



2023 Parliamentary Constituency
Boundary Review

SDLP Response to initial proposals
14 December 2021

Introduction

This submission to the Parliamentary Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland ('the Commission') is made on behalf of the Social Democratic and Labour Party.

The SDLP welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Commission's initial proposals and at the outset we recognise the difficult task that this piece of work represents. We commend the commissioners for the diligence and expedience of their work in this regard.

The SDLP has serious reservations and concerns about a number of the proposals, particularly where they segregate communities with longstanding ties to particular constituencies solely in the pursuit of 'topping up' nearby constituencies or where the character of a constituency is compromised by the application of a formulaic approach. Further commentary on individual proposals is available below and has been provided in conjunction with local representatives.

Context

We note the stringent framework that the Commission operates under and the requirements under the Parliamentary Constituencies Act that all parliamentary constituencies should be of broadly equal size within a 5% tolerance. We welcome the move back to an 18 constituency model for Northern Ireland which should avoid significant distortions which caused significant concern during the 2018 review.

The SDLP believes that application of the 5% tolerance limit fails to acknowledge the unique circumstances of democratic representation in Northern Ireland. And while this falls outside the strict remit of the Commission in this review, it would be remiss to fail to address this point when it may result in adverse consequences for constituencies which will apply to general elections and elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly given the twin nature of constituency boundaries.

We also acknowledge the narrow dispensation available to the Commission to make further minor adjustments to constituency sizes under Rule 7 in Northern Ireland. We would encourage the Commission to apply that latitude where possible in pursuit of the Rule 5 considerations.

We also note that applying the strict ranges determined by the legislation fails to take account of projected population growth over the period of the review. This will cause particular problems in urban centres such as Belfast, for example, where public policy is clearly directed toward encouraging city centre living and where significant numbers of new developments will have a material impact on elector numbers. The expansion of private student accommodation in Belfast South is one such example which could mitigate the proposed expansion into more rural communities. These matters are discussed further below.

The SDLP would also suggest that the Commission should be mindful of the responses to the 2018 review of parliamentary constituencies particularly where changes are proposed to specific towns, cities and their hinterlands.

Procedural Assumptions

The SDLP acknowledges the starting point for the Commission's determinations as the boundaries of existing constituencies and wards. This provides definition for the work of the Commission and makes the process of allocation more straightforward. We note however, that the Review of Public Administration on which current ward and DEA boundaries are based was designed with local government in mind. Decisions related to the mapping of wards were therefore informed by factors that best suited the delivery of local government and other municipal public services. It is not the case, therefore, that the considerations which informed these decisions should automatically transfer to decisions made in the construction of Westminster and Northern Ireland Assembly boundaries.

This approach, while attractive in determining constituency shapes at pace, will also have a distortive effect in some areas. For example, Glengormley and Newtownabbey will have communities in Belfast constituencies for Westminster and Assembly elections while remaining outside Belfast City Council for local government elections.

Response to detail of proposed constituencies

Belfast East

The SDLP acknowledges that the current Belfast East constituency falls below the statutory electorate range and therefore requires amendment.

We agree generally with the Commission proposal to relocate the split wards of Woodstock, Hillfoot and Merok in the new Belfast East Constituency.

We have strong reservations over the inclusion of the split ward of Cregagh, however, which has strong geographic and community connections to the Belfast South constituency. This ward falls fully within the catchment area of local schools and churches in Belfast South, particularly those located on the Ravenhill Road and forms part of the constituency's hinterland. If removed the area would be separated from large areas of the proposed new constituency by the A55 ring road and dual carriageway. The removal of Cregagh would also see the excision of Belfast South's integrated primary school which is due to be relocated in the ward.

The SDLP recommends that the Cregagh Ward remain in Belfast South with the split wards of Woodstock, Hillfoot and Merok located entirely within the new Belfast East constituency.

Belfast North

Based on current and projected electorate numbers, North Belfast sits comfortably within the 5% range, and has, in general, a clear, linked geography. Most changes to the boundaries will be to accommodate the balance of other constituencies.

There are, however, a number of proposed changes within the proposal worth commenting on:

Glengormley - With the Antrim Road as a clear link through the North Belfast Constituency, Glengormley is widely identifiable as being part of the Constituency, but has been broken up across number of constituencies over time. The proposal to adjust this to include the complete wards of Ballyhenry, Carmoney Hill and Hightown, and the removal of Burnthill, Carnmoney, Fairview and Abbey, mean the Antrim Road connection for the constituency is maintained more fully. In particular, the Hightown ward has a strong geographic and community connection with the constituency.

Belfast South and Mid Down

The SDLP has serious reservations about the proposed new constituency of Belfast South and Mid Down.

The constituency is a result not of natural connections, affinities or hinterlands but it appears contrived by the need to reach the statutory electorate range in neighbouring areas. The result is an urban borough constituency which reaches into rural communities and commuter belts with which it has no prior connection.

We acknowledge the attractiveness of altering the Belfast constituencies as the primary population centre in the east of the region. However, extension of Belfast South so far into mid-Down would create a substantial disconnect between the rural and urban sections of the new constituency.

These proposals also fail to recognise rates of home-building in Belfast South, including in Castlereagh South and Malone as well as a concerted effort to re-populate the city centre core by Belfast City Council, which will mean that within the short term, the current constituency boundary will have the requisite number of electors. Currently, due to high levels of short-term renting and student accommodation, the constituency has a relatively high population compared to the number of registered electors.

As above we propose that the Cregagh ward remain in Belfast South.

Belfast West

The transfer of the remaining Dunmurray ward into West Belfast supports West Belfast existing on established geographic boundaries, in this case the M1 motorway.

At present a small area of Falls remains in the Belfast South constituency. The proposed change will ensure that the constituency follows the natural barrier of College Avenue and College Square North.

East Derry

The existing constituency of East Derry is slightly below the Rule 2 statutory range of electors.

The SDLP opposes the suggested inclusion of the Eglinton Ward in the proposed new constituency. Eglinton has a natural connection to Derry and the Foyle constituency, underpinned by its proximity to Campsie as an industrial zone with a clear affiliation with the city. Communities in Eglinton would consider themselves a suburb of Derry with a natural

connection to the labour market of the city. This is reflected in the Travel to Work area which draws people to the Foyle constituency.

Given the unique circumstances, the SDLP proposes that the Commission exercises its latitude under Rule 7 which would bring East Derry into the adjusted range of electors for Northern Ireland.

Foyle

Reflecting the comments made in relation to East Derry, the SDLP believes that the Eglinton ward should not be transferred from Foyle given its strong affiliation with Derry through labour market, housing market and travel to work areas. The ward also forms part of the Faughan DEA within the boundary of Derry and Strabane District Council.

Removing the Eglinton ward would visit substantial inconvenience on local communities. In these circumstances, we suggest applying Rule 7 to the East Derry constituency and maintaining the Eglinton ward presence in the Foyle constituency.

Lagan Valley

The proposed changes to Lagan Valley and Upper Bann are significant and would represent a fundamental shift for people living in those communities.

Lagan Valley is currently within the statutory range of electors. The proposed removal of Derryagh proposes challenges for the community which has a strong connection to North Lisburn. The present proposal splits a natural community area around Derryagh and North Lisburn and ignores obvious physical barriers which should serve as practical delineation points between two urban constituencies, such as the Derryagh Linear Park, Barnfield Road and Creighton Road.

Further commentary on the proposed ward transfers from Upper Bann are included below.

Newry and Armagh

The SDLP acknowledges that Newry and Armagh is currently above the statutory electorate range.

We welcome the proposed inclusion of the split wards of Damolly, Abbey and St Patrick's. These wards form a key part of the hinterland of Newry and there is a strong logic in their inclusion in Newry and Armagh from South Down.

We also acknowledge that a reduction in the number of electors is necessary to bring the constituency within the statutory limit that the Commission is working to. The inclusion of

wards that are firmly based in county Armagh in a constituency as geographically large as Fermanagh and South Tyrone causes some concern. The new constituency will span three counties and, as a result, it is more difficult to define a sense of connection between the most westerly and easterly ends.

North Antrim

We accept the need to reduce the overall size of North Antrim to reach the statutory electorate range.

The SDLP disagrees with the proposal to relocate the split wards of Glenwhirry and Slemish from North Antrim to East Antrim. On a human geography level, there are established connections with North Antrim for people living in Broughshane, Braid or Glenravel, for example. These communities have no obvious connection with East Antrim.

The SDLP would also propose relocating the Lurigethan ward from East Antrim to North Antrim. This ward forms part of the Glens DEA on Causeway Coast and Glens Council. All other wards in the council are within the North Antrim and East Derry constituencies, leaving Lurigethan as an outlier.

South Antrim

As discussed above, the SDLP notes the proposed changes which would clarify the boundary with North Belfast.

South Down and Strangford

The SDLP has very serious concerns about the impact of the changes proposed to South Down on communities in the northern end of the constituency. Particularly the relocation of Downpatrick, the county town of Down and administrative centre of Newry, Mourne and Down District Council to the new constituency of Strangford and Quoile.

We believe that moving the wards associated with Downpatrick severs social, economic and historic ties to the constituency of South Down and neighbouring areas with little logical connection to the Ards peninsula.

The connectivity between Downpatrick and Newry and onwards to Dublin has increased and strengthened as a result of the amalgamation of Newry and Mourne council with Down council into the new Newry, Mourne and Down Council after the review of Public Administration. This has brought an increased identity and level of economic activity across the current constituency of South Down which would undoubtedly be severed if the Downpatrick District electoral Area was moved into a different constituency.

The wider Downpatrick and Lecale area also has a strong affinity to the St Patrick's tourism product. The two communities are connected to the south Down region by this historic affiliation. Maintaining the link through South Down has generated social and economic ties which would be threatened by changes in designation.

Downpatrick also has a strong connection to the communities that the Commission proposes should remain in South Down with catchment areas for five post primary schools attracting pupils from Newcastle and Castlewellan, Downpatrick and around the south Eastern County Down coast.

The SDLP would propose a new constituency of Strangford and Mid Down be considered to resolve the challenges facing the constituencies of South Down, Belfast South and Mid Down and Strangford and Quoile. Transferring the wards of Kilmore, Ballynahinch, Drumbo, Saintfield and Moneyreagh to this new constituency would create a clear hinterland.

Upper Bann

The SDLP has strong reservations about the proposal to transfer the wards of Aghagallon and Magheralin from Upper Bann. These communities establish themselves with Lurgan in terms of school catchment areas and public services.

We recognise, however, that there are strong geographic constraints on what is possible within this constituency given its over-range electorate.

Conclusion

The SDLP welcomes the work of the Commission and the diligence with which it has approached this task. This response represents an initial view on the proposals and the party intends to build on the response during public hearings as well as the second and third stages of the consultation.