



Comhairle Chontae an Chabháin
Teach na Cúirte, An Cabhán
Cavan County Council
Courthouse, Cavan
H12 R6V2

www.cavancoco.ie

Sub 16/044

+353 (0)49 437 8300

eolas@cavancoco.ie

twitter.com/cavancoco

facebook.com/cavancoco

12th December 2016

The Secretary
Constituency Commission
Room 1.65, Custom House
Dublin 1
D01 W6X0

Re: Submission on constituency boundaries as they affect County Cavan

Dear Madam/Sir

Please find enclosed a submission from the elected members of Cavan County Council in relation to your deliberations on constituency boundaries.

This policy position paper was unanimously approved by elected members at their monthly meeting on 9th December 2016. The members maintain that there is a strong case for respecting Cavan's county boundary for election purposes for reasons of population expansion, cohesion, social inclusion, fairness and effective representation.

I trust this submission will be taken into consideration by your Commission in considering the future configuration of constituency boundaries.

Yours sincerely

Cllr Fergal Curtin
Cathaoirleach, Cavan County Council

Respecting the integrity of Cavan's county boundary for electoral purposes

**A policy position paper from elected members
of Cavan County Council**

9th December 2016

Introduction

This policy position paper presents the case for respecting Cavan's county boundary for election purposes. It has been developed by elected members of Cavan County Council with support from TDs and others, and we believe has the backing of the local communities we represent.

Cavan elected representatives wish to articulate a case for observing County Cavan's unitary status for future elections. We maintain that migrating 36 Electoral Divisions of County Cavan to the Sligo Leitrim constituency has been detrimental to the county as a whole in terms of social and economic development, social inclusion and community identity and social cohesion. The area in question encompasses over a third of County Cavan (36 of 93 electoral divisions).

The paper will set out the history of the Cavan Monaghan electoral constituency, the recent changes as a result of the Constituency Committee recommendations, the impact this has had and is likely to have on the county and its people, and the case for retaining the county boundary for General and European election purposes.

We will outline evidence to demonstrate how dividing the county for election purposes is disadvantageous in terms of the economy, community and social inclusion.

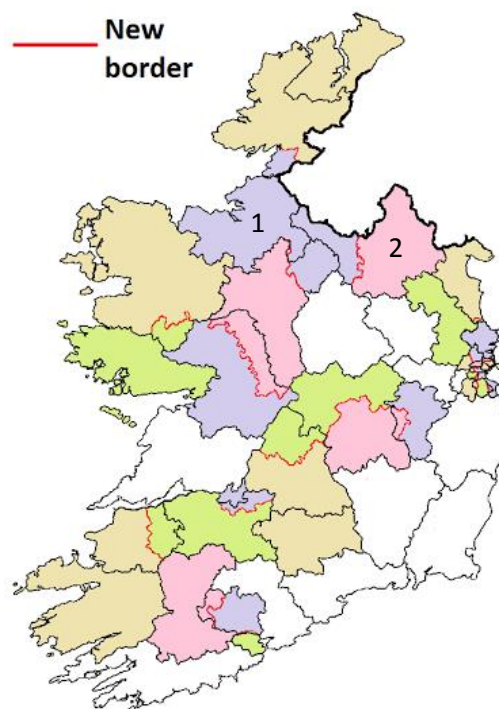
We propose that Cavan Monaghan and Sligo Leitrim are two constituencies that require consideration by the Constituency Commission due to population change and social identity/social cohesion and effective representation.

A campaign led by the local newspaper, The Anglo Celt, to 'reunite Cavan' for election purposes is running in the county with cross party support among county councillors and indeed has the support of all TDs in the region. This paper is submitted in the context of this campaign and with the backing of all elected members of Cavan County Council.

Background

The Cavan Monaghan Constituency was set up in 1977 under the Electoral (Amendment) Act 1974 and encompassed the full geographic areas of both counties. It was originally a five seat constituency.

In 2012 legislation was passed to change the geographic boundaries for electoral areas, resulting in a significant portion of County Cavan (including 36 electoral divisions) being split from the Cavan-Monaghan electoral constituency and incorporated into a new constituency for Sligo-Leitrim.¹ The 2016 General Election was the first election that used these new constituency boundaries. Cavan-Monaghan then became a four seat constituency. The revised constituency boundaries are indicated on the map below.



1. Sligo Leitrim
2. Cavan Monaghan

Source: Irish political maps

The publication of new Census data in 2016 means that a process of revising and re-drawing electoral boundaries for general and European elections will commence following the establishment of the new Constituency Commission. This commission was established in July 2016 by Minister Simon Coveney.

¹ Electoral (Amendment) (Dail Constituencies) Act 2013

The terms of reference of the Commission are set out in the Electoral Act 1997.

They state that:

- the breaching of county boundaries shall be avoided as far as practicable;
- each constituency shall be composed of contiguous areas;
- there shall be regard to geographic considerations including significant physical features and the extent of and the density of population in each constituency; and
- that the Commission shall endeavour to maintain continuity in relation to the arrangement of constituencies.

These criteria must be to the fore in new deliberations regarding boundaries, and certainly suggest that the coupling of West Cavan with Sligo, Leitrim and Donegal is untenable.

The Commission is mandated to produce its report three months after the publication of the final Census data. It is estimated that these data will be available from March 2017, giving an anticipated due date for the Commission's report in May/June 2017.

It is therefore timely that this policy position paper is being developed by Cavan County Council members, to inform considerations for the revised electoral boundaries.



Evidence of Impact of Boundary Change

The rationale for calling for reunification is primarily based on a concern that residents of the 36 electoral divisions in West Cavan that now form part of the Sligo Leitrim constituency are being disenfranchised. If voter turnout is seen as “one indicator of the health of representative democracy”² then the alignment of West Cavan with Sligo Leitrim has been seen to damage the democratic process.

According to election analyst Adrian Kavanagh, voter turnout tends to be higher in more rural areas and among farmers and older people. By this understanding, West Cavan as a rural area with higher proportions of older people and farmers in the

² www.oireachtas.ie/parliament/media/housesoftheoireachtas/libraryresearch/lrsnotes/Election_Turnout_FINAL_28_Jan2016_180434.pdf

community should have a strong voter turnout, but in fact has experienced a decline in voter turnout. This is evidenced by local commentary, for instance, on the day of the General Election 2016, Northern Sound radio reported that voter turnout in the Sligo/Leitrim constituency in Glangevlin was very low.³ In the 2016 General Election the Cavan Monaghan Constituency had a turnout of 65.5 per cent while the Sligo Leitrim Constituency had a turnout of 65.6 per cent. The national voter turnout rate was 65 per cent. This contrasts with 2011 when there was a national turnout of 70 per cent, 72.7% in Cavan Monaghan and 70.7% in Sligo Leitrim (acknowledging however that many other factors also influence voter turnout).

Cavan Monaghan 2016		Sligo Leitrim 2016	
Seats		Seats	
Electorate	90,618	Electorate	95,911
Quota	11,931	Quota	12,468
Total Poll	60,248	Total Poll	62,895
Spoiled	598	Spoiled	560
Valid Poll	59,650	Valid Poll	62,335
Turnout	66.49%	Turnout	65.58%

Source: Irish Times Election 2016 Analysis

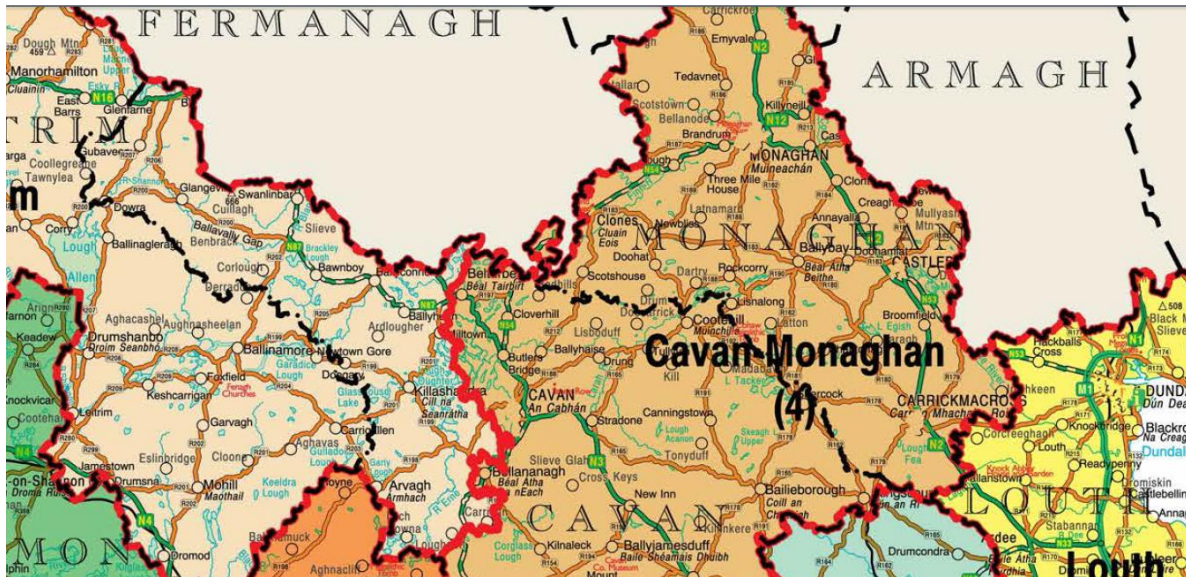
Kavanagh offers an analysis that contributes an explanation for the drop in turnout:

“For a variety of reason, voters tend to vote for candidates from their local area and most candidates, in turn, will tend to get their highest level of votes/highest vote shares from their home areas, or bailiwicks. By contrast, their share of the vote will tend to decline the further one moves away from their home area, or bailiwick, as akin to a distance decay effect. This has been referred to as the *friends and neighbours effect*. This trend is even more evident in constituencies that encompass two counties, or parts of two counties (or indeed parts of four counties, as in the case of the new Sligo-Leitrim constituency, which also takes in southern parts of Donegal and western parts of Cavan). In these cases, voters generally tend to vote from candidates from their own county.” (Adrian Kavanagh)

³ It has not been possible to obtain exact data for voter turnout in the 36 annexed EDs because data from individual polling stations is destroyed six months after the election (personal communications with the Dept of Housing and the Clerk of the Dail’s Office, Nov 2016).

The 36 EDs that make up the part of Cavan in the Sligo Leitrim constituency is such a small percentage in the overall constituency that it inevitably leads to a dilution of representation and consideration of issues. Because West Cavan is such a unique environment and has a layer of complex issues, this unnatural division is particularly unjust. The boundary divided parishes and caused considerable confusion throughout the area.

Anecdotal evidence from local residents in the Belturbet area indicates that the 2016 boundary change caused considerable confusion. Some were unsure of where exactly the boundary lay, and did not know which constituency they resided in right up until the last minute. Indeed, it was also the case that some of the candidates seeking election were confused with the boundaries and canvassed in areas outside the constituency they were running in. Local people were required to vote for candidates with whom they were not familiar. The constituency boundary ran very close to the town, which meant that candidates from both Sligo Leitrim and Cavan Monaghan displayed their posters, leading to a plethora of printed literature all over the town.



Source: www.housing.gov.ie



Source: Cavan Co Council GIS office

Candidates from Sligo Leitrim who had not canvassed in the West Cavan area before had a harder time connecting with the local community.

In a UK context, a news article stated that electoral boundary changes can change not only the people who represent you but also the type of people who are represented with you (and therefore the political and policy outcomes).

Rationale for retaining county integrity

Cavan Elected Members have varied reasons for proposing to retain the integrity of the county boundary.

1) Population change

Firstly, electoral boundaries will require to be redrawn again based on the results of the 2016 Census data. Under the Constitution, no constituency should have more than 30,000 residents per TD. Based on the preliminary national population statistics for 2016 of 4,757,967 people and a current total of 158 TDs, the average number of persons per TD is 30,114. Therefore boundaries will again be subject to revision, so this is an opportune time to examine the cohesiveness of constituency areas.

The county population of Cavan has also increased, growing from 73,183 in 2011 to 76,092 in 2016 (preliminary), with a similar increase in County Monaghan which grew from 60,483 in 2011 to 61,273 in 2016.

2016	Population 2011 (Number)	Population 2016 (Number)	Actual change since previous census (Number)	Percentage change since previous census (%)
Leitrim	31,798	31,972	174	0.6
Sligo	65,393	65,357	-36	-0.1
Cavan	73,183	76,092	2909	4
Donegal	161,137	158,755	-2382	-1.5
Monaghan	60,483	61,273	790	1.3

Furthermore the population of the Border region is projected to increase by an annual average of 2% between 2016 and 2031, according to the CSO. Regional population projections suggest that all regions will show growth during this period due to natural increase between 2016 and 2031. Growth in the Border region will be more noticeable with projected births of 123,000 and a population increase of 18,000.

2) A stated commitment to respect county boundaries

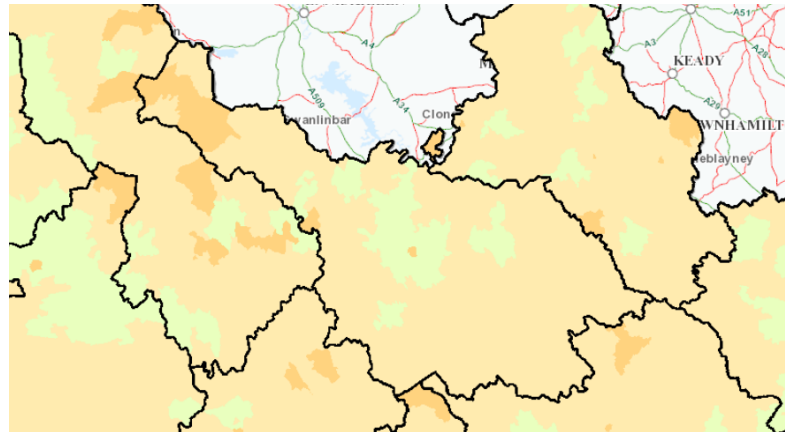
Secondly, it is stated in literature pertaining to the establishment of the Constituency Commission that 'the breaching of county boundaries shall be avoided as far as practicable'. In establishing the boundary for the Sligo Leitrim Constituency, this was in fact the first time that four county boundaries were impinged.

The Cavan Monaghan constituency has always had a contiguous boundary, but the 36 West Cavan EDs are not contiguous with either Donegal or Sligo, and this geographic area shares little in common with other parts of the new Sligo Leitrim constituency.

3) Level of disadvantage in West Cavan

West Cavan is a unique area which, we argue, requires special consideration by the Constituency Commission. It is a very rural area with a sparsely populated landscape, an ageing population and a reliance on agriculture. The percentage of older people and early school leavers is higher here than elsewhere in the county and this population is also affected by the digital divide experiencing greater difficulty in accessing broadband. The decision to move this unique geographic area to a new constituency we believe was most unfair on a population that 1) has difficulty in accessing information due to broadband connectivity issues, 2) has difficulty accessing services due to transport issues and 3) is harder to canvass due to the dispersed nature of the population and a majority of one off housing. The removal of West Cavan from its former constituency to Sligo Leitrim is perceived by the local community as an affirmation of abandonment of the area by government.

The diagram below shows that the areas of West Cavan that have been segregated from the Cavan Monaghan constituency experience higher levels of deprivation (shaded in orange). Due to the vulnerable status of this area we maintain that it is in the best interests of the local population to be allowed to remain within a constituency with which they are familiar and where they know their politicians and have an understanding of the political landscape.



Deprivation index by electoral division 2011
Source: Pobal Maps

Brexit has created uncertainty for the country and this borderland area of the county will be particularly affected by the coming change. Brexit is likely to further hamper a region that is already insecure in terms of social and economic development.

The 2012 Constituency Commission report outlined its rationale for dividing Cavan in two constituencies. This was primarily to address the concerns raised by submissions from County Leitrim in respect of wanting to reunify the county within a single Dáil constituency. Leitrim had been split based on a recommendation from the 2004 Constituency Commission and further split in 2008 which “disenfranchised the people of County Leitrim by significantly restricting their potential to elect a resident TD” according to Leitrim County Council. This territorial transfer of EDs to Sligo Leitrim was one primarily to allow for the political reunification of Leitrim with little regard to the consequence for such a remote and disadvantaged area as West Cavan. We maintain that the decision to split West Cavan from Cavan Monaghan was made without due consideration to the community of West Cavan and gave priority to the Leitrim population. This we believe is against the spirit of the 1997 Act which states that the Commission shall have regard to “reasonable equality of representation between constituencies”.

4) Mismatch between structures at sub county, county and constituency level

Thirdly, local government has recently undergone an extensive restructuring process following the ‘Putting People First’ policy document and subsequent local government reform legislation. This PPF Action Programme for local government

provided for municipal districts as a new tier of local governance at sub county level. The Local Electoral Area Boundary Committee was established to prepare a report with respect to any district or division based on a local government boundary. The Boundary Committee Report 2013 stated “In recommending changes to local electoral areas, the Committee should take due account of local and community identities and linkages and, as far as practicable, of existing local authority electoral and administrative areas.” As it currently stands, the units for local government (ie the Municipal Districts) do not correspond to the national and European political units. This may present issues for data analysis, communication, service delivery etc.

From another perspective, incorporating segments of four counties into a single constituency creates additional complexity for national politicians who need to engage with county level structures. For instance, TDs are required to meet with Council Executives once a year, and having four county elements in a constituency increases the level of meetings required and the level of complexity. From a practical point of view, the spread of the constituency creates difficulties for politicians in the performance of their work. The Sligo Leitrim constituency is cumbersome in nature and requires national politicians to deal with a disjointed region.

5) Sense of identity and community cohesion

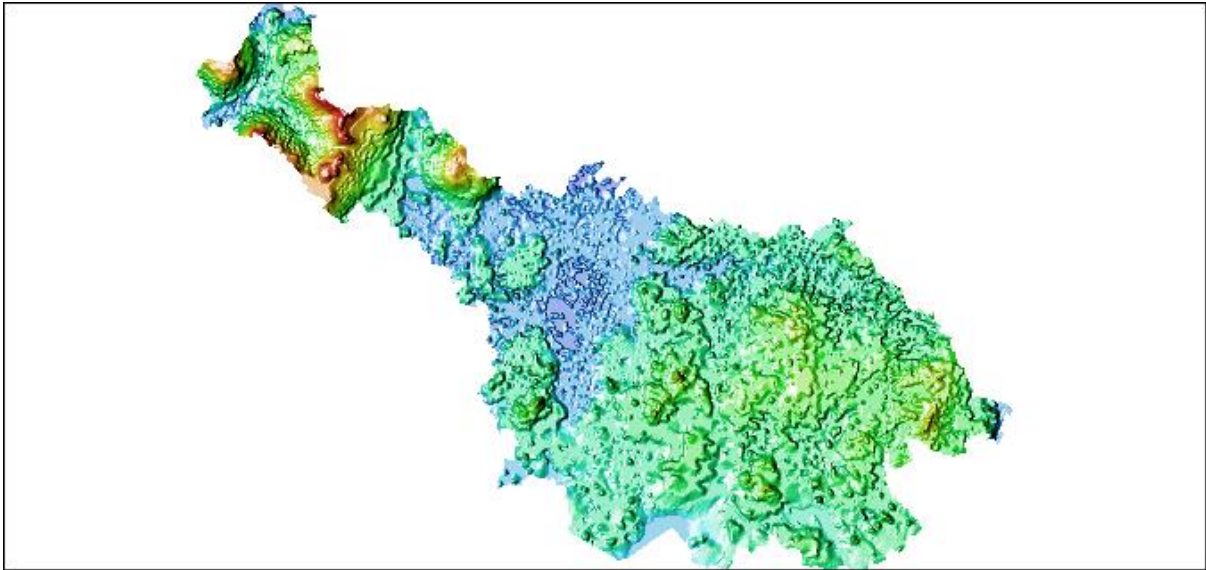
People in local communities have a shared sense of identity and there is a huge affinity to the county boundary. The county boundary is the basis for local authority services and those provided by other state bodies. Sporting organisations are also frequently organised on county boundaries. The Health Service Executive, Education and Training Board, radio licencing, Department of Social Protection offices, are all organised on a two county, Cavan Monaghan basis. These natural affinities were ignored in the recent revision of the Sligo Leitrim constituency. These existing boundaries and associations are all factors that contribute to a sense of identity in a community.

This sense of local and community identity and linkages, seen as important for establishing the Municipal District boundaries, was discounted when constituency boundaries were being redrawn for the last General Election.

The Athlone Boundary Review committee referenced this sense of identity in its 2016 report: “Most citizens have an instinctive understanding of their own sense of identity and belonging. In the Irish context, the county clearly remains a strong source of local identity and affiliation. Successive reports on local government reform have emphasised the county structure (alongside cities) as the primary unit of local government in Ireland...Proposed change to Dáil constituencies which do not respect county boundaries also tend to spark public resistance.” (page 37-38) The committee also refers to shared norms and values which arise from individuals sharing a common bond; this social capital is a contributor to sustainable development.

6) Consideration of significant physical/landscape feature and geographic features

In determining boundaries, the Constituency Commission should also have ‘regard to geographic considerations including significant physical features and the extent of and the density of population in each constituency’. We maintain that the specific geology of the area, including the Cuilcagh mountains, enhances a sense of isolation in the area. The nature of the landscape here, including lakes and a network of minor roads, contributes to a sense of inaccessibility and peripherality. The guillotining of West Cavan has further reinforced this sense of peripherality; it is evidently not considered as central to the county as a whole and is expendable. It is worth noting that the new constituency Sligo Leitrim does not even contain a reference to Cavan or Donegal; the un-named status of these annexed portions further removes these areas from public consciousness.



Map of elevated areas

Source: Cavan GIS System

We argue that, similar to the Boundary Committee report (page 18), the Constituency Commission should consider issues of community identity and linkages including town and village affinities, settlement patterns, topography, dominant natural physical features (presence of mountains and lakes), the location of roads and more general accessibility issues between different areas.

In the UK, constituency boundaries are decided with reference to the size of the electorate, the size of the geographic area, "special geographical considerations" including the size, shape and accessibility of a constituency; local government boundaries; boundaries of existing constituencies; local ties which would be broken by changes to constituencies; inconveniences resulting from changes to constituencies. It is usual for local government wards to be used as 'building blocks' for constituencies. Boundaries are determined by the size of the registered electorate and not the total population. These criteria differ in some respects to those of the Irish Constituency Commission but perhaps they are worth considering in an Irish context.

7) Public opinion on the revised constituency boundary

In Cavan, there is a strong sense that the boundary change is viewed negatively by the public, and particularly by those living in West Cavan. In an article for BBC News Northern Ireland (Feb 2016), Claire Noble drew attention to the border town of Belturbet, which is divided by the constituency boundary. She stated that many voters in smaller towns have said they feel “swallowed up and voiceless” in the move to larger constituencies. In the same report, a local community development worker was quoted as referring to the ‘frustration and total resignation’ among the community over the division, while a former Belturbet Town Council member predicted a low turnout in the election, saying that “people don’t even know who to vote for.”

At a public meeting in the Hotel Kilmore in August 2016, Deputy Niamh Smyth referred to letters she had received from people in West Cavan who felt “disenfranchised from the whole democratic process”. She likewise referred to low voter turnout as a type of ‘protest’ by a community who felt neglected. At the same meeting, Cllr John Paul Feeley suggested that in some West Cavan areas, turnout was down about 20% on previous elections.

Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin said Cavan-Monaghan should look for common ground with the other constituencies nationwide and that “county boundaries should be sacrosanct across the board.” Senator Joe O’Reilly reported that the Fine Gael parliamentary party had discussed the issue, where he had voiced his opinion that there should be flexibility on the terms of reference. Senator O’Reilly was optimistic that the commission would be able to use their discretion if they have to increase the number of seats to maintain county boundaries to the greatest possible degree.

At the meeting, Deputy Brendan Smith referred to the importance of community identity in the political process: “To ensure a healthy, vigorous and responsive political system, the people must be able to identify comfortably and readily with constituency boundaries.”

Conclusion

In summary, elected members of Cavan County Council are representing the voice of their constituents in calling for a new revision to the constituency boundary as it

affects County Cavan. Based on the need to promote social cohesion and adhere to county boundaries as far as possible, the evidence of voter turnout for the 2016 election, and a local sense of frustration with the divisions, councillors are calling on the Constituency Commission to reunite Cavan and respect the integrity of its boundary.

This proposal to reunite Cavan has the backing of Deputy Brendan Smith (FF), Minister Heather Humphreys (FG), Deputy Caoimhghín Ó Caoláin (SF) and Deputy Niamh Smyth (FF) and in, Sligo-Leitrim, Deputy Martin Kenny (SF), Deputy Marc MacSharry (FF), Deputy Tony McLoughlin (FG) and Deputy Eamon Scanlon (FF).

The Reunite Cavan campaign is also backed by the Cathaoirleach of Cavan County Council Fergal Curtin (FF) on behalf of the local authority.

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