



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 14 September 2021

Session 6



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LOCAL GOVERNMENT, HOUSING AND PLANNING COMMITTEE
4th Meeting 2021, Session 6

CONVENER

*Ariane Burgess (Highlands and Islands) (Green)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con)

*Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley) (SNP)

*Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con)

*Mark Griffin (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Councillor Margaret Davidson (Highland Council)

Karen Greaves (Orkney Islands Council)

Douglas Hendry (Argyll and Bute Council)

Derek Mackay (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar)

Maggie Sandison (Shetland Islands Council)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Euan Donald

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee

Tuesday 14 September 2021

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Ariane Burgess): Welcome to the fourth meeting of the Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee in session 6. Our first item is consideration of a decision on taking in private item 3, which will be an opportunity for members to reflect on the evidence that they hear during this morning's meeting. Are members agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Electoral Arrangements Regulations

09:31

The Convener: Item 2 is an opportunity for the committee to take evidence to inform its consideration of regulations giving effect to the recommendations of Boundaries Scotland in relation to six local authority areas. I acknowledge the good work of Boundaries Scotland. Today's session is the first of three in which we will review that work and take evidence.

The committee will hear this morning from five of those authorities: Orkney Islands Council, Shetland Islands Council, Highland Council, Argyll and Bute Council and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. We have received written evidence from North Ayrshire Council, which can be found on the committee's website.

I welcome Karen Greaves, who is head of executive support at Orkney Islands Council—hello, Karen. I also welcome Maggie Sandison, who is chief executive of Shetland Islands Council. Hello, Maggie—welcome to the committee.

Our members will ask a series of questions. If, through our questioning, you feel as though not all of the information that you think we need to hear has come out, I will give you time to speak at the end.

I want to set out the framework behind the meeting. We are in this situation because of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, which came about due to concerns that the distinct interests of island communities were not fully represented in council decisions and discussions. As a result, the Boundaries Scotland review has come about. From our briefing, it is clear that it has had a different effect on each island grouping and each council with islands, so we look forward to hearing what its impact has been for Orkney Islands Council and Shetland Islands Council.

I will ask the first question. I am interested to understand whether you are satisfied with the recommendations as set out in the Boundaries Scotland reports on your council areas. Let us start with Karen, then continue with Maggie.

Karen Greaves (Orkney Islands Council): I confirm that, at its meeting on 26 November 2019, the council endorsed the proposals that Boundaries Scotland made. The council is currently at the optimum solution for the number of councillors allocated. The solution takes into account Orkney's challenging geographical setting, which has slow and fragile transport links that are often affected by the weather .

Maggie Sandison (Shetland Islands Council):

We were happy with the outcome of the commission and its recommendations, largely because, for four of our seven multimember wards, we have stayed with the status quo, which is exactly what the council asked for in the consultation period.

With respect to the other three wards, the status quo was maintained in one area by using the two-member option that was brought in by the 2018 act. That provided a solution and resolved a significant departure from the parity issue that would have arisen in our Central and West wards.

Throughout the process, we felt that the council had been really well listened to, and the engagement was excellent. Information was provided, and our members were fully and effectively briefed.

The commission subsequently engaged with community councils, giving them the same messages, so that they could have conversations with their communities. We feel that the process of communication and engagement has led to the satisfactory result that we have achieved.

Willie Coffey (Kilmarnock and Irvine Valley (SNP): Good morning, Karen and Maggie. Welcome to the committee. I will ask a question that does not relate to your authority areas, but I would be pleased to hear your views. The proposal for North Ayrshire and Arran is that Arran would be a single-member ward. I would like to hear your reflections on whether that kind of principle defeats the principle of proportional representation that we had hoped to introduce within councils. What is your take on that?

Karen Greaves: Orkney Islands Council considered any opportunity for single-member wards. However, given the geography that we have, it would be very difficult to implement single-member wards to every isle without increasing the number of councillors. Although we have some big challenges for the North Isles ward in particular, where there are three members covering quite a number of isles—the transport links do not make that easy—we felt that, for our situation, having a three-member ward covering the area gives the optimum solution, and it helps with the workloads.

Single-member wards would always be welcomed, but the desire to maintain councillor numbers would not give us that solution for Orkney.

Maggie Sandison: We also engaged in a discussion about single-member wards, particularly for our North Isles ward. We had representatives from the community councils speaking about the impacts and about the views from the electorate on the use of single-member wards. For example, one of our communities,

Whalsay, conducted an informal stakeholder engagement in their area, and they felt that they could express a voice for a majority view to stay as part of a three-member North Isles ward. There was very much a recognition that the three-member wards enabled work to be shared between councillors and that the burden that individual councillors might feel in a single-member ward was unsatisfactory.

Our committee structure is set up in such a way that our planning committee, for example, is attended by a member from each ward who is not part of that committee, so ward members have somebody who can represent their views at the committee if they wish to use them. Therefore, it was felt that having a single member would, at times, dilute the opportunity for our electorate to be fully represented, because of the work that is required of members. It was fully explored, and the commission gave us a real chance to engage with members of the community on that, but, overall, opinion was that the work required of councillors is such that they are better supported in multimember wards.

Willie Coffey: Is enough weight attached to the geographical areas that councillors have to represent? I will give you a wee example. Arran is 167 square miles, and the proposal is that a single councillor represent that huge land mass. However, the proposed ward 5 for North Ayrshire Council, which is Saltcoats and Stevenston, would have five councillors, and that looks to me to be about 15 square miles. The Arran councillor has to cover a ridiculous amount of land. Does Boundaries Scotland give enough weight to the distance that a councillor will have to travel to carry out their duties?

Maggie Sandison: If I may come in on that, that formed part of the discussion of the options for our elected members. Some of our elected members who cover the North Isles and Shetland South wards would cover a geographic area from Fair Isle, as the furthest part of the Shetland South ward, up to Cunningsburgh and Gulberwick. Attending meetings, particularly community council meetings, can mean that they are travelling some distances and having a lot of meetings in the evenings, which goes back to what I was saying about the workload. However, our multimember ward councillors have worked together. They agree how they will split up the work across the ward, which, again, manages that workload.

Similarly, with the North Isles ward, you have to get multiple ferries to attend meetings, so people have split that work up across the multimember wards and have managed the demands on their time better in that way. That was certainly recognised in the consultation with our

communities, which welcomed the broader coverage provided by the multimember wards.

Willie Coffey: Karen Greaves, I imagine that it is the same for Orkney, where I imagine that it is essential that you do not have councillors yo-yoing and hopping about islands in order to carry out their duties. Reflecting on the Arran example that I gave, is enough weight given to that aspect—the size of the geographical area that councillors have to represent as part of their work?

Karen Greaves: Our councillors would always emphasise that it is a significant challenge for them to physically undertake constituency business, because of those challenges. Given our geography, we have more of a spoke-and-hub model, in that travel between the isles requires people to connect through the Orkney mainland. In order for a member to visit another isle in their area, they have to go via Kirkwall, so they might have to stay overnight there in order to pick up the transport links. That remains a significant challenge for them. They spread the workload out so that not every councillor has to go to every isle to undertake their business. However, there are elements of the role that mean that they will want to travel—councillors want to visit all the residents in their ward, so they do undertake travel to each of the isles.

Obviously, digital connectivity is helping, but there remains a significant challenge in getting all our remote isles up to the required digital connectivity standards, too. It is quite an issue, but, in the same way as Maggie Sandison described for Shetland, there are advantages to, for example, our North Isles ward being a three-member ward with regard to planning and other issues, too. It is a fine balance, but we should not underestimate how significant a challenge the geography is for councillors.

Willie Coffey: Thank you, both, for those comments.

Elena Whitham (Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley) (SNP): I welcome Karen and Maggie to the session. Before I start, I refer everyone to my entry in the register of interests. I am still a serving councillor on East Ayrshire Council.

My question is for both witnesses. What would you like to see happen next regarding the recommendations? What actions should the committee take and what should the Scottish Government and Boundaries Scotland do, if anything?

09:45

Maggie Sandison: They should move to making a decision. That would be important for us. We have local elections in May next year and we

need to begin to prepare for those. It will be important to understand the boundaries that we will be working with for our wards as early as possible. For me, what would be helpful is a decision, so that we can work on the next stage of our activity around those elections.

Karen Greaves: It is exactly the same for Orkney. There are a few minor tweaks to some of the boundaries by Kirkwall and we would welcome an early decision to agree the proposals for Orkney, so that we can start engaging in our preparations for the local government elections next year.

Elena Whitham: Thanks. I have a wee supplementary question to that. What would be the implications if the proposed new arrangements for both your council areas were not agreed?

Maggie Sandison: For me, the issue that was raised by the commission was that we were beginning to see a significant deviation in parity arising in a number of wards. Two of the changes that we will see are trying to get the electoral balance correct in our wards. We are seeing a centralisation effect happening in our communities. People are moving into central communities from the more rural areas, so a failure to address the parity begins to create an issue about how fairly our communities are being represented in the council. It is appropriate for the wards to represent the settled nature of our communities.

Karen Greaves: For Orkney, if the proposals were not agreed and we had to go back to the drawing board, so to speak, it would be very challenging for us to complete a comprehensive review and consultation with the community again. If the current proposals are not agreed, that might lead us to suggest more radical changes, which would require a lot more consultation and it is important to get things settled and agreed ahead of the local government elections next year. The preparations for those elections are already under way, as they will be in other councils.

The Convener: Thank you both. The next question from Paul McLennan will move to a different theme. I suggest that colleagues ask their question and then direct it to somebody to kick off, so that the witnesses get some guidance on who should start.

Paul McLennan (East Lothian) (SNP): I, too, refer everyone to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a councillor on East Lothian Council. I will direct my question to Karen Greaves first. What are your views on how Boundaries Scotland has applied the criteria for boundary reform during the review?

Karen Greaves: Boundaries Scotland made the criteria clear at the outset of the review, and the

criteria were clear in all correspondence with the council as part of the engagement. The criteria take into account Orkney's specific geography, particularly the areas that contain rural, sparsely populated islands with limited and fragile transport links. We have welcomed all the criteria that the commission took into account, and we believe that that is why we have arrived at the optimum solution.

Paul McLennan: I put the same question to Maggie Sandison.

Maggie Sandison: We certainly felt that Boundaries Scotland was genuinely exploring options for the size of our wards. It was keen to discuss flexibility and how we could provide better results in the process to ensure effective and convenient government.

Although it was felt that electoral parity remains important, there was a willingness to discuss future electoral changes, the issue of local ties and special geographic considerations. For instance, one of our areas, Gulberwick, moved from Lerwick, where it was almost absorbed as a suburb, to the more rural south area, with the number of members of the ward rising to four. Although Gulberwick receives many of its services from Lerwick, it does not consider itself to be a suburb of the town.

The commission was clear about what it would consider, and the guidance booklet was clear and set the scene for good engagement. It also provided a timeline that the commission stuck to, except when we were provided with a bit more time to allow for a council decision, because of the discussions that were happening in our community. We felt that the criteria were clear and enabled people to understand the issue of parity and what could and could not be considered.

Paul McLennan: I have a quick supplementary. Were you satisfied with the discussions before the criteria were set? Are there any lessons for the committee to learn in that regard? How quickly did the commission start the discussions with you before it moved on to the process? Do you have any comments on that, or were you satisfied with the process?

Maggie Sandison: Again, we found the engagement throughout to be absolutely excellent. Boundaries Scotland took up a proposal from the council in presenting ideas to the community. The early engagement, such as seminars with our elected members, and the genuine willingness to explore options gave our members confidence in engaging with the community on those options. We were able to revert to what the community felt was best rather than pursuing an option that either the council or the commission had generated. We felt that the commission listened to the community,

heard its views and applied those views in coming up with the final recommendations.

Paul McLennan: Does Karen Greaves have any thoughts on the question?

Karen Greaves: My view is exactly the same. We welcomed the visit by Boundaries Scotland to Orkney to hold seminars with our elected members and to scope out the initial proposals. That gave us an opportunity to discuss all the options and to explore different ideas at a very early stage, prior to going out for public consultation. We were able to discuss a proposal that we did not think was suitable for our area because it would have broken local ties, and we were very much listened to; that came out in the final proposals. We very much welcomed the approach. We were given every opportunity to feed back to the commission and we felt that we were listened to, so we were happy with the consultation.

The Convener: It is great to hear in more detail about Boundaries Scotland's good work and how well it has been listening in Shetland and Orkney.

Elena Whitham would like to explore a couple of themes.

Elena Whitham: Is placing councils in categories with other, similar councils an appropriate basis on which to determine total councillor numbers, taking into account diversity, rurality and deprivation? Are you both aware of your council's classification, and do you agree with how you have been grouped with other councils?

Karen Greaves: In local government, we always get paired with our family groupings. No two councils will ever be alike—we all have different geographies and contexts. However, there is always the need for some element of comparison and benchmarking, and as we work through this process, we are realising that we need some comparisons, especially with regard to numbers of councillors and electoral parity. That has come through in the final proposals, which we are happy with.

Maggie Sandison: I agree with Karen Greaves that local government often gets benchmarked and that we are, indeed, compared with our family groupings.

With the islands act, the Parliament recognised that islands are unique and different and need to be treated uniquely and differently. We have always said that every island authority and every island are different, but the Parliament produced a process that enabled people to be heard and listened to. Clear boundaries and statutory considerations had to be taken into account, particularly with regard to parity, but it never felt that proposals to discuss things such as

geographic uniqueness and local ties would not be listened to or that options were not available. As a result, the process of engaging with our communities and elected members felt very open.

Elena Whitham: Despite the fact that you were benchmarked against your family groupings, did the process enable Shetland Islands Council to make recommendations that were clearly based on what was best for Shetland, instead of its being steered towards what the other family groupings that it was benchmarked against might have been recommending?

Maggie Sandison: I certainly felt that it did. The flexibility in the islands act was articulated in the provisions for having single-member or two-member wards in addition to three-member or four-member wards, and we felt that the consultation's main goal was to listen to the audience rather than to promote some preconceived idea or to impose on us some map that had already been drawn. It definitely felt that, once the ground rules were clear and had been discussed, members were able to engage in the process. Similarly, our communities and community councils were able to engage in order to understand the various options and their benefits and to be part of making a recommendation that we felt took into account our local issues.

The Convener: Paul McLennan will explore that theme a bit more.

Paul McLennan: My question is for Maggie Sandison. I think that both witnesses have already touched on this, but could variations in the voter-to-councillor ratio across wards impact on effective and convenient local government? Obviously, the issue is relevant to the isles, so I would like to hear your thoughts on it.

Maggie Sandison: Significant disparity can create an imbalance. At times in Shetland, the voices of the central area have seemed louder than the voices in our remote areas.

However—this is partly to do with how the council works together—I feel that we are a council for the whole of our area, and I often see our elected members making supportive decisions for our islands. Indeed, it is enshrined in the islands act that, in every decision we make, we have to consider the implications for islands, even though we are already an island authority. The need to consider islands, which the Parliament has promoted through the legislation, impacts on our local arrangements. I see a council that operates for the whole of Shetland, that listens carefully to its island communities and that considers the impacts of its decisions, regardless of where elected members have been directly drawn from.

Paul McLennan: Did that issue come through in the consultation with the populations of the smaller islands? Did they mention the disparity between a one-member or two-member ward and a three-member ward in a similar geographical area?

10:00

Maggie Sandison: Not so much. The key issue for them was recognising how hard our elected members work, the demands on them and their ability to do what is needed for their community if they are the sole member on their island. Our elected members recognise that they need the best possible support to do the work that they do for their communities and that being part of a peer group is better for them than working as a sole member in their community.

Paul McLennan: I will ask Karen Greaves the same question. In the consultation, was there any feedback from communities on the disparities in the voter-to-councillor ratio and the number of councillors that they had?

Karen Greaves: What I will say is similar to what Maggie Sandison said. Our council very much works together in considering the impacts of any decisions or policies on the Orkney islands as a whole. Isles proofing is an element of decision making when doing an equalities impact assessment, and we undertook that ahead of the islands act. We are committed to the sustainability of our isles and to ensuring that the populations are sustained and that there is work and an economy for them. Our council therefore works very much together to support the isles. Their voices and considerations are heard in the chamber.

There was no feedback on electoral parity in the public consultation. The isles welcome the fact that they were able to retain the number of councillors who represent them, and the feedback is that they are confident that their voices are heard in the chamber.

The Convener: We will shift themes a little and look a bit more at the Electoral Reform Society's work on electoral parity.

Meghan Gallacher (Central Scotland) (Con): Good morning, everyone. I refer to my entry in the register of members' interests. I am a serving councillor in North Lanarkshire.

In a Local Government and Communities Committee meeting in 2016, the Electoral Reform Society stated:

"making electoral parity a priority is outdated."—[*Official Report, Local Government and Communities Committee*, 26 October 2016; c 2.]

Do you agree with that statement? Are you aware of such parity ratios being used to determine

representations in other countries—for example, in the United Kingdom or in Europe?

Karen Greaves: It is important to consider the context of an area, and Boundaries Scotland has done that for Orkney. It has looked at our area as a whole.

On electoral parity, the wards have been split up to give the optimum solution. We have some areas in which there is not electoral parity because of the population and the geography, but the criteria that are set, which allow us to deviate from electoral parity, are an important consideration. It is important that flexibility exists. Simply considering electoral parity alone would not give fair representation and fair workloads for elected members. Therefore, I think that the way in which Boundaries Scotland currently deals with the issue is the best one for our context.

I am sorry, but I am not aware of other examples.

Maggie Sandison: We had the flexibility of having four options to explore, so it did not feel as though electoral parity was being pushed in our discussions at the expense of everything else. In some instances in the past, the commission was so stringent on, or so intolerant of deviation from, parity that it felt that communities were not being listened to. About 20 years ago, the council went to a judicial review because of that history of total adherence to the rules and a lack of capacity to adjust them. Stoic adherence to those rules leads to unhappy communities and unhappy councils.

This consultation was completely different. The workings of the review were fully explained. The full flexibility in the islands act was taken into account. It was clear that the main goal was to engage and to consider all the options that we proposed—there was no predetermined idea. Although the discussions on parity were clear to us, it was clear that geography and local ties would also be considered. That was a completely different experience for our council, which has had a particularly challenging experience of consultation in the past.

I must claim ignorance of whether parity is used in other decision-making processes.

The Convener: I read the report by the Electoral Reform Society in preparation for the meeting. It was interesting that the report compared the average population per square kilometre in Scotland's wards to those in the UK and European Union. This may not apply to Shetland and Orkney, but I was struck that the average local authority in Scotland has 163,200 residents, whereas the EU average is 5,630. The report also says that the UK has one councillor for every 2,860 people, whereas Finland has one for every 500.

Those figures might be part of a bigger conversation about real local representation. Our conversation today is about proposed boundaries. Are we on a journey towards more localised representation and a different way of working together? Has that been explored in Shetland or Orkney?

Maggie Sandison: Our figures are closer to the EU ones than would be the average in the rest of Scotland, so our electorate is better represented.

The first time I recognised the challenge was during the most recent local election. We had a number of uncontested seats and did not have a range of candidates standing in the local elections. I want us to address the challenge of how being an elected member can be seen as making a valuable contribution to society. How can we recognise the work of our elected members?

I want to see better representation of our community. At present, the level of remuneration that our elected members receive means that people who have another income, such as a pension, are often more able to stand for the council, whereas a single mother or somebody with a working family, say, would not be able to find a way of standing.

In Shetland, a third of the working-age population work for the council, and when someone becomes an elected member they cannot be a council employee. We would therefore be presented with a particular challenge if the number of elected members in our community were to increase. People have the right to a choice when it comes to an election, and we should value the work of our elected members. They work incredibly hard, so how do we ensure that their contribution is valued? I personally might prefer to see fewer, but more well-paid, elected members, rather than more elected members who continue not to be recognised or valued for their contribution.

Karen Greaves: I support what Maggie Sandison said. An elected member's role has changed dramatically over the while, and they are now doing a full-time job, but the remuneration does not always reflect that, in particular given the size of our council area. Comparing different ratios across different councils in different areas is always difficult, because there are different degrees of devolved powers, delegations and duties in different councils, whether it be a district council, parish council or local authority.

On representation, we can look further down and think about community councils. In Orkney, we have 20 community councils, and our elected members go to community council meetings, so they are very close to their constituents. Again, we try very much to allow the community councils as

much say as possible in directing—and even, in some cases, delivering—services in their communities. They can do that, or at least help us to prioritise the services that they need in their areas.

It is an interesting topic. We need to keep on down the road of trying to ensure that everybody is empowered, and keeping the decision making where it needs to be. We are at the start of that journey, but there is a long way to go.

The Convener: It is great to hear your perspectives. We move to questions from Miles Briggs, who wants to explore a range of themes, and we will then come to a close.

Miles Briggs (Lothian) (Con): Good morning. You have both answered the questions that I was going to ask on Boundaries Scotland and your involvement in public consultation. It seems, from your evidence, that both your councils were content with that.

I will turn the questioning on its head. I am sure that you will have corresponded with colleagues in other councils. Given the concerns that have been expressed to the committee by those in other council areas, where do you think that their reviews have gone wrong?

Maggie Sandison: I wonder whether the flexibility with which we were provided through the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 enabled us to have a much more open discussion of options. We genuinely felt that everything was available for us on the table. No map had been drawn for Shetland, and we could engage in designing the future boundaries. It felt like a very empowered process for our community and our elected members. The 2018 act had required a different approach, and that is perhaps what generated a genuine conversation and exploration of options, with the ability to explore different things and come back and present a recommendation from the community, which was then taken on board.

10:15

Karen Greaves: I completely agree. With regard to the requirement in the 2018 act for a review, it felt like the review was not being done to us, but with us. There was very early engagement and, as I said before, we have very much been listened to and been given all the flexibility we needed to clearly and comprehensively explore all the different options that were available to us, so we could come up with the optimal solution. We very much benefited from that approach, which has led to us being quite content with the proposals.

Miles Briggs: Was the fact that Shetland will have an additional councillor and Orkney will

remain on the current numbers a significant issue? Are there any specific concerns that you would like to raise that you feel were not addressed during the reviews but should have been as part of that process?

Karen Greaves: We are content. We would not have liked a reduction in councillors; that would have been difficult to take forward, because of the workloads and the area. We are content to remain with the number of councillors that we have been allocated.

Maggie Sandison: We saw some reluctance in relation to the Shetland Central ward. Currently, Shetland has two three-member wards. Because of the issue around parity, one of the proposals is that Shetland West ward become a two-member ward and a four-member ward be created in Shetland Central. Members accepted the proposal in the consultation paper, but with a degree of reluctance. There was a recognition that alignment with our community councils has been a problem here, and that the draw from more remote areas into the central area of Shetland is an issue.

We observed that perhaps the best solution for the whole of Shetland would have been one ward with six members, rather than the split and now having one member move from one of the three-member wards to the other—that is, having a larger ward that covers the whole area, because of the geography and the nature of the communities. However, that solution was not available to us in the legislation.

I think that communities are probably less concerned about whether they form part of a two, three or four-member ward than they are that the representation that they receive from their elected member is good enough. For our communities, how good their elected member is, rather than how many people that member represents, is the key thing that they wanted a focus on. For me, that says that the issue is the role of an elected member and how we value what they contribute to the democratic processes that we have.

Miles Briggs: That is helpful. Finally, Maggie, you are likely to be standing in a two-member ward. Do you think that people will feel encouraged to come forward to stand when they realise that there will be just two councillors representing such a significant number of people, or they will be put off from standing? What impact do you think that will have?

Maggie Sandison: There is a risk that having a ward with smaller cohort of members will have an impact on the number of people who are willing to stand in that area. This will be our first experience with fewer members, so I suppose that we will find out in May, if this is implemented.

I think that the underlying issue is how we make the role of a councillor valued and how we support people to step up and be their community representative. In a small community, it is difficult to put your head above the parapet and represent your community. We have had some challenging issues, particularly in the area—the West and Central wards—where a large wind farm is being built. Our elected members have felt a pressure in their communities. Perhaps the biggest issue affecting whether people stand for election is how elected members get supported in terms of the pressure of social media and the challenges in the local press. They are people standing for their community and undertaking a critical role for poor pay, but they are under probably more immense pressure than some of our officials who get paid a lot more.

For me, the real issue is about whether we get people standing everywhere rather than just in that two-member ward. The issue is how people see their elected members. We are going to do a lot of work around promoting the role of elected members and how important they are for the council. However, that does not necessarily mean that people will get that message.

The Convener: Thank you both for your responses. What has clearly come through the conversation this morning is the point around councillors' remuneration and the acknowledgement of their role, and how improvement there would encourage people to come forward. The committee has already been talking about that and it is perhaps a piece of work that we need to take on and explore. That would be fitting, because the committee members include three current councillors and a former councillor, so we have a valuable perspective in that regard.

I appreciate your contributions this morning. We have to wrap up this session now, but I give you the opportunity to say whether there is anything that has not come out at all in the discussion. I see that you are both shaking your heads. Okay. Thank you so much for speaking to us today.

I have a question for Karen Greaves, which I will put in writing, on her mention of a tweak to the Kirkwall boundary. I will seek clarity in a letter to her about what she meant by that, because my understanding is that if we accept the boundaries, they must be accepted as they currently stand.

We will have a brief suspension.

10:22

Meeting suspended.

10:34

On resuming—

The Convener: I welcome our second panel of witnesses this morning: Councillor Margaret Davidson, leader of Highland Council, who joins us by telephone; Douglas Hendry, executive director of Argyll and Bute Council; and Derek Mackay, governance and elections manager for Comhairle nan Eilean Siar.

We have a range of questions, and I will ask the opening question. Are you satisfied with the recommendations that are set out in Boundaries Scotland's report regarding your council areas? I ask Douglas Hendry to start. We will then go to Margaret Davidson and Derek Mackay.

Douglas Hendry (Argyll and Bute Council): Good morning. There are significant elements of the commission's final proposals with which the council is in agreement, but the council's official response to the recommendations set out a number of areas in which it was not possible for members to come to a single, consolidated view, and there were a small number of areas in which members did not agree with the commission's final recommendations.

The Convener: Thank you. We will probably have a bit of time to explore some of the detail of those differences. Margaret, can you share your perspective in that regard?

Councillor Margaret Davidson (Highland Council): Good morning, convener. It is nice to speak to you. Thank you for this opportunity.

Highland Council has a single view across the chamber—all 74 of us—which is that we ask the committee to consider rejecting Boundaries Scotland's proposals. We are deeply unhappy and even dismayed with some elements of the proposals. My understanding is that there are only two options: acceptance or rejection of them. We ask that the committee consider asking the commission to undertake a fresh review, sensibly after the local government elections in 2022. That is our opening position.

The Convener: Thank you, Margaret. Derek, can you give your perspective?

Derek Mackay (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar): We broadly welcome Boundaries Scotland's proposals, which better reflect the natural and historical communities right across the islands. Indeed, all the comments that the comhairle made were taken on board by the commission. About half the public comments were not as supportive of the proposals, and quite a number were

requests for additional representation on the southern isles, but that issue has been incorporated into the final proposals. So, the comhairle is happy with the proposals, which are much more reflective of our communities in the islands than the current wards.

The Convener: That is great to hear. Before we hear questions from other committee members, I will give Margaret Davidson and Douglas Hendry an opportunity to go into the detail of why their councils hold the views they hold about the proposals. Perhaps Douglas can expand a bit on why there is a split perspective on some aspects of the proposals. That would be helpful.

Douglas Hendry: The council welcomed the fact that the four geographical sub-areas of Argyll and Bute that are recognised for governance purposes remained unchanged. We felt that that was a positive. In respect of the final proposals, it was also considered that the wards where no change was proposed—Cowal, Dunoon and parts of Helensburgh and Lomond—were appropriate.

On the issues that the council had with the final recommendations, the council made a specific objection to the proposals because members felt that they would diminish overall electoral accountability and did not necessarily take into account the material factors of electoral parity or the possible impact of demographic changes and the ageing population. Also, the council was not sure whether appropriate consideration had been given to social and economic deprivation.

The council recognised—*[Inaudible.]*—the commission had made, in particular, to act in accordance with the principle of electoral parity as set out in legislation, but the view was expressed that there is discretion in how that principle is applied, which would have allowed alternative proposals to be made and accepted.

There was a division of opinion in the council on island-only and island-and-mainland wards. In the final proposals, there is a mixture. The principal islands—the biggest ones—would be in three island-only wards, but some of the smaller islands would be part of an island-and-mainland ward—for example, in the Lorne area. The council recognised both sides of the argument, and its final submission to the commission was that, if a view came from the wider public consultation that the commission was carrying out that supported island-only wards, the council would—*[Inaudible.]* It was an area on which the council could not come to a final view.

There was recognition and an acknowledgement that the commission had picked up some suggestions that the council had made in relation to the Kintyre area, which, it was felt,

reflected more accurately local community boundaries.

The final point from Argyll and Bute Council was that members wanted cognisance to be taken of a view that has been held across the council since we responded to the consultation on the Islands (Scotland) Bill, back in 2017. Again, it relates to the general point about island-only or island-and-mainland wards. I reiterate the point that the council's view on that issue has been consistent. However, as I said a moment ago, it has recognised that, if there is a particularly strong view among local communities, it will buy into that.

That is a quick run-through of Argyll and Bute Council's position and views. There may well be things that I have missed or other matters that the committee wants to ask about, and I will be happy to pick those up if that is the case.

The Convener: Thank you. We have a range of questions, and we will see what comes up. I have a particular question that I will come back to if the subject does not come up in other questions.

Margaret, will you give us a sense of why Highland Council is asking us to reject the proposals?

10:45

Councillor Davidson: There are four key issues that we would ask you to take into consideration. The first concerns our remote and sparsely populated wards of North, West and Central Sutherland and Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh. They are the largest wards in Europe—not in Scotland, not in Highland, but in Europe. They are vast. Boundaries Scotland is suggesting that we take away a councillor in North, West and Central Sutherland and reduce the number of councillors for that ward to two. It is also suggesting that we take away a councillor in Wester Ross and reduce the number of councillors there to three. The commission suggests that one of the small towns can move into a neighbouring ward when that happens, but that still leaves the huge geographical area of Wester Ross.

We think that that is a real contrast to the Scottish Government's supportive policies that are emerging on depopulation and that the proposals will only make matters more difficult. We believe that the demographic challenges of representing those vast wards mean that they need more than two and three councillors, respectively. We are very resistant to the idea of removing councillors.

My second point concerns Skye. Similarly, Boundaries Scotland is suggesting that we reduce the number of councillors who represent Skye from four to three, because of the island effect—this whole review has taken place because of the

impact of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018. We have seen no sign of an island impact assessment having been done for Skye—there has been no discussion of it—and we believe that reducing the democratic representation of that extraordinarily busy island is a very serious matter.

The population of Skye is pretty steady. It might be just below parity, or the predictions, although I do not believe for one minute that that reflects what actually happens. The population of Skye must quadruple with visitors during a large part of the year. The councillors on Skye have been extremely active and have done very well over the past five years, so to lose a councillor is a tragedy for us.

The third point that I wish to make is that Boundaries Scotland is proposing, against its own guidelines, that we completely split the community of Loch Ness. Loch Ness is part of a ward called Aird and Loch Ness, which has four councillors. That has worked very well over the past five years, but the commission is now proposing that we split Loch Ness right down the middle, so that south Loch Ness goes with one of the city wards and the rest of the ward becomes a ward called Aird.

The people of south Loch Ness—indeed, the people all around the ward—are extremely upset by that, as they believe that Loch Ness is a community. We have so much more in common than south Loch Ness would have in common with the city wards. It would always feel like an add-on, and it would be very difficult for anyone from south Loch Ness to be elected, because the preponderance of people would be at the city end—and it is a growing part of the city. The city ward that we are talking about has three councillors at present, and we see no problem with that increasing to four. However, Boundaries Scotland is suggesting an increase to five, at the expense of Aird and Loch Ness. We think that that is wrong and that the community should not be split down the middle. It is a fundamental problem.

Culloden and Ardersier is at the other end of the spectrum. The community in Culloden and Ardersier is growing—anyone who has seen the house building in Inverness will see that vividly—and the ward is already 50 per cent over parity. The people there are underrepresented at present, but Boundaries Scotland is proposing that the number of councillors stays as it is. The commission says that it will perhaps review that in the future, but we just do not understand why it has not taken the opportunity to put an extra councillor in Culloden and Ardersier.

I would point out that, in its first revision, Boundaries Scotland returned a councillor to Caithness, where it had proposed that one be lost. We thank it for doing so, but, although that has been helpful, it does not go far enough. Indeed,

the proposals that are still before us are such as we have never seen before. Over the past decade, Boundaries Scotland has steadily reduced the number of councillors in the Highland region, which we find odd considering that the region's population is growing. That growing population should not be represented by having more councillors around Inverness at the expense of the rest of the Highlands. It is a very diverse region in which there are very different needs, and we truly believe that the commission is not taking that into account.

Finally, when we wrote to the Deputy First Minister, we said that we would ask Parliament to look at Boundaries Scotland's remit and whether there could be more flexibility on parity for sparsely populated, rural and island areas. From a Highland point of view, that would work much better for us.

The Convener: We have a range of questions that will help us to dig into some of what you have just highlighted in your opening remarks. Let us see how we go. There will be a little time at the end for the three of you to highlight anything that might not have been brought to light in our questioning.

Elena Whitham: I welcome everyone to the meeting. Margaret Davidson has set out very clearly why Highland Council would like the committee to reject the proposals. She has pointed to issues such as the geography of the Highlands; Highland Council's view that some of the proposals seek to split up a community; and what, in the council's view, is underrepresentation. Can Derek Mackay and Douglas Hendry tell us what they think the committee should do with the proposals?

Derek Mackay: As the depute returning officer, I think that Comhairle nan Eilean Siar would like an early decision, to enable us to plan properly for next May's elections. Boundaries Scotland's proposals seek to reflect communities right across the islands and are broadly welcome—after all, the council has long advocated for a reduction in councillor numbers, which is what we have with these proposals.

We have also advocated for having more flexibility to move away from a system of three and four-member wards to a system of one to six-member wards in order to better reflect communities across the islands. Boundaries Scotland's proposals do that and get rid of some of the current anomalies in the larger wards. All the boundaries will be easily identifiable to the electorate right across the islands as representing natural and historical communities, maintaining local ties and ensuring equal representation in the islands. As I say, the proposals have been broadly welcomed by the comhairle.

Douglas Hendry: First, I echo the comment of my colleague from Western Isles Council—please forgive me for not using the Gaelic—that, whatever happens, things should be moved on as quickly as possible.

Secondly, as was made clear earlier, the commission's proposals can ultimately only be accepted or rejected—[*Inaudible.*]—the proposals are not ones that the council can buy into in their entirety—[*Inaudible.*]—because of that, Argyll and Bute Council's conclusion is that the proposals should be rejected.

The Convener: Thanks for that, Douglas. We missed a bit of the preamble to your statement that the proposals should be rejected, but that conclusion is very clear. Elena, is that okay?

Elena Whitham: That is okay. Thanks, convener.

The Convener: We will move on to questions about process.

Paul McLennan: I will start with a question for Maggie Davidson. What are your views on how Boundaries Scotland has applied the criteria for boundary reform during the review? You went into that quite a bit, and I do not know whether there is anything that you want to add to that. My other question is, what level of discussion did Boundaries Scotland have with you before the criteria were set?

Councillor Davidson: Thank you for bringing that subject up. We had a good discussion with the commission, back in 2019—gosh! it seems like an aeon ago—and raised the point that we did not want to see democracy being watered down. We asked it to look at the issue, and we said, "Please don't think you have to come here and reduce councillor numbers every time. There's a case for increasing them by a couple around Inverness and retaining the situation elsewhere."

That and various other issues came up in 2019. We had what we thought was a really good discussion, which contributed to the fact that we were genuinely dismayed by the proposals when they came out. We were so upset that we did not reply to the commission in the form that it requested; we actually went straight to Parliament and said, "This is appalling. Can you look at what the commission is doing here?" We then took a breath and I wrote to the Boundaries Scotland before it conducted its review after its first consultation. Our officers had been in touch with it, and it knew exactly what we wanted.

To be honest, we are way beyond that now. Everybody knows what everyone else is saying, and it was for the commission to take that into stronger consideration when it amended its first

proposals. However, from our point of view, it did not get anywhere near what we were requesting.

Paul McLennan: Thank you for that, Maggie. I ask the same question of Douglas Hendry and then Derek Mackay.

Douglas Hendry: In Argyll and Bute, the commission's engagement with the council was entirely positive. It began with informal discussions with officers and rolled out to formal engagement with members. It also took into account the wider public consultation exercises that ran over a period of time. I believe that the council's position is that the commission made every effort to engage in a positive manner.

The issues are, to an extent, about the framework within which the commission is required to operate. In its final report, a good deal of weight is given to electoral parity, which has a legislative basis. However, as I said, it is possible for the commission to move away from the application of the parity principle when there are special reasons for doing so. Those special reasons can include things such as slow and infrequent transport and communication links and travel that is subject to interference by the weather and the seasons. Therefore, the council considers that there was scope to go in a different direction from the one that produced the proposals that are with the Parliament.

11:00

Although there was positive engagement by the commission, the council was slightly disappointed that its starting point appeared to be the same as, or similar to, its starting point for the previous review—the fifth review, back in 2016—which was about an overall reduction in councillor numbers. I think that it would be fair to say that, although there has been no discussion between the councils, some of the views that were expressed earlier by the elected member from Highland Council were relevant to, and would have found a listening ear in, Argyll and Bute.

Argyll and Bute Council has no problem with the principles on the basis of which the engagement took place, but we think that, as far as the final outputs are concerned, it would have been possible, within the overall framework, to look at things differently. There is some disappointment that that was not done, particularly with regard to the overall reduction in councillor numbers.

Derek Mackay: From our point of view, the criteria that Boundaries Scotland was working with were clearly explained and outlined to us, and the engagement was comprehensive and open. As I have previously indicated, the comments of the comhairle were adopted in the final proposal, so we have no specific comments to make about that.

We welcome the level of engagement and the fact that Boundaries Scotland took on board our comments. We also welcome the fact that, in three of the 11 wards, it was quite prepared to give greater weight to the maintenance of natural communities, historical ties and particular circumstances and to move away from parity in those areas. That is welcomed by the comhairle and the public.

The Convener: Elena Whitham has a couple of questions.

Elena Whitham: As a serving councillor, I am aware that a lot of benchmarking goes on and that councils tend to be placed in council families. Is putting councils into such categories with other similar councils an appropriate basis on which to determine the total number of councillors? Are you aware of your council's classification? Do you agree with the grouping that you were placed in? We will start with Margaret Davidson.

Councillor Davidson: I am sorry, but I must have missed the beginning of your question. I am not aware of the family that we were put in, but I would be prepared to bet that we are in the same family as Argyll and Bute Council, with which we share many issues.

I am pleased that the process has worked so well for the Western Isles Council. The Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 has given it opportunities that it has not had before. However, the issue of remoteness and sparsity on the mainland still needs to be wrestled with by Boundaries Scotland; indeed, it probably needs to be wrestled with by all of us. That is why the Scottish Government has picked up on depopulation and is working strongly on that, along with the convention of the Highlands and Islands, on which Highland Council and Argyll and Bute Council are represented.

To be honest, I would have to go back and look at the family group that we are in. I certainly feel great kinship with Argyll and Bute Council, as we share many issues.

Derek Mackay: We are grouped in with the other island authorities and, as Margaret Davidson alluded to, we share many similarities. The islands act is an important piece of legislation for island authorities, and it has been welcomed. There always has to be an element of comparison and benchmarking, but note should be taken of the unique circumstances of island communities, and indeed the differences between those island communities.

Douglas Hendry: Again, we think that it is reasonable to accept that there is degree of benchmarking as part of an overall consideration of all relevant factors. However, I suggest that benchmarking should not be applied on a hard-and-fast basis—it is simply an indicator that allows

consideration of the wider position. Therefore, it is accepted that a degree of benchmarking is reasonable.

On the issue of families of councils, like my colleagues, we are aware of the position in general terms. We recognise that certain areas, such as the Highlands, are a large, sparsely populated mainland mass. We have more of a hybrid situation than Highland or North Ayrshire has. They have a relatively small number of islands, whereas Argyll and Bute has more than 20 inhabited islands. In that respect, we are more in line with our colleagues from the islands councils.

I say yes to the principle of benchmarking, and agree that the obvious family members are island councils and those covering big geographical areas with sparse populations. However, benchmarking should not be a major determining factor in the outputs.

Paul McLennan: This issue has been touched on, but do you think that having variations in the councillor to voter ratio could impact on effective local government? I know that the position will probably vary from area to area.

Derek Mackay: There are variations above parity in three of the wards. The weight that is given to maintaining the natural communities is correct, and the wards that are proposed will ensure that there is better representation across the islands. The communities that are laid out in those wards better reflect the understanding of communities across the islands. The approach is positive, and the variation from parity is welcome.

Paul McLennan: Was there much consultation with the public on the issue? Was there feedback from members of the public on the number of councillors that they want for their ward area?

Derek Mackay: In total, there were very few comments—64, I think—given to the commission. The commission's proposals were circulated to two community councils, and there were few comments.

Some of the public comment was about maintaining the number of councillors in the southern isles. The initial proposal was a reduction from seven to six, but the two councillors who are proposed for Barra would mean that seven are retained. Across the comhairle area, there is a chain of remote island communities, and Barra is a remote island in that chain. It is felt that the variation of parity—the figure is 35 per cent there—is justified due to Barra's distance from the administrative centre in Stornoway.

Councillor Davidson: It was the key issue with the communities. I will be very surprised if the committee has not had representations from some

of them; the commission has certainly had representations from Sutherland, Skye and Loch Ness. They do not want to see a reduction in the number of their councillors. In some ways, I am asking for consistency. Derek Mackay was really good—he reminded us that some of the reasons for varying from parity can be to do with transport and the impact of the seasons. Will you ever see that more strongly than in the vast stretches of north-west Sutherland and Wester Ross? We are an extreme example. If you put us in a family of councils, we will be the extreme example, given the huge Highland mainland. We hope for more consideration of that, which is why we do not want to lose councillors.

One of the gains of the pandemic—it is an odd business, as the committee knows—has been the move to online technology, which will be a huge boon in these areas. It will really help, particularly in the winter months. However, I think that the committee will find that we have a lot of new councillors next time. I think that we have a fair turnover of councillors coming—I can say that because I know everyone. I also think that you will find that it will be very difficult for those who are representing Wester Ross or north-west Sutherland and who want to understand and visit their communities. Sometimes, councillors really do need to be there; that has very much been the case in the past. That can lead to inequalities in the number of councillors who can turn up at events, particularly open public meetings on policy discussions and local hot issues—believe me, you get a big turnout whenever you mention roads.

One of the things that I did not understand at all in the commission's findings is that it retained the same number of councillors for Fort William and Ardnamurchan. Although I was pleased about that, because Ardnamurchan is also extremely large and difficult to represent fairly, it cited the example of roads as one of the issues, and there is no difference between the roads in Wester Ross and north-west Skye and those in Ardnamurchan. They are all difficult and they are all extraordinarily long. Although it might be reduced from what it was, the amount of travelling will therefore still be extraordinarily large in those areas.

Paul McLennan: Thank you for that—that was very extensive.

Douglas Hendry: On the basic point about the number of electors and councillors, I again concur with the views of colleagues in general terms.

I will try to summarise the position from an Argyll and Bute perspective. Although there is a place for the ratio among a suite of factors, it is one of a number of factors and it should not hold undue sway or outweigh other factors, such as local communities and local ties. It is fair to say that Argyll and Bute Council's position is that, as a

principle, the ratio should demonstrably not be the same across all of Scotland. Therefore, there needs to be a recognition that, in proposing the number of electors for areas with islands and supersparsity, there should be regard to wider factors such as communications, and the ratio could and should be lower.

11:15

I echo the comments that were made on where we are now. In particular, I think that, as we keep on moving away from lockdowns and into the new post Covid environment, across the board, it will be possible to carry out more council business remotely. I believe that—[*Inaudible.*]—and will not go back to what they were before in terms of the conduct of council business. However, the possible changes that will arise because of new ways of working should not deflect from the basic principle of democratic accountability and having regard to local communities and local interests. I hope that that answers the question.

Paul McLennan: It does. That was very extensive.

The Convener: Thank you for the responses so far. I note an interest, which is that I am an MSP for Highlands and Islands. All the council representatives taking part today represent councils that are in my region. North Ayrshire is not in my region, but the council is not represented at the meeting.

I will bring in Meghan Gallacher, who will shift the focus a little bit.

Meghan Gallacher: Good morning, Margaret, Derek and Douglas. My question relates to parity, which has been raised a few times this morning, and the Electoral Reform Society. During a Local Government and Communities Committee meeting in 2016, the ERS stated:

“making electoral parity a priority is outdated.”—[*Official Report, Local Government and Communities Committee, 26 October 2016; c 2.*]

Do you agree with that statement?

Councillor Davidson: I wish that I had been at the meeting when the ERS representative said that. I would have written them a thank you letter straight away, because I agree that making electoral parity a priority is outdated.

I have been a rural councillor for 20 years—I represent Aird and Loch Ness. The ward contains many villages, and each village has its own views and ideas. The differences are much greater than in an urban area. Parity does not work for me—it never has—when it comes to somewhere such as the Highlands and how it should be represented.

I thank you for raising the point. Making parity a priority is outdated, and it would be good to revisit some of the principles around that. Maybe it works for central belt authorities better than it does for those of us on the edges. It has long been a thorn in our sides. Although we have compromised in the past, this review has stopped us in our tracks.

Douglas Hendry: I stop short of saying that there is no place for electoral parity as a consideration. As I said in response to the previous question, it should be one of a large number of factors, and it should not be the major or determining factor. The comments made by the elected member for Highland Council on the issue reflect, in general, the views of Argyll and Bute Council.

It is perhaps worth noting one of the comments that were made in the final report, which might be an indication of the basis on which the commission does its business:

“Best practice and previous reviews suggest an electorate within 10% of absolute electoral parity is acceptable.”

That is unnecessarily restrictive and it does not helpfully contribute to the overall principle of arriving at a situation in which elected members with connections to their local communities or groupings of communities are best able to do their jobs. I would hesitate to say that there is no place for electoral parity, but it should not be the major or fundamental consideration.

Derek Mackay: I concur with everything that Douglas Hendry just said. Parity should not be the only consideration in deciding council numbers and wards. It might be more applicable to an urban setting, but strict adherence to parity would not be suitable for rural areas and particularly not for remote rural areas.

Miles Briggs: Good morning. Ahead of the meeting, I received personal correspondence about public consultation, including from Islay community council, for example. It is fair to say that some of the community councils that were involved in the process do not feel that their views were taken on board by Boundaries Scotland, specifically around the reduction in the number of councillors. What views have you heard on that?

Councillor Davidson: Good morning, Miles. I am sorry—I can hear a woman in my other ear saying that I am muted or unmuted regularly.

When we spoke again to our communities after our council meeting, that was the first thing that people said to us: they just did not feel as though they had been listened to. That goes to the heart of it, and it was particularly the Sutherland, Wester Ross and Loch Ness councillors, community councils and community members who said that they did not feel listened to. That creates a real

feeling of abandonment and it reduces open engagement. I know that those are emotional words, but that sort of engagement is what drives forward rural areas in particular. When they are working well, the energy that that releases is extraordinary. This has definitely put people back in their thinking. They feel neglected, and some of them are very upset about the proposals from Boundaries Scotland.

Derek Mackay: I am not aware of any issues with consultation with community councils on the islands. The proposals were circulated to community councils, and they were invited to respond directly to Boundaries Scotland. They could also feed back through the councillors, as each of our elected members are on the community councils. That might well reflect the broader proposals, which, as I said previously, reflect what we see as our natural communities. Indeed, they correspond very closely to our current community council boundaries—more so than the three or four-member wards.

Douglas Hendry: On engagement with the wider community in Argyll and Bute, the council did not hear a great deal of adverse comment about the activities that were carried out. The council helped the commission by providing it with a full list of the 57 Argyll and Bute community councils, all of which were contacted. I am not aware what response was received, but the commission tried to engage with all of them.

There was also what you might call old-school engagement, involving the local newspapers, posters in public buildings and so on.

The commission also went out to some of the local area community planning groups—we have one for each of our four geographical sub-areas—and, at the request of at least two of them, it engaged with the groups, which represent the council and all the other community planning partners in an area.

As for 21st century methods of communication, it tried to engage via social media. In general, there was a mix of approaches that appeared to hit significant bodies of opinion such as community councils, community planning partners and so on.

On the number of responses and their content, I am obviously not sighted on that, but in principle, it appears that the commission tried to engage on a wide front.

Miles Briggs: Thank you—that was very helpful.

From what I have heard from both panels this morning, I would say that there seems to be a consensus among Shetland, Orkney and the Western Isles, which seem to be content with what has been put forward. Perhaps the challenge of

managing islands as well as the wider review of mainland council wards as part of this work has presented difficulties and caused concern. What are your views on that, given that not many people to whom I have spoken about this expected to see a reduction in councillors to come out of the islands act? Can you start, Derek?

Derek Mackay: The comhairle has been advocating for a reduction in councillors for a number of years now; indeed, in some of our earlier discussions, we were looking at reducing the number to either 21 or 26, but when we looked at the wards that that would have created, we realised how much the workload of the remaining councillors would have increased. The reduction by two is therefore welcome.

With regard to flexibility, the islands act has benefited the three island authorities. Prior to the introduction of multimember wards in 2007 and as part of the fourth review, the council advocated for legislative change to allow a wide range of one to six-member wards to give more flexibility and allow us to create wards that reflected local understanding of what communities were, that maintained local ties and that were much more representative of our islands. I think that the islands act has given us that opportunity.

Miles Briggs: Perhaps Douglas Hendry can give us a view on how councils with a mainland and island mix have been dealt with.

Douglas Hendry: Argyll and Bute Council found it hard to come to a settled position on that issue. As per my earlier comment, there is a view that a mix of island stand-alone wards and island and mainland wards could work. In Argyll and Bute pre-1996 and the last reorganisation, we had other stand-alone island wards aside from Bute, which was already an island ward; however, after the 1996 restructuring, Bute remained an island ward, while the rest of our islands became part of island and mainland wards.

11:30

I have a couple of relevant points to make on that—I hope that I will not take up too much of the committee's time. I go back to the point about the mix. On our western seaboard, under the arrangements that we have had in place for a number of years, we have a ward that comprises part of Oban and Lorn, along with Mull, Tiree and the other islands.

That has worked because—to go back to the point about natural community links—those communities have links with each other. Nobody—well, hardly anyone—stays on an island all the time, and when islanders come off the islands, if they do not head down to the cities in the central

belt, they connect with Oban. They see Oban as part of their wider community.

One of the main factors that prevented Argyll and Bute from coming to a definitive view was that a lot of folk value the connections with the mainland, whereas others quite like the idea of standing alone. Again, I echo the comments from my Western Isles colleague about the islands act, and the potential benefits coming out of it.

Ultimately, I come back to my basic point: there is no right or wrong answer here. Either scenario can work.

Councillor Davidson: We were astonished at the proposal to take a councillor out of Skye, especially as the review was based on the islands act. The act itself has given great energy and impetus to the islands, both the stand-alone island councils and the mainland councils. It has given them the chance to think about where they sit, and to be more thoughtful overall. I am astonished, therefore, that the commission wants to take a councillor out of Skye—we were not expecting that, I can tell you. That was a particular shock.

Douglas Hendry's comments are perceptive. There is a difference in the use of parity and representation for islands and its use for the big rural mainland authorities, and that has not yet been captured by the stricter use of parity that Boundaries Scotland is proposing.

Miles Briggs: That is helpful.

The Convener: We are getting to the time when we need to wrap up. There are some questions remaining, on which we could write to you, but I want to give you each the opportunity to talk for a minute or so if there is anything else that you want to tell us this morning, while we are all here together. If you feel strongly that there is something that you want to let us know, I will give you a bit of time for that. We will start with Margaret Davidson, followed by Derek Mackay and Douglas Hendry.

Councillor Davidson: I want to mention two things. First, I turn to something that I did not mention earlier, when I talked about the great improvements in connectivity across the piece. Here I am talking to you on the phone, because my broadband is not strong enough to work with the system that you guys are using. Broadband is still appalling in parts of the Highlands. I am nine miles from Inverness—you can imagine what it is like in some parts of Wester Ross and north-west Sutherland.

I know that it is due for improvement over the next few years. However, BT Openreach, which has the big contract, is talking about fulfilling it by 2026 or 2027. That is another five years of a councillor's life. Connectivity and representation

are just as important as they have ever been, from the point of view of Highland councillors and their communities.

Secondly, we need to step back and think about what is being proposed for Highland. It involves moving the focus—the centre of gravity—further east, rather than west. That is not what we in Highland want to do. We are working hard on localism and on trying to get repopulation in the west and the north. We believe that it is really important that those areas have sufficient democratic representation so that, for the next five years, the people who live there can be sure that they will see their councillors often enough and have discussions that will help them into the future and give them vibrant local communities. The Boundaries Scotland proposals do not help us to do that.

The Convener: Thank you, Margaret. We move to Derek Mackay, and then Douglas Hendry. To frame the contributions a bit more, perhaps you could mention specifically anything that has not so far come to light with regard to the committee's work on the Boundaries Scotland review.

Derek Mackay: I do not have much to add, so I will be brief. Under the current arrangements, in which we have three-member or four-member wards, we come up against a number of issues. There is a specific issue with Barra. It is currently in with South Uist, so if a member based in South Uist wants to attend an evening meeting on Barra, or vice versa, it automatically involves an overnight stay. There is also a danger that we could have a circumstance in which there were no elected members on the island of Barra for a whole term. That is corrected by the proposals.

A number of other three-member or four-member wards are currently grouped together in what is seen as an unusual, while perhaps not unhappy, marriage. Those instances are corrected by the proposals from the commission, so we welcome those proposals.

Douglas Hendry: I will be brief. As I mentioned, there is an issue in Argyll and Bute in relation to the reduction in councillor numbers. Having said that, elements of the proposals are, and the discussion will be, very positive.

As I said at the start, our position is dictated by the fact that the answer is either yes or no. We could not say yes whole-heartedly, as there is also a no camp. I hope that what we have said today has been of some assistance to the committee in its deliberations.

The Convener: I thank all three of you for coming along this morning. The session has been very helpful—I have certainly become aware of the more nuanced issues that everyone has raised. If we have any other questions, we will put them to

you in letter form. I now close the public part of our meeting, and we move into private session for our next item.

11:38

Meeting continued in private until 12:30.

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