[IC- Ulster Unionist Party]

Wednesday 15 DECEMBER 2021

**Boundary Commission for NI – INITIAL PROPOSALS – UUP RESPONSE**

**INTRODUCTION**

The Ulster Unionist Party recognises the importance of periodic boundary reviews in order to ensure electoral equality and comply with the basic principle 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.

The new Electoral Quota is 73,393, and as a variation of 5 per cent is permissible, the acceptable range is between 69,724 to 77,062.

The geography of Northern Ireland also presents challenges with room to manoeuvre limited by the border and the sea.

We also recognise that this is not an easy task, not least because what may appear to be a solution in one constituency may well cause a difficulty elsewhere.

This is especially true in terms of this review, because although seven existing constituencies are deemed to be within the acceptable range, several of them – particularly Fermanagh & South Tyrone and South Belfast – are recommended for major changes.

We also have four constituencies deemed to be too large and seven deemed to be too small.

The Commission attempted to end the practice whereby wards were split between constituencies, and has managed to do this in 54 of the 56 cases. We believe that in principle, ending the practice of split wards is desirable and should be supported wherever possible.

**KEY ISSUES**

A number of issues present themselves.

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.

We also note that a number of towns are being separated from their natural hinterlands – this was always a problem in Newry & Armagh where Newry is cut off from neighbouring wards to the east, and under the Boundary Commission’s proposals, Armagh would be cut off from its hinterland to the north (the wards of Loughgall and Blackwatertown).

Under these proposals Dungannon is cut off from its hinterland to the south and west and in North Antrim Ballymena would be separated from wards immediately to the east.

Banbridge is cut off from its hinterland to the east and west, Downpatrick would be cut off from its hinterland to the west.

**THE COMMISSION’S PROPOSALS**

**1THE WEST**

In order to address the situation in **West Tyrone** which is 3,385 below the bottom limit the Commission has proposed a number of changes.

The constituencies around it are all within the permitted range.

The moves recommended by the Boundary Commission to rectify West Tyrone cause a disproportionate amount of disruption elsewhere, not least by transferring the Dungannon area from Fermanagh & South Tyrone to Mid Ulster, and transferring the wards of Loughgall and Blackwatertown from Newry & Armagh into Fermanagh & South Tyrone.

This ultimately produces a Fermanagh & South Tyrone which stretches from the Donegal border to the edge of Armagh City and it would encompass three counties of Northern Ireland. In distance terms it would be the same distance across as Crossmaglen to Coleraine.

And all this is triggered by the fact that West Tyrone is 3,385 below quota, which is equivalent to a single ward.

Electoral boundaries need to make sense on the ground to have credibility and a number of the suggestions here simply will not command support to put it kindly.

Disruption should be kept to a minimum but this is certainly not the case with regard to West Tyrone and Fermanagh & South Tyrone. The level of disruption proposed is out of all proportion to the problem we are supposedly trying to solve.

**2 THE NORTH EAST**

**East Antrim** is the smallest constituency in Northern Ireland at 64,907 which is 4,817 below the lower limit. It is bounded by North Antrim – which is currently just 94 above the upper limit - and South Antrim which is within the accepted range.

The Boundary Commission has suggested 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.

**3 THE SOUTH**

**Newry & Armagh, South Down and Upper Bann** are all neighbouring constituencies which are too large and all of which need to lose electors. Options to rectify this are limited by a number of factors.

Firstly, the border restricts what can be done to the west and south, and the sea restricts options in the east. Efforts must therefore be focused on moving wards eastwards, inevitably affecting Lagan Valley and Strangford. This helps explain why the Boundary Commission’s proposals involve major change to Strangford which involves the proposal to transfer the Downpatrick area (five wards) from South Down to Strangford to compensate for three wards lost from Strangford to South Belfast.

The Commission proposed major changes in **South Down.**

It would gain the split wards of Derryleckagh, Loughbrickland and Mayobridge from Newry & Armagh.

It would gain the split ward of Loughbrickland from Upper Bann

It would gain the split wards of Ballywardand Gransha from Lagan Valley

It would gain Ballynahinch and Kilmore wards from Strangford

It would lose the split wards of Abbey, Damolly and St Patrick’s to Newry & Armagh

It would lose the split ward of Banbridge East to Upper Bann

It would lose the split ward of Dromara to Lagan Valley

It would lose the split wards of Crossgar & Killyleagh and Derryboy to Strangford & Quoile

It would also lose the wards of Cathedral, Knocknashinna, Lecale, Strangford and Quoile (Downpatrick area) to Strangford & Quoile.

The Commission’s full proposals for **Strangford** are that it should lose the wards of Ballynahinch and Kilmore to South Down; lose the wards of Moneyreagh and Saintfield to South Belfast; lose the split ward of Ballyward to South Down; lose the split ward of Ballygrainey to North Down; and lose the split wards of Carryduff East and Knockbracken to South Belfast.

This is clearly a very significant amount of electors to lose.

By way of compensation the Commission proposed that Strangford should gain the split wards of Crossgar & Killyleagh and Derryboy from South Down; gain the split ward of Glen from North Down; and gain the wards of Cathedral, Knocknashinna, Lecale, Strangford and Quoile (the Downpatrick area) from South Down.

The Commission also proposed that the name be amended to take count of the addition of the Downpatrick area and that the new constituency be known as Strangford and Quoile.

This would produce a modified Strangford & Quoile constituency of 71,286.

With regard to **Newry & Armagh** (81,329 electors currently) we have already stated our opposition to the Commission’s 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.

We recognise Newry & Armagh does still need to lose over 4,000 electors to bring itself within the acceptable range

**4 BELFAST**

**South Belfast** is currently within the accepted range with 70,134 electors, but as a result of electors being transferred out to East Belfast it requires electors be transferred into it from its neighbours to the south - Lagan Valley and Strangford.

This has led the Boundary Commission to propose a very strange looking constituency which stretches from Belfast City Hall deep into rural County Down and incorporates large rural wards such as Drumbo, Moneyreagh and Saintfield to the extent that a new name has been proposed of ‘Belfast South & Mid Down.’

The Boundary Commission also proposed that South Belfast should gain the split ward of Belvoir from Lagan Valley; gain the Drumbo from Lagan Valley; gain the wards of Moneyreagh and Saintfield from Strangford; gain the split wards of Blackstaff and Central from West Belfast; and gajn the split wards of Carryduff East and Knockbracken from Strangford.

The Boundary Commission also proposed that South Belfast would lose the split wards of Cregagh, Hillfoot, Merok and Woodstock to East Belfast and lose the split ward of Falls to West Belfast.

The Boundary Commission has proposed other changes affecting the Belfast Constituencies

**North Belfast** is also is currently within the accepted range with 72,332, but changes ae proposed, largely as a result of the need to transfer electors to West Belfast which is 3,963 below the accepted range.

North Belfast would gain the split ward of Carnmoney Hill from East Antrim; gain the split wards of Ballyhenry, Carnmoney Hill and Hightown from South Antrim and gain the split ward of Forth River from West Belfast.

It would also lose the split ward of Abbey to East Antrim, lose the split wards of Shankill and Woodvale to West Belfast; and lose the split wards of Burnthill, Carnmoney and Fairview to South Antrim.

**West Belfast** at 65,761 is currently 3,963 below the lower limit. The Commission proposed that it should gain the split wards of Shankill and Woodvale from North Belfast; gain the split ward of Falls from South Belfast; and gain the split wards of Dunmurry and Derryaghy from Lagan Valley.

It would also lose the split ward of Stonyford to South Antrim and lose the split wards of Blackstaff and Central to South Belfast.

**East Belfast** at 66,273 is currently 3,451 below the bottom limit. The Commission has proposed that it gain the split wards of Cregagh, Hillfoot, Merok and Woodstock from South Belfast; and lose the split ward of Garnerville to North Down.

**OUR PROPOSALS**

**1 THE WEST**

The Ulster Unionist Party does not support the 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.

**Mid Ulster** would also remain unchanged at 70,501, again within the permitted range.

Slievekirk would remain in **West Tyrone** and not transfer to Foyle leaving West Tyrone on 66,339 and below the quota.

The ward of Eglinton (2,834) could be transferred from **Foyle** to **East Londonderry** bringing it up to72,193, whilst Foyle would be 71,597, both within the agreed range.

If necessary, the ward of Park (2,576) could be transferred from East Londonderry to West Tyrone bringing West Tyrone up to 68,915, still slightly under the quota (809) and leaving East Londonderry on 69,617, again slightly still under quota (107).

We believe that the amount of disruption is required in this area under the Commission’s proposals to fix West Tyrone is excessive and disproportionate. Consequently we believe that minimal change is by far the best solution for the West of the Province.

In these circumstances the Commission could consider applying Rule 7 to permit West Tyrone to remain at 66,339 (3,385 under the limit), or to permit West Tyrone plus Park ward to be 68,915 and East Londonderry minus Park ward - 69,617 (107) under quota. The option would also be open to the Commission to transfer a ward into East Londonderry from North Antrim – such as the Giants Causeway 2,470 - which would bring East Londonderry to within the acceptable range.

**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.

As stated above, 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.

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

This would bring East Antrim to 69,973 which is within the acceptable range and North Antrim would be likewise at 72,090.

**South Antrim** has 71,915 electors and is also within the acceptable range.

Under the Commission’s proposals, South Antrim would gain the split ward of Stonyford from Lagan Valley and West Belfast; gain the split wards of Burnthill, Carnmoney and Fairview from North Belfast; and gain the split ward of Ballyduff from East South Antrim.

South Antrim would lose the split ward of Jordanstown to East Antrim and lose the split wards of Ballyhenry, Carnmoney Hill and Hightown to North Belfast.

This would result in a South Antrim constituency of 71,646, well within the acceptable range and we are content to endorse the Commission’s proposals for South Antrim.

**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 in the split wards of Abbey, Damolly and St Patrick’s. They could be retained in South Down thereby reducing the size of Newry & Armagh. If South Down were to exceed the permitted limit as a result, then the Commission could look at transferring another ward from South Down to another constituency.

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.

**Upper Bann** currently has 83,028 electors and is therefore almost 6,000 above the upper limit deemed acceptable.

The Boundary Commission’s proposals would see Upper Bann gain the split ward of The Birches from Fermanagh & South Tyrone, the split ward of Mahon from Newry & Armagh, the split ward of Banbridge East from South Down and the split ward of Donaghcloney from Lagan Valley.

Upper Bann would also lose the split ward of Loughbrickland to South Down, the split ward of Ballinderry to Lagan Valley and the wards of Aghagallon and Magheralin to Lagan Valley.

Under the Boundary Commission’s proposals Upper Bann would have 74,979 electors and this seems a reasonable solution.

**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.

**This does 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.**

One cannot help but feel that the plan to transfer the five wards from the Downpatrick area out of South Down and into Strangford is being done to compensate for the proposal to transfer two wards from Strangford to South Down and two more wards from Strangford to South Belfast.

**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 – for example 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 comprising 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.

The wards of Lecale, Cathedral, Knocknashinna, Strangford and Quoile very much focus on the town of Downpatick. The Commission’s proposals would cut them off from Downpatrick’s natural hinterland to the west and the rest of the existing South Down constituency. If they were to be removed from the proposed Strangford and Quoile constituency that would involve 14,708 electors.

We propose that the wards of Ballynahinch and Kilmore should not be transferred to the Commission’s proposed South Down constituency and should remain in Strangford. Drumaness should transfer from South Down to Strangford. This would account for 8,945 electors.

The ward of Saintfield (3,033) should remain in Strangford and not be transferred to South Belfast.

**This would produce a Strangford constituency of 68,556 which is 1,168 below the Boundary Commission’s acceptable range and the name of the Constituency should remain as Strangford.**

**South Down would now be 78,115 which is 1,053 above the permitted limit.**

In order to resolve the issue, at least 1,170 electors need to be transferred from South Down to Strangford. This could be done either by moving an entire ward, or by an alternative suggestion as follows. We suggest that the Commission should look at splitting the Quoile ward using the river Quoile itself as the new constituency boundary between Strangford to the north and South Down to the south. The river would provide an easily recognisable and understandable boundary and this should transfer the 1,170 electors needed.

As stated earlier with reference to reducing Newry & Armagh in size, the Commission should give serious consideration is to looking at those electors being transferred into Newry & Armagh from South Down in the split wards of Abbey, Damolly and St Patrick’s. The Commission could consider retaining them in South Down and this would obviously increase the size of South Down still further, and to rectify this, the Commission could look at transferring another ward from South Down to another constituency.

**Lagan Valley** currently has 75,884 electors, which makes it within the permissible range and 1,178 below the upper limit.

Under the Commission’s proposals, Lagan Valley would gain the split ward of Ballinderry from Upper Bann; gain the wads of Aghagallon and Magheralin from Upper Bann; and gain the split ward of Dromara from South Down.

Lagan Valley would then lose the split ward of Donaghcloney to Upper Bann; lose the split ward of Belvoir and the mainly rural ward of Drumbo to South Belfast; lose the split wards of Dunmurry and Derryaghy to West Belfast; lose the split ward of Stonyford to South Antrim; and lose the split wards of Ballyward and Gransha to South Down.

This would produce a modified Lagan Valley constituency of 73,564.

We propose that the ward of Ballymacbrennan (2,337) should transfer from Lagan Valley to South Belfast (to make up for Saintfield ward being retained in Strangford and not joining South Belfast).

This in turn would produce a modified Lagan Valley constituency of 71,227 which is well within the Commission’s permitted range.

**North Down** currently has 67,109 electors, which makes it 2,615 below the permissible range.

Also as outlined above, the Boundary Commission proposed that the split ward of Garnerville should be transferred from East Belfast to North Down.

North Down would also gain the split ward of Ballygrainey from Strangford and lose the split ward of Glen to the new Strangford & Quoile constituency.

This would result in a North Down constituency of 70,412 well within the acceptable range and we are content to endorse the Commission’s proposals for North Down.

**4 BELFAST**

**South Belfast** is currently within the permissible range with 70,134 electors yet the changes proposed for it by the Boundary Commission are some of the most eye-catching.

In order to increase the number of electors in East Belfast which at 66,273 is 3,451 below the lower range, the Commission proposed that the split wards of Cregagh, Hillfoot, Merok and Woodstock should be transferred from South Belfast to East Belfast.

This would obviously impact on South Belfast which would require additional electors to compensate.

The Commission proposed that South Belfast should gain the split wards of Blackstaff and Central from West Belfast in addition to the split ward of Belvoir from Lagan Valley and the predominantly rural ward of Drumbo from Lagan Valley.

The Commission also proposed that South Belfast should gain the predominantly rural wards of Moneyreagh and Saintfield from Strangford in addition to the split wards of Carryduff East and Knockbracken also from Strangford.

South Belfast almost trebles in terms of the size of area it covers as a result of the addition of the rural wards of Drumbo, Moneyreagh and Saintfield and achieves an electorate of 71,978.

Due to the change in the nature of the constituency the Commission proposed that it be renamed ‘Belfast South and Mid Down’.

There is no doubt that in an ideal world, South Belfast would be a wholly urban constituency (like the other three Belfast seats) and would not need to extend south to Saintfield and also incorporate rural wards like Drumbo and Moneyreagh.

South Belfast extending from Belfast City Hall to rural Saintfield is a rather bizarre looking proposition, especially given that the current South Belfast Constituency is within the accepted range.

The very name “South Belfast & Mid Down” merely serves to highlight the unique nature of that proposed ward. Half the seat by territory is rural and it is heavily weighted population wise to the city of Belfast in the north of the seat.

The rural wards of Saintfield, Moneyreagh and Drumbo really would be better served by remaining where they currently are but we recognise the need for South Belfast to gain electors to replace those lost to East Belfast in particular.

As stated above, we propose that Saintfield (3,033) should remain in Strangford, reducing South Belfast & Mid Down to 68,945 which is 779 below the acceptable minimum. To compensate, we propose that the ward of Ballymacbrennan (2,337) should be transferred from Lagan Valley to South Belfast to create a new South Belfast constituency with an electorate of 71,278.

We would also suggest that a more appropriate name would be ‘Belfast South & Carryduff”.

**East Belfast,** as outlined earlier has 66,273 electors, which makes it 3,451 below the permissible range.

Also as outlined above, the Boundary Commission proposed that the split wards of Cregagh, Hillfoot, Merok and Woodstock should be transferred from South Belfast to East Belfast. It also proposed that the split ward of Garnerville should be transferred from East Belfast to North Down and as result, East Belfast would comprise 70,076 electors.

We are content to endorse the Commission’s proposal for East Belfast.

**North Belfast** iswithin the acceptable rangeand **West Belfast** is 3,693 electors below the bottom limit. In order to remedy the situation in West Belfast, the Commission proposed changes to North Belfast.

The Commission’s proposals for **North Belfast** would see it gain the split ward of Carnmoney Hill from East Antrim; gain the split wards of Ballyhenry, Carnmoney Hill and Hightown from South Antrim and gain the split ward of Forth River from West Belfast.

North Belfast would lose the split ward of Abbey to East Antrim; lose the split wards of Burnthill, Carnmoney and Fairview to South Antrim; and lose the split wards of Shankill and Woodvale to West Belfast.

This would result in a North Belfast constituency of 70,361, well within the acceptable range.

We believe that ending the practice of split wards is desirable and should be supported and are content to endorse the Commission’s proposals for North Belfast.

**West Belfast** is currently 3,693 electors below the bottom limit. As stated above it is due to gain the split wards of Shankill and Woodvale from North Belfast.

The Commission’s proposals would see West Belfast gain the split ward of Falls from South Belfast; and gain the split wards of Dunmurry and Derryaghy from Lagan Valley

The Commission’s proposals would also see West Belfast lose the split ward of Stonyford to South Antrim and lose the split wards of Blackstaff and Central to South Belfast.

This would result in a West Belfast constituency of 71,921, well within the acceptable range and we are content to endorse the Commission’s proposals for West Belfast.

**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.

It is now imperative that as many people as possible engage in the process and make their feeling known during the Secondary Consultation period once the responses to these Initial Proposals are published.