

Electoral Commission review of Dáil Constituency Boundaries

Submission from the Fine Gael Party

We welcome the opportunity to make a submission, and take this opportunity to wish the new Electoral Commission well in their work.

In considering the basis for our submission, we are mindful of the Commission's Terms of Reference, in particular:

- the total number of members shall be not less than 171 and not more than 181
- the breaching of county boundaries should be avoided as far as practicable
- there shall be regard to geographic considerations
- maintaining continuity in relation to the arrangement of constituencies

Population growth

Given the extent of population growth (+8%), and the wide range of seat options included in the Terms of Reference, the Commission has quite an amount of latitude in considering the best or most suitable options available.

The greatest increases are in parts of Dublin, and surrounding counties, which have experienced growth of between 10% and 13%, and given that the total number of seats must increase by at least 11, or at most, 21, it is likely that a significant number of the additional seats will be focussed on Dublin and the east coast.

It is worth reflecting here on the increase in population; the likelihood is that population will continue to grow, and some CSO predictions anticipate the national population could exceed 6 million as soon as 2036.

County Boundaries

In general terms, we are strongly of the view that county boundaries should be respected wherever possible; we made the point in a submission to the last Boundary Commission that the public feel isolated, marginalised and disenfranchised when they end up as an 'add-on' to a neighbouring constituency, but in a different county, and in one case in 2012, in a different province and European constituency (when part of Co. Tipperary was included in the constituency of Offaly).

In its Report in 2004, a previous Commission noted that whilst not adverted to in the Terms of Reference, as a general rule, the breaching of provincial boundaries should be avoided.

It appears that fixing a seat total in the middle of the range offers the best prospects of dealing with many of the existing breaches of county boundaries. And it is also the case, that whilst a Dáil at the upper end of the scale available to the Commission may resolve some existing breaches, it will also result in more breaches of other county boundaries, and the resulting difficulties in terms of citizens feeling displaced. (See Appendices 1 and 1a). It is our view that if the Commission were to create more than 178 seats, the extra seats allocated at that level would be likely to give rise to even more boundary breaches in a range of counties. We therefore consider the middle to lower upper end of your range is the most appropriate outcome.

Accepting the principle of a wider range of variances, together with the optimal number of seats, will result in constituencies which are more cohesive, and have the potential to last for more than one electoral cycle, thereby minimising future disruption.

As things stand, eight constituencies include parts of (ten) neighbouring counties (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1 Constituencies which include part of a neighbouring county

Constituency	Including part of:
Cavan Monaghan	Co. Meath
Galway West	Co. Mayo
Kildare South	Cos. Laois and Offaly
Limerick City	Co. Tipperary
Louth	Co. Meath
Meath West	Co. Westmeath
Roscommon Galway	Co. Galway
Sligo Leitrim	Cos. Donegal and Roscommon

All bar two (Roscommon Galway and Sligo Leitrim) could be resolved (See Fig. 2). The situation in Louth is somewhat unique, insofar as there are extensive linkages to the hinterland to the town of Drogheda, in Co. Meath.

Fig. 2: Breaches of County Boundaries resolved (Constituencies reflect county boundaries)

County	2022 pop.	If seats	Pop. per TD	Variance from national average, depending on total number of seats										
				171	172	173	174	175	176	177	178	179	180	181
Cavan Monaghan	81201 64832 146033	5	29,207											
				-3%	-2%	-1%	-1%	0%	0%	1%	1%	2%	3%	3%
Galway Roscommon	276,451 69,995 346,446	12	28,871	-4%	-3%	-3%	-2%	-1%	-1%	0%	0%	1%	1%	2%
				3%	4%	4%	5%	5%	6%					
Kildare	246,977 246,977	8 9	30,872 27,442					-6%	-6%	-5%	-5%	-4%	-4%	-3%
Limerick	205,444	7	29,349	-2%	-1%	-1%	0%	0%	1%	1%	2%	3%	3%	4%
Louth	139,100	5	27,820	-7%	-7%	-6%	-6%	-5%	-4%	-4%	-3%	-3%	-2%	-2%
Meath	220,296 220,296	7 8	31,471 27,537	5%	6%	6%	7%	7%	8%					
							-6%	-6%	-5%	-5%	-4%	-4%	-3%	-3%
Sligo Leitrim	69,819 35,087 104,906	4	26,227	-12%	-12%	-11%	-11%	-10%	-10%	-9%	-9%	-8%	-8%	-7%

Operating within a variance of +/-5%, four could be solved in a Dáil with 171-175 seats, and five in the context of a larger Dáil. However, almost all could be resolved, regardless of the overall size of the Dáil, if the Commission accepted a wider variance up to +/-9%

In doing that, county boundaries could be restored to seven counties; again, there is a greater chance of achieving this, in the context of a wider range of variances. It seems difficult to avoid a breach in Co. Galway, but the breach in Co. Roscommon could be minimised. (See Fig. 3)

Fig. 3: Variances from national average, in counties where breaches of county boundaries have been reversed

County	2022 pop.	If seats	Pop. per TD	Variance from national average, depending on total number of seats										
				171	172	173	174	175	176	177	178	179	180	181
Donegal	166,321	5	33,264	11%	12%	12%	13%	14%	14%	15%	16%	16%	17%	18%
		6	27,720	-7%	-7%	-6%	-6%	-5%	-5%	-4%	-4%	-3%	-3%	-2%
Galway and Roscommon	346,446	12	28,871	-4%	-3%	-3%	-2%	-1%	-1%	0%	0%	1%	1%	2%
Laois	91,657	3	30,552	2%	3%	3%	4%	4%	5%	6%	6%	7%	7%	8%
Mayo	137,231	5	27,446	-8%	-8%	-7%	-7%	-6%	-6%	-5%	-5%	-4%	-4%	-3%
Meath	220,296	7	31,471	5%	6%	6%	7%	7%	8%					
		8	27,537					-6%	-5%	-5%	-4%	-4%	-3%	-3%
Offaly	82,668	3	27,556	-8%	-7%	-7%	-6%	-6%	-5%	-5%	-4%	-4%	-3%	-3%
Tipperary	167,661	5	33,532	12%	13%	13%	14%	15%	15%	16%	16%	17%	18%	18%
		6	27,944	-7%	-6%	-6%	-5%	-5%	-4%	-3%	-3%	-2%	-2%	-1%

If variances up to +/-9% were accepted (and all orange categories turned to green), virtually all options would be acceptable, regardless of the total number of Dáil seats. (See Fig. 3.1)

Fig. 3.1: Variances from national average, in counties where breaches have been reversed – assuming greater tolerance of variances

County	2022 pop.	If seats	Pop. per TD	Variance from national average, depending on total number of seats										
				171	172	173	174	175	176	177	178	179	180	181
Donegal	166,321	6	27,720	-7%	-7%	-6%	-6%	-5%	-5%	-4%	-4%	-3%	-3%	-2%
Galway and Roscommon	346,446	12	28,871	-4%	-3%	-3%	-2%	-1%	-1%	0%	0%	1%	1%	2%
Laois	91,657	3	30,552	2%	3%	3%	4%	4%	5%	6%	6%	7%	7%	8%
Mayo	137,231	5	27,446	-8%	-8%	-7%	-7%	-6%	-6%	-5%	-5%	-4%	-4%	-3%
Meath	220,296	7	31,471	5%	6%	6%	7%	7%	8%	9%	9%			
		8	27,537				-6%	-6%	-5%	-5%	-4%	-4%	-3%	-3%
Offaly	82,668	3	27,556	-8%	-7%	-7%	-6%	-6%	-5%	-5%	-4%	-4%	-3%	-3%
Tipperary	167,661	6	27,944	-7%	-6%	-6%	-5%	-5%	-4%	-3%	-3%	-2%	-2%	-1%

In summary, were the Commission to increase the level of variance deemed acceptable, it should be possible to eliminate most of the existing breaches of county boundaries, and keep to a minimum, any new breaches. (See Fig. 4)

Fig. 4: Extent to which breaches of county boundaries can be minimised

No breach	Possible to avoid a breach (+/-9%)	Some breach - can't be avoided
Cavan	Carlow	Galway
Cork	Clare	Kilkenny
Dublin	Donegal	Waterford
Kildare	Kerry	Wexford
Leitrim	Laois	Wicklow
Limerick	Offaly	
Longford	Tipperary	
Louth	Waterford	
Mayo		
Meath		
Monaghan		
Roscommon		
Sligo		
13	8	5

Note: As indicated in Fig. 2, Sligo Leitrim struggles to stand on its own, without population from at least one other county – but the counties of both Sligo and Leitrim should remain intact; however, decisions on additional territory could impact on the categories above

Equality of Representation

We have also made the point previously, that notwithstanding the +/-5% 'rule of thumb', the Commission clearly has discretion with regard to the extent to which population per TD in any given constituency can vary from the national average; again, in pursuit of protecting county boundaries, and giving constituencies a clear and unambiguous persona, our strong view is that the Commission should be prepared to accept larger variances than heretofore; previous Commissions have accepted variances up to +/-8% (1983, Mayo East -7.89%, 2004 Louth, +7.87%).

It is worth noting here, that generating constituencies with parts of adjoining counties added on, solely for the purpose of falling within a prescribed range of variances, is inimical to the concept of Equality of Representation; the figures in the table below prove clearly that in the General Election of 2020, turnout in the 'displaced' areas was on

average 2 percentage points below the rest of the constituency in which they found themselves (with a range of +4% to -8%) and the difference when compared to the turnout in the rest of their 'home' county was even greater, with an average of -4% (with a range of +5 to -9%). Equality of Representation is not simply about the relativity of population to TD, but also about all voters feeling sufficiently included, recognised and motivated to exercise their franchise. (See Fig. 5)

Fig. 5:

General Election 2020 : Turnout in areas 'added on' to neighbouring constituencies, compared to rest of that constituency, and compared to the rest of their home county

Dáil Constituency	Turnout	Part of other county included	Turnout in 'add-on'	Difference	Turnout in rest of home county	Difference
Cavan Monaghan	66%	Co. Meath	61%	-5%	64%	-3%
Galway West	58%	Co. Mayo	62%	4%	66%	-4%
Kildare South	61%	Co. Laois	57%	-4%	63%	-6%
	61%	Co. Offaly	54%	-7%	63%	-9%
Limerick City	60%	Co. Tipperary	58%	-2%	65%	-7%
Louth	63%	Co. Meath	55%	-8%	64%	-9%
Meath West	62%	Co. Westmeath	65%	3%	60%	5%
Roscommon Galway	66%	Co. Galway	62%	-4%	60%	2%
Sligo Leitrim	63%	Co. Donegal	58%	-5%	62%	-4%
	63%	Co. Roscommon	67%	4%	71%	-4%
Average	62%		60%	-2%	64%	-4%

Note: Turnout figures derived from election tallies; in 75% of cases (highlighted in pink), turnout in displaced areas was lower either than in the adopted constituency, or in the 'home' county

Naming of constituencies

Despite the best of intentions, it is likely that there will be some constituencies that encompass additional territory from neighbouring counties. We suggest that where possible, the resulting constituencies should be named to reflect that geographic diversity i.e. in the current configuration, Galway West could possibly have been named Galway West/South Mayo, although it might not be practical in constituencies which are more diverse.

Furthermore, in this context, we believe constituencies in Dublin and Cork should have names that either people can recognise, and relate to, or otherwise, which describe their location by reference to compass points i.e. Dublin North West, Cork North Central.

Geographic blocks

In previous reports, the Boundary Commission has tended to treat Dublin and Cork as stand-alone regions, and then looked at the situation applying in various blocks of neighbouring counties.

It is on that basis that we make the following suggestions:

Dublin

At the low end of the scale, Dublin should see three additional seats, but could gain as many as six.

The five constituencies on the northside of the River Liffey could see gains of one to three seats, with significant growth in Dublin Fingal and Dublin West, while the constituencies on the southside should see two or three additional seats.

Whilst the Commission is not obliged to take account of the boundaries between councils in Dublin, the combination of Dublin Rathdown and Dún Laoghaire, falling within the one county council, facilitates optimum alignment in terms of local and national representation, and service delivery at local level; these two constituencies should gain a seat, and the question is whether the eight seats end up as a 5/3 split, or 4/4.

It is too easy, in urban areas, to configure constituencies which satisfy numerical requirements i.e. variance from

national average; we believe the Commission should have an equal regard for significant physical features, including rivers, motorways and main roads, as well as taking into account the existence of strong local communities, and avoid unnecessary disruption or fracturing of those communities; as an example, previous reviews resulted in an area of Swords forming part of Dublin West; the people of Swords were divided, and never felt any association with Dublin West.

Equally, it should be noted that some natural communities like Castleknock or Ballinteer are bisected by a motorway; the River Liffey divides both Lucan and Chapelizod – so on a case by case basis, community may override geography.

Cork

The likelihood is that Cork should gain one, or more likely, two seats, depending on the total number of seats; in the mid-range, it is likely that the one extra seat should be in the city area; at the upper end, a second seat could end up between Cork East or Cork NC, on the basis that Cork SW and Cork NW each remains with three seats.

North East

It appears that most breaches of county boundaries across Counties Louth, Meath and Westmeath can be resolved, particularly in the context of a Dáil with 175/176 seats, with the possible exception of Louth, where there is a compelling case for some of the hinterland around Drogheda, which is in Co. Meath, to stay in Louth.

Louth can retain five seats, Cavan Monaghan be restored to county boundaries, Meath could end up with seven or eight seats, while Longford Westmeath, if based on county boundaries, could gain a seat.

South East

This area poses the biggest challenge; Carlow Kilkenny, Wexford and Wicklow combined have 15 seats, and should see a gain of one seat, if not two. If this issue is to be resolved within these four counties, it is likely that there could be multiple breaches of county boundaries. It is possible to resolve the situation in Wexford and Wicklow between the two counties, and then address Carlow Kilkenny in conjunction with Waterford, and/or Tipperary.

Tipperary and Waterford currently have more population than their existing representation warrants, but neither has sufficient population for an extra seat, although Tipperary comes close to six seats, at the upper end of the range.

Mid West

The combined constituencies of Clare, Limerick City, Limerick County and Kerry could gain a seat between them, but whilst the Limerick constituencies, and Limerick as a county, are well placed to retain the existing number of seats, it will be difficult to allocate an extra seat without breaching each county's boundary.

If Tipperary is included in this grouping, two additional seats could be warranted at the upper end of the scale, but the risk of breaching county boundaries remains.

West/North West

We currently have a number of breaches of county boundaries; part of Mayo is in Galway West; part of Roscommon is in Sligo Leitrim, as is part of Donegal; the rest of Roscommon is associated with part of Galway.

Given the population in each county, it is difficult to avoid some of these breaches.

However, on this occasion, it looks as if Co. Mayo could constitute a five seater, in the context of a Dáil with 175 seats.

Galway East, Galway West and Roscommon Galway currently have 11 seats between them, and in a 175 seat Dáil, would gain an extra seat.

The counties of Sligo and Leitrim are short of sufficient population for four seats, and need to keep about 10,000 population from other counties. On that basis, Donegal as a constituency could retain five seats at the lower end of the range, but from 175 on, Co. Donegal is a better fit for six seats (2 x 3 seats).

Midlands

Laois and Offaly between them, have sufficient population for six seats; depending on the total number of seats in the Dáil, it would seem likely that Laois and Offaly will each become a three-seat constituency.

Kildare as a county, has sufficient population for 8 seats, or possibly 9 at the upper end.

Appendix 1: Propensity for more breaches of county boundaries in larger Dáil

County	2022 pop.	If seats	Pop. per TD	Variance from national average, depending on total number of seats										
				171	172	173	174	175	176	177	178	179	180	181
Cavan Monaghan	146,033	5	29,207	-3%	-2%	-1%	-1%	0%	0%	1%	1%	2%	3%	3%
Clare	127,419	4	31,855	6%	7%	8%	8%	9%	9%	10%	11%	11%	12%	13%
Cork (x5)	581,231	19	30,591	2%	3%									
		20	29,062			-2%	-1%	-1%	0%	0%	1%	2%	2%	3%
Donegal	166,321	6	27,720	-7%	-7%	-6%	-6%	-5%	-5%	-4%	-4%	-3%	-3%	-2%
Dublin	1,450,701	48	30,223	1%										
		49	29,606		-1%	0%	1%	1%						
		50	29,014						0%	0%	1%			
		51	28,445									-1%	0%	0%
Kerry	155,258	5	31,052	4%	4%	5%	5%	6%	7%	7%	8%	8%	9%	10%
Kildare (x2)	246,977	8	30,872	3%	4%	4%	5%	5%	6%					
		9	27,442						-6%	-5%	-5%	-4%	-4%	-3%
Laois	91,657	3	30,552	2%	3%	3%	4%	4%	5%	6%	6%	7%	7%	8%
Limerick (x2)	205,444	7	29,349	-2%	-1%	-1%	0%	0%	1%	1%	2%	3%	3%	4%
Longford Westmeath	142,474	5	28,495	-5%	-4%	-4%	-3%	-3%	-2%	-2%	-1%	0%	0%	1%
Louth	139,100	5	27,820	-7%	-7%	-6%	-6%	-5%	-4%	-4%	-3%	-3%	-2%	-2%
Mayo	137,231	5	27,446	-8%	-8%	-7%	-7%	-6%	-6%	-5%	-5%	-4%	-4%	-3%
Meath (x2)	220,296	7	31,471	5%	6%	6%	7%	7%	8%					
		8	27,537						-5%	-5%	-4%	-4%	-3%	-3%
Offaly	82,668	3	27,556	-8%	-7%	-7%	-6%	-6%	-5%	-5%	-4%	-4%	-3%	-3%
Sligo Leitrim	104,906	4	26,227	-12%	-12%	-11%	-11%	-10%	-10%	-9%	-9%	-8%	-8%	-7%
Tipperary	167,661	6	27,944	-7%	-6%	-6%	-5%	-5%	-4%	-3%	-3%	-2%	-2%	-1%
Waterford	127,085	4	31,771	6%	7%	7%	8%	9%	9%	10%	10%	11%	12%	12%

These seventeen counties could cover approx. 35/36 Dáil constituencies.

- Double-digit variances are more likely at 181 (three pink counties/combinations of constituencies more likely to generate breaches of county boundaries)
- A 175-seat Dáil has more green (+/-5%) and orange (+/-6-9%) – 16 vs 14 at 181
- In addition, the greater the number of seats, the bigger the margins become when comparing population per TD nationally, and by constituency

Appendix 1a: Propensity for more breaches of county boundaries in larger Dáil contd'

County	2022 pop.	If seats	Pop. per TD	Variance from national average, depending on total number of seats										
				171	172	173	174	175	176	177	178	179	180	181
Carlow	61,931	16	30,289											
Kilkenny	103,685													
Wexford	163,527													
Wicklow	155,485													
	484,628			1%	2%	2%	3%	3%	4%	5%	5%	6%	6%	7%
Carlow	61,931	10	29,270											
Kilkenny	103685													
Waterford	127085													
	292,701					-2%	-2%	-1%	-1%	0%	1%	1%	2%	2%
Carlow	61,931	15	30,691											
Kilkenny	103,685													
Tipperary	167,661													
Waterford	127,085													
	460,362			2%	3%	4%	4%	5%	5%	6%	7%	7%	8%	8%
Tipperary	167,661	10	29,475											
Waterford	127,085													
	294,746					-2%	-1%	0%	0%	1%	1%	2%	2%	3%
Donegal	166,321	9	30,136											
Sligo	69,819													
Leitrim	35,087													
	271,227					1%	1%	2%	2%	3%	4%	4%	5%	5%
Galway	276,451	12	28,871											
Roscommon	69,995													
	346,446					-4%	-3%	-3%	-2%	-1%	-1%	0%	0%	1%

The majority of these combinations of counties minimise breaches of county boundaries, with a +/-5% variance, and cover all options if a wider variance is accepted.