

South Belfast SDLP Consultation Response regarding the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner's Provisional Recommendations

This submission to the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner (the Commissioner) is on behalf of the Social Democratic and Labour Party in South Belfast.

May we take this opportunity to state that we recognise the difficult and delicate task the Commissioner has been given and commend her and her colleagues for the diligent manner in which they have approached this work. We do however respectfully come to different conclusions on a number of the suggestions and so have laid out some proposals we feel would be better suited to South Belfast, factoring in the broad range of statutory and desirable parameters.

We acknowledge that a degree of interpretation has to be made in the assignment of *readily identifiable* boundaries, that is, the importance and impact of man-made or natural physical features.

We note the fact that legislation has determined that all wards should be composed of a broadly equal number of electors, that is within a 10% tolerance of the district average.

The district average for Belfast is 3,837, therefore a 10% tolerance is +/- 383.7 which gives us a range of between 3,453 and 4,221 (rounded).

Balmoral

| Ward | Existing | Proposed | Comparison to DAv |
|--------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| Belvoir | 3681 | 3681 | 95.9% |
| Finaghy | 3539 | 4217 | 109.9% |
| Malone | 3754 | 4202 | 109.5% |
| Musgrave | 3705 | 4219 | 109.9% |
| Upper Malone | 3707 | 4218 | 109.9% |
| | | Total: 20537 | Electors per Cllr: 4107 |

Botanic

| Ward | Existing | Proposed | Comparison to DAv |
|-------------|-----------------|-----------------|--------------------------|
| Blackstaff | 4398 | 4209 | 109.6% |
| Central | 5282 | 4214 | 109.8% |
| Ormeau | 4200 | 3911 | 101.9% |
| Stranmillis | 4391 | 4184 | 109.0% |
| Windsor | 4865 | 4178 | 108.8% |
| | | Total: 20696 | Electors per Cllr: 4139 |

While we accept that each proposal for the above wards is within the accepted range, we would also highlight that four of the five redrawn wards generally within the extant Balmoral DEA – Finaghy, Malone, Upper Malone and Musgrave – and four of the five

wards generally within the extant Botanic DEA – Central, Blackstaff, Stranmillis and Windsor – are all within close proximity to the upper threshold, and therefore even after the review there would still be a significant democratic deficit and under-representation in these areas, not to mention little capacity for natural populations growth. We would suggest a much smaller transfer of electors between the above wards and the creation of a new ward to go alongside Central, Blackstaff, Windsor, Ormeau and Stranmillis and a new ward to go alongside Belvoir, Finaghy, Malone, Musgrave and Upper Malone to organically accommodate the changing nature of these areas, as is permitted in the legislation.

While we appreciate the need to satisfy the legislative requirement for each ward within the district of Belfast to have substantially the same number of electors, we have grave concerns that the plans to decimate a number of the wards within the existing Botanic DEA in particular will have a detrimental impact on their residents and the city more generally; the plans do not seem to take into account the unique character of these wards, the sense of community within them, or their diverse make-up, and therefore will have a negative impact if implemented.

The wards that make up the existing Botanic DEA collectively had the second lowest turnout of any in Belfast in 2019 – 44.76% – a full eight percentage points below the next lowest set of wards. This is based on the existing ward boundaries. However, the proposals will remove many of those areas from within these wards which traditionally have a higher turnout, meaning that turnout in the reshaped wards under the proposed boundaries would collapse, creating a substantial democratic deficit and effectively resulting in ‘ghost constituencies’ characterised by vast tracts of largely unpopulated areas such as the city centre. Added to this is the fact that increasingly we are seeing plans being approved and implemented for student accommodation in the most urban parts of several of the wards such as Blackstaff and Central which may overinflate the numbers of registered voters, but which will not result in a healthy turnout. It will also lead to a paucity of democratic engagement given the skewing of the wards towards this type of accommodation.

We accept that there may be a need to adjust some aspects of a number of the wards within the existing Botanic DEA, but feel that the nature of how this is proposed takes no account of the diverse communities within the five wards that currently make up Botanic, is focused primarily on the southern parts of Stranmillis and Windsor so therefore lops off entire neighbourhoods of a similar cohesive nature rather than being done in a way which is equitable across the wards, and will effectively create a shells of wards with isolated and unconnected neighbourhoods, skewing the wards away from the current age, race, religious, economic and social diversity that they currently enjoy. Indeed, collectively Central, Blackstaff, Windsor, Ormeau and Stranmillis form the most diverse area on the island of Ireland – this is at risk under these plans.

In particular, we believe that too much of the Windsor and Stranmillis wards are being transferred to Malone – while we accept that some move across may be required and support this, the wholesale lifting of entire sections of this part of the community across is too focused on this one area – to cleave the patch between Hillside Drive and Deramore Park South, and the area around the Marlborough Park South, Central and North, focuses too much change on one specific area of

Stranmillis and Windsor, and will result in a seismic impact on the demographic nature of these wards, not to mention on the residents of these areas themselves. For example, the Holyland area which has no link with Stranmillis, is being brought within the ward to reduce the number of electors within the current Central ward, while parts of Stranmillis itself are being taken out of the ward altogether, unnecessarily splitting natural communities. Likewise, parts of Blackstaff are being moved into Windsor, only for communities at the south end of Windsor to be cut off from neighbouring streets and moved into Malone.

With regard to the proposed transfer of electors from Ormeau to Ravenhill, the location of this transfer is not appropriate – to carve up streets such as Park Road, North Parade, South Parade and the Ravenhill Road will cause confusion in those communities, split streets apart and create an issue of streets being arbitrarily divided between wards, especially as it will mean one part of a street falling under East Belfast for council administrative purposes, and another falling under South Belfast. If electors need to be transferred from Ormeau, we believe this could be done in a much less detrimental way in locations such as the northerly sections of Ailesbury Road and Florenceville Avenue (where the anomaly of the ward boundary between Ormeau and Rosetta running up the middle of the road could actually be rectified) or in the streets around Hampton Drive, which is a discrete community already contiguous to the Rosetta ward. Streets such as Knockeden Park and adjacent streets could then be moved from Rosetta to Ravenhill to satisfy the requirements for the number of electors in those respective wards.

Rather than responding to the population growth of Central, Blackstaff, Windsor, Ormeau and Stranmillis, which will largely be focused on student and apartment living in the urban parts of the northernmost areas of the wards around the city centre and university area, by jettisoning residential areas with diverse communities, which would ultimately result in wards being starved of the character that they currently enjoy and will see a collapse in democratic engagement and turnout, we would advocate for a much smaller transfer of electors, and for the location of transfers to be reconsidered, and the creation of a new ward to go alongside Central, Blackstaff, Windsor, Ormeau and Stranmillis within the general area of the extant Botanic DEA and a new ward to go alongside Belvoir, Finaghy, Malone, Musgrave and Upper Malone within the general area of the extant Balmoral DEA to organically accommodate the changing nature of these areas and keep communities together, as is permitted in the legislation.

While the overriding purpose of this review is to ensure that there is equality of representation for electors, to do this in a way which is purely focused on numbers without taking into account the character of the communities which make up a Central, Blackstaff, Windsor, Ormeau and Stranmillis and the unique set of circumstances within them (a combination of a city centre, inner-city communities and suburbs, alongside the increase in student and apartment-based accommodation) risks creating a situation which will damage these areas and their ability to make their voices heard within the democratic structures of the city.

**Social Democratic and Labour Party
21st September 2021**