

Fine Gael Submission to Committees re Local Electoral Areas

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission.

Having reviewed the Terms of Reference, we also support and welcome the move to smaller LEAs; one of the outcomes of the last review was a number of LEAs which covered enormous areas, to the extent that some were almost as big as Dáil constituencies i.e.

- West Cork (8) - over 100km wide, covering 4000km²
- West Mayo (7) - up to 120km from one end to the other, covering 4400 km²
- South and West Kerry (9) - extends across three peninsulas – also covering about 4400km²

The scale of some of these areas has had a detrimental effect on the capacity of elected representatives to service their area adequately, and as a consequence, the public suffer.

In addition, we welcome in particular, the provision for areas with three or four seats, to address this issue, particularly in rural areas with low population density, and also areas where communities are separated by significant physical/geographic features.

We note the aspiration to create electoral areas with a 'distinct urban focus' – but have some reservations regarding the possible interpretations of this criterion. Whilst we absolutely accept that large towns should be a focal point, we are also of the view that many people living on the outskirts of towns identify with their town. Secondly, we know from previous experience, that the definition of towns, or census towns, was frequently subject of much criticism previously, as defined town boundaries did not necessarily reflect the manner in which development took place around such towns, or rarely changed to match development.

A strict interpretation of this 'distinct urban focus' could fall foul of such concerns again; in addition, where the population of a town is sufficient for the minimum number of five seats, creating an electoral area accordingly might have some bizarre knock on effects, which would inevitably lead to LEAs which would have to wrap around such towns, or create a doughnut effect.

As an example, Naas, Co. Kildare has a population in excess of 20,000, as do Celbridge and Newbridge. Creating five seat areas in Naas and Newbridge would result in a narrow strip of no-man's land between the towns, and also to the east of Naas.

These situations arise in many other instances, and on that basis, we are strongly of the view that whilst LEAs should certainly have a major urban centre as a focal point, the areas concerned will be more representative, if they also incorporate the rural hinterland in each case; this also takes into account the potential development on the fringes of large towns. In no way should this be construed as being incompatible with the objectives as stated in the Terms of Reference. Rather, we believe this approach supports the stated aim of '*taking due account of local and community identities and linkages as well as natural boundaries*'.

The Terms of Reference also deal, in some detail, with Municipal Districts. We support the proposition that Municipal Borough Districts should be created in towns which previously enjoyed Borough Council status, or towns with population in excess of 30,000. In some cases, it will be relatively easy to give effect to this proposition i.e. Drogheda currently has ten seats; creating a Municipal Borough District with two LEAS with five seats each, is relatively straight forward.

Dundalk, on the other hand, has sufficient population (39,000) for nine seats – which would suggest two LEAs, one with four seats, and one with five; if four seat areas are intended solely for areas where otherwise, *‘the geographic size of the area would be disproportionately large’*, then an urban area, with four seats, is unlikely – in which case, it will be necessary, as suggested earlier, that rural hinterland be incorporated, to justify two LEAs of at least five seats each. Having said that, we also recognise that there needs to be some coherence to such electoral areas, and there is a limit to the extent to which such areas could be expanded.

On the other hand, the Committee may well judge that it might be appropriate to create a small number of four-seat areas, which help in terms of the most sensible configuration in a given county.

It is also suggested that *‘there should be no change in the configuration of Municipal Districts generally, save in such limited circumstances where the Committee considers it necessary to recommend such a change.’* For the most part, existing Municipal Districts coincide with individual LEAs. Given that the maximum number of seats in any LEA, under these Terms of Reference, is now to be seven seats – inevitably, we will see an increase in the total number of LEAs.

As an example, Tipperary currently has 40 seats, across five LEAs; the minimum number of LEAs will be six, but there could be seven or eight.

It is likely that there will be at least ten additional LEAs nationally – and potentially many more, depending on the extent to which the Committee recommends LEAs with three and four seats.

That being the case, we suggest that the Boundary Committee will have to adopt some flexibility in relation to the configuration of Municipal Districts, either to the extent of increasing the scope and scale of such Districts, to encompass two LEAs, and possibly re-naming Districts - or alternatively, maintaining the number of Municipal Districts in a council, but re-configuring them to accommodate the revised spread of LEAs i.e. rotating an East/West divide to North/South. It would otherwise be extremely challenging to maintain the configuration of Districts, in the context of potentially significant changes to individual LEAs.

Whilst we do not intend dealing with every county in this submission – we would like to address some broad principles in the context of reviewing boundaries and resultant LEAs.

It would appear that there are up to ten counties which may not require any change at all, or possibly only minor changes.

Counties such as Longford and Offaly each have LEAs which fall within the recommended five to seven seats, and the population variances for each of their areas are within the +/-10% variance.

In others, like Leitrim, Meath, Roscommon or Westmeath – whereas the current configuration meets the minimum requirements, we are aware that minor changes may be recommended in other submissions – and we would respectfully suggest, that those submissions are given serious consideration, as they are likely to be based on detailed local knowledge, as regards the effectiveness, or otherwise, of such boundaries.

A number of counties are in a position to retain the same number of LEAs, but boundaries may need to be reviewed, to ensure proportionate representation within the county; this would appear to be the case in Clare, Limerick, Waterford and Wicklow – although in the case, of Clare, the treatment of Ennis may have a bearing, as would the treatment of Baltinglass in west Wicklow, which is separated from the east of the county, by the Wicklow Mountains.

Dublin

Whilst much of the foregoing relates to the work of Committee 1, many of the general points and principles apply to the review of areas in Dublin also. The Terms of Reference for Committee 2 also mention the principle of urban centres, in this case, around urban villages.

It is all too easy to divide communities in urban areas inadvertently, by simply creating a boundary along a main road. However, the purpose and viability of communities built around the various urban villages should not be underestimated, or disregarded. Dublin City Council, in particular, has worked hard to support community initiatives and so, insofar as it is possible, we would urge the Committee to avoid dividing our urban villages; currently Finglas and Raheny, to name but two, find themselves in multiple LEAs.

In previous reviews, the re-working of LEA boundaries in Dublin South Central have also been quite arbitrary, and frequently, have not been sympathetic to local communities.

We believe also, that electoral areas must reflect communities on the ground – and so, in cases like Cabra-Finglas, we find that two entirely separate and distinct communities, with little in common, and separated by the Tolka Valley, found themselves thrown together in one LEA.

This situation is highly unsatisfactory – and the people suffer in terms of representation, as a result. Representatives from Finglas are unlikely to present themselves in Cabra or Navan Road, or vice versa. Some degree of contiguity should be a basic requirement, in determining the component parts of LEAs.

The recent practice of aligning council boundaries with Dáil constituency boundaries has served the people and councils well. In particular, whilst Municipal Districts do not exist in Dublin, or other cities – the formation of Area Committees, which frequently reflect Dáil constituencies, has worked in everyone's interest.

Otherwise, we note that some changes will be required to address the ten electoral areas in Dublin which currently have more than seven seats; for the most part, limited transfers to neighbouring areas should address the issue; it is likely that at least one new electoral area will be required in each of the councils of Dublin City, Fingal and South Dublin, to deliver areas which meet the criteria established under the Terms of Reference.