

31/3/2017

To whom it may concern,

I write in relation to the County boundary between Waterford and Kilkenny. I wish to preface my comments by outlining the many links that exist, and have historically existed, between Waterford and Kilkenny. For many Kilkenny people, Waterford City has always been their local centre for business, work, education and other services. This is a natural situation owing to the geographic location of Waterford City within County Waterford and the proximity of a very large part of South Kilkenny to Waterford City.

Naturally this proximity has led to many personal and family connections on both sides of the boundary. As somebody who lives in Ferrybank and has always lived in South Kilkenny and who is a former student of WIT, I can personally attest to these connections.

The reality is that, in terms of people's daily lives, the boundary is not a factor, it is invisible. Speaking as a Kilkennyman, however, there is a deep sense of identity within Kilkenny people as to their sense of place – perhaps more so than most other counties.

That sense of place has been deeply offended by this current process. It was particularly brought home to me at a Kilkenny County Council public meeting held some months back on the boundary matter. To be perfectly honest, they were deeply angered at the prospect that their home place could possibly, at the stroke of a pen, be moved from the Authority of Kilkenny County Council to be administrated by Waterford Local Authorities into the future. For a great many of those I met on the night, they have lived in the area for all of their lives and they wish in the strongest possible sense for their area to remain in Kilkenny. For them, as myself, they wish to see Waterford City thrive into the future but, like me, they see no argument as to how moving the County boundary can achieve this. In an Irish context, there are few more contentious matters than boundaries.

If the boundary were to be moved out into County Kilkenny, what will happen in the future if development takes place out to and beyond any new line? Will the boundary in future be moveable feast? It seems both logical and obvious that the key to the development of Waterford, Kilkenny and indeed the region into the future is co-operation, I will return to this later.

There have been a number of attempts in the past, indeed one just 10 years ago, to examine this same matter. Each has come to naught with the realisation that there is no cogent argument to move the Waterford-Kilkenny boundary. What is also striking on this occasion, more so than the others, is the lack of any large-scale public support within Waterford for a boundary change. Like so many other South Kilkenny

people, I too have many friends and relations in Waterford and, having spoken to many of them recently, they do not see a boundary change as necessary.

It is also striking that reading the terms of reference of the review, there is not a solitary mention of people. Not of those directly affected in South Kilkenny or indeed in the rest of Kilkenny or Waterford.

The people of Kilkenny, myself included, resent any attempt that we and our native place could be used as a political guinea-pig for other boundary issues. The Department of the Environment has many currently pressing matters to address, not least the current housing shortage, without creating a controversy where there was none. This whole process will cost many thousands of euros which could have been far better used to improve the lives of both Waterford and Kilkenny people.

To my mind, there have been no moves by the public in Waterford, or indeed by the Local Authorities, to seek a boundary change. All of which begs the question 'who is seeking this?' I am also puzzled as to what problem is being proposed to be solved by this happening now? Government policy on local administration deals entirely with a bottom up approach, while this proposal is completely driven from the top and as such directly contradicts stated government policy. A newspaper headline some months back in Waterford stated "Ferrybank thrives in two Counties". It is a unique place, with a blend of Kilkenny, Waterford and indeed people originally from all over the country and the world.

The reality is that nowadays very few services are delivered house to house by local authorities bar the roads service. Changing the boundary will have no impact on this one way or other. The recent report of the Galway Boundary Review committee went as far as to say that moving of boundaries would gain nothing in terms of efficiencies. It is also worth remembering that government policy on procurement ensures a central procurement system, again showing that boundary changes will have no impact on efficiencies.

The PLUTS document which is an example of cooperation between Waterford and Kilkenny outlines until 2020 a joint strategy for planning matters. The setting up of the steering committee, with Waterford local authorities as the lead authority, to oversee it took three years. What is needed now is a new PLUTS document to outline a strategy beyond 2020 for our whole area. This should be done on a coordinated joint framework between the two local authorities as a matter of priority.

The recent report on boundaries within Cork referred specifically to IDA and FDI supported job creation. On this it was very instructive saying that neither the IDA or FDI had ever raised concerns about boundary issues being a roadblock to investment in Cork. Recently the government have set up the Regional Economic Forum headed by Frank O'Regan. This body encompasses the whole region and lists six key objectives, none of which mention county boundaries. It is clear that boundaries are not seen nationally as a bar in any sense to economic development.

There is no lack of available land in Waterford for development, in fact the opposite is the case if anything. There is however a very significant financial problem in the local authorities in Waterford. With debts of circa 65 million euros and a current deficit of 8 million euros the fear from a Kilkenny perspective is that the real matter at issue in this case is an attempt by those in authority to shore up the Waterford local authority finances by annexing a large part of Kilkenny's commercial rates base and indeed LPT base. When one considers that Kilkenny local authority debts stand at 2 million euros and will be paid off within a year and their current budget is virtually balanced it is hard to argue against this point.

The strategic development zone around Belview Port has seen significant investment by Kilkenny County Council. Despite efforts to get funding support from Waterford local authorities, none was forthcoming.

There are so many examples of how cooperation has worked between Waterford and Kilkenny. Too many to mention but I shall reference two:

Abbey Community College, the largest school in Kilkenny, it actually straddles the county boundary and is undergoing a huge extension project at present. The waste water treatment plant for Waterford is located in the Belview Port area at Gurteens and showed in its development how the neighbouring authorities could work together.

The key to the future economic success of Waterford city and all of the people of the region is cooperation. It is worth noting that despite years of attempting to have a joint meeting between the Waterford city councillors and the Piltown district councillors the first such meeting of modern times was only agreed to by the Waterford side after this boundary issue arose most recently, and on that occasion only one Waterford councillor attended while all six from the Piltown area were present.

As we move to establishing a new Technological University in our region this cooperation is more important than ever. Waterford people are our friends and neighbours, in many cases they are our family! Everyone in South Kilkenny wishes with all their heart that Waterford City will thrive into the future, it is in all our best interests. However the changing of the county boundary will not help this in any way. We need all together to work together. As the saying goes "together we are stronger".

May I finally raise the issue of the N24 Limerick to Waterford road and the urgency of upgrading it to a key economic route for the development of the South East region. There can be few, if any, other national primary routes that still pass through so many towns and villages.

Yours sincerely,

John Paul Phelan TD