

0. Introduction

I maintain the Northern Ireland elections website at <http://www.ark.ac.uk/elections>, the most substantial archive of electoral information regarding the region available anywhere. Although I have not resided in Northern Ireland since 1997, I maintain a strong interest in these matters and was invited by BBC Northern Ireland to participate in their live telecasts of the election results in both May 2010 and May 2011. I was a candidate in North Belfast in 1996, and electoral agent for a local council by-election in 1995, but am not at present a member of any Northern Irish political party.

1. Overall observations

The Provisional Proposals of the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland in most places make the best of a bad job. In particular, the proposals for **three Belfast constituencies**, while a little ragged at the eastern edges, are an elegant solution to the problem of reducing the city from four seats to three. Once the Commission had (correctly) made the strategic decision to make more changes in the northern seats than in the south, most of the proposed boundaries are generally as good as is possible given the legislative constraints under which the Commission works.

There are exceptions. Rather than creating a new **Mid Antrim** seat, the existing **South Antrim** and **East Antrim** seats can be altered to improve both on the Provisional Proposals and on the current situation; details are given below. A number of further amendments to the Provisional Proposals are also suggested, of which the largest is that six wards of **Dungannon district**, rather than **Omagh district**, should be transferred to **Fermanagh and South Tyrone**.

2. The numbers

But before getting to the detail, there is an important general observation to be made regarding constituency sizes. One gets a sense from the Provisional Proposals that the Commission has interpreted its mandate more tightly than is required by the legislation, and has favoured arrangements which bring Northern Ireland constituencies as close as possible to the UK quota of 76,641 electors.

If this is the case, the Commission may have misdirected itself. Its duty is simply to produce proposals for new constituencies where the electorate is between 70,583 and 80,473 electors. It should be agnostic as to where within that range the proposed constituencies' sizes are to be found. There is no obligation to produce any more seats in the 76,000-77,000 range than in the 79,000-80,000 range.

In Northern Ireland specifically, the conditions under which the Commission may choose to exercise its discretion in proposing constituency sizes between 70,583 and 72,810 (which is the lowest permissible figure for most of the rest of the UK) are not perceptibly different from those applying to the range from 72,810 to 80,473. Exactly the same considerations under Rule 5 apply to both ranges.

The Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland has been given greater freedom of manoeuvre than its counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales, and it should not hesitate to use that freedom.

It would not have been unreasonable for the Commission, in its Provisional Proposals, to have produced a set of constituency boundaries which rather strictly satisfy the mathematical criteria, in the realistic expectation that any Rule 5 issues, resulting from seats that are in the correct numerical range but otherwise have undesirable features, will be resolved through the consultation process. But that is not what it claims to have done (Chapter 5.3 and 3.25). The Provisional Proposals also refer to a 'Northern Ireland electoral average', which has no statutory basis. (It appears to be identical with the quantity N in 7(2) of Schedule 2 to the Act; but Parliament rejected amendments which would have enshrined a 'Northern Ireland electoral quota' in the legislation.)

In summary, the Commission has no obligation to consider any question relating to constituency size, other than ensuring that a proposed constituency has more than 70,583 and less than 80,473 electors.

3. Proposed alterations to the Provisional Proposals

The following proposals are made below:

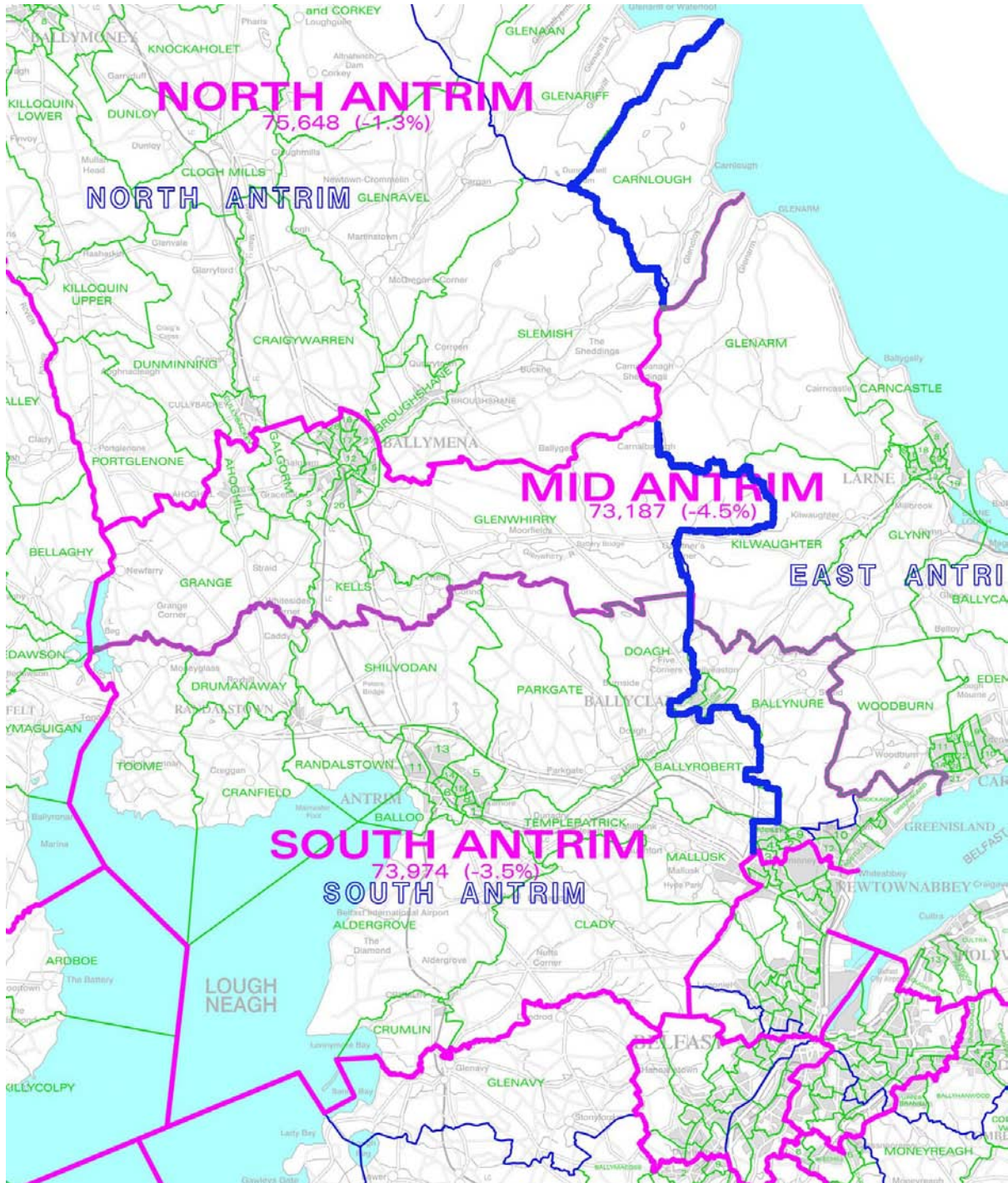
1. The proposed constituencies of **South Antrim** and **Mid Antrim** should be divided east-west rather than north-south, resulting in an amended **South Antrim** centred on **Antrim district** and **Ballymena** town, and an amended **East Antrim** including all of **Larne** and **Carrickfergus** districts with most of **Newtownabbey**.
2. The proposed **North Antrim** should not include **Carnlough** ward and should be renamed to either **Causeway Coast** or **North Antrim and Coleraine**.
3. The proposed **Fermanagh and South Tyrone** should include six more **Dungannon** wards rather than the six **Omagh** wards currently proposed.
4. The proposed **Mid Tyrone** constituency should include the six **Omagh** wards currently proposed for transfer to **Fermanagh and South Tyrone** rather than the six **Dungannon** wards in the Provisional Proposals; and it should be renamed **Mid Ulster**.
5. The ward of **Lissan** should be included in the **Mid Tyrone / Mid Ulster** constituency rather than the proposed **Glenshane** constituency.
6. The ward of **Loughbrickland** should not be transferred from **Upper Bann** to **South Down**. Though it is not strictly necessary, the ward of **Killinchy** could be transferred to **South Down** from **Strangford**.
7. The ward of **Loughries** should be split between **Strangford** and **North Down**.

3.1 South Antrim and Mid Antrim / East Antrim

The Provisional Proposals create a new seat of **Mid Antrim** which brings much of **Ballymena** district together with most of **Larne** and **Carrickfergus** districts. It is internally divided by a major geographical barrier (the **Antrim mountains**). There is no good quality road connection between **Ballymena** and **Larne**, let alone between **Ballymena** and **Carrickfergus**. Compared with the alternative option presented below, this seat is inconveniently shaped, has poor internal communications, breaches the local government boundaries of three district councils, breaches the boundaries of two existing

constituencies, and ignores local ties between **Ballymena** and **Antrim**, on the one hand, and **Larne/Carrickfergus** and **Newtownabbey**, on the other.

It would be preferable instead to apportion the southern part of County Antrim as shown in the map (the thick blue line being the proposed improvements, and the Provisional Proposals which are to be changed in dim purple):



South Antrim

East Antrim

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The whole of Antrim local government district, with 33,771 electors. | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The whole of Larne local government district (including the ward of Carnlough, |
|--|---|

2. The seventeen **Ballymena** wards which the Provisional Proposals would transfer from **North Antrim** to **Mid Antrim** (**Glenwhirry, Kells, Grange, Ballee, Ballykeel, Moat, Castle Demesne, Summerfield, Fair Green, Dunclug, Harryville, Ardeevin, Park, Ballyloughan, Academy, Galgorm** and **Ahoghill**), with 29,756 electors.
3. Three **Newtownabbey** wards (**Doagh, Ballyrobert** and **Mallusk**) with 10,662 electors.

This seat would have a total electorate of 74,009, which is within the acceptable range of variation from the quota.

which the Provisional Proposals would put into **North Antrim**), with 22,502 electors.

2. The whole of **Carrickfergus** local government district, with 27,178 electors.
3. Eleven **Newtownabbey** wards (**Ballyclare North, Ballyclare South, Ballydŕf, Ballynure, Burnthill, Carnmoney, Hawthorne, Jordanstown, Monkstown, Mossley** and **Rostulla**), which the Provisional Proposals include in **South Antrim**, with 24,914 electors.

This seat would have a total electorate of 74,594, which is within the acceptable range of variation from the quota.

Tested against Rule 5 of the regulations, there can be no doubt that this arrangement is better than the Provisional Proposals on almost every count. **Larne** and **Carrickfergus** districts are maintained intact rather than split, the close connection between **Antrim** and **Ballymena** rather than the tenuous connection between **Ballymena** and **Larne** is reflected in the boundaries, and **Newtownabbey** is kept within the **East Antrim** seat apart from its three westernmost wards.

3.2 North Antrim

The proposed **North Antrim** seat should not include the Larne ward of **Carnlough**, which should remain in the **East Antrim** seat described above (or be retained for the proposed **Mid Antrim** seat). **Carnlough** looks towards Larne rather than Ballycastle, and the constituency boundaries should reflect this. It is not needed mathematically. Removing **Carnlough**, which has 1442 electors, from the boundaries proposed for **North Antrim** in the Provisional Proposals still leaves **North Antrim** with 74,206 electors, which is within the acceptable range of variation from the quota.

In addition, the name of the proposed **North Antrim** seat should be changed, perhaps to **Causeway Coast** or to **North Antrim and Coleraine**. The largest town in the proposed constituency is now Coleraine, which has never been in County Antrim (and indeed was the seat of a county in its own right between 1583 and 1613).

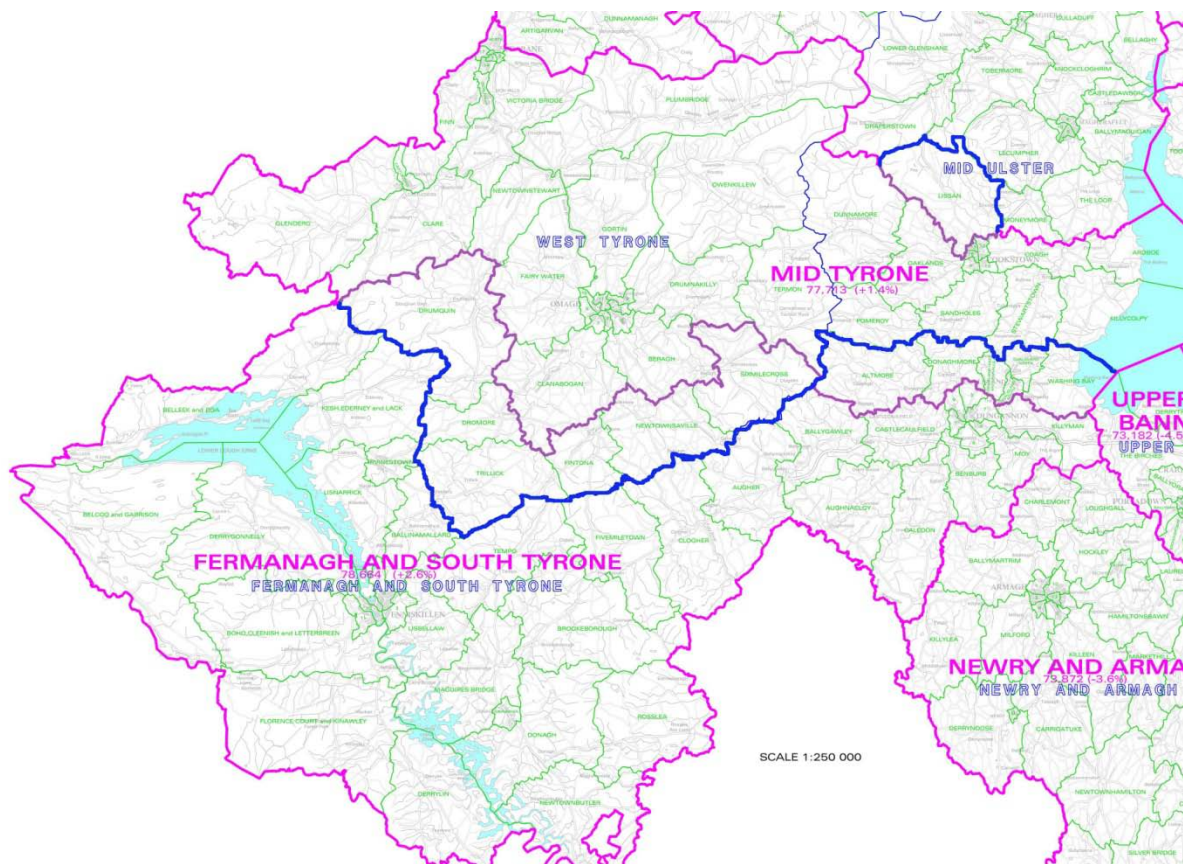
3.3 Fermanagh and South Tyrone

The Provisional Proposals would transfer the **Omagh District** wards of **Dromore, Drumquin, Fintona, Newtownsaville, Sixmilecross** and **Trillick** ('the six Omagh wards'), with a total of 9,685 voters, from **West Tyrone** to **Fermanagh and South Tyrone**. It would be preferable instead to transfer the **Dungannon** wards of **Altmore, Coalisland North, Coalisland South, Coalisland West** and **Newmills, Donaghmore** and **Washing Bay**, with a total of 10,836 voters, from **Mid Ulster** to **Fermanagh and South Tyrone**.

The six **Dungannon** wards specified together constitute the **Torrent District Electoral Area** of **Dungannon and South Tyrone District Council**. They were in fact part of **Fermanagh and South Tyrone**

from the creation of that constituency in 1950 until the 4th Periodical Review in the 1990s. They border **Dungannon** town, which is one of the two nuclei of the **Fermanagh and South Tyrone** constituency. Their links with the current **Fermanagh and South Tyrone** constituency are much stronger than any connection between the six **Omagh** wards and **Fermanagh** or **Dungannon**. The six **Omagh** wards look to the town of **Omagh**, and should *ceteris paribus* be in the same parliamentary seat.

This change to the provisional proposals would bring **Fermanagh and South Tyrone** up from 78,664 electors, to 79,815, which is within the acceptable range of variation from the quota. The Provisional Proposals note with apparent pride (Chapter 5.4) that Fermanagh and South Tyrone is the only proposed constituency which differs by more than 5% from the 'Northern Ireland electoral average', but, as argued above, the Commission should attach no importance to that fact.



3.4 Mid Tyrone / Mid Ulster

As noted above, the seat of **Mid Tyrone** described in the Provisional Proposals should not include the six **Dungannon** wards of the **Torrent DEA**, currently in **Mid Ulster**, but should instead include the six **Omagh** wards, currently in **West Tyrone**, which the Provisional Proposals would transfer to **Fermanagh and South Tyrone**. This would bring the proposed seat from 77,713 electors to 76,562, which is within the acceptable range of variation from the quota.

In addition, the name **Mid Ulster** should be retained for this constituency. Its borders are very similar to the **Mid Ulster** constituency which existed from 1950 until the 4th Periodical Review in the 1990s, apart from the fact that **Magherafelt** is not included. It bears much less resemblance either to the 1929-72 Stormont constituency of **Mid Tyrone** or to the 1885-1918 Westminster constituency of **Mid Tyrone**. As far as there are historical associations, they are with the concept of **Mid Ulster**.

3.5 Glenshane and Mid Tyrone / Mid Ulster

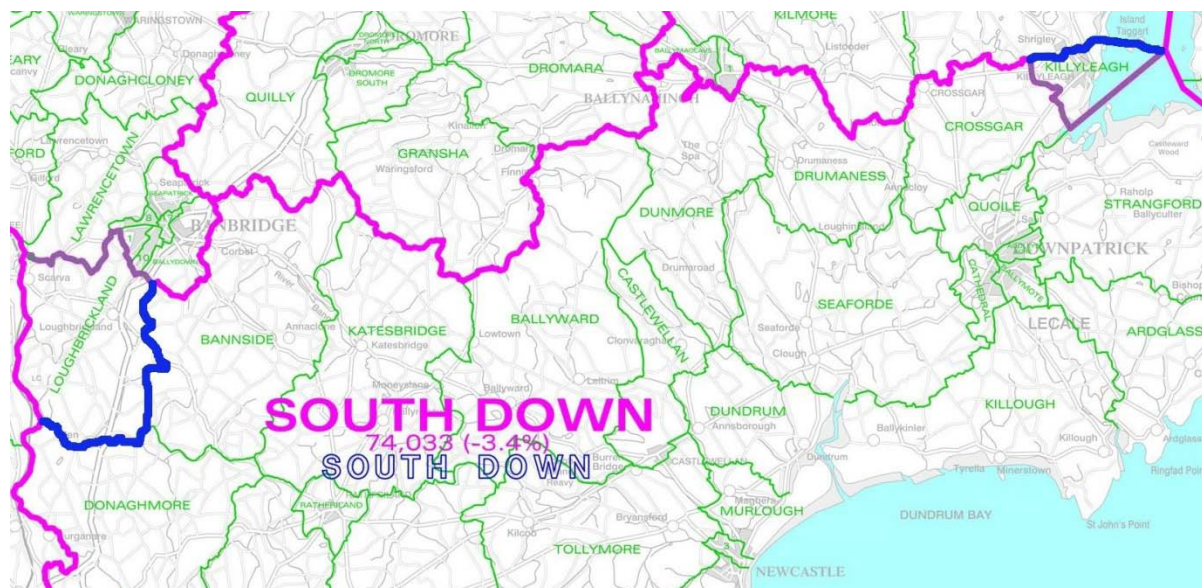
The ward of **Lissan** should be included in the new **Mid Tyrone** (or, following the proposal above, **Mid Ulster**) rather than in **Glenshane**. **Lissan** is more integrated with **Cookstown** than the other two **Cookstown** wards to be included in **Glenshane**, and shares with it the BT80 postcode. This would ensure that the urban centre of **Cookstown** is not cut off from its immediate hinterland, and would also slightly ameliorate the considerable problem of internal accessibility in the **Glenshane** constituency.

With **Lissan**, the new Mid Tyrone seat will have 79,169 electors, or 78,018 if the above proposal regarding the **Dungannon** and **Omagh** wards is adopted. Both of these figures are within the acceptable range of variation from the quota.

Without **Lissan**, the new **Glenshane** seat will have 71,616 electors, which is within the range of discretion allowed to the Boundary Commission by Rule 7. This is clearly a case where that discretion should be applied in line with the principles of Rule 5.

3.6 Upper Bann, South Down and Strangford

The ward of **Loughbrickland** should not be transferred from **Upper Bann** to **South Down**. It looks to **Banbridge**, which is in **Upper Bann**, and has only poor quality road connections with **Newcastle** and **Downpatrick**, the main population centres of **South Down**. Transferring it from **Upper Bann** leaves the town of **Banbridge** cut off from its hinterland, with the urban centre in a different constituency to three of the four wards which border it.



If **Upper Bann** includes **Loughbrickland**, it will have 75,123 electors, which is within the acceptable range of variation from the quota. If **South Down** does not include **Loughbrickland**, it will have 72,092 electors, which is within the range of discretion allowed to the Boundary Commission by Rule 7. This is clearly a case where that discretion should be applied.

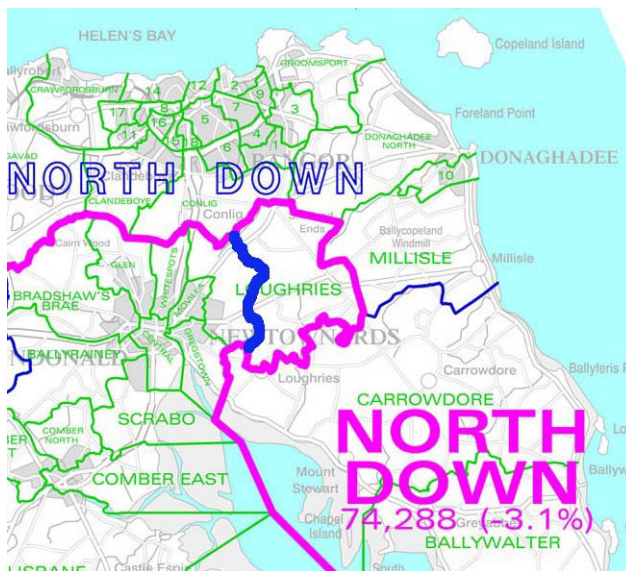
Alternatively (as illustrated), the **Killyleagh** ward could be transferred to **South Down** from **Strangford**, which would bring **South Down** up to 74,039 electors, and reduce **Strangford** to 73,112 elec-

tors, figures which are within the acceptable range of variation from the quota. **Killyleagh** is much closer to the **South Down** population centre of **Downpatrick** than it is to **Comber, Newtownards, Dundonald** or **Carryduff** in **Strangford**.

3.7 Strangford / North Down

The requirement on the Commission to take account of local government ward boundaries is in fact rather weak. Although in most cases, it is reasonable to take local government boundaries as building blocks, since they are the smallest well-defined units available; but there is already one split ward (**Derryaghy**, divided between **West Belfast** and **Lagan Valley**). In addition, the current ward boundaries will be substantially revised if the Review of Public Administration is ever brought into effect. The Commission should therefore be open to cases where division of a ward will improve the constituency boundaries.

The necessary transfer of the **Ards Peninsula** to **North Down** leaves the **Loughries** ward as a peculiar salient of **Strangford** into **North Down** territory. In fact the shape of the **Loughries** ward does not



reflect the distribution of its population at all; around 90% of its electors live in the westernmost sliver of the area, in the houses on and off Strathearn Heights, Old Forge Lane and the northern part of Abbot Drive in **Newtownards**. The Commission should divide the ward of **Loughries** as illustrated by the thick blue line on the map to the left. Its eastern part, up to and including the townlands of **Ballygrainey, Gransha** and **Loughriscouse**, should be transferred to **North Down**. This change primarily affects the settlements of **Loughries** itself and **Six Road Ends**, and better reflects the communications network within

both **North Down** and **Strangford**. The number of electors involved is not known, but cannot be more than a few hundred, and will not shift either **North Down** or **Strangford** out of the acceptable range of variation from the quota.

3.8 Other constituencies

Given the constraints, the Commission's recommendations for the three Belfast constituencies and for **Newry and Armagh, Foyle** and **Lagan Valley** are acceptable, and no change to the Provisional Proposals is advocated here.

4. Conclusion

As I reside and work in Belgium it is unlikely that I shall attend any of the public hearings. I wish the Boundary Commissioners and their staff well in the coming months.

Nicholas Whyte, 20 September 2011