Karen Hoey: Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Slieve Donard Hotel. I have a few housekeeping announcements for the inquiry this morning. The facilities in the hotel are just out the door and right down the corridor; we don't expect a fire alarm this morning but if we do hear it staff will direct us to the assembly point. May I ask that mobile phones are switched to silent mode during the inquiry for the courtesy of others? I'd like to hand over to Assistant Commissioner, Paul Dougan, for the proceedings this morning. Thank you.

Paul Dougan: Thank you very much. Well good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It is 10am and I now formally open this public inquiry into the proposed District Electoral Areas for the local government district of Newry, Mourne and Down. As you have heard, my name is Paul Dougan and I have been appointed by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to conduct this inquiry. I have a number of general points to make before we get into the inquiry proper.

Firstly, I should stress that I am independent of the District Electoral Areas Commissioner, Dick Mackenzie. It is not my function to defend his recommendations; my role is to listen to and to consider the evidence put forward at this inquiry and to report my findings and my recommendations to the Commissioner. My recommendations are to be made within four weeks of the close of this inquiry.

In terms of the running the inquiry today, I intend to break for lunch between 12.30pm and 1.30pm and finish this evening at 5pm. Other than that, I do not propose to stop for breaks but will of course stop for adjournments, if necessary.

Can I speak briefly about maps and documents? Copies of the Commissioner's provisional recommendations are available for inspection and they are located in the room and everyone should take a copy of those. There are also copies of the written representations relating to this district, which have been made to
the Commissioner during the eight week consultation period which ended on 27th June.

I should also point out that this inquiry will be recorded, as you can see, and a transcript will be made available on the Commissioner’s website in due course. If anyone cannot access the website and wishes to receive a printed copy of the transcript, please leave your name and contact details with a member of my support staff. There are maps available and on the screen behind me showing the proposed grouping of wards into electoral areas and, again, everyone who wants to should take a copy of the map for purposes of reference.

So what is the purpose and scope of this inquiry? Well, the purpose of this public inquiry is to consider representations concerning the provisional recommendations of the District Electoral Areas Commissioner for this local government district of Newry, Mourne and Down. It should be noted that this inquiry has been convened to consider and to hear arguments for and against the objections raised to the Commissioner’s proposal during the consultation period which closed, as I said, on 27th June.

New objections unrelated to those already submitted cannot be considered and that is a very important qualification; new objections unrelated to those already submitted cannot be considered. I must also emphasise that you cannot reserve your position to await my report. It will not be possible for you to make any written or oral submissions to me, or indeed, to the Commissioner, after this inquiry has concluded. Some of you may already have made written representations; I have studied those carefully as part of my preparation for today’s inquiry I will certainly take those into account in my report to the Commissioner.

Those of you who have already made written representations will want to elaborate on those representations today. However, I will not be assisted by the repetition of written submissions. If you have already made your points fully in writing you may simply wish to state that you support or oppose a particular recommendation for the reasons that you’ve already stated in your written representation and I can assure you that full account will be taken of all the written representations regardless of
whether or not they are referred to during the course of this inquiry.

I should also be grateful if other speakers would try not to repeat points already put to the inquiry, but rather simply record their support for views expressed previously. Above all, it is important that you try to back up your proposals with evidence where possible, rather than relying on unsubstantiated statements, and bear in mind that in making these recommendations the Commissioner was constrained by the rules set out in the relevant legislation and replicated in his report. The statutory rules can be found at Schedule 3 of the Order and they are repeated on Page 5 of the Commissioner's report at Paragraph 3.1.

Issues outside of the scope of this inquiry, there are a number of issues; these include the boundaries and names of local government districts and their constituent wards, since these have already been settled under the terms of the Local Government Boundaries Order Northern Ireland 2012; the impact of the provisional recommendations on political representation; and the third issue outside the scope of the inquiry is any issue that does not relate to the Commissioner's proposal for the grouping of wards within this particular local government district. So please, therefore do not raise these issues in your representations.

Our programme of speakers has already been prepared. Anyone who wishes to make an oral submission can be added to the programme of speakers; just speak to a member of the support staff and have your name added. If you not already registered, I would be grateful if you would do so or indicate your intention to do so as soon as possible. When I've finished these remarks I propose to move straight into the inquiry proper.

In terms of the order of speakers, I would ask that everyone is as flexible as possible and I too will certainly try to accommodate people as far as is reasonably possible. I am aware that some people have other commitments, which is perfectly understandable and may require a particular speaking slot, and of course I will try to give them priority and accommodate everyone. If anyone has difficulty being present at a particular time, again please let my staff know so that we can try and make arrangements for a suitable slot for you.
In terms of the procedure for the inquiry, we will follow the following procedure in relation to the oral submissions. You will be called to come up to this table in front of me to speak into one of the microphones provided and that is very important to ensure that a proper recording of what you say has been made.

In making your submission could you please start by stating your name, whether you’re speaking in a personal capacity or in a representative capacity and, if so, for whom? And ensure that you try and speak clearly and try not to use abbreviations or colloquialisms as they may cause difficulties for the transcribers. Could you also please state whether you have already made a written submission?

Your oral submission will be of particular assistance if you are able to explain the reasons why you have taken a particular position; for example, supporting an objection and counterproposal to the Commissioner’s recommendation, supporting the Commissioner’s original recommendation or proposing an alternative to both. When you have finished your submission other people may wish to put questions to you from the floor and I probably will have some questions for you or points of clarification.

Can I please emphasise that I intend this inquiry to be conducted in an informal manner conducive to all those who wish to contribute, so formal cross-examination is not appropriate at an inquiry of this nature; however, I am very happy for people to put questions to the particular speaker through myself and similarly I will facilitate the person answering the question in the best way possible.

Could I touch very briefly on the topic of site visits? After this inquiry is over I may go to view some areas under consideration so if there is a particular boundary or feature that you want me to look at then please mention it during the course of your submission. It will be noted and I will try to go and see it.

In terms of running today’s inquiry, I am assisted by a team composed of staff from the District Electoral Areas Commissioner Office and Morrow Communications, so please feel free to approach any of these staff with any queries that you may have.
and they will be pleased to help you or draw the matter to my attention.

That concludes my opening remarks. In order to move swiftly into the inquiry itself, I propose to commence the inquiry and if I could ask our first speaker, Mr Berkley Farr to come forward. Just a suggestion, Mr Farr, that you may wish to be joined by your colleague, so Mr Griffin, by all means if you want to come up as well, take a seat in front of the microphone and I look forward to hearing from you.

Berkley Farr: My name is Berkley Farr and I am representing the Alliance Party this morning.

Paul Dougan: Thank you, Mr Farr.

Berkley Farr: We already made a submission earlier in the year, setting out our objections to certain proposals, and the paper we've submitted this morning is an elaboration on that earlier one. I'll go through the paper we've submitted this morning.

I'll start by recognising the work that the Commission has done and the difficult job in trying to draw up the boundaries and we support the basic four rules that you have set forward that no ward shall be included partly in one electoral area and partly in another, each electoral area should consist of not less than five and not more than seven wards. Each ward shall have at least one boundary in common with another ward in that area except if it's an island, and a name should be given to each ward.

We'll also point out that the inquiry is an important part of a democratic process enabling local people to provide local knowledge and perhaps pointing out things that aren't immediately apparent to people from outside the area who may be working purely on statistics.

So we've set out what the Commission proposed first, setting out the electoral areas and the number of wards and so on. So if we move onto page two, the vital concerns that we have, the two main concerns we have, the most important one is about the new Mourne DEA cutting off Newcastle from its natural hinterland from Castlewellan and Dundrum.

You don't need to go far to do a site visit; if you just go out the front door and look to your right you will see Slieve Donard, so
there is a clear physical barrier between Newcastle and the area to the south, whereas the area to the north and west is natural hinterland. And the hinterland of Newcastle covers Castlewellan and Dundrum and the areas in north and west, whereas the area to the south of Newcastle is quite clearly part of the Kingdom of Mourne. I'll touch on this in a bit more detail later.

And the other main concern we have is the Ballydugan Ward being cut off from Downpatrick. Downpatrick's natural hinterland includes the area all round Downpatrick and right over to the inner bay of Dundrum and over to Loughinisland, and to cut this area off from Downpatrick seems unnatural if there's a possibility of including it in Downpatrick.

I move onto the alternative proposals that we put forward and the following table sets out these proposals. I'll run briefly through the main electoral areas and, starting off with Slieve Gullion in Newry, we're proposing that there should be no change in these areas. And in the Crotlieve area we're proposing that the Rostrevor ward should be transferred to the Mournes area to the east. I'll read over the rationale for these proposed changes shortly.

So that's the only change affecting the Newry and Mourne Council area as it is now. The next change is we're proposing that the Mournes area should have a total of five wards, Rostrevor, Lisnacree, Binnian, Annalong and Kilkeel. So it's more or less the traditional Kingdom of Mourne.

The next major change we recommend is that there should be a new Newcastle District Electoral Area created based on Newcastle itself and its natural hinterland. This would include the wards of Tollymore, Donard and Murlough; and then the three wards of Castlewellan, Ballyward and Dundrum would be taken from the Slieve Croob electoral area and added to the Newcastle area.

Moving onto Downpatrick, we would add the Ballydugan ward from Slieve Croob to Downpatrick. As I said, it's part of the natural hinterland of Downpatrick. And finally, we are proposing an abolition of Slieve Croob, so the final ward of Slieve Croob is Drumaness, we would propose putting into the Rowallane ward, bringing it up to six wards in that electoral area.
I’ll move onto the rationale for our proposed changes. The new Newry, Mourne and Down local government district stretches from a southern part of County Armagh and the hinterland of Newry along the coast of South Down from Carlingford Lough to Strangford Lough, it contains a wide range of settlements and related rural areas; the Mourne Mountains are a major physical barrier separating Newry from the eastern part of County Down.

In a rural area such as this, it is desirable that the District Electoral Areas should be based upon centres of population found in the main towns and their natural hinterlands. This gives a greater sense of cohesion and identity to local population and is important in establishing the authority and credibility of local government. It is recognised that the Commission intends to have regard generally to existing District Electoral Areas as far as possible; the objective by the Commissioner is to maintain as many existing District Electoral Areas across the new council area and this also recognises a strong link between people and places.

Wards used to comprise areas which have a broad community of interest; any unnecessary transfer of these units from existing to new District Electoral Areas would be likely to break local ties and would be disruptive to political representation. The alternative proposals that we put forward for the District Electoral Areas represent a viable and cohesive pattern of ward groupings.

I’ll deal first with the Newcastle and Mourne areas. The method of approach described by the District Electoral Areas Commissioner is very reasonable, particularly in the use of physical features to define boundaries and the desirability of having geographically compact areas. This principle is contradicted by the provisional recommendation of the Mournes District Electoral Area centred on the highest peaks of the mountains with distinct centres of population to the north and south.

Whenever possible, major physical boundaries such as mountains should be used to separate District Electoral Areas rather than being used as a focus of District Electoral Areas. The Kingdom of Mourne south of Mourne Mountains forms a geographically compact area based on Kilkeel and its natural hinterland. This area comprises the wards of Annalong, Binnian, Kilkeel and Lisnacree. The addition of Rostrevor ward from
Crotlieve District Electoral Area would create a five seat Mourne District Electoral Area, while reducing Crotlieve to five seats.

In common with other Mourne wards, Rostrevor lies south of the Mourne Mountains joining a coast and has a mutual interest in the economic importance of tourism. So you can see quite clearly from that that the whole area south of the Mournes, from Rostrevor right down to Slieve Donard, would all be included in this new five seat electoral area and forms a very distinct natural unit. And in all our proposals we have a major town as the focus of the electoral area, so Kilkeel would now become the focus of this new electoral area of the Mournes.

The new Newcastle District Electoral Area north of the Mourne Mountains would be based in the town of Newcastle and its hinterland and this includes villages of Castlewellan, Dundrum, Clough, Bryansford, Ballyward and Kilcoo. The new six seat District Electoral Area comprises of the three wards around Newcastle of Donard, Tollymore, taking from the provisional Mourne Electoral Area and the addition of the wards of Dundrum, Castlewellan and Ballyward, taken from the provisional Slieve Croob Electoral Area.

The new Newcastle District Electoral Area forms a natural geographical area bounded by the Mourne Mountains, Slieve Croob and Dundrum Bay. And as you can see quite clearly if you look outside, the Mournes form a very distinct barrier to the south, Dundrum Bay forms a very distinct barrier to east and Slieve Croob and the northern part of the Mournes to the west. And this is a whole natural area focusing on Newcastle and with a common interest in tourism, it has good traditional transport links, community links and everything else is all focused in Newcastle and these villages are satellite villages to Newcastle.

The Commissioner recognises it’s unreasonable to ignore the existing framework of District Electoral Areas, since it’s been in place for many years and this new Newcastle Electoral Area that we propose is approximately the same as the previous one in Down District Area.

The southern boundary of the proposed Newcastle District Electoral Area would also correspond to the boundary of a number of public boards and this would avoid problems of the District Electoral Area councilors having to deal with two separate boards in the local area. So it would seem logical that
with police, health and education and so on boundaries existing already, that councillors should within their own area only have to deal with one board for their own District Electoral Area rather than having to deal with two boards. It would be an unnatural thing to do that, if you could avoid it.

I'll move onto the Downpatrick District Electoral Area. This area is based on Downpatrick and its Lecale hinterland between Strangford Lough and Dundrum Bay. The addition of the Ballydugan ward from the provisional Slieve Croob District Electoral Area would be logical as it would complete the inclusion of the immediate Downpatrick hinterland and take advantage of inner Dundrum Bay as a boundary for an electoral area. This would increase Downpatrick Electoral Area from five seats to six seats. And you can see clearly from the map how Ballydugan is virtually on the very edge of Downpatrick; it's completely focused on Downpatrick and not focused on Slieve Croob.

So, we're proposing the abolition of Slieve Croob District Electoral Area and the only one left would be the Drumaness ward. The Rowallane District Electoral Area contains the town of Ballynahinch and the villages of Saintfield, Crossgar and Killyleagh; it forms part of the Belfast commuter belt, as well as having a rural farmland character.

The Drumaness ward from the former Slieve Croob area should be added, as Drumaness is closely associated with Ballynahinch and this would increase Rowallane from five seats to six seats. And you can see clearly that Drumaness is really a satellite village and Spa as well – these are completely linked to Ballynahinch and would seem natural to anyone who is going to represent Ballynahinch that they'd be interested in representing the immediate area around it.

In conclusion then, we would say the proposed changes are based on the principles of physical and social geography; they also reflect the nature of community life in this part of County Down and we ask you to consider them. Thank you very much.

Paul Dougan: Thank you, Mr Farr, for your very succinct and very carefully thought out submission and indeed for providing it to me in written format which is certainly very helpful. Mr Griffin, do you have anything to add?

David Griffin: I have nothing further to add.
Paul Dougan: From the floor, does anybody have any observation, points in favour, points in opposition with what has been said? No questions at the moment? Perhaps after I ask a few questions it may prompt some further debate.

A few questions, Mr Farr, from me first of all. Can we deal with the proposal in respect of Rostrevor? You are suggesting the transfer of Rostrevor from the Crotlieve DEA into Mourne; you've talked about the importance of physical features being a boundary as opposed to a focus, is the Mourne Mountains not a physical boundary between Rostrevor and Lisnacree, and a separation that seems to have been reflected in the existing architecture of electoral wards and district areas?

Berkley Farr: I think the whole question here is being constrained by the rule that you must have between five and seven wards in each electoral area and obviously if you're going to have five wards, the Kingdom of Mourne consists of four wards so you need an extra ward added to it. The important issue here is the question of Slieve Donard and splitting Newcastle and its hinterland from Kilkeel and its hinterland - in that way, the Rostrevor ward is going to be minor, compared with Newcastle.

At the same time, as we said, in an ideal world you would have a four seat electoral area for Kingdom of Mourne but if we're not allowed a four seat one then it's more natural to add Rostrevor rather than adding Newcastle and the three wards there onto Kilkeel.

Paul Dougan: The second point that I want to make to you is the factors which the Commissioner decided to take into account in making these provisional recommendations you broadly agree with; one of those factors appears to have been the creation of distinct urban and rural DEAs. Your proposal seems to focus very much on the urban and its hinterland, as opposed to the creation of urban distinct, rural distinct. Would you like to comment on that?

Berkley Farr: In the case of Newry itself, it's obviously a very distinct urban area and I think it's six seats in Newry. And you can draw a boundary around a major town like that but obviously you can't have a purely urban one – for example, just Kilkeel, just Newcastle, just Downpatrick. These are smaller towns which have natural hinterlands and the hinterlands are a key part of each town.
The major towns recognisably would be Kilkeel, Newcastle, Ballynahinch and Downpatrick and the natural thing in each of those towns would be to include the immediate hinterland surrounding them which forms part of it. You can’t just isolate, say, Newcastle from its hinterland because a hinterland is people who work in Newcastle, people who commute in and out of Newcastle, it’s a vital part of the local community.

It is the same in Downpatrick; most people in Downpatrick and the surrounding area of Lecale all travel in and out of Downpatrick; it’s where we have the local shops, we have the local doctors and it’s the whole centre of the community and if you cut off the hinterland from the town you’re splitting the whole community. So it makes sense to have the town and the hinterland connected wherever possible.

Paul Dougan: On that point, if we take the three wards of Tollymore, Donard and Murlough, which are Newcastle-centred, are you saying there’s no connection between those three wards and the other four proposed wards in the Mournes of Lisnacree, Kilkeel, Binnian and Annalong?

Berkley Farr: Well, they have a common interest in the mountains but that’s not a thing that affects everyday life in the community. The people in Bryansford and Kilkoo and so on all travel back and forward to Newcastle and the same thing applies to Castlewellan and Dundrum. So the actual physical barriers of Slieve Donard and Slieve Bearnagh and Slieve Commedagh and so on, represent a distinct barrier at the southern end of that local community.

People north of the Mournes look to Newcastle, people in Binnian and Annalong look to Kilkeel. So it’s a historic boundary which has been recognised for many decades and it’s recognised in all the public bodies that have been in existence for many years.

Paul Dougan: That brings me onto a topic. You talked about boards and services, specifically what boards and groups are you talking about that would now be split if this proposal went through?

Berkley Farr: I think the policing and education and health boards are divided along that boundary.

Paul Dougan: Can you give me the details of, for example, the policing boundary?
Berkley Farr: I’m basing it on what our MP is reported as saying in the paper; it’s one of her main objections to that particular change.

Paul Dougan: But specifically you’re talking about policing, health and did you say education?

Berkley Farr: I was quoting the local paper. There are two different policing boards, two education boards and library boards and two health and social care trusts that all have boundaries along that boundary.

Paul Dougan: Thank you. Now you quite rightly refer to the Commissioner, I think it’s at paragraph 3.8 of the Commissioner’s report, about the deference to existing DEA frameworks and that is what paragraph 3.8 states, that he felt it would be unreasonable to ignore this framework altogether since it has been in place for many years. But he does qualify that in the remaining part of the paragraph, “however there’s been a substantial change in the ward architecture as a result of the Local Government Boundaries Order in 2012 and a reduction of wards from 582 to 462”.

Now obviously there has to be movement and there has to be change. Why do you feel the existing framework as pertains in this area of Newcastle should be preserved with then the knock-on effect for changes to other areas to fit within the constraints of the 1984 schedule?

Berkley Farr: Obviously with the whole reorganisation you’re going to have fewer councillors elected for the whole system so it’s going to reduce the area. But the core argument that would be that Newcastle is the centre of a community and Newcastle’s natural hinterland of Castlewellan and Dundrum is a physical and social geographical fact and it would make sense to try to retain Newcastle and its hinterland altogether in the one area if possible.

It’s quite possible to have boundaries as we have put forward and these don’t correspond exactly to the previous area. But in the previous area - people are used to councillors in particular areas as local communities are used to particular areas - and it would be unnatural to split the communities as the previous proposal does by dividing Newcastle from half of its hinterland.
As far as natural individual wards go, I don't think there's been any - the southern part of the proposed DEA along Slieve Donard and Commedagh and towards the highest ridges of the Mournes - that haven't been affected by the changes in the wards.

Paul Dougan: Those are the points that I had in respect of Newcastle. You don't touch upon it as such but it is contained in the Alliance Party's general initial recommendation, a change in the name of The Mournes to Mourne. Do you want to speak to that? I know it's a very minor point but it is certainly something that has been reflected in your party's earlier contribution.

Berkley Farr: I'd leave it to the Commission to decide. Basically the actual name, it was traditionally known as the Kingdom of Mourne, the area south of the Mournes and either calling it Mourne or the Kingdom of Mourne or the Mournes, I think people know where it is. It's the area based around Kilkeel including the mountains, up to the highest ridges of the mountains. So I think we'd be happy with either name.

Paul Dougan: Now, the abolition of Slieve Croob as a DEA, irrespective of what wards go into that DEA - you want that to reflect Newcastle and its hinterland but you also want the name of the proposed Slieve Croob DEA amended to Newcastle. Could you explain your rationale for that? I've got the point about the grouping of the wards but why is the abolition of the proposed name of the DEA important?

Berkley Farr: As I said before, Newcastle is a natural focus of the whole hinterland here and if you ask people in this electoral area roughly where we live, you won't find many people saying 'we live in Slieve Croob'. Most people will say we live near Newcastle or we live in Newcastle and Newcastle is the place they recognise as the centre of their community. Geographically Slieve Croob is the middle of County Down; it's also very much marginal to the actual lowland area on this eastern side of Slieve Croob. So it would seem logical to have it called Newcastle after the major town in the area.

Paul Dougan: Even though for the entire local government district, with the exception of Downpatrick and Newry, all of the other DEAs, both existing names and proposed new names, do borrow from prominent geographical features of this area?
Berkley Farr: I think people would recognise the major town rather than the major geographical feature.

Paul Dougan: But surely the major geographical features of this area is one of the reasons why this area is so popular and for which it is renowned.

Berkley Farr: We have the Mournes as the name to the south; you could call it North Mourne but I think we would look on it from the point of view of people in the community rather than the physical features on the ground. The name, at the end of the day, is not the key issue; the key issue here is recognition of where local communities are. And the communities are based on Newcastle and the satellite villages around it; they are not based on Slieve Croob.

Paul Dougan: That's everything I wanted to raise. Have my series of questions to Mr Farr prompted any response or commentary by anybody else in the room? Mr Griffin, anything you wish to add?

David Griffin: No, I've nothing to add.

Paul Dougan: Mr Farr, thank you very much indeed, I hope you can remain and continue to contribute to the discussion for the remainder of today. Thank you very much for your time and for your presentation.

Berkley Farr: Thank you.

Paul Dougan: Our second speaker is Mr Morgan. Would you read out your name and your capacity?

Ryan Morgan: My name is Ryan Morgan; I'm here representing Sinn Fein.

Paul Dougan: Thank you, Mr Morgan.

Ryan Morgan: I'd like to speak in favour of the proposals. We've looked at the proposals and we understand some of the difficulties that were presented to the Commissioner. We feel that the proposed DEAs in as close a way as possible represent the best formation that was available to the Commission.

We understand that the Mourne DEA of old with just four wards was going to create change to some of the existing DEAs as they sit. Therefore we agree with the proposed Mourne DEA and believe that all areas within have considered community, social,
economic and educational links. We would be opposed to the Rostrevor ward going into the Mourne DEA and we believe that Rostrevor is more naturally linked with the Crotlieve DEA as it sits.

We believe the proposed Slieve Croob DEA is representative of the area and the communities included in the DEA and will very ably represent the people of that area.

In relation to the Downpatrick DEA, we are satisfied with the proposed wards. We do not believe that the wards should be increased as Downpatrick is a major economic hub of the district with huge investment and tourism potential and we believe the proposed DEA is adequately placed to maximise its potential.

With regards to Rowallane, we are satisfied with the proposed wards and we do not believe the addition of Drumaness would add anything to this DEA and we believe Drumaness should remain within the proposed Slieve Croob area.

Paul Dougan: Thank you very much. Has anybody any questions for Mr Morgan? Mr Farr, did you want to put something to Mr Morgan?

Berkley Farr: Berkley Farr here from the Alliance Party. I'd like to just ask Mr Morgan if he recognises the principle that towns and their natural hinterlands should be kept together wherever possible and the District Electoral Areas should be based on local communities in towns and their natural hinterlands.

Ryan Morgan: Yes, I understand that but, as I pointed out, we're satisfied with the proposals within the Commissioner's guidelines and the Commissioner has worked to create urban and rural districts.

Paul Dougan: Is there anybody else? On the basis that you have largely agreed with the proposals and you've set that out, I don't have any questions of clarifications so thank you very much again for coming along.

Ryan Morgan: Thank you.

Paul Dougan: The third speaker is Councillor Clarke.

Patrick Clarke: My name is Councillor Patrick Clarke from the Alliance Party. I represent Newcastle DEA and I have also made a written submission.
Firstly, I'd also like to concur and recognise the enormous difficulty that the District Electoral Areas Commissioner had in making these provisional recommendations; I'm sure it wasn't an easy job. At the outset, I would have to say that I would completely oppose the provisional boundary recommendation of dividing Newcastle, which I represent, from its natural hinterland of Castlewellan and Dundrum. It is my firm belief that it flies in the face of any common sense or logic to divide a cohesive population area and link its main town with the other side of the Mourne Mountains.

The vital concerns that I would have is that the new Mourne DEA would cut off Newcastle, as has been previously stated, from its natural hinterland of Castlewellan town and Dundrum village. The other concerns would be the Ballydugan ward, which is also part of Downpatrick's natural hinterland and should be included in the Downpatrick DEA.

The Alliance party suggests the following arrangement of the wards across the new council area. The key changes to the provisional recommendations are the creation of a new DEA based on Newcastle and the abolition of the Slieve Croob DEA.

In the decades since local government reorganisation, going back to 1973, local councillors have been the clear and democratic voice for the people of Newcastle and its surrounding areas. People know their councillors and are familiar with their councillors and the issues which affect them. Particularly with Newcastle, issues in Newcastle usually involve, certainly in my role as elected representative, the adjoining towns of Castlewellan and the village of Dundrum and it's always helpful to have the same councillors dealing directly with them.

As one of the councillors representing Newcastle and Down District Council, the electoral area, as you already know, includes the town of Newcastle and smaller associated areas as Castlewellan and Dundrum. The present electoral area forms a natural geographical unit bound by Dundrum Bay, the Mourne Mountains and Slieve Croob and has long established links with the local population.

Going back to what the Alliance Party is proposing, which is a new Newcastle DEA which would take in six wards, namely Tollymore, Donard, Murlough, Castlewellan, Ballyward and
Dundrum, effectively making it a six seater with an electorate of approximately 17,000.

These are all interlinked because of their geographical area and I believe that is common sense. I don't have anything other to add other than I would like to maintain, as do the Alliance Party, Newcastle as a DEA and consider maintaining Castlewellan and Dundrum together with Newcastle purely on the basis of logic, common sense and maintaining an electorate population together. Thank you.

Paul Dougan: Largely your submissions have replicated that which has been said by your colleague, so a lot of the points that I put to him I could equally put to you, there's no point in repeating that. I assume that you're in agreement with what he said.

Can I ask just from a philosophical perspective, these proposals are to move away perhaps from the old Down, the old Newry, the old council structures and look to a wider spread, a new dispensation. What do you say about that in terms of a proposal which focuses very heavily on retaining what some might argue is the old structure and the old format focusing on Newcastle and moving away from this greater spread of a Newry, Mourne and Down LGD?

Patrick Clarke: It's all a case of interpretation and what you believe is going to be moving forward with a larger DEA. I primarily base it purely on my own opinion, on logic. Newcastle is a central town; if it goes under the new Mournes, as is proposed, you're then linked into Kilkeel and that hinterland which is on the other side of the Mournes, a much larger geographical area which I feel as an elected representative is going to be harder to fully and effectively represent.

The Mournes, under the existing proposals, I feel that Newcastle will lose possibly its identity. Without being repetitive here, Dundrum, Castlewellan and Newcastle are all intertwined because they are the hinterland, they're the village, they are the town, they are what people know travelling from Castlewellan to Newcastle to Dundrum. And to effectively put it into a new electoral area with Kilkeel and the other wards on the other side of the Mournes, it just completely dilutes the whole ethos of what I believe a proper and effective electoral representation should be.
I have no disrespect to the other wards on the other side of the Mournes, but purely on the basis of what I can see as makes common sense is that as they are, irrespective of moving into a new council, I still maintain that that should be kept.

It's not a case of trying to hold onto the old and not move forward. I understand that populations grow and populations move but it's purely just on what I can see and in terms of geography, possibly historic, but primarily on what you see and with what's on this side of the Mournes to the other side of the Mournes. Now I don't know whether that fully answers your question but that's my interpretation of it.

Paul Dougan: I know it's difficult because we're effectively straddling two proposed DEA, but in terms of the importance of representation, how do you say the figures stack up with your proposal in terms of ratio, level of representation, do you feel that the proposal that is currently on the table leaves any deficit in that regard or not?

Patrick Clarke: I think the Commissioner’s proposal under the seven wards of the Mournes, is effectively an electorate population of 20,000 - as opposed to what the Alliance Party would be proposing. As an elected representative I even find this electoral area, to fully represent it at its existing level at times can be challenging but with the new recommendations I just feel that it's a very hard mountain to climb effectively, excuse the pun, because of the large electorate.

I believe in giving as full and open transparent representation to as many of my constituents as I can and I would find, personally speaking, trying to represent all of the people in the new area, irrespective of political or religious opinions or affiliations, if I want to be a councillor representing the new Mournes area and the seven wards, that could prove challenging. I think that what we have proposed, not because it’s manageable, I just think it's common sense and logical and everything that has already been alluded to here by the Alliance Party.

Paul Dougan: Again, the minor point over this name Mournes or Mourne or Kingdom of Mourne, where do you stand on that?

Patrick Clarke: Well, ultimately as has been already stated, it's going to be a decision that's going to be made by the Electoral Areas Commissioner. Personally speaking, I think it should be Mourne;
that's what I've always known it as and certainly from this side of the area.

Paul Dougan: Does anybody from the floor want to put any questions to the councillor? Again, thanks for your presentation, thanks for taking the time to come here and I hope you can remain to listen to the rest of the discussions.

Our next speaker is Councillor Carmel O'Boyle. And is it a Mr Fitzpatrick? You're very welcome.

Carmel O'Boyle: Good morning, everybody; good morning, Commissioner. My name is Councillor Carmel O'Boyle and I have a message from the MP, Margaret Ritchie this morning. She's hoping to get here but she's caught up in Downpatrick at the Downshire Hospital so I'll be making a few points on her behalf. As you know, she has already made a submission and the points that she made centred mostly on the coterminosity issues in relation to policing and health and the education boards. As you know, ESA still has not been established but we're told it's imminent.

So the message from her this morning is simply to the Commissioner that she hopes that they will address those issues of coterminosity. But apart from that, the position of the SDLP in relation to the proposed plans is that we are broadly supportive of the configuration of the new DEAs as we're discussing today.

So what I am about to say is almost a personal statement as well from myself as a councillor. I've been a Down District SDLP councillor representing the Newcastle DEA since 1997 and that means that for four local government elections I drew my mandate and support from the current Newcastle wards of Murlough, Tollymore, Donard, Shimna, Dundrum and Castlewellan. And what we're discussing today is that Dundrum and Castlewellan should be in the Slieve Croob DEA while Newcastle wards of Murlough, Tollymore and Donard are to be placed in the Mournes DEA.

My election area in 2014 in the next local government elections will be in the new Mournes DEA and, while it would be tempting for me to argue that Dundrum, Castlewellan and the Castlewellan ward should be retained within the present DEA, I would be doing so for my own convenience and I suppose for obvious reasons. I've attended many meetings to discuss the pros and cons of the proposed configuration of the new DEAs and I have to concede
that I understand what lies behind the new plan and I can see the clear logic of it.

The new Mournes DEA must of course contain the Newcastle wards of Tollymore, Donard, Murlough, with the former Shimna Ward subsumed within these. Without these wards the very name Mournes would be a nonsense and, as you've referred to yourself earlier, Newcastle is known as the gateway to the Mournes.

While it would be tempting to opt for the status quo and for the sake of enlightened personal self interest, maybe what is at stake is the greater good and therefore I want to say that I along with my colleagues in the SDLP, the DEA structure proposed by the DEA Commission and the choice and allocation of the wards within each of these DEAs. I'm opposed and we are opposed to the removal and relocation of any of the wards within these DEAs, even though, as I said, it would make life easier for me as a local Newcastle councillor.

It's been an intelligent piece of work and while it will make my work as a Newcastle councillor in the next election more challenging and will take me out of my comfort zone, it is a challenge I'm prepared to work with if it's for the greater good.

There's been a lot of talk about this not being the natural layout for wards and so on, for hinterlands and so on. I'll remind everybody that we have already been working very closely with Newcastle, Kilkeel and Warrenpoint to formulate a South East Coast Master Plan which has already been launched. The Commission can see the work that has been done there, the funding that we hope to attract and draw down for these areas. So, in a sense, we have been ahead of the Commission or maybe they have referred to it when they have actually been drawing up the new boundaries.

It's a very important piece of work and far from us being strangers to one another, we actually have more in common than have differences. And of course you're aware of the Mournes Heritage Trust which has been in existence for 20 years; I've been a member of it for many years and this also takes in the whole vision of this Mournes DEA as well. We work right across the Mournes area just as has been enclosed within the boundary of the Mournes.
So as I said, it would be nice if life stayed the same for me and in the next elections I'm going to have relations and friends cut off from me in Slieve Croob who would have been former voters and supporters. I do understand that for the greater good this is a visionary piece of work and I have to say that I and the SDLP are supportive of it. Thank you.

Paul Dougan: Thank you. Does anybody want to comment on what Councillor O'Boyle has submitted? Mr Fitzpatrick?

Peter Fitzpatrick: Peter Fitzpatrick, SDLP member. I support what the party has done and what Councillor Carmel O'Boyle has said. There are three points. To demolish the Slieve Croob electoral area would be a major haemorrhage in the proposals for the new council and would have a serious knock-on effect on the entire programme. That's number one.

Number two is Newcastle and Kilkeel have a natural affinity and they're linked by roads, water, trade and tourism and it doesn't cause much hassle because it's an area which lies into one another. And thirdly, I would know the southern end of the constituency very well, the Crotlieve area. Rostrevor, if you look at the map, has a natural affinity to Warrenpoint and as such it's naturally at home in the Crotlieve ward and to say it should move is crazy.

Paul Dougan: Before I open it to the floor, you say the serious knock-on effect of abolishing the Slieve Croob DEA and the haemorrhaging; what would those serious knock-on effects be?

Peter Fitzpatrick: It would mean that the proposals that are currently put, people wouldn't know what the next proposals may be. Everyone would be saying I'm not happy with that, that shouldn't be there, and you could be looking at a further demand for a further inquiry after this, which is highly unlikely but that's what the demand would be.

Paul Dougan: Is there any practical knock-on effect in terms of anything, for example, what the Alliance Party has suggested with abolishing the Slieve Croob.

Peter Fitzpatrick: If you start moving Slieve Croob around you will have a knock-on effect right through the new proposed council area no matter what you do because you're going to have to move different bits
all over to balance it out and therefore it would have a major knock-on effect.

Paul Dougan: But in fairness to the Alliance, they have worked that out and they have set out the ripple effect in their proposals.

Peter Fitzpatrick: But other parties throughout the constituency would feel that for them there would be something in it which wouldn't they wouldn't be happy with. All parties I can think of would be unhappy with it.

Paul Dougan: But the proposal that the Alliance Party have made was made during the consultation exercise; the consultation exercise was there for eight weeks, it's been widely available, easy to read and to consider so again I'm just trying to understand.

Peter Fitzpatrick: I am saying people cannot form an opinion until they knew, if it was changed and abolished, until the new area would be shown, and then they would form an opinion and I'm sure my colleague would know that.

Carmel O'Boyle: I didn't even mention the removal of Slieve Croob; I just don't think it's a runner at all. The intention is simply to leave the status quo, as I said, as it appears the present existing Newcastle DEA basically unchanged.

Paul Dougan: Mr Farr was going to speak so if you would like to address either speaker, Mr Farr again, just read your name for the record.

Berkley Farr: Berkley Farr from the Alliance Party here. I'd like to ask Councillor O'Boyle if she regards it being in the better good to divide up existing communities, particular towns and immediate hinterlands and this is while she thinks that linking communities on the other side of the mountains is more important than having the immediate neighbours included in the electoral area.

Carmel O'Boyle: I'll just return to the point that I made, that the Mourne Heritage Trust and our South East Coast Master Plan are already a matter of record and we have been working with those communities for very many years. The definition of who your immediate neighbours are is something very subjective. We have a very close affinity with those communities that will be in the proposed Mournes DEA; they're not strangers to us at all.

Paul Dougan: Can I just clarify, when you said we, who is we?
Carmel O'Boyle: I'm actually talking about, for example, the South East Coast Master Plan. On that sits councillors from all of those areas and all parties. So it's not just the SDLP I'm talking about; I'm talking about our colleagues in the Ulster Unionist Party, DUP and the rest, Sinn Fein as well.

Paul Dougan: Is that a council driven body or group of people?

Carmel O'Boyle: Yes, it is but on it sit community representatives, voluntary groups and all the rest; it's just very much representative of everybody including elected representatives but we're not the driving force.

Paul Dougan: Before I ask questions, is there anybody else from the floor who would like to follow up on any point? Maybe after I speak there might be a few things. Just on that latter point, Councillor O'Boyle, why do you think those groups, the Heritage Trust and the South East Coast Master Plan, have focused on this particular structure or grouping?

Carmel O'Boyle: As you know, there has been talk of a national park for the Mournes and that hasn't moved forward really because there has been opposition from some groups. But that hasn't stopped people having the vision for the Mournes and for the Mournes area in order to make life more prosperous for the people who live within that area. And while it might not be a national park, people do see themselves as Mournes people and that includes the people of Newcastle. Slieve Donard sweeps right down into our town and we have an idea within the South East Coastal Master Plan of getting possibly a gondola type lift into the mountains coming up from Newcastle and going across the mountains.

So, as I say, we do see ourselves as a unit, we do see ourselves as a certain type of people and we are happy to be included within that for political purposes as well.

Paul Dougan: What do you then say if I can put the Alliance and Mr Farr's argument that when you say Newcastle you must read across to Castlewellan and Dundrum and that it is an artificial division to separate Newcastle from, as he would say, its natural hinterland?

Carmel O'Boyle: When it was originally divided up, the boundaries to include Castlewellan and Dundrum, surely it was artificial at that time too. Somebody has to draw the line somewhere and I think, as you
said yourself, this is out with the old and in with the new because we will only have eleven council areas now and we've got to fit those into the twenty six areas that we have at present.

The line has to be drawn somewhere and it's not as if we are complete strangers. In fact we're not and, as I said, my party and other parties, and we've talked to other parties as well and we have all weighed up the pros and cons and yes, there are pluses, yes, there are minuses. But to use the expression again, for the greater good, we do believe that this is the best that can be done.

And as I just come back to the point that the MP made in the submission on behalf of our party; it's only the issue of coterminosity to do with health and education boards and policing and so on that really need to be addressed but that's on a different level.

Paul Dougan: Can I then refer back to Ms Ritchie’s submission? There were two aspects to her written submission initially. One concerns specifically the Warrenpoint issue. Obviously that is outside the remit because the wards themselves and their boundaries are settled so can I take it that we don't need to address that?

Carmel O'Boyle: No.

Paul Dougan: On the coterminosity point, does the Alliance Party's proposal with the configuration of Newcastle, which would take in Castlewellan and Dundrum, address the coterminosity issue?

Carmel O'Boyle: I simply don't put as much emphasis on the coterminosity issue.

Paul Dougan: It's the only point that your MP actually raises and you've said you've brought your submission back round to that point. So the Alliance Party with their proposal deal with this coterminosity point and deal with the different policing division and the different library boards and the different health board authorities, etc.

Carmel O'Boyle: I don't think that's a strong enough argument to leave the situation as it is actually.

Paul Dougan: But where does coterminosity sit in your submission? It has to go somewhere.

Carmel O'Boyle: The MP this morning said that - and she's not making a very strong point about this - but she wants the Commission when
they are finalising their plan to look at it again themselves; she thinks the ball is in the court of the Commissioner.

Paul Dougan: I don’t wish to put you on the spot because you’re speaking for her and if she’s here in due course she can articulate her point herself. The issue of boundaries to take account of policing boards or policing districts or health is outside the remit of this inquiry, it’s about the grouping of wards. The wards and the local government districts are settled by legislation so we are stuck with that whether we like it or not but I think I need to push, in fairness to other contributors, that if coterminosity is an issue of some importance, it does appear to be addressed by the proposals that we hear at the outset of the inquiry this morning.

Carmel O’Boyle: Yes, but you did say that the coterminosity issue is not really within the remit of this. What we’re talking about today is the DEAs, so I’ve just brought that message from the MP, but if it is to be dealt with it will be dealt with at a different level and a different place.

Paul Dougan: Are there any matters arising from what I have said to the councillor? Thank you both again for your succinct and robust argument and I hope that you can remain to continue to contribute from the floor in due course. Thank you very much.

We have gone through our speakers as scheduled. Is there anybody else who has not yet registered but who would like to come forward and say something on the objections that have been raised?

The inquiry sits until 5pm today, irrespective of whether people are here or not, so what I would propose to do is to adjourn the inquiry now until such time as another speaker or speakers come forward.

Anybody who has already spoken and feels they want to revisit an issue can certainly do that but in the absence of someone ready now to speak, I would propose to adjourn and then we’ll sit again as and when we’re required to. As I said at the outset, we do propose to break for lunch at 12.30pm but I am ready and available to return to the inquiry when a speaker is available. For now I propose to adjourn this inquiry. Thank you.
ADJOURNMENT

Ladies and gentlemen, we adjourned at 11.20am; no one since then has indicated a desire or intention to speak. Now that the time is approaching 12.30pm, I propose to formally adjourn the inquiry for lunch and the inquiry will sit again at 1.30pm, so if you could come back to this room for 1.30pm. We will now adjourn for lunch. Thank you.

ADJOURNMENT

Good afternoon everybody, it's 1.30pm and the adjourned public inquiry into the Newry, Mourne and Down District has reconvened. It is important that these inquiries all follow a similar pattern and although there are no speakers registered to present to me at this stage, the inquiries have reconvened as were advertised at 1.30pm and therefore we do reconvene for this purpose.

However, on the basis that nobody in the room is registered to speak and unless anybody from the floor wishes to make a point or raise something with me, my intention would be to adjourn again until such time as a speaker comes forward. So we will adjourn now until we need to speak again, so thank you very much.

CLOSING COMMENTS

Paul Dougan:

It is now 5pm and I am bringing the public inquiry for the Newry, Mourne and Down Local Government District to a close. Since I adjourned the inquiry at 11.20am nobody else has presented themselves and indicated that they wished to speak. I also confirmed at that time that all present were content that they had an adequate opportunity to make their representations.

Before I formally close these proceedings, I would like to place on record my gratitude to everyone who has attended, particularly those who have made representations. I want to
thank my support team from the office of the District Electoral Areas Commissioner and Morrow Communalisations and the transcribers and audio engineers for the help they have given me in preparing for and conducting this inquiry. I would also like to thank the management and staff of the Slieve Donard Hotel for the excellent facilities they have provided.

My immediate task now is to consider carefully all of the evidence I have heard at this inquiry, as well as the written representations that were received during the recent consultation period and to prepare a report for the District Electoral Areas Commissioner within the next four weeks.

My report will be made publicly available on the Commissioner's website together with the Commissioner's final recommendations report. It will ultimately be a matter for the Commissioner to decide whether to accept any or all of my recommendations. Thank you all very much for your assistance and participation.