

Letter to the Scottish Government

Dear

Fifth Statutory Review of Electoral Arrangements – Argyll & Bute

Since the Local Government Boundary Commission's proposals for Argyll and Bute were first made known to all Scottish local authorities last year, Argyll and Bute Council has been clear in its objection and opposition to the suggested changes. We remain opposed to the final recommendations as outlined in the report to Scottish Ministers. We have made this clear formally to the LGBC as part of its consultation and also to the parliamentarians who represent Argyll and Bute. We therefore seek your support in maintaining the status quo in terms of councillor numbers and existing ward boundaries within Argyll and Bute in the interests of ensuring effective and convenient local government.

Our opposition to the LGBC proposals has been strenuous and consistent, given that Argyll and Bute has the highest number of inhabited islands and the second largest mainland area of all of Scotland's 32 local authority areas. The people our councillors represent are scattered across thousands of square miles of land and sea. We have previously made representation on the existing complexity of representing our rural and island communities which have unique and diverse needs, and the additional burden that this places on committed local councillors. We believe that the final recommendations only serve to increase that challenge and, of more concern, will significantly impact on our communities' parity of access to true local representation. All but one of the existing Argyll and Bute Council wards will be affected by the proposals which seek not only to reduce councillor numbers but alter the very make-up of the wards themselves.

The proposed boundary changes and the significant travel demands they would bring also risk preventing from standing in next year's council elections anyone who cannot drive or who has family commitments with a consequent impact on encouraging diversity in representation. There are very substantial distances to be travelled within a number of wards, which will be even more challenging during times of adverse weather. There is a lack of regular public transport links across a significant number of the recommended new wards. As well as creating difficulty in attending community council meetings (generally held in the evening when transport is even more limited) there may also be a disadvantage for current or potential councillors who are not able to drive or easily stay away overnight.

You will be aware that concerns have been raised by COSLA in relation to the methodology used by the LGBC to determine councillor numbers and in particular the use of SIMD data on deprivation as a key factor in arriving at these numbers. Best practice dictates that such data should be used carefully in rural areas, such as Argyll and Bute, where deprivation may be hidden and consequently we are concerned that this untested approach has had a significant detrimental impact on Argyll and Bute with a maximum reduction of 3 councillors. We would prefer an approach where the evidence base has been accepted by local government and which has overarching support in meeting the statutory requirement to act in the interests of effective and convenient local government.

We acknowledge that the LGBC has amended some of the proposals through the process of consultation but the basis for setting councillor numbers which is a key determinant in establishing boundaries is flawed. The matter has already created considerable disquiet and concern for our local communities, who see the revised boundary arrangements as fracturing existing community connections and cohesion. It is therefore highly disappointing that the proposals from the Commission have now become recommendations.

Our priority is serving the communities we have been elected to represent as well as we possibly can. We are convinced that these recommendations will seriously hamper that priority because they do not adequately address representation in our remote, rural and island communities.

Our concerns are echoed and shared by local people, by our community councils, by our fellow elected members and by constituency MSPs. Given that strength of feeling and opposition to the LGBC's proposals we would urge you to reconsider and to maintain the status quo which respects and strengthens natural community bonds and boundaries, maintains community links and identity and supports local democracy.

Yours sincerely