



Local Area Boundary Committee – Cork City

Submission by the Workers' Party (Cork Region)

The Cork Regional Council of the Workers' Party wishes to make the following submission to the Local Area Boundary Committee in respect of the proposed new electoral wards for the extended city:

To begin we feel that the Terms of Reference for the committee are far too restrictive, particularly the stipulation that there should be no change in the total membership of Cork City Council as specified in the Local Government Act 2001 as amended by the Local Government Reform Act 2014. To suggest that an increase of some 75% in the population of any city would not envisage a significant number of additional elected representatives commensurate with that population change is undemocratic and amounts to a gerrymander which would significantly benefit larger political parties on the council.

We feel it necessary to point out that prior to the abolition of Cork County Borough Corporation in 1924 the city had no less than 56 elected aldermen and councillors. While this may have been excessive for a city of just over 80,000 citizens at that time, it would seem we have now gone in the opposite direction. In fact we would point out that the population increase resulting from the 2019 boundary extension is greater than the total population of the city in 1924. We would therefore call on the Boundary Committee to go beyond the Terms of Reference and recommend a significant increase in the number of elected members, at least in line with the revised Democratic Representation Ratio of one councillor for every 5,018 citizens, thus increasing the membership of Cork City Council from 31 members to 42. Even this increased representation would be below European norms and we would draw your attention to the number of councillors in the following cities of similar size to the extended Cork:

Rennes (France) 215,000 inhabitants– 61 councillors

Southampton (Britain) 214,000 inhabitants – 48 councillors

Rostock (Germany) 206,000 inhabitants – 53 councillors

Linz (Austria) 213,000 inhabitants – 45 councillors

Charleroi (Belgium) 201,000 inhabitants – 51 councillors

Oulu (Finland) 201,000 inhabitants – 67 councillors

Area/District structures

We agree in principle with the recommendation in paragraph 12.1.8 of the report of the Expert Advisory Group on Local Government Arrangements in Cork, dated April 2017, that a newly expanded Cork City Council should also move to introduce an area or district based structure for the wider city area based on electoral areas. Such area bodies should have greater power than existing Ward Committees and additional funding in line with their size. They should also seek submissions and participation in debates from as wide a range of community groups from the area as possible. The ideal arrangement would be for these area based bodies to be directly elected rather than acting as glorified sub-committees of council.

Electoral Divisions

The recommendation in the Terms of Reference that the number of electoral divisions (wards) be reduced at a time when a major population increase is taking place strikes us as peculiar. We also question the recommendation of a City Centre Ward and the extent of such an electoral division. People living north or south of the River Lee tend to identify as Northsiders or Southsiders, not as City Centre dwellers. In the early 20th century there was a centre ward but this was at a time when many business owners and indeed workers lived above shop premises. This is not common today despite a previous “Living Over the Shop” initiative encouraging business owners to move back into the city. It also preceded the major slum clearances of the 1930s. Thus the city centre had a significant population. Unless and until there is a major population shift back towards the city centre we do not believe that a centre based electoral division would be workable and it could potentially encourage electoral fraud through the registration of individuals in the large number of vacant premises in the district.

Where possible existing urban villages and districts which have a natural affinity towards one another should be kept within the same electoral districts. Equally areas without a natural affinity should not be conjoined in a common electoral area merely to satisfy bureaucratic demands. We would suggest that areas such as Blarney, Tower and Kerry Pike have a natural affinity with one another and should not be subsumed into a North West Ward which is also to be extended to take up half of the existing North Central Ward. Equally Glanmire, Riverstown and Rathcooney have a natural affinity with one another and should not be simply subsumed into an extended North East Ward. It would be preferable to keep them as separate entities.

We feel that it would better to retain the existing urbanised South Central Ward and to extend it to the east and west rather than create an anomalous pear-shaped entity as depicted in Appendix 4-New LEA Option 1 produced by the city management. Rather than add large areas of Grange, Lehanaghmore and Farmer's Cross to South Central these should be part of a new South Ward consisting of the aforementioned areas in addition to new areas of Douglas, Donnybrook and Rochestown. An extended South Central should consist of the South City areas including the Central Island, City Hall, Albert Road, South Parish, Ballyphehane, Togher, Glasheen and Gilabbey.

Overview

Local government has been under attack by successive governments over the last three decades but in particular the Fine Gael party has been keen to downgrade and sideline the role of elected local councillors, including the abolition of 79 town councils and the forced merger of city and county councils in Limerick and Waterford. This was no mere administrative revision but a fundamental dilution of democracy at local level. Even before these changes came into effect Ireland had one of the least democratic and representative forms of local government in Europe.

The Workers' Party believes that if the government is serious about its proposals in the Ireland 2040 plan to make Cork City and its hinterland a genuine counterbalance to the burgeoning growth of Dublin then it must not only ensure that it has adequate representation but must devolve greater power to local government and provide it with significantly increased funding for such a role.

The Buchanan Report of 1968 recommended that Cork and Limerick be developed as growth centres as a counterbalance to Dublin. Several other reports since then, including the abandoned National Spatial Strategy of 2002, have made similar recommendations but instead the population of Dublin has grown exponentially.

While the 2019 Cork City boundary change is long overdue and is welcome, merely increasing the boundary will not transform Cork into a genuine counterbalance to Dublin. The boundary change has to be accompanied by a whole range of financial and administrative changes to make that happen. These changes should accelerate the growth of Cork in a planned way and provide it with the finances to create economic, employment, social and cultural changes necessary to make Cork a major city in European terms. We simply cannot wait another 50 years of failed initiatives and shelved plans.

The Workers' Party

Cork Region

1st May 2018