



SOUTH BELFAST PARTNERSHIP BOARD

Elizabeth Benson
Secretary to the Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland
Boundary Commission for Northern Ireland
Forestview
Purdy's Lane
Belfast
BT8 7AR

07 December 2012

Dear Elizabeth Benson

I write to you on behalf of the South Belfast Partnership Board in response to the publication of the Revised Proposals Report from the Sixth Periodical Review of Parliamentary Constituencies on 16 October 2012. We are disappointed to see that ours, and a number of other parties', comments in relation to the removal of the Belfast South Parliamentary Constituency, have not resulted in any proposed amendments to the proposals. We continue to argue that the boundary changes as proposed in South Belfast would not best serve the residents of South Belfast and do not acknowledge both natural/physical boundaries and local identity.

As we have previously stated the River Lagan has always provided a natural boundary for local communities on the ground, drawing a distinction between East and South Belfast. Similarly the A1 Motorway/Westlink continues to provide a perceived demarcation between South and West Belfast. However, the revised constituency of Belfast South West includes wards either side of this physical barrier. The presence of these 'natural' boundaries on the ground has also served to increase the sense of local identity felt by communities living in South Belfast.

Local identity is of particular importance to the distinctive inner city communities of South Belfast, such as Donegall Pass, Sandy Row, the Markets and the Village. To be more specific, there has been significant public sector investment over the past two or three decades in building a strong and cohesive community infrastructure within these communities, most recently under the cross-Government Neighbourhood Renewal Programme. This programme targets communities identified as the most deprived 10% of wards within NI and has led to the establishment of Neighbourhood Partnerships – bringing together community representatives with the statutory and private sectors, as well as political representatives – within each defined area to oversee the implementation of the programme. Within South Belfast there are two Neighbourhood Renewal Areas, including Inner South Belfast (which

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covers Donegall Pass, the Lower Ormeau and the Markets) and South West Belfast (which covers Greater Village, Mid-Donegall Road and Sandy Row). Maps of these areas are available from the NISRA website.

In practice, the majority of Government programmes and public sector investment decisions seek to address social deprivation and inevitably seek to utilise these existing structures when channelling their resources. It is therefore very important that strong local ties are maintained between these communities, both for those who live and work in the areas, but also in terms of maintaining political support for the relevant areas. We would therefore continue to argue that the sense of local identity, community cohesion and solidarity are therefore vital for the ability of society to address the causes of multiple deprivation. Similar issues of identity and community cohesion also exist within less deprived areas, such as Stranmillis and Malone. We therefore urge the Boundary Commission to re-consider its decision with regards to South Belfast.

We are disappointed to see that many of these arguments made by local groups with regards to these matters have been dismissed simply because “most of these were from local organisations and community groups in south Belfast” (p12). If anything, the fact that such a response has been seen from those people to be most affected by the proposals should add strength to the point, highlighting the importance of the proposals to communities on the ground. In fact, the report seems to provide greater weight to arguments made by political parties and their representatives, most notably, those who are most likely to gain from the proposed changes. However, it is also notable that some of the political responses still identified matters such as “identifiable natural features” (DUP, p15) and “community structures” (Sinn Fein, p15) as important considerations.

It is also disappointing to see that the groups representing the communities affected by the proposals are specifically mentioned on p16 as having their arguments “deployed in support of maintaining a four constituency Belfast”, almost dismissing any important issues raised because we failed to suggest specific “revisions to the proposed Belfast SW/Belfast SE boundaries. We feel this is a weak response from the Boundary Commission, who, even if you deem it necessary to move to a three constituency model in Belfast, could have reviewed the Boundary between the two new wards in the light of the matters raised.

To be more specific, if we were to accept that a three Belfast constituency is inevitable based on the fact that “the disruption to local ties within the city is nothing to that produced by the knock-on effects” (p14) outside of Belfast if a four constituency model is retained, there are still improvements that can be made to the proposed boundary between the two new wards.

For example, if the Botanic ward was moved to the Belfast South West constituency, the inner city communities within the two Neighbourhood Renewal areas could maintain the existing ties and sense of identities. To compensate in terms of constituency populations, the wards of Ballynafeigh would also need to be moved into the Belfast South West constituency and the Upper Malone ward from the Belfast South West constituency to the Belfast South East constituency, thus bringing both constituencies within the 5% rule parameters.

Obviously this is not an ideal solution as it still risks breaking local ties between Malone and Upper Malone or Malone, it fails to maintain any continuity of constituency for the full length of the Ormeau Road and it neglects the river as the natural boundary. However if Rule 7 cannot be utilised to in this instance, it may be a useful compromise given the fact

that there are “inevitably difficulties in delineating boundaries without breaking some existing local ties” (p17). It does, we believe, better reflect natural boundaries in some locations, maintain some of the local connections and sense of identity, moves to a three constituency model and prevents any undesirable ‘ripple effects’ in constituencies outside of Belfast.

We therefore urge the Boundary Commission to take greater notice of the voice of communities within south Belfast and reconsider the proposals with regards to the Belfast South constituency. Whilst maintaining a four constituency model in Belfast would be the preferable outcome, if this is genuinely unobtainable the Boundary Commission should review the location of the demarcation between the two new wards within South Belfast. We believe there are solutions that better reflect the sense of identity within communities on the ground, respecting existing community infrastructure and networks, provide fewer problems in terms of attracting inward investment and take into account natural boundaries, such as the River Lagan.

As an aside, we have also been asked to raise a local matter in relation to the Blackstaff ward, which although it may seem relatively insignificant within this debate is an issue of high importance for the local communities who live in the area. We refer you to the responses made to your previous consultation by the Blackstaff Community Development Association, who point out that the Broadway roundabout was agreed to form part of the Blackstaff ward during a local government boundary review in 2008/9, but which is now shown to be part of the neighbouring Beechmount ward. We understand there were no objections to this proposal at the time and so would be grateful if you could check that the local boundaries shown as part of your consultation are indeed accurate in this regard.

We finish by re-iterating that this is about representation and identification with an area, not party politics. People are disengaged with the political process because they believe it does not represent them. We continue to hold that better solutions are possible. The South Belfast Partnership Board welcomes the opportunity to provide this additional input into the Review process and would be happy to discuss any of these matters further if necessary.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark J Finlay', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Mark J Finlay
Chairman
South Belfast Partnership Board