

An Coimisiún Toghcháin,  
Dublin Castle,  
Dublin 2

Dear Chair,

I am writing to you in response to the request made by the Electoral Commission inviting written submissions in relation to the formation of constituencies for the election of members to Dáil Éireann and to the European Parliament, in accordance with section 56 of the Electoral Reform Act 2022 and following the publication of the 2022 Census Preliminary results.

My submission specifically relates to the Dáil constituency of Longford Westmeath. I am of the firm belief that county Westmeath should not be divided when it comes to electing members of Dáil Éireann.

As a member of the Dáil representing Longford Westmeath since 2016, I am well placed to observe and comment on the operation of this constituency and how it could be improved order to serve the population in a more efficient and representative manner.

### **Population change**

While it is one of the stated aims of the Commission, observing the relevant provisions of Bunreacht na hÉireann, that the breaching of county boundaries shall be avoided as far as practicable, I understand that up to now the population may not have supported a stand-alone constituency based in Westmeath County, or a five-seat constituency made up of Longford and Westmeath combined. However, our population has now changed.

The preliminary 2022 Census data indicates that Longford-Westmeath has a total population of 133,056 people. In our four-seater constituency, this gives a figure of 33,264 people per TD and a 3.88% percentage variance of population per TD in the constituency in comparison to the national average per TD in 2022.



Article 16.2.2° of the Constitution provides that “The number of members shall from time to time be fixed by law, but the total number of members of Dáil Eireann shall not be fixed at less than one member for each thirty thousand of the population, or at more than one member for each twenty thousand of the population”. As such, the numbers for this constituency now show that four seats for this population is no longer sufficient.

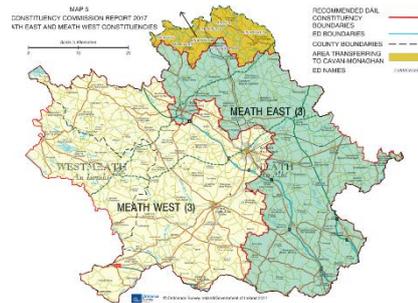
Furthermore, the preliminary data from Census 2022 showed that the population of Westmeath alone has increased by 7,000 since 2016. The Constituency Commission report of 2017 considered transferring a “population of over 8,600 in nineteen electoral divisions from Meath West to Longford-Westmeath” thus restoring the breach of the Westmeath count boundary. They opted to not take this option at the time, however the data from the Census highlights that this is now a viable option, allowing the Constituency to operate in line with our Constitution.

## County Border Breach

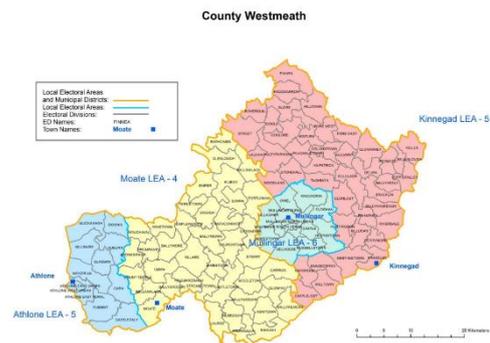
Having been elected to Westmeath County Council in 2009 and subsequently to Dáil Éireann in 2016, I am of firm belief that the separation of Westmeath into two different Dáil constituencies was a mistake. As things stand, the majority of the population of Westmeath vote in Longford Westmeath, with a minority of Westmeath citizens voting for TDs who cover the Meath-West area.

As stated in the Electoral (Amendment) Act 1997, Section 6 (2)(c), “the breaching of county boundaries shall be avoided as far as practicable”. I believe the breach involved in the division of these constituencies creates a number of problems and obstacles to good representation:

- The dividing line of the constituency is completely arbitrary and there is a lack of local awareness about the precise location where once constituency transitions into the next. The towns of Delvin, Castlepollard, Clonmellon and Collinstown all look to Mullingar in relation to services and amenities, yet their residents cannot vote for candidates from Mullingar/North Westmeath to represent them in Dáil Éireann.



- Westmeath County Council overlaps both jurisdictions and residents of the county vote for local county councillors from Westmeath. We know that many TDs begin their political careers in our Local Authorities, so when these candidates make the move to Dáil elections, they can no longer receive votes from the people they previously represented in the east of the County. When it comes to voting in general elections, many voters feel disenfranchised from politics as they are unfamiliar with the candidates on the ballot paper.



- Many TDs and representatives in Longford Westmeath receive a large volume of work from the Meath West area. I can personally attest to this. This proves that the system is not working.
- TDs for Meath West are under pressure to attend events across their constituency. When there are time pressures involved, representatives may choose to attend events or meetings where the maximum number of constituents will be present. This may explain why the Meath West TDs traditionally have a very poor record at attending Oireachtas briefings organised by Westmeath County Council. The minutes of these meetings will confirm this.
- We have a strong sense of pride in our county and our identity here in Westmeath. We receive education and training here, we raise our children and follow Westmeath in GAA, soccer and other sports and there is a great sense of community. I am sure this is also the case in Meath, but areas in North Westmeath are not linked in any meaningful

way to Meath in this manner. It is unfair that Westmeath citizens are excluded from a wider Westmeath constituency purely because of their proximity to county borders.

For the above reasons, I feel strongly that Westmeath in totality should be reunited as part of our constituency in respect of future general elections.

I trust you will consider the above as part of your deliberations.

Sincere good wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Peter Burke". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "P" and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

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MINISTER PETER BURKE TD