[TC – South Down Association of the SDLP]

South Down Association of the SDLP

Recommendations for the Revised 2023 Review of Parliamentary Constituencies

The Social Democratic and Labour Party expressed its concern for the initial proposals made for the 2023 review of parliamentary constituencies. Within the South Down Association we are of the view that additional recommendations must be made for the revised proposals as set out by the Boundary Commission. The South Down Association, and the Lecale area branch, are particularly concerned as to the impact the revised proposals will have on South Down, and have put forward the following proposals, which we believe will adequately satisfy the Boundary Commission’s principles for parliamentary constituencies, will garner cross community support, and offer a better outcome for South Down and its neighbouring constituencies specifically.

The South Down Association of the SDLP is concerned that the proposals for South Down suggested in the second publication by the Boundary commission create unnecessary change, impacting more people that it needs to.

We are concerned at the complete splitting of, and isolation of half of, the Downpatrick District Electoral Area and the resultant minuscule connection between the Strangford Ward and its new constituency via one 10-metre wide road.

Currently the Boundary Commission’s second proposal would see:

* The Gransha ward move from Lagan Valley into South Down, and
* The Strangford ward move from South Down into the Strangford constituency

This move would impact 6486 people.

However, we feel there is an alternative proposal, which would affect less people, and would achieve cross community support. The South Down Association would recommend moving:

1. Ballymacbrennan Ward from Lagan Valley into Strangford
2. Leaving the Strangford Ward in South Down and potentially
3. Moving a small number of people (around 300) between North Down and Strangford constituencies (via existing split wards between the two constituencies already split)

For the South Down Association proposals 1 and 2 are essential, however 3 could potentially be avoided.

This move would affect only 2637 people

Overall, our suggestion would result in the following elector numbers for each constituency:

* Lagan Valley 74,843 ( + 1139)
* South Down 73,904 ( - 466)
* Strangford 69,727 ( - 373)
* North Down 70,112 (-300)

The Boundary Commission’s first and second proposals see one single ward transfer out of Lagan Valley (currently the Gransha Ward into South Down). We are suggesting that instead of it being the Gransha Ward transferring into South Down that the Ballymacbrennan Ward transfers into Strangford.

Both are rural wards; similar in size; neither has a main town or settlement, and both are connected fully to the constituency they might move into. We believe that the difference in transferring the Ballymacbrennan ward rather than Gransha ward is minimal.

We believe the move of the Strangford ward into the Strangford constituency has major impacts, specifically:

* The move splits completely in half the District Electoral Area of Downpatrick
* Removes housing estates at the edge of Downpatrick (South Down), and moving them into a different constituency (Strangford)
* Will result in cul-de-sacs of the same development being in different constituencies (Saul Acres, Saul Rd, Downpatrick) and
* Even splits a semi-detached house down the middle – with one house being in the Strangford consituency and one being in the South Down constituency.

The rural area of the Lecale coastline has always had its home in South Down, and this split will cause constituents (of the settlements of Strangford village, Saul, Ballyhornan, Kilclief, Dunsford, Ballyalton, etc) to have to travel through their main local town (Downpatrick), in a different constituency, to access the main towns of their new constituency (Ballynahinch, Comber and Newtownards).

For the Strangford ward to move to their new constituency this part of the Lecale Coastline (of some 40 square miles) will only be connected to their new constituency via a 10-metre strip of road (around the junction of the Mearne Rd/Strangford Road) and yet they will share an 8-mile border with a different constituency.

It will be all but landlocked by a different constituency (except for a 10-metre strip of road). This can be avoided; is unhelpful, and opposes the principles of Rule 5 of the Commission’s guidelines:

These are:

1. Special geographical considerations, including in particular the size, shape and accessibility of a constituency;
2. Local government boundaries which exist, or are prospective, on the review date
3. Boundaries of existing constituencies ;
4. Any local ties that would be broken by changes in constituencies;
5. The inconveniences attendant on such changes.

We believe the removal of the Strangford ward and splitting of the Downpatrick District Electoral Area and isolation of the Lecale coastline would breach each of the above rules, in turn, as follows:

1. ***Special geographical considerations, including in particular the size, shape and accessibility of a constituency;***

We believe the isolation would leave an unusual shape to the constituency, having the Strangford ward only connected to the Strangford constituency via a stretch of single carriageway road. The connecting road is about half a mile long and 10m wide. This would tag the ward onto the Strangford constituency. I do not believe this area will receive the necessary attention from elected representatives, as it will be geographically isolated.

1. ***Local government boundaries which exist, or are prospective, on the review date***

Currently the Strangford Ward is part of South Down constituency and Newry, Mourne & Down Council area. This removal will place it into the Strangford constituency, of which the majority is in the Ards and North Down Council area. This will further exacerbate the geographical isolation. In addition, the Strangford ward is in the Downpatrick District Electoral Area of Newry, Mourne & Down Council, and this will be split across two constituencies by this decision.

1. ***Boundaries of existing constituencies***

The proposed change will see the ward of Strangford move from South Down to Strangford. However, our proposal maintains it within the constituency of South Down thus minimising change and maintaining some of the integrity of the current boundary of the existing South Down constituency

1. ***Any local ties that would be broken by changes in constituencies***

Local ties in the area will be obliterated; neighbours from the same street will be in separate constituencies; housing estates will be split; council district electoral areas will be split; local ties will be split; school catchment areas will be split.

This change splits every facet of public administration in two for areas that have been together since before the time of St Patrick – who will, incidentally, under this proposal now have arrived in the constituency of Strangford and rest in the constituency of South Down!

The arguments that were made initially by the SDLP for the retention of Downpatrick (meaning the Downpatrick District Electoral Area including the Strangford Ward) in South Down related to both Downpatrick town ***and*** its wider hinterland, which is now scheduled to move. These arguments still stand for the electors of the area scheduled to move and we have appended these arguments to this submission, as they remain valid. (See Appendix A)

1. ***The inconveniences attendant on such changes***

We believe we have more than highlighted how the split of the Downpatrick District Electoral area will cause major ramifications.

**Imbalance of Strangford Constituency (ie, being 297 voters short)**

If it is accepted that the Ballymacbrennan ward moves rather that the Gransha ward, as we have detailed, we understand that this leaves the Strangford consituency 297 electors short of the required electoral threshold. However, there are two options available:

1. Moving a small number (around 300) between the North Down constituency and the Strangford constituency (in pre-existing split wards between the two constituencies) or
2. Using Rule 7 from the guidance given to the Boundary Commission
3. ***Moving small number (around 300) between North Down and Strangford (in existing split wards between the two constituencies)***

We suggest that the Loughries ward (which is currently split between North Down and Strangford) could have electors moved from the North Down side to the Strangford side, and the Carrowdore Ward (which is likewise split between North Down and Strangford) could also have electors moved from the North Down side to the Strangford side.

The re-lining of the internal spilt of these wards could provide the additional 300 voters to rebalance the constituencies and allow them both to fall within the necessary electoral range.

We would suggest moving the internal dividing line of the Loughries ward and the Carrowdore ward closer to the settlements of Donaghadee and Millisle, and thus capture more of the rural hinterlands’ electors of these settlements into the Strangford Consituency.

Roads include Abbey Road; Moss Road, and Killaughey road. There appears to be enough rural dwellers on these roads, currently residing in the North Down constituency who could move into the Strangford constituency to allow it to reach the required threshold.

Or

1. ***Using Rule 7 from the guidance given to the Boundary Commission***

Rule 7 states: *“Rule 7 only applies to Northern Ireland. Where the Commission feels that having to apply Rule 2 would unreasonably impair its ability to take into account the factors set out in Rule 5, or to submit a report on time, Rule 7 can be applied and one or more constituencies recommended which fall slightly outside the Rule 2 range, in accordance with a prescribed formula. For the 2023 Review this means that the Commission could propose one or more constituencies of between 68,314 and 77,062 electors.”*

Rule 7 could be used in this case to leave North Down and Strangford as they are, resulting in only the Strangford constituency falling below the required level of 69,724 electors but above the level of 68,314 electors cited in the rules as being permissible and being the only one of the 18 constituencies in Northern Ireland to do so.

**Conclusion**

The South Down Association have given all these matters serious consideration; understand why there is a need to review the boundaries of parliamentary constituencies, and want to see the best outcome for everyone in Northern Ireland. However, the proposals, which have been made by the Boundary Commission, offer an unnecessary level of disruption. Our proposals minimise said disruption, maintain cross community support (which has always had a home in South Down), and offer a better outcome for all.

We hope that the Commission will take all of the above into consideration and reach the determination that will satisfy its needs; the needs of the people in the constituencies and offer that all-important cross community support.

**Appendix A**

**Natural Connections**

The Downpatrick area (meaning the Downpatrick District Electoral Area including the Strangford Ward) has no affinity with, or to the Newtownards area. It is culturally and politically different. Newtownards’ transportation connections are to Belfast and to Bangor.

There are no clubs, groups or societies that operate on an Ards/Downpatrick basis.

Families do not move between the locations. The connectivity between the two communities is minimal. To force us together will create problems as funding is often analysed and distributed on a constituency basis. Removing the Downpatrick hinterland (meaning the Downpatrick District Electoral Area including the Strangford Ward) from the South Down constituency could see the loss of connection for groups and loss of funding leverage will impact upon hundreds of groups across the wider South Down area.

**Member of Parliament**

The Downpatrick area (meaning the Downpatrick District Electoral Area including the Strangford Ward) has provided the base for the South Down Member of Parliament for the greatest majority of its existence in its current form. For over 30 years (the majority of South Down’s current form), the Member of Parliament has had a base in Downpatrick and local people have been able to access and engage with constituency services of their MP. To move the Downpatrick hinterland into a different constituency could see the loss of this political connectivity and seems unfair in order to facilitate the size of other constituencies.

**Transport Corridors**

The connectivity between the Downpatrick hinterland 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 split and half moved into a different constituency.

Currently there are no public transport connections or links between Downpatrick and Comber/Newtownards. This is due to a very practical business reason – there is no need! People do not naturally move between these areas, there are no familial, economic, social or cultural links between what would have been the two chief towns in the new constituency. We fear that given the significant differences between the community designation and other differences between the two communities that there would be unleashed a generation of competitiveness between the two areas which would be served by a local council of mainly one community designation favouring one of the towns. This will cause, and indeed, since the announcement of the initial outline proposals has caused, significant unease.

**Educational Hub**

Downpatrick is an identified educational hub. We have five second-level schools, which draw their pupils from the surrounding area. Many children from Newcastle, Castlewellan, Dundrum and the rural areas of Slieve Croob attend schools in Downpatrick, yet will all be attending school in a different constituency should the proposals be implemented. Presently children from the Strangford area gravitate towards Newtownards/Saintfield/Ballynahinch for their education. The educational catchment areas for schools have developed along constituency basis and to change the constituency boundaries will cause confusion and problems with the present establishment.

**Sporting Organisations**

Many sporting organisations have developed along an East Down/South Down basis with the organisations being within the capture of the existing South Down boundary. Many leagues, groups and competitions are based in the Downpatrick area (meaning the Downpatrick District Electoral Area including the Strangford Ward) and extend to the legacy Down and Newry and Mourne areas. Council support is extended on this basis too. To remove merely the Downpatrick DEA and place it in the Strangford area would sever this tie.

**Geography = Connectivity**

While there may be some logic to this suggestion based on geography, i.e. all of the new area will be touching Strangford Lough; there is no consideration that the people who live in the area are not connected. A constituency, its vibrancy and development must be based on the connectivity of its people. This proposal takes no account of this and would be disastrous for the communities within.