

## **South Belfast SDLP Consultation Response regarding the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner's Revised Recommendations**

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

We recognise the diligent work of the Commissioner and her colleagues since the completion of the consultation process on the provisional recommendations. We welcome the changes that have been proposed to the provisional recommendations, but do however still have a number of serious concerns about the splitting up of extant wards, and the impact it will have on the respective communities, as well as the democratic deficit compared with other proposed wards in terms of voter/ councillor ratio.

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 in South Belfast will have a detrimental impact on their residents and the city more generally; the revised plans do not seem to have taken into account this issue which we has raised previously, apart from with regard to Ormeau where the proposed changes have understandably been dropped (which we very much welcome, as this will keep a distinct community together), in that 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.

As we have noted previously, the wards in the northern strip of South Belfast had the second lowest turnout of any in Belfast in 2019 – 44.76% – a full eight percentage points below the next lowest set of contiguous 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.

We accept that there may be a need to adjust some aspects of a number of the wards, but feel that the nature of how this is proposed takes no account of the diverse communities within the most affected wards, and is focused primarily on the southern parts of Stranmillis and Windsor wards 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, the extant wards in the northern portion of South Belfast form the most diverse area on the island of Ireland – this is at risk under these plans.

While we welcome the decision to keep the Ormeau ward intact rather than transferring parts of it which lie along the Ravenhill Road to Ravenhill and thank the Commissioner for revising the original proposals on this, we remain very concerned

that **too much of the southern end 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 will be too detrimental to the fabric of 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 Holylands area which has no link with the Stranmillis community geographically or in terms of character, is being brought within the Stranmillis 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 southern end of Windsor to be cut off from neighbouring streets and moved into Malone. We don't believe that due consideration has been given to the impact of this in either the provisional recommendations or the revised recommendations, so would be **very grateful if the Commissioner would consider a much-reduced transfer between Stranmillis and Windsor to Malone e.g. leave the stretch from Hillside Drive and Deramore Park South within Stranmillis, or leave Marlborough Park South, Central and North within Windsor,** to reduce the upheaval in this part of South Belfast. We appreciate the mathematical impact of this, but strongly believe that it is important to keep similar communities intact.

We also have remaining concerns that in any extant, proposed or further revised configurations, the population density in South Belfast means that there are not enough wards to adequately serve the community compared with other parts of the city. We welcome the Assistant Commissioner's agreement with our proposal on this in terms of his suggestions for the creation of a new 'University' ward to ease the pressure on those wards in that part of the city, and would ask the Commissioner to reconsider this proposal. We note that she comments in her provisional recommendations that although she "did not choose a model of more than 60 wards for my Provisional Recommendations, I would not rule out using my discretion to increase or to decrease the number of wards as a method of configuring boundaries within a District and this submission provides a welcome opportunity to further test the issue in the context of this district," so would ask her use exercise this discretion in this instance.

We would also raise the point that there is likely to be population growth in the communities around Queen's University, given efforts to address ongoing issues and rebuild communities in the Holylands and wider university area, as well as plans for large student accommodation – we don't believe this has been factored into considerations.

The district average number of voters per councillor 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**

<b>Ward</b>	<b>Existing</b>	<b>Proposed</b>	<b>Comparison to DAv</b>
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**

<b>Ward</b>	<b>Existing</b>	<b>Proposed</b>	<b>Comparison to DAv</b>
Blackstaff	4398	4209	109.6%
Central	5282	4214	109.8%
Ormeau	4200	4200	109.5%
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 nine of the ten wards in South Belfast 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 population growth. We would still 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 in South Belfast will have a detrimental impact on their residents and the city more generally; the revised plans do not seem to have taken into account this issue which we has raised previously, in that 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.

As we have noted previously, the wards in the northern section of South Belfast had the second lowest turnout of any in Belfast in 2019 – 44.76% – a full eight percentage points below the next lowest set of contiguous 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.

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 and a new ward to go alongside Belvoir, Finaghy, Malone, Musgrave and Upper Malone 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  
February 2022**