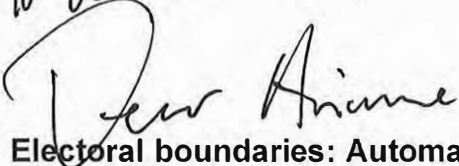


T: 0300 244 4000
E: scottish.ministers@gov.scot

Ariane Burgess MSP
Convener
Local Government, Housing and Planning
Committee
Scottish Parliament
E-mail: localgov.committee@parliament.scot

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Electoral boundaries: Automaticity – Independent Review

You will be aware that the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee's Stage 1 report on the Scottish Elections (Representation and Reform) Bill, welcomed the Scottish Government's position on automaticity as the right way forward for approving electoral boundary changes in the future and invited us to set out more detail. I recognise that your Committee also has a long-standing interest in the issue.

I am writing to you now, ahead of Stage 3 of the Bill's consideration next week, to inform you that I will shortly establish an independent review of the process for determining electoral boundaries in Scotland. Since the SPPA Committee's consideration earlier in the Bill's passage, I have met the Chair of Boundaries Scotland to hear her perspective directly and have taken Professor Henderson's views into account and will continue to do so as the review goes forward. The review's terms of reference will focus on making recommendations on how automaticity could work for the approval of changes to electoral boundaries for Scottish Parliament and local government elections.

The review will be asked to take account of experience elsewhere in the UK and internationally and consider all aspects of the boundary review process. By doing so, I believe it will be able to recommend an approach to automaticity that strikes the right balance between the independence and impartiality of the work undertaken by Boundaries Scotland and the appropriate levels of input and scrutiny from those affected by changes.

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While it would appear that a broad position of consensus has emerged in support of a move from the current process of Parliamentary approval for boundary changes to one of automaticity, it would, of course, represent a significant change in electoral rules. Therefore, I believe it is best considered within the context of an independent review, with fuller consideration of the version of automaticity that would work best in Scotland, alongside all of the relevant consultation processes and rules that underpin proposed changes. It is important that the person appointed to chair the review is independent of Government in order that their recommendations can carry cross-party support and we can maintain the consensual approach to electoral reforms that has been a feature of Parliament's scrutiny of this and previous elections bills.

To that I end, I will ask the review to engage directly with Parliament, as well as the range of others with an interest, and would be interested in any views the Committee has on how Parliamentarians can best feed into that work.

I expect the review to be able to be undertaken its work and produce a report relatively quickly so that Parliament and Government can consider its recommendations next year. My officials in the Scottish Government Elections Team have started the necessary arrangements to set up the review and I will provide more details early in the new year when a chair is appointed and the Terms of Reference and timescale is agreed with them.

I have written in similar terms to the Convener of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee.

JAMIE HEPBURN

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St Andrew's House, Regent Road, Edinburgh EH1 3DG
www.gov.scot

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