

4th December 2006

Mr Richard H. Mackenzie CB
Local Government Boundaries Commissioner
Office of the Local Government
Boundary Commissioner
Forestview
Purdy's Lane
Belfast
BT8 7AR

Dear Mr Mackenzie,

RE: REVIEW OF NORTHERN IRELAND LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARIES

I am writing as SDLP spokesperson for the Environment regarding the current consultation on the review of local government boundaries. The SDLP welcomes the opportunity to respond to the consultation and would like to address the consultation process itself as well as responding to the provisional recommendations in our response to the document published.

The Consultation Process

The SDLP has serious reservations about the timescale allowed for the consultation. The provisional recommendations were launched on the 8th of November with submissions expected by the 5th January, allowing just over 8 weeks to respond to significant changes to local government wards across the north. The consultation period also failed to take into consideration the constraints in responding experienced by many organisations over the Christmas holidays. We note the recommendation by the Northern Ireland Office that public consultation continue for a minimum of 12 weeks in order to give the public adequate time to respond. The SDLP has raised the issue of the consultation period with the Local Government Boundary Commissioner and with the Minister responsible for the Review of Public Administration, David Cairns MP.

Already in advance of the commencement of public hearings political parties are in election campaign mode. This has grave implications for the manner in which hearings can take place. It is apparent now that those hearings scheduled for January and February may well happen in the context of an Assembly election. The Secretary of State has indicated that he expects to confirm the election by the end of January. We are seriously concerned about such a development.

We found the *Provisional Recommendations Report* did not provide sufficient information that such substantial changes would merit. The SDLP requested, but did not receive, comparative maps detailing how existing wards would change. The maps provided in the report in most instances failed to identify street names. The SDLP requested street names by ward, which was not received until 22nd of November. The SDLP believe that as a minimum this information should have been available at the launch of the consultation and it is not clear whether this information was made available to all people intending to respond to the consultation.

The Review Recommendations

The SDLP continue to oppose the seven council model proposed in the Review of Public Administration and agree with the NILGA recommendation that “democratic processes should be valued and nurtured and supported in a way which is closely connected to the local community”. We believe that proposals for the seven super councils will undermine the principle of local identity which has characterised many councils throughout Northern Ireland. The principle of local identity is also deeply valued by people everywhere in Northern Ireland.

The party is also concerned that the proposals will widen the east/west divide and cause greater division, polarisation and marginalisation.

The SDLP are conscious of the sectarian division that has plagued Northern Irish politics in the past. We are very disappointed that the seven council model will reflect and exacerbate these divisions. Furthermore the seven council model proposed, or any other seven council model, cannot have the necessary protections to ensure equality and fair treatment for all.

Please contact me if you wish to discuss any aspects of this response in greater detail.

Yours sincerely

Tommy Gallagher MLA
SDLP Spokesperson for the Environment