’s good to be doing these things face to face and in a room again. It’s been a long time, and very welcome that we can get the opportunity, albeit that there was the opportunity to do it virtually, I thought it was important to be here, in the room.

As you’ve said, my name is Colin McGrath. I am an MLA for the SDLP for South Down, and prior to that was a Councillor on Down District Council for eleven years before that, so I have reasonable understanding of the boundary issues that there are within the area. And I suppose just maybe to begin by saying that I would be deeply unhappy with the proposals that have been suggested for South Down, and whilst I will expand upon some of the explanations for that, although I represent roughly the Downpatrick and Newcastle area, it’s no shock to people that I was born and bred in Downpatrick. It’s the area that I represented as a councillor. I’m privileged now to represent in Stormont, albeit now for a few weeks, that area.

For Downpatrick under the proposals to be split essentially into two thirds and one third, I think, is just, it’s sad. I think that it will be very unhelpful. I think that it will split the identity of the town. And something that I think is really important to remember for Downpatrick is that it is the county town of Down. It is an administrative headquarters for many organisations that have been part of the Down District Council, the Newry Mourne & Down and indeed, South Down. And now for that area to be completely split just doesn’t seem to have any logic to it, and there has been considerable concern from people on the ground making representations to myself that they are very unhappy that they would be moved into the Strangford constituency.

There is affinity to places such as Crossgar, Annacloy and Teconnaught which are sort of outlying areas to Downpatrick that have been part of South Down and maintain that identity. And the feelings would be similarly strong there that they have been part of South Down, they know their representatives, they know the area and they feel like they have that connection that there is through to South Down, and they feel that they will be at a distinct loss if they had to move into a Strangford constituency.

To look at maybe some of the areas that I think would be impacted, I think one has to look at the natural connections. The bottom line is, there is no affinity between the people of Downpatrick and the surrounding areas, the places such as Comber and Newtownards. It is a place that is 15-20 miles away, there are little or no connections between many different strands of public life, some of which I will detail after. And people are just left quite sort of senseless as to how they are supposed to suddenly have an affinity to another area to which they have got no connections at present.

As I said, representing Downpatrick and Newcastle, people within the Downpatrick area would have affinity to Newry given that they are part of it as a council area and that transition took place a number of years ago. And even though there is a massive mountain range in the middle, there is still a connection between the communities of those areas through sporting organisations, through cultural clubs and through community identity but people simply don’t have that connection through to Comber, to Newtownards and beyond.

Downpatrick is also, for South Down, it has more or less been in its current form for around about 30 years, give or take a ward or two, and the Member of Parliament has in fact been located within Downpatrick, and actually to suddenly have a sense of losing that, people in the Downpatrick area feel like they would be losing some sort of connectivity to their elected representative who would suddenly undoubtedly be based in Newtownards or beyond.

And in terms of issues such as transport connections, there isn’t even a bus. If anybody wanted to go and speak to their MP or to some of their elected representatives that will be based in Newtownards, there isn’t a bus that will take you from Downpatrick through to there. And people are feeling then in some instances that the house directly across the road from them can go down to the end of the street and see their MLA and they would have to go down into the street, get a bus to Belfast and then get a bus from Belfast out to Newtownards simply to go and speak to wherever their MP is based, and where the majority of MLAs for that constituency would be likely to be based.

Given that Downpatrick has been that sort of central town, it has become quite an administrative hub. So we have the Council Headquarters, we have further education colleges, we have a hospital, we have many other public administration buildings which suddenly then if your constituency is somewhat different you may be drawn in different directions. And that may be something that’s built upon in the future as opposed to something that may happen overnight but there will be that sense of the question of what constituency are you from - if you have to say that you’re from Strangford and Quoile, it could direct you in a different way from many of the services that are available within the centre of the town.

In terms, as I mentioned, about the sporting organisations and the cultural identity, I really don’t want to downplay that. The connections are within the Mourne area, if we go to organisations such as the GAA, it’s part of an East Down. If we go to cultural organisations, if we go to various services that are provided to different groups, they have an identity around the Down area which would then be changed with one group then being unable to participate in that. And people are afraid that that division means that they will lose their identity of being part of Downpatrick in order to facilitate the rejigging process.

And I understand and appreciate that this is a little bit, drawing the boundaries is not dissimilar to the child’s toy of putting the shapes into the box, only you’re only given one set of shapes and it’s very difficult to construct it together, but I think that taking the principal town of an area and splitting it two thirds/one third is something that has just gone down very, very badly. In fact, I grew up in a part of Downpatrick and I’ve moved to another part, the part that I grew up in will now be part of a different constituency from the constituency that I represent, and these are neighbours that I have grown up with all of my life that suddenly I will have to say that your representation will now be over in Newtownards. And again, they just can't see any of the logic to it.

Tourism is a very important issue, it’s one of the key drivers within South Down as an industry, if not the leading industry in the area. And tourism products are based around the Mourne Mountains and the St. Patrick’s product. And again, taking parts of Downpatrick and the Quoile River where we will take Saul which is the historic landing place of St. Patrick in Ireland, and then the cathedral where he is buried. To separate them out into different constituencies and then potentially in the future, constituencies may become the part that build into council areas or reviews of the future, to have those two separated from a tourism perspective seems rather illogical as well. If we could try and keep everything under one constituency, one council area, then it is much easier for us to brand those tourism products and ensure that they are amplified and sold as best we can.

Also, I would somewhat question just the reasoning for the substantial changes outside of Belfast. Evidence is likely to suggest that the population of Belfast is moving somewhat out but there seems to be an underlying principle of maintain the four constituencies in Belfast and then it actually goes out and impacts the rural areas. Many of my Belfast colleagues will be well used to me saying, “sure the city gets everything”, and even in this review it gets the four constituencies but again, it’s the rural communities that have to lose. But not even lose, they’ve been literally split and for people on opposite sides of the road to be put in different constituencies it just seems illogical.

Most of the connections that I have mentioned, be it the sporting, be it the geography, the transport, the education – all of those issues, there is an identity that moves in towards Downpatrick. As the local lad I’m going to protect that and I would really implore that, certainly within any changes, that we go back to maintaining the integrity of Downpatrick and those outlying areas that naturally move towards the hub of Downpatrick, that they can have their representatives based in Downpatrick and that they don’t have to suddenly turn and go 20 miles up the road to a place that they very rarely visit, to where they have no connections in terms of attending schools previously in the past, where there are no sporting or cultural connections. And from a community perspective, the representatives of the Strangford area as it is at the moment wouldn’t necessarily share the same designation as the representation that there is in South Down, so that would be a complete change for many of the people within Downpatrick as well.

And I know that in terms of redrawing the boundary, moving Ballynahinch back into South Down may look logical on a bit of paper, but they have been connected with the Strangford constituency for the last 20 or 30 years so they’re very well used to the fact that that’s what they have to do, that they need to go towards Newtownards for the representation or further along the peninsula. So they’re suddenly going to be changed and having to move in towards Downpatrick which they haven’t previously done, and I just think that leaving those areas roughly as they are at the moment would get close to maintaining the balances that you have to keep.

I’ll leave it there. If there’s any questions, I can expand.

**District Judge Steven Keown (Chair of the Public Hearing):**

Thank you very much, Colin, if you could just stay where you are at the moment just I until check please if anybody has any questions for Colin in relation to his presentation? And there’s nobody online at the moment, Colin, so I think that’s you finished. Thank you very much for your presentation.

Our next speaker, I believe is Stephen Barr from the Ulster Unionist Party. Mr Barr, if you want to come forward, please. Just in your own time, whenever you’re ready. If you could introduce yourself and who you are representing before you start, please, for the recording.

**Stephen Barr (UUP):**

Hello, my name is Stephen Barr, I’m representing the Ulster Unionist Party today. I propose to deal with our submission as a whole rather than just one area. If anyone has any doubts about what we’re saying or needs to see it in any more detail, it’s on the Commission’s website. So rather than go through it all today, that will take quite some time, I’ll just focus on several key areas.

First of all, we very much welcome the opportunity to engage with the Commission. We understand the importance of these reviews to ensure that all votes are of equal value, that constituencies are an equal size as much as possible because that’s a very desirable objective. We have the situation at the moment where we have East Antrim with about almost 65,000 electors, we have Upper Bann with 83,000 and clearly votes in Upper Bann are worth less than votes in East Antrim. And that’s not a good thing, either at Westminster or Stormont level, so you’ll completely appreciate what we’re trying to do here.

We also would like to state the fact that the geography of Northern Ireland is a problem for the Commission - we get that, that in many areas they’re constrained by the border. Fermanagh, for example, on three sides is constrained by the border so there’s not an awful lot you can do in terms of your leeway, and much of the country is also constrained by the sea in terms of constituencies there. So we get that it’s not an easy task, and also we know that what you do in one constituency does indeed have a knock-on on others and that one of the big problems here is there’s seven that are within the permitted range but unfortunately some of them are the ones destined for the most change under the Commission’s proposals and we see that.

The three areas that we particularly noted when it came to the Commission’s proposals was, West Tyrone is currently 3,385 below the range - it’s too small. We have East Antrim which is also, as you said, too small. And then the big problem is obviously in the south-east of the province, we have Newry and Armagh, South Down, and Upper Bann. Unfortunately the three largest are abutting each other so you’re going to have to do something that moves them all in some direction because we can't leave them untouched. So we get that.

In the west we look at West Tyrone, we look at the size of it - it’s a reasonably large constituency but in order to fix it, and it’s only 3,385 below quota which is basically a single ward, but in order to fix that, the level of change that’s proposed we believe is disproportionate. Certainly in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, the proposal to extend the borders of Fermanagh and South Tyrone eastward, basically to the edge of Armagh, Armagh City, we think is definitely not something we can support.

We also understand there is a great opposition from Dungannon at being put out of the existing Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency. The fact that that has been a very well settled constituency and a very well established one, there is a real identity there that has grown up over quite a period of time, so to lose Dungannon has really caused a lot of angst. And then to lose Dungannon and have that compensated for by the addition of two Armagh wards of Blackwater town and Loughgall is just not going down well, shall we say. And I think our submission hopefully makes that clear.

You’ve got a constituency that distance-wise runs from Belleek to Armagh which is the same distance from Crossmaglen to Coleraine. I think it’s sort of self-evident and I certainly make the point that political parties where they have one representative - if you have two MLAs you can argue, you can base one in the east and one in the west of a large constituency but to ask one MLA, be it he or she, to cover a distance like that is pretty spectacular. When you look at all the other constituencies, you do not see that level of territorial size or distance across.

So our proposals were that Fermanagh and South Tyrone should stay as is because it is within the range. We then looked at what could be done elsewhere and we understand this is the first stage of the review so we’re trying to give options and we’re trying to give the Commission leeway and almost tell it where to look, rather than tell it exactly what to do but there are options within, you either leave West Tyrone under quota because the options are there under some of the rules available to you, so that’s one that can be considered. If that isn’t acceptable to leave West Tyrone under quota because everyone around it is okay, you’ve got - Mid-Ulster is fine, East Londonderry is slightly under by about 300 and Foyle is okay. You’re talking a fairly small number of people. So of the disruption you’re doing to several constituencies to try to fix one, we think is disproportionate and therefore unnecessary and would justify West Tyrone being left as is, bearing in mind that I think it’s 350 for East Londonderry. Its figures are sort of masked because there’s a large student population sits within it regularly, there’s also a very large holiday home population up there with the caravans and the holiday homes, so East Londonderry is, I would submit, larger than it sometimes looks but it’s only 300 so it’s not to be worried about.

And then taking the north-east, there is a slight issue with regards to the proposals there. We believe that Ballymena is losing a significant part of its eastern hinterland in East Antrim, you can see those wards sitting, Glenwherry, Slemish, etc. - they look to Ballymena. The roads radiate into Ballymena, all the connections and ties are into Ballymena and therefore, we would argue that they should stay as is because again, we’re not talking about a huge number of people. East Antrim is 4,817 below the limit which is effectively one ward, so to go moving four or five wards to fix that one ward problem. So we would suggest the Commission looks at taking it up the Antrim Coast road towards Ballycastle and see what can be done there with regards to getting the numbers right because North Antrim, rather than lose those three, if it can lose something that will actually connect into keeping the Antrim Coast Road together. It’s well-defined in terms of tourism, it’s well-defined in terms of identity and we think that would be a better solution in that particular area. And we did suggest that in our proposal which would have East Antrim in an acceptable range, and North Antrim. So we’d just ask you to consider that.

The main problem, and I think it’s been alluded to by the SDLP, in South Down, we have that problem with those three large constituencies or population, and they’re large constituencies, electorates. Clearly it doesn’t help the fact that you’ve got all three together. Now, if we have closed off your latitude to move to the north and west with those two Armagh wards, you’re then completely truncated by the border and the sea, to the south and pretty much to the east. We think there is a way of, we agree ourselves obviously that Downpatrick is a better fit with South Down. I think there’s no real argument about that, and we wouldn’t want to advance one.

If you have to move from Newry and Armagh, we believe we can look at the Newry area. We do not like splitting urban areas, it’s a principle that we’ve long advocated ourselves but the eastern wards of Newry, under the Commission’s proposals because of the split ward idea - and again, we think that’s a good idea how you’ve tidied up 54 of the 56 - you’ve got an affiliation to the county of Down. You have some of the split wards already in the South Down area, so to put them back in would help the numbers there to take out of Armagh. When you look at Upper Bann, Upper Bann can lose a couple of wards up in towards Lagan Valley and that has indeed been suggested by yourselves. There’s the knock-on with South Belfast which comes into play because South Belfast is a very strange looking concoction, you have got it coming down well into County Down with wards like Saintfield, etc. So these things are all interlinked and interconnected.

We have come up with proposals that we believe would help to alleviate the problem and retain Strangford pretty much on its existing boundaries, which would mean we don’t need to move Downpatrick in. There’s a movement of wards around the area but Downpatrick stays with South Down. I mean I can go through them all in detail if we need to but the proposal from us would be don’t touch the north west if you’re in Armagh, leave Downpatrick as it is and work around the Lagan Valley, Upper Bann, South Belfast area to move wards around as you need to, to get it to the correct numbers.

We’d also just say, having looked at some of the other proposals from the other parties at this stage, Sinn Féin had a proposal for three seats for Belfast and a new ward created in the middle of Antrim. And one thing we would like to say on that is that we noticed the name Coleraine, the district of Coleraine would move into North Antrim, and the existing, effectively East Londonderry and Mid-Ulster would become known as Glenshane. We would oppose that. Coleraine is in County Londonderry and always has been. It’s not North Antrim. The other point would be Londonderry would be the only name of Northern Ireland’s six counties that does not feature on the electoral map if that were to be accepted, and we think that would be a retrograde step. All six counties are represented and we don’t see any reason why we wouldn’t want to see that going forward.

So basically, that’s our commentary on the wards. We get what the Commission is trying to do, we understand that it isn’t easy, we understand that there are other issues of contention within this but in terms of the main issues, we would sort of focus our minds and urge yourselves to have a look at.

**District Judge Steven Keown (Chair of the Public Hearing):**

Just to clarify, Stephen, you’ve confirmed that what you have spoken about today is also on the Commission’s website in more detail and the written representation is broken down into more specifics, perhaps below the general headline points that you’ve mentioned today?

**Stephen Barr (UUP):**

Exactly. To go through, I’m not sure how many pages, it could be up to 18 or 20, to read through those I don’t think would be a good use of your time or anyone else’s.

**District Judge Steven Keown (Chair of the Public Hearing):**

I just wanted to make that clear for the recording so that people know they can drill down and underneath those headline points, and consider carefully the representations that have been made in writing to the Boundary Commission as well. Thank you. Could I ask if there are any questions for Stephen Barr in relation to the presentation? Stephen, thank you very much.

Can I also check please just if anyone else wishes to speak at the moment? I propose just to say that I would like to thank the speakers today for their articulate and clearly set out presentations. Thank you very much. As I said earlier, the day is broken down into three sessions. So there is nobody who has indicated that they wish to speak any further at this morning’s session. I would propose even if the recording ends, I intend to sit on just for a short period just to make sure nobody else turns up, before I formally adjourn until after lunch time. But thank you very much everybody for their participation this morning. That formally closes the morning session although as Chair, I will remain here for at least 10 or 15 mintues before adjourning for lunch, just to make sure nobody else turns up. It is clear and important to point out that if somebody did turn up when the session adjourns, there will be more than enough time to accommodate them in a later session. Thank you very much everybody. Thank you.

**[Hearing adjourned]**

**District Judge Steven Keown (Chair of the Public Hearing):**

Good afternoon everybody, to the afternoon session of the Boundary Commission Northern Ireland Public Hearing. Everybody is welcome including our speaker who is coming in on video link. We’ve already established that technology is running smoothly and Mr Munro, who appears on this video link, can see and hear us and we can see and hear Mr Munro, so thank you for that. I formally declare this afternoon session of the public hearing open. Obviously the hearing is divided into three sessions and as a result, as people are appearing in the sessions, different sessions, who didn’t appear this morning, I propose to run through the introduction again so that everybody understands the remit and the background and why we are here.

My name is Steven Keown and I have been appointed by the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland to chair this hearing about its Initial Proposals for Parliamentary constituencies in Northern Ireland. I’m a District Judge sitting in the Magistrates’ Court. I am not required to subsequently make any recommendations to the Commission relating to the proposals.

I am assisted here today by members of the Commission Secretariat, including the Secretary to the Commission, Heather McKinley, who is sitting beside me. I am also grateful to our AV team who are managing the technical side of the hearing.

The Parliamentary Constituencies Act (as amended) sets out a number of duties relating to my role – but in particular, it notes that it is for the Chair to determine the procedure that is to govern the hearing and ensure its effective operation, in line with the legislation.

The Act requires the Commission to hold a number of public hearings during the secondary consultation period. The relevant legislation states that that ‘the public hearings in Northern Ireland shall be concerned with proposals for Northern Ireland, and shall between them cover the whole of Northern Ireland.’ Public hearings are therefore intended to provide an opportunity to make representations about any of the Commission’s initial proposals, and to present or comment on any alternative proposals.

If you have a view on the Commission’s proposals, this is your opportunity to be heard. I would however highlight that in making their initial proposals, the Commission was constrained by the rules set out in the legislation and so any alternative proposals put forward should also comply with those rules.

It is important to note that representations about any or all proposed constituencies can be made at any of the three public hearings in Northern Ireland that have been scheduled as part of the 2023 Boundary Review. You may therefore attend any of the public hearings and make a representation about any constituency in Northern Ireland.

The legislation requires me to make you aware of how written representations may also be made during the secondary consultation period. In addition to the public hearings, the secondary consultation period provides an opportunity to submit further written representations with respect to the representations from the initial consultation period. These are available on the Commission’s website. Written representations made during the secondary consultation can therefore support or challenge the representations made by others during the initial consultation.

Written representations must be received by the Commission by the close of the secondary consultation period on 23rd March. Details about how to submit your representation are available on the Commission’s website, or please do speak to any of the Secretariat staff here today.

The Commission will take both written representations, and those made at the public hearings, into account as it moves through the review process.

The legislation also requires that the hearing should begin with an explanation of the proposals about the hearing is concerned. I would now ask the Secretary to the Boundary Commission, Heather McKinley, to make a brief presentation of the Boundary Commission’s Initial Proposals.

**Heather McKinley (Secretary to the Boundary Commission):**

Thank you very much and good afternoon. Myself and the Secretariat team are responsible for supporting the Boundary Commissioners in delivering the 2023 Parliamentary Boundary Review. My team and I are here today to support the Chair in carrying out his role at this public hearing.

As we have heard then, the Parliamentary Constituencies Act (as amended) requires that each public hearing should begin with an explanation of the proposals about which the hearing is concerned. So I’ll briefly run through those now.

The Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland is an independent and impartial public body responsible for reviewing Parliamentary constituency boundaries in Northern Ireland on the basis of rules established by Parliament. These rules are set out in the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986, amended most recently by the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 2020.

As set out in the 2020 Act, all four UK Commissions are required to submit a final report with recommendations to the Speaker of the House of Commons by the 1st July 2023. The 2020 Act also stipulates 650 seats across the UK, with Northern Ireland retaining its 18 seats for the 2023 Review.

This review commenced in January 2021 with the publication of the electoral data as at March 2020, which is the base data which must be used. The Commission published its initial proposals on 20th October 2021 and the eight week initial consultation period ended on the 15th December.

The representations received during the initial consultation period were then published on the Commission’s website in line with its statutory duties. The secondary consultation period then commenced on the 9th February, it will last for six weeks and close on the 23rd March.

There are a number of statutory rules which the Commission must follow in making its recommendations. Rule 2 specifies that each constituency must be within 5% of the electoral quota, that is between 69,724 electors, and 77,062 electors.

Rule 5 specifies other factors which the Commission may take into account if, and to such extent as they think fit. These factors are: special geographical considerations including, in particular, the size, shape and accessibility of a constituency; local government boundaries, i.e. ward boundaries, which exist or are prospective on the review date; the boundaries of existing constituencies; any local ties that would be broken by changes in constituencies; and the inconveniences attendant on such changes.

Rule 7 only applies to Northern Ireland, and where the Commission feels that having to apply Rule 2 would unreasonably impair its ability to take into account the factors set out in Rule 5, or to submit a report on time, Rule 7 can be applied, and one or more constituencies can be recommended which fall slightly outside the Rule 2 range in accordance with a prescribed formula. For the 2023 Review, this means that the Commission could propose one or more constituencies of between 68,314 electors and 77,062 electors.

The last enacted Parliamentary Boundary Review was in 2008. In formulating its initial proposals, the Commission noted that eleven of the eighteen extant constituencies’ electorates fall outside that Rule 2 statutory range. For example, East Antrim has the smallest electorate at 64,907 electors, and Upper Bann has the largest electorate at 83,028 electors. Changes to the existing constituencies are therefore required.

It was also noted that the existing Parliamentary constituencies are those established in 2008, but that the existing local government boundaries, or wards, date from 2012. It is therefore the case that the boundaries of the current wards do not completely align with the boundaries of the existing constituencies. There are 56 wards which currently straddle two or more existing constituencies.

The Commission’s initial proposals are displayed on screen here, on an interactive map which you may have seen, and which the Commission published as part of its initial consultation resources. All eighteen of the Commission’s proposed constituencies fall within the Rule 2 range. In making their initial proposals, the Commission did not consider itself to be unreasonably impaired and therefore, has not relied on Rule 7 in any of these proposed constituencies.

In considering the Rule 5 factors, the Commission considered that the boundaries of existing constituencies and wards, being clear and certain, provided an appropriate starting point for its work. Wards are well-defined and well-understood units and the Commission therefore considered them to be the default building block for constituencies. In developing its initial proposals, the Commission was also mindful of undue disruption to existing constituency boundaries. In considering those existing ward boundaries to be the default building block for constituencies, the Commission sought to address the misalignment of the 56 wards that are currently split, by moving each of them wholly into a single constituency where the Commission was satisfied that it was appropriate to do so. Being mindful of undue disruption to existing constituency boundaries, the Commission was satisfied that it was appropriate for 54 of these split wards to be aligned wholly into one of the constituencies in which it was already partially located.

In addition, the Commission also took into consideration special geographic considerations, and understands that the factors of local ties and inconvenience will be informed by the consultation process.

Finally, the Commission is also required to recommend a name and designation, either county or borough, for each of the proposed constituencies. The Commission considered that in two of the 18 constituencies, the proposed changes mean that the existing name is no longer appropriate. The other 16 constituencies retain their current names. Four constituencies have been designated as borough constituencies, with the remaining 14 designated as county constituencies.

So this is an explanation of the proposals published by the Commission at the initial consultation stage. The Commission welcomed the representations it received relating to those proposals, and as we’ve heard, is now partway through the secondary consultation period during which of course, further reps can be submitted both via these public hearings and also in writing. Thank you.

**District Judge Steven Keown (Chair of the Public Hearing):**

Thank you, Heather. As we have already indicated, the public hearings for the 2023 Boundary Review are being held in a hybrid format, allowing, as we have seen throughout the day, for representations to be made both in-person, and via video link. Today’s hearing, as I indicated, is across three sessions. We had a session this morning from 11am to 1pm. This is the afternoon session of 2pm to 4pm, and the third session is 5pm to 7pm.

I can vary that timetable and I will take into account the attendance today and the demand for opportunities to speak. I may adjourn any of those sessions early, if appropriate, or consider allowing them to run on to ensure all those who wish to speak have an opportunity to do so.

After the end of the secondary consultation period, the Act requires the Commission to publish the record of each public hearing. Therefore, all contributions to the hearing (both in-person and virtual) will be recorded, and to ensure accuracy, participants may be asked to repeat what they have said. The transcript will include the name of the speaker and organisation represented (if any).

I will not be able to hear representations about issues outside the scope of this hearing, such as the possible impact of the Commission’s proposals on future election results or the Rules contained within the legislation.

A number of people have registered to speak in advance, and have been given an indicative timeslot. If you have not registered to speak in advance, but wish to make a representation, you should indicate this to the Commission staff during the adjournment, who will seek to offer you a suitable speaking slot, and it doesn’t appear that there will be any difficulty in accommodating anybody.

Those making a representation in-person will be called up to the table at the front in turn. Please begin by:

* speaking into the microphone;
* stating your name; and
* whether you are speaking as an individual or on behalf of an organisation, and if so, the name of the organisation.

Those making a representation virtually will be asked to unmute themselves when called upon and are also asked to state the same information for the purposes of the recording.

If you have requested that the Commission team display any supporting materials on our screens relating to your representation, whether delivered in the room or online, we will cue those up for you at the appropriate time with the assistance of the AV staff, otherwise the Commission’s proposals map will be put back up on the screen as you speak.

At the end of each representation, there will be an opportunity for questions from other attendees to be put to speakers through myself. I would ask anyone wishing to pose a question to raise their hand (either in-person in the room, visibly on camera or using the electronic feature on Zoom) and wait until they have been called upon, before speaking. I would ask everyone to be courteous in their questions, bearing in mind that this is not intended to be a cross-examination. I may also put questions or points for clarification to speakers myself.

During the course of the hearing, please feel free to approach any of the Secretariat staff with any queries that you may have and they will be pleased to help you or to draw the matter to my attention. If attending virtually, please use the chat function to raise any issues with our technical support team.

Shortly we’ll move onto the speakers. I don’t think there’s any need to pause in the hearing in order to move onto that. Depending on the number of speakers, we may have to move that around but I do not envisage that today or certainly not this afternoon. I would also note that we have requested that representations be of a duration no longer than 15 minutes but again, the Chair has flexibility and there is clearly scope to ensure everybody has an opportunity to speak fully during each of the sessions today.

We move onto the first speaker, it’s Shane Munro who is appearing remotely. Could I please ask Mr Munro that you unmute please and introduce yourself and then make your representation?

**Shane Munro:**

I’m Shane Munro and I’m not affiliated with any organisation, totally not at all. I have a bit of text I can read out but I’ll probably want to expand on points in the text and make things clear, but one of the sort of things I recognised is that I think the Boundary Commissions lack a tool for necessary production and that is basically another pen with a different colour. And that’s essentially really simple because you have basically a classical spectrum of power, you’re connected to that, that is that you define boundaries and they’re allocated relative to votes, of course there’s local ties and things like this.

One of the things I noticed is that actually you have this thing where an MP is elected, after that election they have a relationship to the distribution of funds and allocation of resources and so on, so we build our societies this way. And they represent well, they represent badly, things can go skewiff. If you have something like a hospital and it’s located in one location, it’s serving several districts, and the balance of -okay, what I’m proposing is a shared constituency or shared constituencies and this extra pen would cover everything apart from the voting element of the constituency. Maybe I should just read this, it’s clearer.

The Boundary Commission has a relationship to a classical spectrum of power. The technocratic power can be used to create a tool which will address representational deficits in the democratic system. These deficits have nothing to do with proportional representation or gerrymandering, it’s a dislocation of resources away from the voter. To begin to correct this all that you need is new lines on the map with a different colour. These boundaries are not drawn around voter allocations but instead, around resources. Within these new boundaries MPs from local constituencies are allocated into the newly defined spaces along with their localities’ current representative. These boundaries are essentially integrated into the current boundary space.

And when I say that, I don’t necessarily mean that - okay, so there’s several constituencies, you would have a hospital say - I mean I have been in contact with the Boundary Commission of England, I’ve made a presentation in Westminster, I’m making a presentation to you, I’ll write a presentation to the Scottish Boundary Commission. So, when I give you examples it’s not out of disrespect that I don’t point out necessarily Irish particular examples, I don’t know the environment, I don’t understand the local ties in the same way but what I do know is it’s a deficit and the deficit is not a consequence of the Boundary Commission or the great works that they do - there are limits and concerns about gerrymandering and things like that, and you see the damage that that does across the world and how important it is to represent effectively.

And of course, resources are redistributed and choices are made and it’s very difficult for any person to be impartial in any of those things. I have to admit that, in any given case, that I will have a certain desire or need. Like in Cambridge where my parents are living and where I’m staying at the moment, there is Addenbrooke’s Hospital. I had my foot smashed and I’ve got three massive screws through it, they did an amazing job. I can definitely say in the process that I see, oh there’s maybe this way that could have been improved, that way could be improved, I’m not going to go on some massive campaign about doing that but when I think about these differences and problems, I can extrapolate into other spaces and understand that the given, the purpose, you have the purpose to do this, right, and I just think you need that pen to do it. It wouldn’t affect any of the work that you’ve done already to draw say, a circle around a hospital or the border in the Irish Sea. This is not specific to solving any of those particular conflicts or anything else, what it is, is something that could have always been done at any time. I didn’t notice or realise that, there’s potential, and while in England, the Boundary Commission are responsible for that side.

If you were to circle, for example, a port area in Belfast and you could take up some housing - the host constituency would deal with the voting. This is another colour. You highlight the port area and then you offer it up to the other side. There’s no power applied to this boundary, it’s just a mark on a piece of paper, it’s just a mark on a piece of paper but because you mark it in some way or another. It wouldn’t adjust essentially fundamentally the choices that you’ve made today because it would be a presentation where you say look, we’ve made a mark on a piece of paper, there’s this proposition, it could deal with - so, if say in Liverpool where they are receiving ferries, If they were to do the same thing and offer it up as a shared constituency, the MPs on each side would have to listen to the voice of people on the other side of the water. That would begin to essentially sew up some of these differences. And like I say, it’s got nothing to do with the Good Friday Agreement or the protocol essentially, what it is, is the boundary drawn through the centre of the water sort of reveals an essential problem that anyway you’d have the waters, you can't part the seas. You can complain about - okay, if I find - so you still need to climb the mountain, don’t you.

Okay, maybe I’m not helping describing that way, it’s all kind of biblical. But anyway, you know, the distribution of resources and the general, gradual, essential allocation of resources, they pile up. So a hospital is a great example of where they pile up. And what this does is it expects the MPs to bring their discussions closer to the regions by reconnecting the voters to places that they love. And love is an important factor here because you can clap all day for a hospital but you need to then back it up, right. And if you’re gonna trust the voter, then trust them. The MPs that get elected, they go to Parliament, you know in Ireland that going to Parliament isn’t always the best idea for all corners of the - if you ask the Sinn Féin, for many years they refused to go to Westminster just because Westminster say you have to come here. It doesn’t mean that they seek a power essentially in local representation.

And I don’t think that the unionists would say fundamentally any different. And if you’re gonna clap, for example to the NHS, I can use the NHS as the easiest example. It is meant to be that we’re pulling in the same direction, so if they can’t sit and argue, we shouldn’t have to go to Westminster, give our ideas to Westminster as often as we do, that they take everything up there, they shout at the cameras, they’ve got their jeering wall lined up, they know how to do that and then they bring it back and say we did the best we can.

There are resources, they’ve been allocated per person, these resources are created because they understand what we care about and what we love. And actually, more fundamentally it can be very, while I say something like Addenbrooke’s, is that’s very generic. I think if you were to do something like this, the Boundary Commissions would have to somehow have a very standardised - that isn’t contentious in the same way as the Northern Ireland protocol - which I would recommend that each of you circle a bit on the map, send it to your local MPs and just say you know, we’ve done our job but here’s something that doesn’t mean anything that could mean everything. And we offer it to them. And you don’t need to wait for the British, the English Boundary Commission to respond, they can do the same and you can see if the MPs then decide to sew it up. It will just be a mark on a piece of paper.

I’m an artist. This is like a bit of art work. I say Belfast and Liverpool because the ferries go there, that’s the sort of technocratic solution but I don’t know if there’s a better connection across the waters that you could think of that you could then offer it up. I haven’t done the research. I just know that people need to be better connected and this can definitely do that. And if it puts more responsibility on the MPs it’s designed to do that, there’s an idea, and it can, you know - if you’re talking about an effective - you know, the value here is it doesn’t matter what political system you’re using, you just need somebody who is - so it can cross many different types of borders, it can deal with issues in Russia and Ukraine for example, that if one side offers up in one way then you’ve done your job. You cannot relentlessly argue a case until you actually say okay, then we will share, we love this thing, we have this problem, it doesn’t have to be that you necessarily agree, you just have to agree that this is a problem that needs to be resolved, or an area of particular interest, or if there’s going to be a huge amount of investment in an area and you say well, we have to pull in the same direction so the MPs can argue correctly and argue, make their case - why are they taking up to Westminster in the first place.

**District Judge Steven Keown (Chair of the Public Hearing):**

Could I just interrupt, Mr Munro, and say - would it be fair to say that the core issue of your representation is that constituencies should be defined by access to resources and infrastructure, and the sharing of same, as a consideration that should be given more weight than perhaps it currently is, and more weight as set against electoral quotas and numbers of electors?

**Shane Munro:**

Oh no, no I’m not saying that. I’m saying that the electoral quotas are very important. What I’m saying is that you need to draw - Parliament -but to recognise that on a map in terms of shared resources is something.

**District Judge Steven Keown (Chair of the Public Hearing):**

So the Boundary Commission’s remit should be, in addition to the issue of electoral quotas, to include looking at areas, constituencies, around resources, and access to resources, and sharing resources and ports?

**Shane Munro:**

I think if you would do that in that shared - like if it was a hospital who you call, if you’ve got two heads are better than one. If you’ve got an operation there, if you’re staying there. I’m not exactly quite sure how the navigation of discussion will occur but what I do know is that that reconnects a voter relative to the resource and doesn’t disconnect, doesn’t undermine.

If you were gonna take this idea and apply it in the United States, for example, like I say, any boundaries, any different - you know, you’ve got states, Texas, it could be applied on a federal level. In the US, it’s the federal government allocating a lot of social investment in hospitals and so forth, and they have a huge amount of gerrymandering there, offensive amount, destructive, totally horrible. Nobody is going to argue about that I think generally, they don’t even take, nobody has got an argument about that over there either, that’s part of their policy somehow but on a federal level it could be applied and then you’d actually see, even if you drew a map you could see, “oh look how far away from particular constituencies their resources have been placed from all these other people”. It’s a problem. And in terms of love and unionism and all the rest of it for one part of your country, that resource somehow is over the water and somehow disconnected. I’m just making a point that these things are - it won’t affect gerrymandering. You cannot convince these people to stop gerrymandering but you can highlight the things that the voter can see, this is how disparate and separated we are kind of becoming and it’s like of course, you know, boundaries are important but you can agree locally how to get around this problem and really lots of places could benefit from it.

And post-Brexit I think if you’re gonna restructure and you’re gonna rethink about how we communicate with each other, you need to respect local ties much more substantially I think, and I think that’s really been discovered everywhere. And you need to trust people locally. It would be much better for the Bank of England, and any bank in terms of investments across the country, across the world, that you would then look, okay, well at least the British they are respecting, they’ve found a way to start to respect their local representation, the value of their investments and protecting it, maybe we’ll take loans from them because dah-dah-dah - right, at least the proof is in the pudding. Whereas right now, the square mile is kind of investment wise, it just - versus any other investment.

There’s lots of other comparisons about what people decide to love or care about in their communities, and one of those is domination of origin, particularly cheeses and things like that - and things like that. People love spending time in their kitchen and knocking things up and so this is really traditional and this is part of who we are and so on. That’s one little way in which that’s sort of - and it’s in a different spectrum of power but what I’m saying is your spectrum of power requires another pen in a different colour and allows sharing in a way that has not been done and is more democratic, it will be more democratic. You’ll still get your votes in, you can still do whatever. I’m still totally down for proportional representation, I’m completely against - you need the extra tool to do your job better than you’ve ever done before and that’s with full respect because it must be really difficult going around and listening to all of the things that people care about and say well, we have to pick this one more than this one. That’s the really tough position and I salute you all for doing it amazingly, irrespective I know that you’re dedicated so that’s why I’m doing this.

**District Judge Steven Keown (Chair of the Public Hearing):**

Thank you very much, Mr Munro. Your representation will be taken into account by the Boundary Commission, and will be taken with all the other representations into consideration as the Boundary Commission moves through this review process. So your input is important and we thank you for it.

**Shane Munro:**

You’re welcome. I will send the text as well.

**District Judge Steven Keown (Chair of the Public Hearing):**

You can submit that in writing to the Boundary Commission. I would encourage you to do so, please.

**Shane Munro:**

Okay lovely, thank you very much.

**District Judge Steven Keown (Chair of the Public Hearing):**

Thank you so much. Thank you. There is nobody else on the video link? There is currently nobody else in the room. Can we check maybe outside if there’s anybody outside that would like to make representations as part of this afternoon session? No more attendees.

Well as I say, this is the afternoon session. I propose to adjourn the afternoon session to the evening session which will be commencing at 5pm. I would like to make it clear that whilst the afternoon session is being adjourned, the staff and myself are staying in the building and if somebody makes themselves known before the start of the 5pm session that they wish to make representations we will reconvene early and hear those representations. Failing that, this session is adjourned until the third session at 5pm. Thank you very much.

**[Hearing adjourned]**

**District Judge Steven Keown (Chair of the Public Hearing):**

Good afternoon everyone, you’re all very welcome. It is now 5.07pm and I declare this hearing formally opened for the third session of the day. My name is Stephen Keown and I’ve been appointed by the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland to chair this hearing about its

Initial Proposals for Parliamentary constituencies in Northern Ireland. I’m a District Judge sitting in the Magistrates’ Court. I am independent of the Commission, and my role is to chair this hearing, in line with the legislation – I am not required to subsequently make any recommendations to the Commission relating to the proposals.

I am assisted here today by members of the Commission Secretariat, including the Secretary to the Commission, Heather McKinley, who is sitting beside me. I am also grateful to our AV team who are managing the technical side of the hearing.

The Parliamentary Constituencies Act (as amended) sets out a number of duties relating to my role – but in particular, it notes that it is for the Chair to determine the procedure that is to govern the hearing and ensure its effective operation, in line with the legislation.

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**Heather McKinley (Secretary to the Boundary Commission):**

Thank you. Myself and the Secretariat team are responsible for supporting the Boundary Commissioners in delivering the 2023 Parliamentary Boundary Review. And my team and I are here today to support the Chair in carrying out his role.

As we have heard then, the Parliamentary Constituencies Act (as amended) requires that each public hearing should begin with an explanation of the proposals about which the hearing is concerned. So I’ll briefly run through those now.

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In considering the Rule 5 factors, the Commission considered that the boundaries of existing constituencies and wards, being clear and certain, provided an appropriate starting point for its work. Wards are well-defined and well-understood units and the Commission therefore considered them to be the default building block for constituencies. In developing its initial proposals the Commission was also mindful of undue disruption to existing constituency boundaries. In considering those existing ward boundaries to be the default building block for constituencies, the Commission sought to address the misalignment of the 56 wards that are currently split, by moving each of them wholly into a single constituency where the Commission was satisfied that it was appropriate to do so. Being mindful of undue disruption to existing constituency boundaries the Commission was satisfied that it was appropriate for 54 of these split wards to be aligned wholly into one of the constituencies in which it was already partially located.

In addition, the Commission also took into consideration special geographic considerations, and understands that the factors of local ties and inconvenience will be informed by the consultation process.

Finally, the Commission is also required to recommend a name and designation, either county or borough, for each of the proposed constituencies. The Commission considered that in two of the 18 constituencies, the proposed changes mean that the existing name is no longer appropriate. The other 16 constituencies retain their current names. Four constituencies have been designated as borough constituencies, with the remaining 14 designated as county constituencies.

So this is an explanation of the proposals published by the Commission at the initial consultation stage. The Commission welcomed the representations it received relating to those proposals, and as we’ve heard, is now partway through the secondary consultation period during which of course, further reps can be submitted both via these public hearings and also in writing. Thank you.

**District Judge Steven Keown (Chair of the Public Hearing):**

Thank you, Heather. As we have already indicated, the public hearings for the 2023 Boundary Review are being held in a hybrid format, allowing for representations to be made both in-person, and via video link as we had earlier, but this final session relates to in-person representations, certainly so far that we’ve been advised of. This is the third session – the 5pm to 7pm session.

I can vary that timetable and I will take into account the attendance today and the demand for opportunities to speak although I don’t anticipate any problems. I may adjourn any of those sessions early, if appropriate, or consider allowing them to run on to ensure all those who wish to speak have an opportunity to do so.

After the end of the secondary consultation period, the Act requires the Commission to publish the record of each public hearing. Therefore, all contributions to the hearing (both in-person and virtual) will be recorded, and to ensure accuracy, participants may be asked to repeat what they have said. The transcript will include the name of the speaker and organisation represented (if any).

I will not be able to hear representations about issues outside the scope of this hearing, such as the possible impact of the Commission’s proposals on future election results or the Rules contained within the legislation.

A number of people have registered to speak in advance, and have been given an indicative timeslot. If you have not registered to speak in advance, but wish to make a representation, you should indicate this to the Commission staff during the adjournment, who will seek to offer you a suitable speaking slot, and it doesn’t appear that there will be any difficulty in accommodating anybody.

Those making a representation in-person will be called up to the table at the front in turn. Please begin by:

* speaking into the microphone;
* stating your name; and
* whether you are speaking as an individual or on behalf of an organisation, and if so, the name of the organisation.

For people who are attending virtually, there are requirements but that doesn’t apply to this session because there is nobody coming in virtually for the final session.

If you have requested that the Commission team display any supporting materials on our screens relating to your representation, whether delivered in the room or online, we will cue those up for you at the appropriate time with the assistance of the AV staff, otherwise the Commission’s proposal map will be put back up on the screen as you speak.

At the end of each representation, there will be an opportunity for questions from other attendees to be put to speakers through myself. I would ask anyone wishing to pose a question to raise their hand (either in-person in the room, visibly on camera or using the electronic feature on Zoom) and wait until they have been called upon, before speaking. I would ask everyone to be courteous in their questions, bearing in mind that this is not intended to be a cross-examination. I may also put questions or points for clarification to speakers myself.

During the course of the hearing, please feel free to approach any of the Secretariat staff with any queries that you may have.

I now propose to proceed onto our first speaker for this afternoon session which is Gavin Robinson MP on behalf of the DUP. If you wouldn’t mind coming forward please, Gavin.

**Gavin Robinson MP (DUP):**

Mr Chairman, Madam Secretary and staff, can I thank you. From the outset I wish to record our thanks for your work on the Commission, the work to date, and I welcome the opportunity to participate in this secondary consultation stage of your work. I do not plan to read into the record the DUP’s response to the provisional recommendations but rather to highlight the clear commonality between our proposals and the overwhelming majority of responses submitted at this stage of the process.

It is clear from the submissions made by others that they have identified the same core flaw with the provisional recommendations that we have, which have resulted in unacceptable changes proposed by the Commission - that of the proposals for Strangford and Quoile constituency and the consequential changes unnecessarily they cause to neighbouring constituencies.

It comes as no surprise to the DUP that the proposals for the Strangford and Quoile constituency in South Down have generated by far, the most objections during the provisional recommendation stage. As the Commission will be aware, the DUP’s response centred on the unacceptable nature of the proposals for these constituencies and the disruption that these proposals cause. We warmly welcome the strong endorsement for our proposed changes to the provisional recommendations from across the political and community spectrum which we believe are much more compliant with Rule 5, retain local resonance and provide a more purposeful geographical split.

As the core of the DUP’s proposals centred on the Strangford and Quoile constituency, and this has generated the most objections, I will begin my comments with this constituency. No political party has endorsed the proposals by the Boundary Commission for this constituency and the responses from those living within the constituency are overwhelmingly negative. The commonality in all these responses is the unwarranted and unnecessary decision to attempt to move the Downpatrick area into this constituency when Saintfield, Kilmore, Ballynahinch and Drumaness have far greater local connections. Their inclusion would be in far greater compliance with Rule 5 and would minimise the movement of electors from their existing constituencies. IC007 endorses the DUP proposal to keep Lecale in South Down. IC008 shares our deep concerns regarding the proposed changes highlighting Ballynahinch and Saintfield as having stronger links to Saintfield and Newtownards. IC011, as a resident of Downpatrick, totally opposes the inclusion of Downpatrick in the Strangford and Quoile constituency. Councillor Patrick Brown of the Alliance Party endorses our proposal to include Kilmore and Ballynahinch with Newtownards. The SDLP has very serious concerns with the proposed of inclusion of Downpatrick and Lecale area in the Strangford and Quoile constituency. The DUP highlights that Downpatrick’s identity is more to South Down than north towards Newtownards. This overwhelming and frank rejection of the proposals for Strangford and Quoile from such a large section of the community, and the consequential changes they have caused to South Down and neighbouring constituencies must be, we feel, a matter that will be addressed in the revised recommendations issued by the Commission.

No other constituency in Northern Ireland has received such objections from such a broad range of responses. This must lead the Commission to the inevitable outcome that changes of the next stage of the process must begin with Strangford and Quoile. As highlighted in the DUP response and endorsed by the responses of others, there is a solution that we believe is much more compliant with Rule 5, retains local resonance and provides a more purposeful geographical fit. As the Commission will be aware from the previous exercises, the DUP has always encouraged the full use of the legislative flexibilities afforded to Northern Ireland under the Act to create the most compliant constituencies. We believe this move by the Commission in other constituencies sets an important precedent which we believe should be built upon in the case of Strangford and Quoile, and South Down, to ensure special geographical considerations are maximised and disruption to local ties through changes to existing constituencies are minimised.

Outside of the problems caused by the proposals for Strangford and Quoile, and South Down, and the consequential impact for these constituencies upon neighbouring constituencies, just like the DUP, the majority of the responses are, on the whole, content with the provisional recommendations with a number of localised exceptions. In the city of Belfast, the Ulster Unionist Party, IC002, Dr Nicholas Whyte, the SDLP and the Alliance Party all generally concur with the position that we have outlined, and the Commission, on the provisional recommendations for East Belfast.

In North Belfast, while our concerns remain over the removal of the Shankill wards and the loss of Newtownabbey wards to neighbouring constituencies, no response put forward by others at this stage would overcome legislative requirements or improve the proposals made in the provisional recommendations of the Commission. Only the Alliance Party have endorsed the provisional recommendations for South Belfast and Mid-Down, although their proposals to change South Down and Strangford conflict with the stance they have adopted in relation to this constituency. They approach these constituencies in isolation rather than presenting a complete solution to you as a Commission.

The common solution to South Belfast as proposed by the DUP is based on moving Saintfield back into its natural home of Strangford. This view is endorsed by IC015, Councillor Patrick Brown, the SDLP, the Ulster Unionist Party and Sinn Féin. Rather than the Commission engaging in a fundamental rewrite of the proposals for the Belfast seats which would lead to major disruption, the solution put forward by the DUP has strong support from others and minimises disruption. This proposal would encompass Strangford retaining Saintfield, with Ballymacbrennan moving into South Belfast and Mid-Down in its place.

The proposals of West Belfast attract very limited commentary which we believe is indicative of the sound proposals put forward by the Commission. Our view is endorsed by IC002, the Ulster Unionist Party and the SDLP on the whole.

Moving to East Antrim, we welcome the views expressed by IC002 and the Alliance Party’s support, who strongly endorse the proposals for East Antrim. The counter-proposals by the Ulster Unionist Party to stretch East Antrim from the edge of Belfast to Ballycastle are completely unacceptable and would destroy local ties in both East Antrim and North Antrim. The DUP welcomes the endorsement of IC001 and IC002 for the East Londonderry constituency - as highlighted, the inclusion of Eglinton within East Londonderry is entirely reasonable. None of the counter-proposals suggested would be compliant with Rule 7 of the Act whilst at the same time minimising disruption to existing communities and constituencies.

The responses of IC001, IC014, IC016 and the Ulster Unionist Party all share the DUP’s concerns regarding the inclusion of Loughgall in Fermanagh and South Tyrone. Though like the DUP, all recognise that the Commission is constrained by the available electors in surrounding constituencies. As IC001 highlights, the Foyle constituency is also a fairly sound unit as a proposal. As with the counter-proposal produced for East Londonderry, those put forward for Foyle all suffer from a fatal flaw of not being compliant with Rule 7 of the Act, whilst at the same time minimising disruption to existing communities’ constituencies.

The SDLP and IC006 shares the DUP’s concern at the inclusion of the Aghagallon ward in the Lagan Valley constituency as the area has no affiliation with Lisburn but rather looks toward Lurgan. We welcome the UUP’s endorsement of our proposal to move Ballymacbrennan into Belfast South. The limited commentary and opposition to the proposals by the Commission for Mid Ulster which have been positively endorsed by the DUP and the UUP show the Commission made sound proposals in this constituency. Notwithstanding our previous remarks regarding Loughgall, we welcome IC001, IC002, the SDLP’s and the UUP’s overall endorsement for the proposals for Newry and Armagh. As IC001 rightly says, changes to North Antrim are somewhat inevitable. Our concerns over the removal of Slemish and the Glenwhirry wards are shared by the SDLP, the Ulster Unionist Party and IC001.

The DUP shares the position of IC001, IC002, the Ulster Unionist Party and the Alliance Party to support the provisional recommendations for the North Down constituency. The DUP, SDLP, Ulster Unionist Party, IC002 and IC001 all support the overall proposals for South Antrim. As highlighted above, there is a lack of support for the provisional recommendations for South Down - this is as a result of the proposals for Strangford. As endorsed by others, the Gransha ward we believe should move to Lagan Valley. Kilmore, Drumaness and Ballynahinch should move to Strangford, and the Quoile ward should be split at the river to deliver a solution that has overwhelming support.

The DUP and SDLP share the view that the loss of Aghagallon and Magheralin from Upper Bann are not strong proposals and lack local support. As IC006, who is from the area says, “There is no sense of affiliation or sense of belonging to Lagan Valley”.

The DUP welcomes the endorsement of IC002 for the provisional recommendations for West Tyrone. The counter-proposals put forward by others cause a huge amount of unnecessary and avoidable disruption which we believe would be in breach of Rule 5 of the Act.

Before I conclude, Mr Chairman, I believe it is important that I highlight the completely unacceptable nature of the proposals put forward by Sinn Féin which stand alone as the only proposals to be advancing a three-seat model for Belfast. This complete redraw of the provisional recommendations would cause an untold amount of change, disruption and movement of electors to entirely new constituencies. Rule 5 is enshrined in law for a very clear reason and these proposals which have no support amongst any of the responses would be in clear breach of that rule. Indeed, Mr Chairman, the work of previous Commissions rejected the idea of a three-seat Belfast model even in circumstances where Northern Ireland would have seventeen seats. Any attempt to reverse that precedent would be opposed strongly.

To conclude, it is clear from the submissions that they have identified the same core flaw with the provisional recommendations that we have - that of the proposals for the Strangford and Quoile, South Down, and the consequential changes unnecessarily caused to neighbouring constituencies. The DUP believes that if the major changes are focused in this area, the Commission will be able to produce revised proposals that will meet with the approval of the overwhelming majority of parties and the people of Northern Ireland. The DUP thanks the Commission for their work, encourages them to make these focused changes and use the full legislative flexibilities afforded to them to deliver the best and the most compliant revised proposals for Northern Ireland. Thank you.

**District Judge Steven Keown (Chair of the Public Hearing):**

Thank you very much, Gavin, for that clear and articulate presentation. It falls upon me to ask if there are any questions in relation to this and if not, I’d just like again to thank you very much for that.

**Gavin Robinson MP (DUP):**

Thank you both. Mr Chairman, would it be useful for me to pass this written copy to whoever is transcribing?

**District Judge Steven Keown (Chair of the Public Hearing):**

Yes, that would be helpful, I’m sure. Thank you very much indeed. Now, we’re just waiting for our next speaker who hasn’t yet arrived so I may just check, she may not have wanted to interrupt the proceedings so we’ll just pause for a moment to see if Ms Hanna is here?

[Hearing adjourned]

**District Judge Steven Keown (Chair of the Public Hearing):**

The third session of the day has reconvened. Now it is 6.03pm. I should say that our next speaker, Claire Hanna, MP on behalf of the SDLP, is here. Ms Hanna, at the start of each session we did some opening remarks and a presentation was made by Heather McKinley, Secretary to the Boundary Commission - she gave a brief presentation of the Boundary Commission’s initial proposals. Would you like us to go over that again?

**Claire Hanna MP (SDLP):**

No, no.

**District Judge Steven Keown (Chair of the Public Hearing):**

We can hand over. Just really to say that each person who is making the presentation is asked to sit at the table where you’re already sitting and speak into the microphone stating your name and the organisation that you appear on behalf of.

**Claire Hanna MP (SDLP):**

Thank you very much. My name is Claire Hanna, I am a Member of Parliament for South Belfast for the Social Democratic and Labour Party. And I don’t have that many points to make, just first of all to thank you, the Commission, for what is clearly very hard work and conscientious work and professional work. And from the outset, agree with the top line proposal to retain 18 seats for Northern Ireland and to retain four in Belfast.

You’ll be aware obviously of the quota parameter – 69,724 to 73,393 and you’ll know of course that only North Belfast hits the target for the desired registered number, although South Belfast is the second largest and yes, we understand that East and West Belfast are below the proposed target. So the first thing to say is that there is no credible mathematical or geographic case for moving to a three-seat model and the abolition of South Belfast as has absurdly been suggested by one party. And even if, and I don’t support the reduction of the Belfast Borough to three, but if you were doing so, you wouldn’t start with the second largest. This isn’t your fault but it does seem that South Belfast is always the kind of first to have surgery. It appears in previous iterations and I don’t know whether, I think the public made quite clear in the last time this was done, there is a sense of place and there’s a sense of identity in South Belfast and I think the belief that it doesn’t have that same cohesion and coherence was fairly well debunked.

Obviously I am aware that you have to work on the March 2020 figures but you’ll be aware that there’s already been really significant change in the data and we believe that must be taken into account. If not building into your model, certainly the trajectory and the direction and by my rough calculations as of yesterday and the register published yesterday, there appears to be a 20% increase in registration in Belfast bringing the total of the four boroughs up to just shy of 279,000 which is 3.8 quotas I suppose, in the terms politicians understand, towards filling the seats and you would lack then just 14,594 voters. And given the level of housebuilding that is going on, particularly it must be said, in South Belfast, particularly in areas like Four Winds and in particular, in Malone and other areas, as well as the very active drive by Belfast City Council to repopulate the core of the city centre for habitation and to use brownfield sites as much as possible. We’ll all be aware that there is huge capacity in the core of the city centre for housing and huge benefits available to the city for climate reasons, for economic reasons, for all sorts of reasons to have more people living above the shop and elsewhere in the city centre and that’s something that, as I say, the council are actively pursuing, not just passively seeing happen.

As I say, that’s the trajectory that has already been mapped out over the last two years with that very dramatic 20% increase. So, we believe that there’s a very strong case to keep North Belfast and South Belfast as they are in that regard, and I would be very confident that within the next parliamentary term that shortfall of just shy of 15,000 voters across the four seats would be achieved.

The other adjustments to the boundaries, partly as a result of that analysis and that trajectory, we believe are unnecessary. As per our written submission, we believe we are within the acceptable range already in South Belfast. It doesn’t seem to make sense to nip a bit here and tuck a bit there and add some on elsewhere, and we believe as well that the identified areas, Hillfoot, Wynchurch and Woodstock are fully integrated into South Belfast and it makes sense to retain them, and the proposal to absorb Drumbo and Moneyreagh and Saintfield I think is particularly unwise. It is an urban seat and it would make it a rural seat. There is a danger that it would dilute the issues of both and some of the issues specific to, for example, a town like Saintfield, might become lost in a lot of the other political issues that elected representatives work on day and daily. It would also make it by far, the biggest Parliamentary constituency in Belfast without an obviously good reason. As I say, you are putting back in as many as you’re taking out so, it doesn’t seem to be that clear rationale to create such an incongruous rural/urban dichotomy and it doesn’t seem to make for numbers.

That is the main thrust I think of the points from us. And obviously just to close, and I know this is outside of your remit but we would like to plead with somebody somewhere to rationalise the dysfunctional application of the ward names and boundaries. I understand that that came about I think when the Local Government Commissioner decided for, what I am sure are very well-intentioned reasons, to change some of the names and change some of the boundaries but it just creates confusion in the management of areas. Also when people are trying to diligently engage with the electorate, it’s an unnecessary confusion and it makes sense for the ward boundaries to be consistent for Council and Assembly and Parliamentary elections. Do you have any questions for me?

**District Judge Steven Keown (Chair of the Public Hearing):**
No, not as the Chair, I don’t have any questions but I will open it to see if there are any questions for Claire Hanna in relation to those representations? Thank you very much for that representation. I’m conscious that we didn’t have the preamble, or that you weren’t present for the preamble, but obviously these oral representations are included with the written representations and they are taken into account by the Commission as we go through the review process. That’s what will happen next, which is why it’s being recorded and will be published on the Commission website in due course. Thank you very much for attending.

**Claire Hanna MP (SDLP):**

Thank you very much.

**District Judge Steven Keown (Chair of the Public Hearing):**

Thank you very much. This session is between 5pm and 7pm so I propose to not close the session but adjourn it, to wait to see if there is anybody else who wishes to arrive to make a representation. So we’ll just adjourn at this stage. Thank you very much.

[Hearing adjourned]

**District Judge Steven Keown (Chair of the Public Hearing):**

Thank you everybody. The hearing has been reconvened and I can confirm with nobody else in the room or online to make representations, and the time being 7.01pm, that I would just formally like to conclude by thanking everybody who participated and also everybody here throughout today for all your assistance. I now formally declare this public hearing closed at 7.01pm on Wednesday 2nd March. Thank you very much everybody.

***HEARING CLOSED***