

As an elected councillor in the Lower Falls DEA and a resident of the area, I would like to make the following written submission to the Local Government Boundary Commission review of the revised recommendations on the new council boundaries and ward boundaries.

Proposal 1

Beechmount Gardens, Beechmount Close and Beechmount Grove should be moved out of the Clonard ward into the Beechmount ward in order to keep the Beechmount area together in the same ward, thereby avoiding the division of the Beechmount community.

These 3 streets are represented by the Beechmount Residents Association and are not part of the Clonard area.

The additional electors who would become part of the Beechmount ward if this proposal was accepted would be small enough in number to keep the Beechmount ward within the recommended maximum ward size limits.

Proposal 2

Moyard Park should be moved from the Ballymurphy ward into the Turf Lodge ward. This would keep the Moyard estate together and would have no real impact on the size of either ward. This is a minor proposal that is important for the Moyard community.

Proposal 3

I would ask that the Local Government Boundaries Commissioner consider the use of Irish language ward names alongside the English version in the West Belfast wards named below;

I would recommend that the following ward names be adopted;

- Falls should become Ceantar na bhFál
- Clonard should become Cluain Ard
- Beechmount should become Ard na bhFeá
- Ballymurphy should become Baile Uí Mhurchú
- Turf Lodge should become Lóiste na Móna
- Falls Park should become Páirc na bhFál
- Andersonstown should become Baile Andarsan
- Shaws Road should become Bóthar Seoighe
- Collin Glen should become Gleann Chollan
- Stewartstown should become Baile Stíobhaird
- Ladybrook should become Sruthán na Bantiarna
- Poleglass should become An Poll Glas
- Twinbrook should become Cill Uaighe
- Lagmore should become An Lag Mór
- Dunmurry should become Dún Muirígh

In making this representation I would argue that;

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

The 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.

I would query some of the Commissioner's reasoning. For example:

- 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?
- 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?
- How does the Commissioner justify his 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 large 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.

I believe that the ward names should reflect the growing and vibrant Irish language community in west Belfast where there are many Irish language nursery schools (Naiscoileanna), primary schools (Bunscoileanna), and an Irish medium secondary school (Colaiste Feirste).

There are also Irish speaking areas including the Gaeltacht Quarter, (An Ceathru Gaeltachta), and the Shaws Road Gaeltacht. There are many Irish language groups, Irish language classes, Irish language businesses and thousands of Irish language speakers in west Belfast.

There are Irish language cafes and restaurants.

Translink publish their bus timetables in both Irish and English and the West Belfast Black Taxi Association displays its destination signs in both Irish and English.

Many of the streets in west Belfast have bilingual street signage, erected by Belfast City Council, and the bilingualisation of ward names in west Belfast would be widely welcomed within the community.

In the wards I am proposing are named bilingually, the two main political parties, Sinn Féin and the SDLP, have the support of over 95% of voters.

Both parties are firmly in favour of an Irish Language Act (Acht na Gaeilge) which would give the Irish language equal status to the English language in the North of Ireland.

I hope you will look positively on this proposal given the overwhelming support within these wards for this proposal.

Support for Commission Decision on New Council Boundary

In addition, I would like to express my complete support for the decision of the Boundary Commission to keep the Poleglass, Lagmore, Twinbrook and Dunmurry wards in the new Belfast council boundaries. This decision has the support of the overwhelming majority of the community represented in these wards and is a logical and sensible decision.

The identification of people in this area with Belfast is there for all to see.

Conclusion

I hope you will give full and thorough consideration to the proposals I have made.

Is mise le meas,

Al McComb