

Elizabeth Benson  
Secretary to the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland  
Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland  
Forestview  
Purdy's Lane  
Belfast  
BT8 7AR

2 December 2011

Dear Elizabeth Benson

I write to you on behalf of the South Belfast Partnership Board in response to the Boundary Commission's Provisional Proposals Report of the Sixth Periodical Review of Parliamentary Constituencies. Although we understand the need to review existing constituency boundaries in order to reduce the number of Northern Ireland constituencies from 18 to 16, we are concerned that the proposals set out in relation to Belfast fail to take account of the local geography and identity of communities.

Under Paragraph 27 on page 12 of your report, it states that "the Provisional Proposals take account of both special geographical considerations and their potential impacts on identifiable local ties." However, in the case of South Belfast, we believe that the proposals fail to acknowledge both natural/physical boundaries and local identity.

The River Lagan has always provided a natural boundary for local communities on the ground, drawing a distinction between East and South Belfast. However, under the current proposals, wards both east and west of the River would be part of the Belfast South East constituency. Similarly the A1 Motorway/Westlink continues to provide a perceived demarcation between South and West Belfast. However, the revised constituency of Belfast South West includes wards either side of this physical barrier.

The presence of these 'natural' boundaries on the ground has also served to increase the sense of local identity felt by communities living in South Belfast. To suggest that a resident living in Stranmillis or Botanic is part of East Belfast and not part of a wider community taking in the other half of Stranmillis, or that communities living in Malone and Finaghy are part of West Belfast fails completely to reflect local perceptions of strong cultural identities.

Likewise, on the Malone Road one side of the street will fall within the Belfast South East constituency, whilst the other side is with the Belfast South West constituency. On the

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Ormeau Road, we are currently working with local business communities who draw representation from the whole Road, stretching from Forestside and the outer ring road to the City Centre. Under the provisional proposals, the Ormeau Road would also be divided between two constituencies, weakening their collective voice and representation.

Local identity is also of particular importance to the distinctive inner city communities of South Belfast, such as Donegall Pass, Sandy Row, the Markets and the Village. Politically, the predominantly loyalist communities resident in the Village and Sandy Row, which are two of the most deprived neighbourhoods in Northern Ireland, would become a minority voice within the broader Belfast South West constituency, as would residents of the Markets and Lower Ormeau within the Belfast South East constituency. To think that the inner Belfast communities of Sandy Row, Donegall Road and Blackstaff sit comfortably with West Belfast is misguided.

To follow old ward boundaries (in part) does not reflect the identity and lives of people in South Belfast today. To follow the River might make more sense, although completely refreshed boundaries, which relate to peoples patterns of life – schools, churches, work, sports clubs, retail and services provision – is probably the ideal. We would also urge the Boundary Commission to reconsider the need for a 3 Belfast constituency model, as opposed to the existing 4 constituencies. We understand that this may result in the Commission needing to look once again at the extension of Belfast constituency boundaries into adjacent areas and settlements outside of the city, but feel this would be more coherent given the social, economic and political context on the ground.

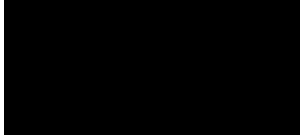
Over the past 10-15 years, many of the surrounding settlements have coalesced within the 'Greater Belfast' area, with many smaller settlements surrounding Belfast now functioning as commuter towns. This means the wards within the surrounding Belfast Metropolitan Area are now more closely aligned to the political, economic and social context of Belfast than ever before. We therefore believe that this alternative solution, based on an extension of the existing 4 constituency model for Belfast would better reflect the geographic context and perceptions of local identity, as well as reflecting Belfast's development from a 'city in isolation' to a city at the centre of a broader 'Belfast Metropolitan Area'.

The South Belfast Partnership Board brings together representatives from all sectors and we both represent and work closely local community groups, businesses and organisations across South Belfast. It has been clear during recent weeks that our contacts in South Belfast have been totally unaware of the proposed boundary changes until we have drawn their attention to it. We are therefore concerned that their views have therefore not been heard in response to this consultation.

As we have discussed your proposals with businesses and communities in South Belfast, people have expressed to us concern that the proposals fail to recognise the unique identity and character of South Belfast as a distinct and culturally diverse area of the City. They are concerned that the changes would give the communities of South Belfast a weaker voice in the City and would have negative implications for the level of inward investment South Belfast may be able to secure in the future.

This is about representation and identification with an area, not party politics. People are disengaging with the political process because they believe it does not represent them. The South Belfast Partnership Board would therefore welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss these matters and would be happy to work with the Boundary Commission to facilitate genuine public engagement with these proposals.

Yours sincerely



Anne McAleese

Chief Executive South Belfast Partnership Board