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Secretary,
Office of the Local government Boundaries Commissioner, Forest View, Purdy's Lane, Belfast.
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A chara,

Re. Representation on Revised Recommendations on the Review of Local Government Boundaries

We would ask that the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner consider the use of Irish language ward names alongside the English version, and that in areas where the demand is clearest - eg. throughout Belfast - the Irish language version should always appear alongside the English language version.

In making this representation we would argue that

- 1) such a move would be in accordance with both local and E.U. law, as well as international best practice,
- 2) there is a clear demand for such a move, as demonstrated by the submissions on the provisional recommendations,
- 3) there is a natural geographic, historical and current social justification for recognition of Irish language ward names in certain areas, and
- 4) there is a precedent for such a move by the Commissioner.

The blank refusal of the Commissioner in his report on the revised recommendations to consider the merits of recognising the Irish language version of ward names (in many cases, the original names) is regrettable.

Were the commissioner's reasoning for this decision to prevail, this would be a significant opportunity missed. Accordingly, we would question some of that reasoning. For example:

a) Why does the Commissioner believe that the Local Government Boundaries Commission is not an "associated body" under the European Charter for Regional and Minority Languages? Is this the Commissioner's opinion, or was he told this, and if so, by whom?

b) Referring to the Good Friday Agreement, the commissioner reports that his difficulty is in assessing whether there is "appropriate demand" for such a move. How does the Commissioner justify this statement, considering the already well documented concentration of Irish speakers and institutions in many wards, and in light of the fact that over three quarters of respondents in Belfast (82% by one estimation) called for Irish language versions of wards to be recognised? Also, is the role of the Commissioner not to make recommendations based only on the findings of his Commission, and if not, are there other areas where he has called for "further work... to be done in support" of a clear demand.

c) Following on from this, how does the Commissioner justify such a minimalist approach to Irish language place names in contrast to his willingness to recognise the ward names of Blackstaff and Duncairn "for reasons of history and geography/heritage of the area and the associations which local residents have with the name" (Paragraphs 3.1.22 & 3.1.23 from

Revised Recommendations), especially considering that in both of these cases the decision was made on the request of only two submissions?

The Commissioner could again, if he wished, take one simple step towards recognising the identity of a portion of our society, and the cases of Duncairn and Blackstaff demonstrate that it is within his power and remit to do so. Such a small move in recognising Irish ward names would have the knock-on effect of affording to Irish speaking and nationalist communities a greater sense of ownership of the democratic process.

The abundance of gaelscoileanna (Irish medium schools), Irish language centres and Irish language organisations & businesses in many areas, as well as a Gaeltacht (Irish speaking) Quarter in Belfast and regional Irish language media, are all proof of the present strength of the language and of an Irish language identity in the north of Ireland. Adding to this are the widespread and often successful attempts to have street names recognised in Irish.

These realities are not addressed by the revised recommendations and we strongly recommend that they are taken in to consideration before the final report is produced.

Le meas mór