

REVISED RECOMMENDATIONS – NEWRY SDLP OBJECTIONS

On the Commissioner's Revised recommendations for the whole of N. Ireland, Newry SDLP have 2 major objections. These are on: (1) The number of wards allocated to the 7 Councils & (2) the Districts' boundaries.

THE NUMBER OF WARDS. We object to the number of wards allocated to the 7 Councils i.e. the Commissioner's decision to give 60 wards to each new Council. Our grounds for this is the Local Government (Boundaries) Order 2006, Section 17(a), which states: "in determining the NUMBER ... of wards within a district, regard shall be had to: the..... POPULATION ..of the district". His recommendation has NOT followed this. Nor has it implemented the linked Section 19 (1) of the Order, which states: "within any one district THERE SHALL BE SUBSTANTIALLY THE SAME NUMBER OF LOCAL ELECTORS IN EACH WARD." This principle of equitable representation is, we assert, upheld by Sections 17(a) & 19(1) & it should be the basis for any new Local Government election system.

The failure to obey Sections 17(a),19(1) are proved by the table below:
(The commissioner used the voter numbers from the December 2005 electoral registers. The table's Column 5 figures derive from the Revised recommendations document's totals of voters per ward across the 7 Districts (a N. Ireland total of 1,150,174); the voters per ward average` of 2739 is based on the 1,150,174 divided by 420 (it's N. Ireland wards` total).

District	Commissioner's Voter Total(*from old councils:+,-)	Voters per Ward Average	Wards Allocated	Wards` Entitlement (per 2739 average)

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Inner East	170,624 (-16283	2844	60	62
East	177,377 (-18527)	2956	60	65
South	189,380 (-740)	3156	60	69
N. East	134,629 (-569)	2244	60	49
Belfast	200,095 (+32279)	3335	60	73
West	135,168 (-627)	2253	60	49
N. West	142,901 (-3435)	2382	60	52

Thus, there is a wide difference between the 7 Districts in average voters per ward. It ranges from 3335 (Belfast) to the lowest (N. East) at 2244 – the latter only two thirds of the former. This is clearly inequitable & undemocratic & breaches Section 17 (a). Therefore WE ASSERT that the number of wards allocated per District should be changed – in line with the differing electorates.

We realise that the Order cannot implement some of the ward numbers in our table's Column 5. However it can represent more equitably the Districts' differing electorates. Therefore WE PROPOSE that the Commissioner uses the Order's Section 18(2) & 18(3) which gives discretion in allocating the number of wards per district of "not more than 65" & "not fewer than 55". This also would be a way of meeting Section 17(a) & Section 19(1)'s requirements. We remind you that the principle of equitable representation is used in the current Councils' system. In that, Councils have different numbers of wards – ranging from 51 in Belfast to 15 in Larne. There is no good reason why the same principle should not be used in the new system.

Anticipating your rejection of our 'number of wards' proposal – saying Section 17(a) & Section 19(1) cites “within a district”, we point out that our proposal does use that. It entails changes in ward numbers “WITHIN” each district - across N. Ireland.

DISTRICT BOUNDARIES

We also object to the District Boundaries suggested in the Revised recommendations. Our grounds for this are also Section 17(a) quoted above. The district boundaries suggested do not have “regard to .. the ..population ..of the district”. On this specifically we cite the recommendation “that the new Belfast District should incorporate the whole of the existing City Council area ..together with parts of the current Castlereagh & Lisburn city districts”. As Column 2 of our table shows, this recommendation gives Belfast 32,279 extra voters & produces its huge 'voters per ward average' figure. This recommended ward average discriminates against Belfast voters – who need 33% more voters per councillor than those of the North East. This addition to Belfast's electorate also breaks the Order's Section 19(1) which requires “substantially the same number of local electors in each ward” - because in 5 other districts, 'voters per ward' is much lower.

The Belfast's 'voters per ward' recommendation is undemocratic.

WE PROPOSE it be reversed by transferring the new 32,279 voters back. That is, 16,283 back to Inner East & 18,527 back to East. That would result in these 'voters per ward averages': Belfast: 2798 - its 3335 average losing 537 (32,279 divided by 60); Inner East: 3115 - its 2844 average gaining 271 (16,283 divided by 60) from Belfast; East 3264 - its average gaining 308 (18,527 divided by 60) from Belfast. Importantly we must question the Belfast district boundaries' recommendation's validity under the Order's Section 3. This states “the 7 local government districts shall incorporate, respectively, the WHOLE or the MAJOR PART OF the former.... districts”. Yet the recommended Belfast district contains the WHOLE of the former Belfast council, but ALSO contains parts of Lisburn & Castlereagh. Does Section 3 not forbid MORE than a whole district forming a new district? Apart from a tiny part of Magilligan strand being added to the N. West, ONLY Belfast gets substantial parts from other old councils' groupings - from East & Inner East. Is ONLY Belfast district being allowed to breach Section 3? Finally on Belfast district, why were Development Plans (“Urban Area Plan 2001” & “Belfast Metropolitan Plan 2015”) studied & allowed influence the decision making on District boundaries for Belfast - but not for the other 6 districts?

CONCLUSION

Our contention is that decisions on District Boundaries as well as Ward Numbers should uphold the principle of equitable representation.

We submit our 2 Objections to the Revised Recommendations – on Ward Numbers & District Boundaries across N. Ireland. We close by formally requesting an opportunity to argue our objections at a public hearing or any avenue available under the procedure at this stage.

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Submitted for Newry Branch, SDLP by Paul Hoben, Councillor John McArdle.