



Your Ref:

Our Ref: Misc/14 M/L 12064

Date: 21st November 2011

Being dealt with by: Chief Executive's Dept

Email: daniel.mcsorley@omagh.gov.uk

Elizabeth Benson

Secretary to the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland

Forest view

Purdy's Lane

BELFAST

BT8 7AR

BOUNDARY COMMISSION
23 NOV 2011
FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Dear Madam

**RE: Response to Sixth Periodical Review of Parliamentary Constituencies
Publication of Provisional Proposals Report**

I am writing on behalf of Omagh District Council in response to the consultation on the Sixth Periodical Review of the Parliamentary Constituencies Publication of Provisional Proposals Report. At the outset, I would like to convey the Council's appreciation to the Boundary Commission for the opportunity provided to present oral evidence at the Public Hearing on 19th October 2011 at the Silverbirch Hotel, Omagh.

Omagh District Council focussed its comments and recommendations both at the Public Hearing and in this written response on the proposed new Mid-Tyrone County Constituency. Whilst the Council is not proposing to go into detail on the addition or removal of proposed electoral wards across the proposed Constituency, it does nonetheless believe there is room for movement of wards between the proposed Fermanagh and South Tyrone Constituency and the Mid-Tyrone Constituency which would still fall within the required range and ensure that the 6 Omagh district electoral wards proposed to move into the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency remain with the other Omagh wards in the new Mid Tyrone Constituency. In return the Fermanagh and South Tyrone constituency would include the 6 Dungannon LGDs which would ensure the ongoing traditional ties in the current parliamentary alignment of South Tyrone with Fermanagh. The Council would request that such a proposal is given consideration by the Boundary Commissioner in his final determinations.

The Council's main suggestions centre on the significance of a number of factors which are highlighted under 'Discretionary Powers' in the Proposals Report. Such factors include historic connections, subsidiarity, common boundaries, County identity and co-terminosity of Council structures and boundaries. Additionally, whilst the future of the Review of Public Administration remains unclear, the need for reform of local government is still on the agenda and must be considered, with collaborative working essential at both local and central government level to take the modernisation agenda forward to the mutual benefit of all. Currently this is progressing through the Improvement, Collaboration and Efficiency (ICE)

Programme. It is important however, that this is complimented by the guiding principles of subsidiarity and common boundaries. Strong and effective government at all levels is bolstered by the delivery of services and the exercising of power close to the people it serves. Having public services organised within common boundaries creates real opportunities for well planned, joined up working across and between central and local government. The Council would strongly advocate that local government boundaries should mirror constituency boundaries. It is particularly important to this Council that the relationship between Omagh and Strabane districts, as is in the current West Tyrone Constituency, is consolidated in any future alignments. In the absence of such consolidation of relationships, it is likely to further exacerbate the disjointedness of the workings of central and local government into the future.

The Council wishes to reiterate and elaborate upon the following comments presented by the Council at the Public Hearing for consideration by the Boundary Commissioner:-

Historic Connections

- The historic connections of the current West Tyrone Parliamentary Constituency dates back to 1929, albeit there have been a number of alignment changes over the years. Since 1995, the West Tyrone Constituency has included the whole of Omagh and Strabane District Council areas, setting out very distinct and robust boundaries. This alignment recognised the commonalities of the two districts in terms of rurality, demographics, and geographical location and provided the basis for effective collaborative working across the two Councils in terms of lobbying for issues of mutual benefit and interest, such as infrastructural deficits, planning issues and progressing tourism initiatives and the promotion of sport and leisure across the catchment area
- The West Tyrone Area Plan (WTAP) whilst out of date, recognised and built upon the commonalities of the districts
- The two districts are currently served by the same 6 MLAs and 1 MP which has provided a strong and mutual foundation and solidarity of Political representation when lobbying for or profiling issues of significance such as the infrastructural deficits in the area, promoting the area for potential inward investment and previously in the hospital campaign for the rural west
- Such is the traditional and historic ties of the West Tyrone Constituency, that in times of need the Councils immediately provide each other with support and assistance. Most recently, due to extenuating circumstances, Omagh and Strabane Councils have been sharing interim Chief Executive management arrangements which is a first in Northern Ireland and both Councils are currently investigating the potential opportunities to be afforded by other mutually beneficial collaborative working arrangements

The proposed new Mid-Tyrone Parliamentary Constituency will fragment this cohesiveness and solidarity.

Natural Affinity/Traditional ties

- The Council believes that natural affinity and traditional ties should be given priority weighting in the final consideration of the boundaries. The proposal to transfer 6 LGDs from the Omagh district and 3 from the Strabane district into the Fermanagh and South Tyrone and Foyle Constituencies respectively will result in electoral isolation for many who have a natural affinity to the West Tyrone area including Omagh. For those citizens who live in the 6 affected LGDs their natural affinity is with Omagh as the main town and County town of Tyrone. Omagh traditionally has been the location of a number of central government and public sector agencies providing employment as well as service delivery, it is the location of 5 post primary schools and the South West College's sub-regional campus catering for students from across all of Tyrone and further afield and it is the nucleus for work in agriculture and the service sector. Omagh is also a focal point for shopping and for sport and cultural activities. The main political parties and the MP for the area all have constituency offices in Omagh, resulting in the voters associating their representatives with the central location of Omagh. For those living in the 6 LGDs of Fintona, Dromore, Drumquin, Trillick, Newtownsaville and Sixmilecross, the new configuration could result in voting apathy due to feelings of isolation from political representation, for eg, those living in Drumquin, Sixmilecross or Newtownsaville may have their political representative located in Fermanagh
- The reconfiguration into Fermanagh and South Tyrone of Fintona and Dromore, which are the two largest towns and centres of population within the Omagh district, after Omagh town, also poses natural affiliation/identity issues, as both towns view themselves as strongly attached to all things Omagh/West Tyrone

County Identity

- The Council favours a joined up 'Tyrone' and 'County' identity and it believes that Constituency and Council boundaries should be aligned, although it acknowledges the difficulties in following this through when we currently await clear direction on Council boundaries going forward. Omagh is the County town of Tyrone, with an expanding population now in excess of 50,000 across the district. As previously mentioned it is a public sector centre with a significant central government presence which in itself brings an affiliation and affinity of the people of Tyrone to the 'County' identity for work and services. In sport and cultural activities, the County identity is very strong, with the Tyrone GAA, the Ceoltas and the Orange Family of Loyal Orders all organised on a County basis. This 'County' significance should be recognised and strengthened by any boundary changes rather than diminished, as are the current proposals for the new Mid-Tyrone County Constituency, which only serves to dissect all of the four County Tyrone Local Government Districts

Conclusion

The Council recognises the statutory limitations of the legislation in determining the new county constituency boundaries, however, it believes a number of the issues listed as 'discretionary' powers are significant and should be given the priority weighting required. To ignore the issues outlined above in the final determination of the new constituencies has the potential to result in a number of adverse impacts, such as the isolation of Constituents and the deterioration of relationships and linkages with political representatives; the fragmentation of representation where an MP has too diverse and geographically spread out a constituency to serve; the severing of traditional ties and historic connections; the fragmentation of long established constructive working relationships and partnerships and the complete loss of subsidiarity and co-terminosity with local government. Additionally, the Council believes the fragmentation of political representation/constituencies will lead to further disadvantage for rural and deprived areas particularly in West Tyrone as well as further disempowerment and disenfranchisement of strong local government in the future.

It is on this basis that Omagh District Council would ask that serious consideration is given to the 'discretionary' powers, hence giving weight and priority to issues of subsidiarity, common boundaries, identity and historical connections and affinities, in the final composition of the new County Constituencies configuration.

On behalf of Omagh District Council I wish to thank you for the opportunities provided to respond to this very significant consultation and we eagerly await the final outcome of the consultation process.

Yours sincerely



D McSORLEY
Chief Executive