[SC – UUP]

Monday 21 MARCH 2022

**Boundary Commission for NI – SECONDARY CONSULTATION – UUP RESPONSE**

**INTRODUCTION**

The Ulster Unionist Party restates the points it made in our written response to the Initial Proposals and we reinforced this position at the public hearing in the Clayton Hotel in Belfast on Wednesday 2 March 2022. **What follows in this paper is a shortened version of our written response to the Initial Proposals and should be read in conjunction with that document.**

We recognise the importance of ensuring that Parliamentary constituencies should be of roughly equal size in terms of the number of voters, and thereby ensuring votes have equal value. Our largest constituency is Upper Bann with 83,028 electors, which is just over 18,000 more than our smallest constituency East Antrim, which has 64,907. Clearly this has to be addressed.

We also recognise the constraints of geography apply in Northern Ireland with more than half of our 18 constituencies having boundaries with the border or the sea and the restrictions this places on room to manoeuvre.

**KEY ISSUES TO BE RESOLVED**

Firstly, West Tyrone is currently 3,385 electors below the number permissible, but its neighbouring constituencies of Fermanagh & South Tyrone, Mid Ulster and Foyle are all within the acceptable range, whilst East Londonderry is only 365 below the lower limit.

Secondly, East Antrim is 4,817 below the quota and needs to gain electors from either North Antrim or South Antrim.

Thirdly, three of the four largest constituencies (Upper Bann, Newry & Armagh and South Down) are neighbours, and whilst all need to be reduced in size, it is clear that some kind of shift of electors to the east will be required.

**OUR PROPOSALS**

**1 THE WEST**

The Ulster Unionist Party does not support the Commission’s Initial proposals in the **West of Northern Ireland** and urges the Boundary Commission to consider alternatives that would avoid the major disruption to Fermanagh & South Tyrone in particular, and avoid a scenario whereby the constituency would stretch from the Donegal border to the edge of Armagh City.

Given that **Fermanagh & South Tyrone** is already within the permitted range, this makes the proposal to stretch it into County Armagh even more incomprehensible. This revised Constituency would encompass three counties, and Northern Ireland only has six! Indeed it would be so elongated that it would be 77 miles long from the most westerly point at Belleek to the eastern point of the Commission’s proposal close to The Birches outside Portadown.

This is an appropriate time to refer to page 16 of the Commission’s Initial Proposals in which it stated that ‘the Commission considered it appropriate to take account of ‘*special geographical considerations’* as referred to at Schedule 2 to the Act, which continues … *‘Including in particular the size, shape and accessibility of a constituency.’*

Reference is also made to *‘the geographical compactness of a proposed constituency’* as well as the need to be *‘Mindful of undue disruption to existing constituency boundaries’* which we believe should be a major consideration here.

We would also refer to Rule 5, *‘local ties and inconvenience’.*

Fermanagh & South Tyrone is a long-established constituency which local people easily understand and identify with. It is a very rural constituency with two main centres of population Enniskillen and Dungannon. There is no good reason to remove that urban centre of Dungannon and push the constituency into the heart of rural Armagh. Dungannon is the very heart of South Tyrone, therefore it should remain in Fermanagh & South Tyrone. The loss of Dungannon would break long-standing ties and should therefore be avoided.

Given the fact that the existing Fermanagh & South Tyrone constituency is within the agreed range at 72,945, we believe that it should be retained on its current boundaries.

**2 THE NORTH EAST**

**East Antrim** is the smallest constituency of the 18 in terms of electors at 64,907, which is 4,807 below the lower accepted number. It borders **North Antrim** which with 77,156 electors, is 94 above the upper limit.

The Boundary Commission proposed transferring the ward of Glenravel from North Antrim to East Antrim along with the split wards of Glenwherry and Slemish whilst the split ward of Torr Head & Rathlin would transfer to North Antrim from East Antrim. We are concerned that the loss of Glenravel, Slemish and Glenwherry would have a negative effect on local community identity in the area, given that these wards form the eastern hinterland of Ballymena and look to the town as their natural focus and we therefore propose that these three wards remain with North Antrim.

East Antrim needs to gain electors, so we propose that the wards of Torr Head and Rathlin (2,659) and Ballycastle (2,407) transfer to East Antrim from North Antrim, a total of 5,066. This would unite the Glens area in the East Antrim constituency which would be linked by the Antrim Coast Road

**3 THE SOUTH**

As stated above,**Newry & Armagh, South Down and Upper Bann** are all neighbouring constituencies which are too large and all of which need to lose electors and the options to rectify this are limited by a number of factors, not least geography with the border restricting what can be done to the west and south, and the sea restricting options in the east. Efforts must therefore be focused on moving wards eastwards, with unavoidable impacts on neighbouring constituencies like Lagan Valley and Strangford.

With regard to **Newry & Armagh** (81,329 electors currently) we have already stated our opposition to the proposal to transfer the wards of Loughgall and Blackwatertown to Fermanagh & South Tyrone. These two wards look to Armagh City and to retain them in Newry & Armagh would, we believe, better reflect local community identity and ties.

In order to reduce the size of Newry & Armagh, an option that should be given serious consideration is to look at those electors being transferred into Newry & Armagh from South Down. Whilst it is not ideal to split an urban area, given the need to reduce Newry & Armagh in size, and the lack of room to manoeuvre to the west and south, it must be considered.

**South Down** currently has 79,295 electors and is therefore 2,233 above the permissible range. South Down is constrained by the sea to the south and east so any room to manoeuvre will involve the neighbouring wards of Newry & Armagh, Lagan Valley and Strangford. As outlined earlier, the Commission proposed major changes to South Down affecting numerous wards but its proposals so seem rather a lot of disruption just to reduce one constituency in size by in size by 2,233 electors, which the equivalent of one ward.

**Strangford** currently has 66,990 electors and is therefore 2,734 below the permissible range. This could in theory be resolved by the transfer of one ward into Strangford from a neighbouring constituency – ie South Down - but as a result of the Commission’s proposals elsewhere, not least the loss of two wards each to South Belfast and South Down, Strangford becomes five wards short, hence the proposal to transfer five wards in the Downpatrick area into Strangford from South Down.

We cannot help but feel that Downpatrick’s identity and linkages are more to South Down than north towards Newtownards.

Consequently, the Ulster Unionist Party would ask the Commission to look again at the South Down and Strangford area with a view to reducing the amount of disruption proposed - which appears to be totally disproportionate to the problem we are trying to address and in particular to find a way to retain the Downpatrick area within South Down.

**OTHER SUBMISSIONS RECIVED AT THE INITIAL STAGE**

We have also examined the other submissions which the Commission received following the initial stage. At this stage we would like to comment on one aspect of the Sinn Fein proposals, namely the one which would transfer the Coleraine area to North Antrim and the establishment of a new ward to be called Glenshane, covering the remainder of East Londonderry and part of Mid Ulster. Firstly Coleraine is in County Londonderry not County Antrim, and secondly, this proposal would mean that the name of Londonderry would be the only one of Northern Ireland’s six counties not to feature in the name of a constituency. We could not support this suggestion.

**CONCLUSION**

The Ulster Unionist Party recognises that Boundary Reviews are no easy task and that it is quite literally impossible to please everyone.

Fixing one constituency in terms of numbers often leads to a consequential and often unintended effect elsewhere. This point is particularly highlighted in Chapter 4 of the Commission’s Initial Proposals and at points 4 and 5.

We want to see a pattern of constituencies across Northern Ireland that produces electoral equality in terms of votes being of equal value and also respects community identities and local ties.

We believe the Boundary Commission’s Initial Proposals for the 2023 Review are a starting point and a fair attempt at beginning a conversation. We have approached this review with an open mind and in those constituencies where we believe the Commission’s proposals will work, we have endeavoured to support them.

Where we take issue with the proposals, we have sought to provide workable solutions and alternatives that better reflect community identities and local ties and which would be better understood on the ground.

ENDS

Ulster Unionist Party Press & Policy Office