

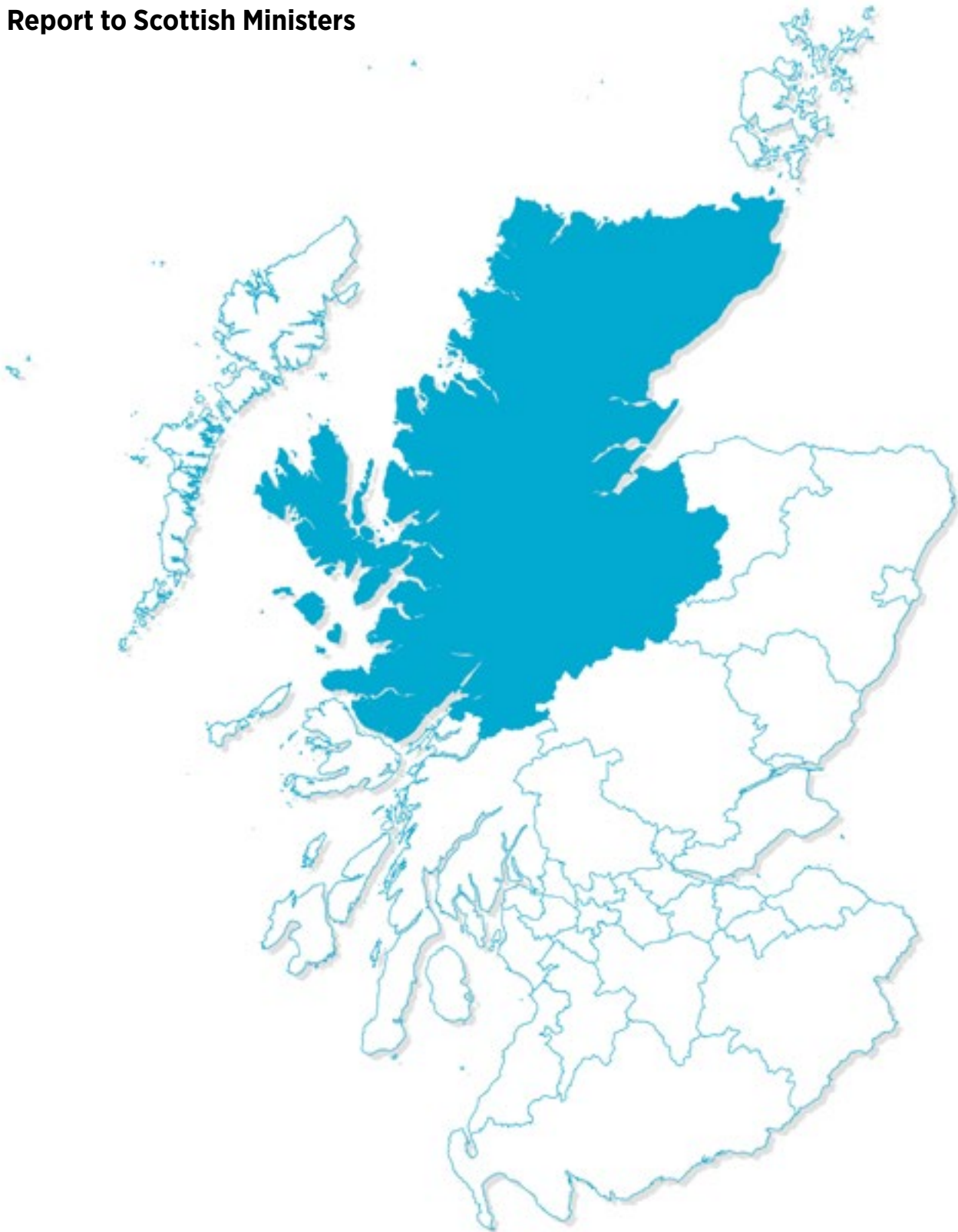


Boundaries Scotland

Criochan na h-Alba

Review of Electoral Arrangements The Highland Council Area Final Proposals

Report to Scottish Ministers



Boundaries Scotland

Statutory Review of Electoral Arrangements

Final Proposals

The Highland Council Area

Membership of the Commission

Chair:	Ronnie Hinds
Deputy Chair:	Ailsa Henderson
Commissioners:	Roland Bean Jon Collins Gordon Macmillan Susan Walker

Boundaries Scotland

Scottish Ministers

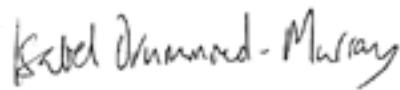
We, Boundaries Scotland¹, present our proposals for The Highland Council area resulting from our Review of Electoral Arrangements under, and in accordance with, section 20 of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018.

In accordance with the provisions of section 18(3) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, copies of our report, together with illustrative maps, are being sent to The Highland Council with a request that the report and maps should be made available for public inspection at its offices.

The report is available on our website and is being publicised on social media. Notice is also being given in newspapers circulating in the council area of the fact that the report has been made so that interested persons may inspect the report and maps at the Council's offices.



Ronnie Hinds
Chair



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June 2021

¹ We conducted this Review as the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland but have submitted our proposals and report to Ministers as Boundaries Scotland following the commencement of section 28 of the Scottish Elections (Reform) Act 2020 on 14 May 2021.

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Part 1 Final Proposals for The Highland Council area

1. We propose that in the interests of effective and convenient local government the future electoral arrangements for The Highland Council area should provide for a council of 73 councillors in 20 wards, comprising one ward returning 2 members, eight wards each returning 3 members, eight wards each returning 4 members and three wards each returning 5 members as follows:

Ward No.	Ward Name	Cllrs	Electorate (Dec 18)	Variation from Electoral Parity (%) ¹	Forecast Electorate (2024) ²	Forecast Variation from Electoral Parity (%) ¹
1	North, West and Central Sutherland	2	4,833	-3.9	4,578	-10.1
2	Thurso and Northwest Caithness	4	10,083	0.3	9,543	-6.3
3	Wick and East Caithness	4	9,815	-2.4	9,389	-7.8
4	East Sutherland	3	5,958	-21.0	5,858	-23.3
5	Wester Ross and Lochalsh	3	7,803	3.4	7,414	-3.0
6	Cromarty Firth	4	9,643	-4.1	9,529	-6.5
7	Tain, Easter Ross and Edderton	3	7,355	-2.5	7,083	-7.3
8	Dingwall and Seaforth	5	11,757	-6.5	12,142	-4.7
9	Black Isle	3	8,895	17.9	8,683	13.6
10	Eilean a' Chèò	3	8,579	13.7	8,299	8.6
11	Caol, Mallaig and the Small Isles	3	7,009	-7.1	7,156	-6.4
12	Aird	3	8,265	9.6	8,202	7.3
13	Inverness North West	5	14,091	12.1	14,140	11.0
14	Inverness North East	4	10,081	0.2	9,620	-5.6
15	Inverness South West	5	11,235	-10.6	12,676	-0.5
16	Inverness South East	4	9,910	-1.5	9,926	-2.6
17	Culloden and Ardersier	3	8,521	13.0	11,781	54.2
18	Nairn and Cawdor	4	10,425	3.7	10,047	-1.4
19	Badenoch and Strathspey	4	10,637	5.8	11,310	11.0
20	Fort William and Ardnamurchan	4	8,646	-14.0	8,567	-15.9
		73	183,541		185,943	

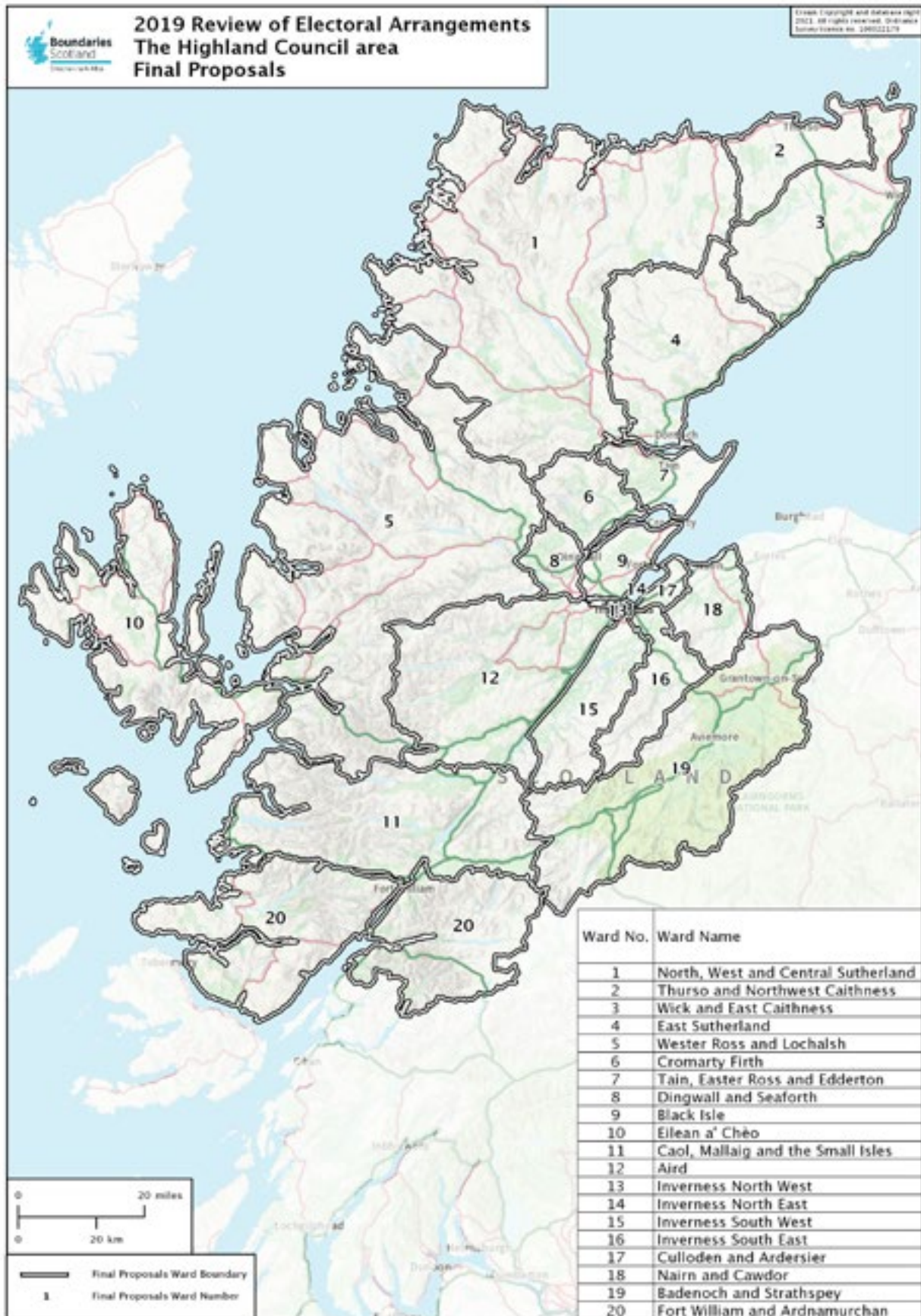
¹ Absolute parity throughout the council area would result in each ward being at 0%: that is, each councillor representing exactly the same number of electors. A negative parity % figure indicates a ward is over-represented, that is, that each councillor represents fewer electors than absolute parity would require. A positive % figure indicates a ward is under-represented, that is, each councillor represents more electors than absolute parity would require.

² Forecast electorate derived from data provided by each council, including new build and demolition data and population estimates published by National Records of Scotland.

2. Our proposals:

- make no changes to the boundaries of six of the existing wards: Cromarty Firth; Eilean a' Chèò; Fort William and Ardnamurchan; Nairn and Cawdor; North, West and Central Sutherland; and Thurso and Northwest Caithness;
- reduce forecast variation from electoral parity in wards over 10% from eleven existing wards to seven wards;
- improve variation from electoral parity in Sutherland;
- consider special geographic circumstances in relation to variation from electoral parity in the proposed Fort William and Ardnamurchan ward due to its remoteness and poor transport links;
- recognise local community ties in the Black Isle;
- create more recognisable ward boundaries by Inverness, Tain and Knoydart. Our proposals also better align with the historical Caithness–Sutherland county boundary and Cairngorm National Park boundary;
- take account of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 and retain Eilean a' Chèò as an island ward and rename Caol and Mallaig to include a reference to the Small Isles, and so recognise the island communities within the ward; and
- take account of the Scottish Elections (Reform) Act 2020 that allowed the use of 2-member and 5-member wards to design wards that consider local ties in Sutherland and Dingwall, to create more easily identifiable ward boundaries in Inverness and to the south of Inverness.

Map of proposed ward boundaries



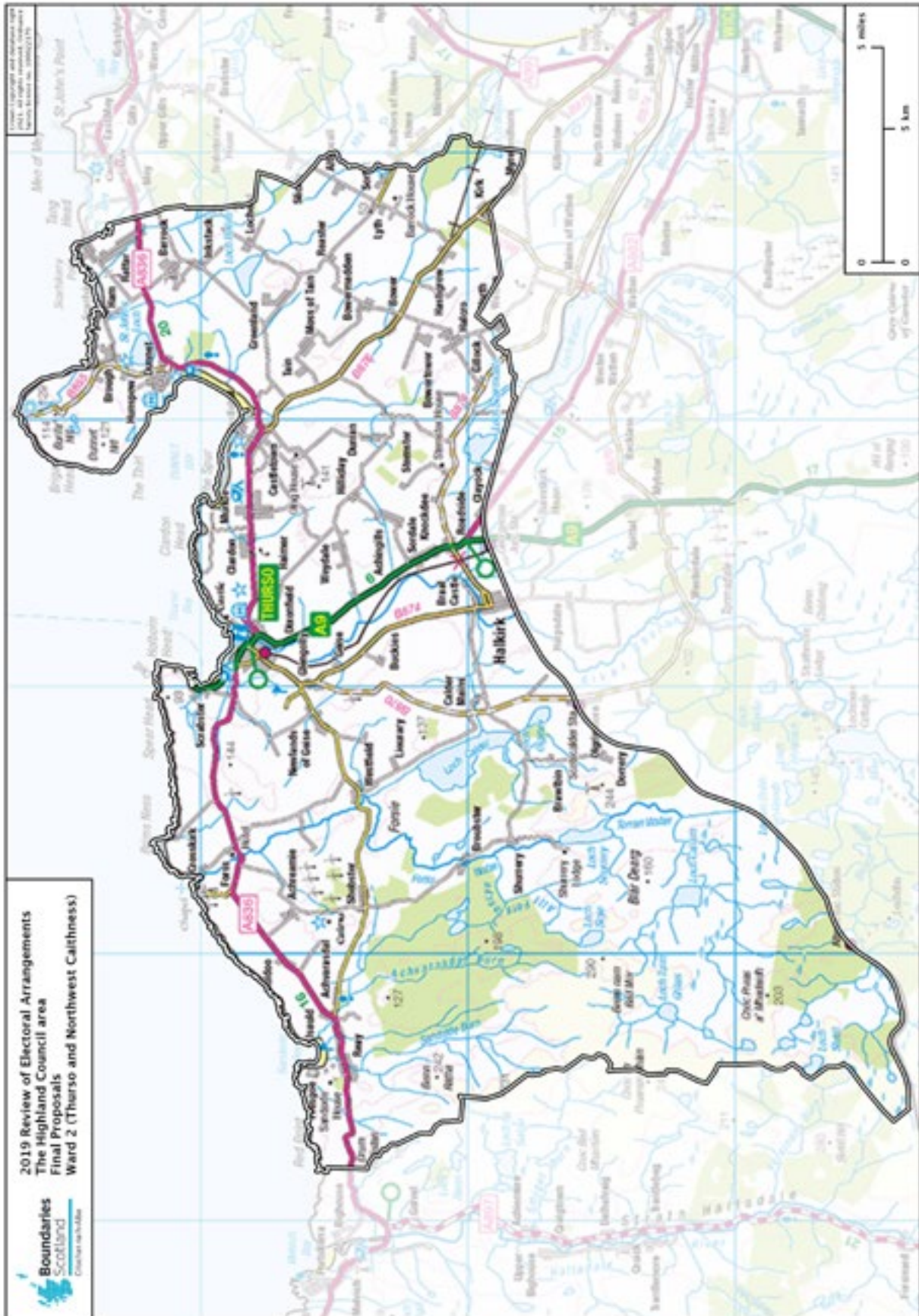
Ward 1 North, West and Central Sutherland – 2 councillors

Our proposals retain the boundary and name of the existing North, West and Central Sutherland ward. Councillors in this ward are forecast to represent 10.1% fewer electors than absolute parity would require.



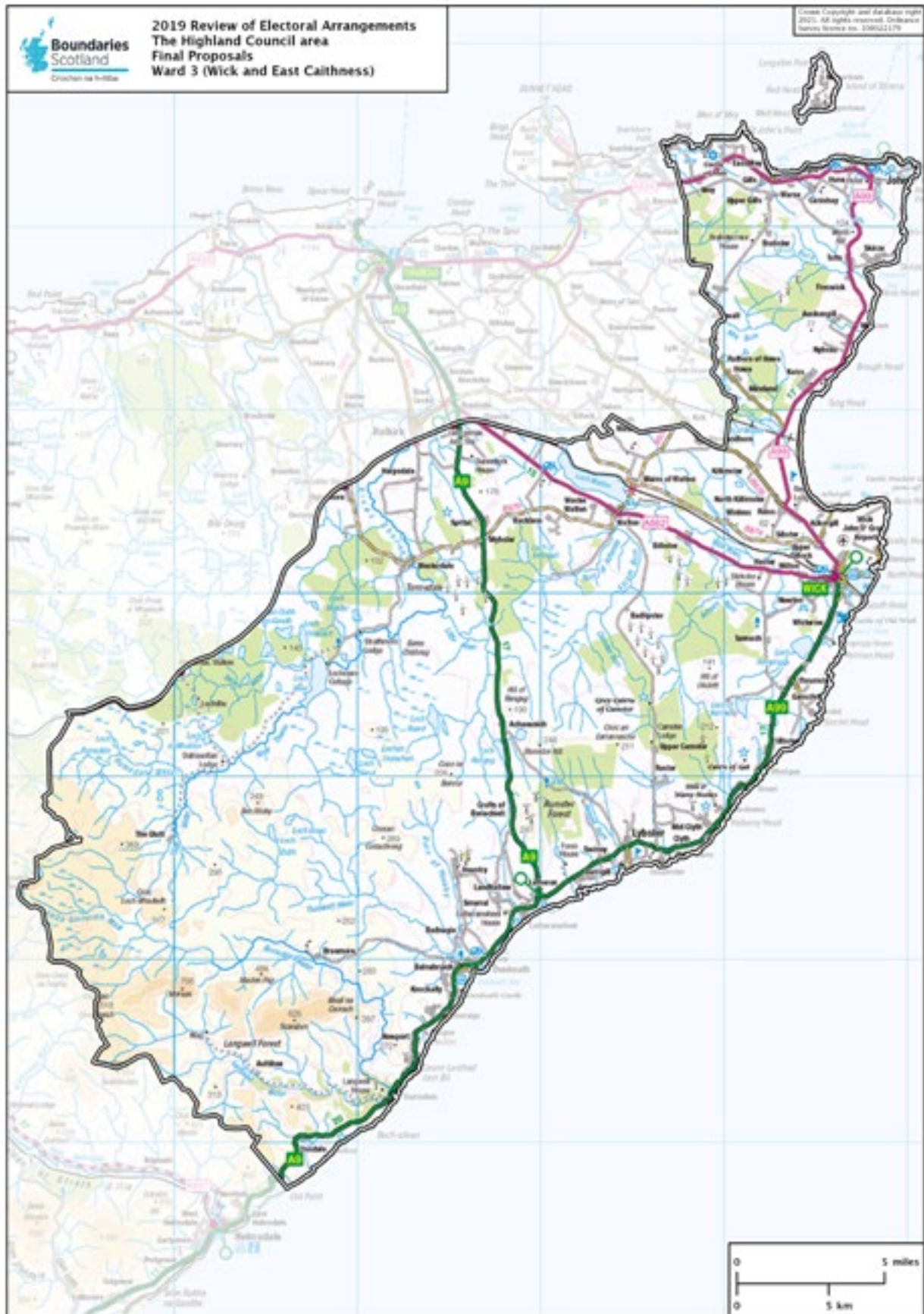
Ward 2 Thurso and Northwest Caithness – 4 councillors

Our proposals retain the existing Thurso and Northwest Caithness ward, with the name, boundary and number of councillors unchanged. Councillors in this ward are forecast to represent 6.3% fewer electors than absolute parity would require.



Ward 3 Wick and East Caithness – 4 councillors

Our proposals align the existing Wick and East Caithness ward with the Caithness–Sutherland county boundary, with the name and number of councillors unchanged. Councillors in this ward are forecast to represent 7.8% fewer electors than absolute parity would require.



Ward 5 Wester Ross and Lochalsh – 3 councillors

Our proposals create a similar ward boundary to the existing Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh ward but transfer Strathpeffer to a Dingwall and Seaforth ward. Councillors in this ward are forecast to represent 3.0% fewer electors than absolute parity would require.



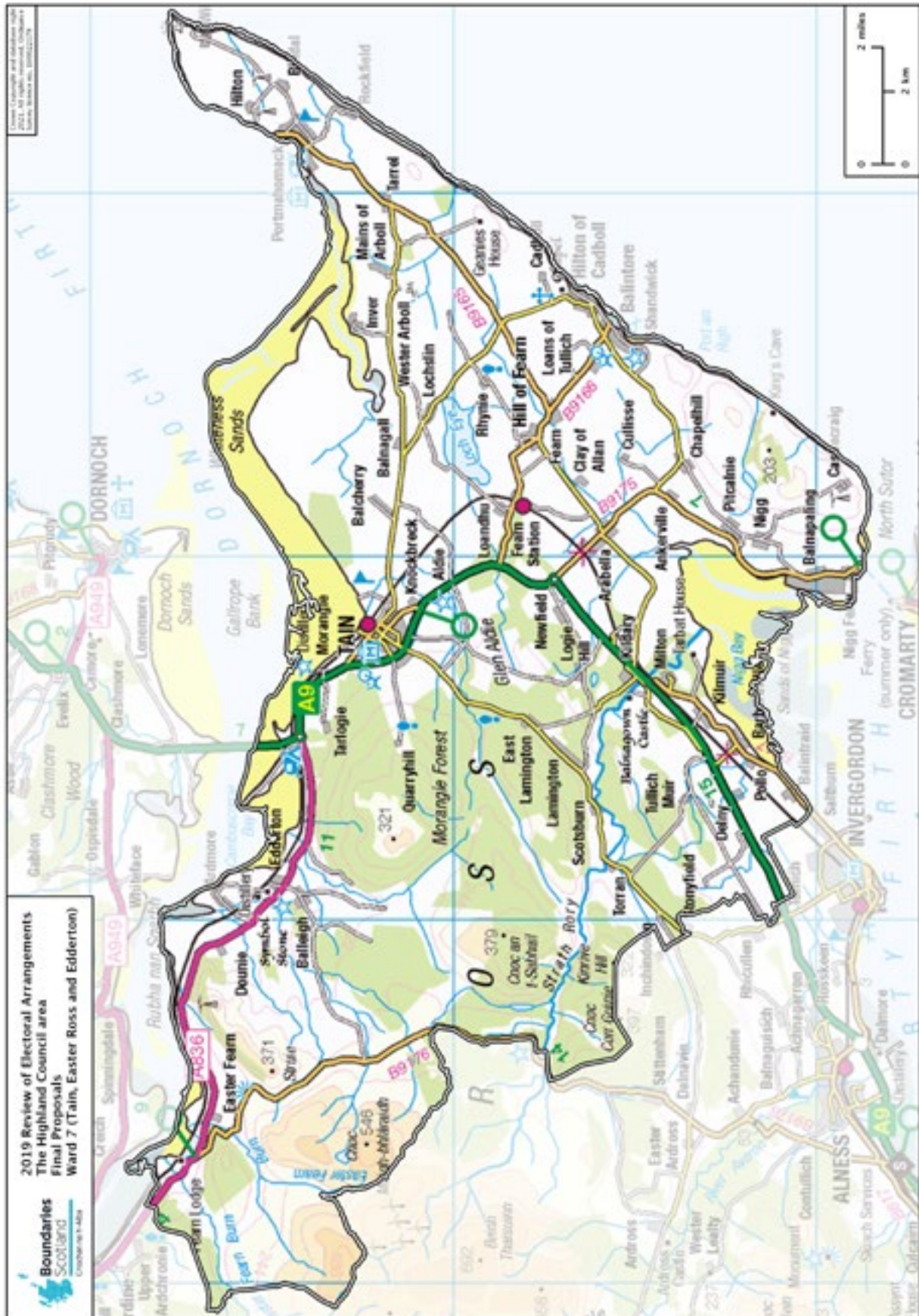
Ward 6 Cromarty Firth – 4 councillors

Our proposals retain the existing Cromarty Firth ward, with the name, boundary and number of councillors unchanged. Councillors in this ward are forecast to represent 6.5% fewer electors than absolute parity would require.



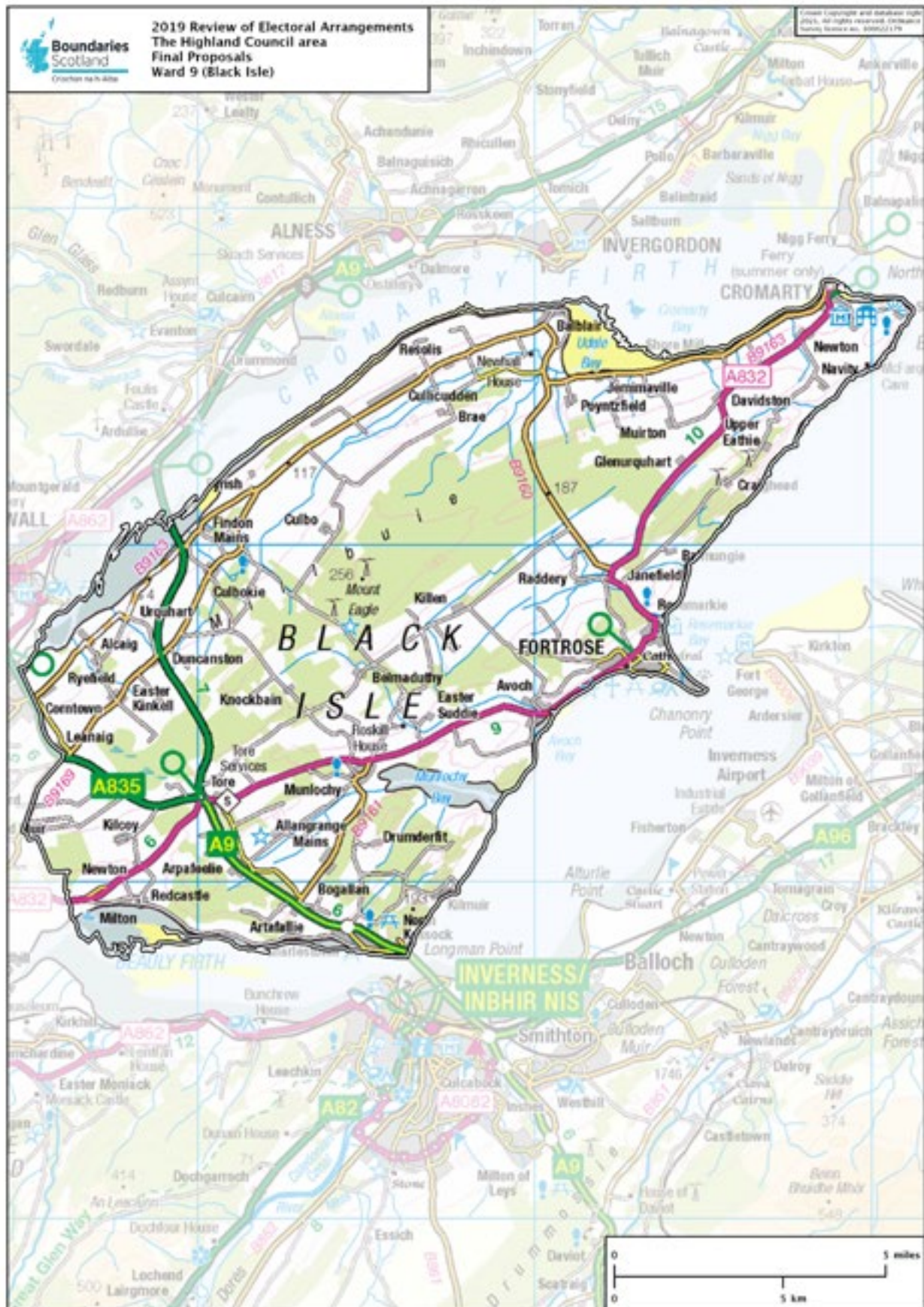
Ward 7 Tain, Easter Ross and Edderton – 3 councillors

Our proposals amend the existing Tain and Easter Ross ward with the addition of Edderton. Councillors in this ward are forecast to represent 7.3% fewer electors than absolute parity would require.



Ward 9 Black Isle – 3 councillors

Our proposals make a minor change to the existing Black Isle ward boundary and revert to the ward boundary in use from 2007 to 2017. Councillors in this ward are forecast to represent 13.6% more electors than absolute parity would require.



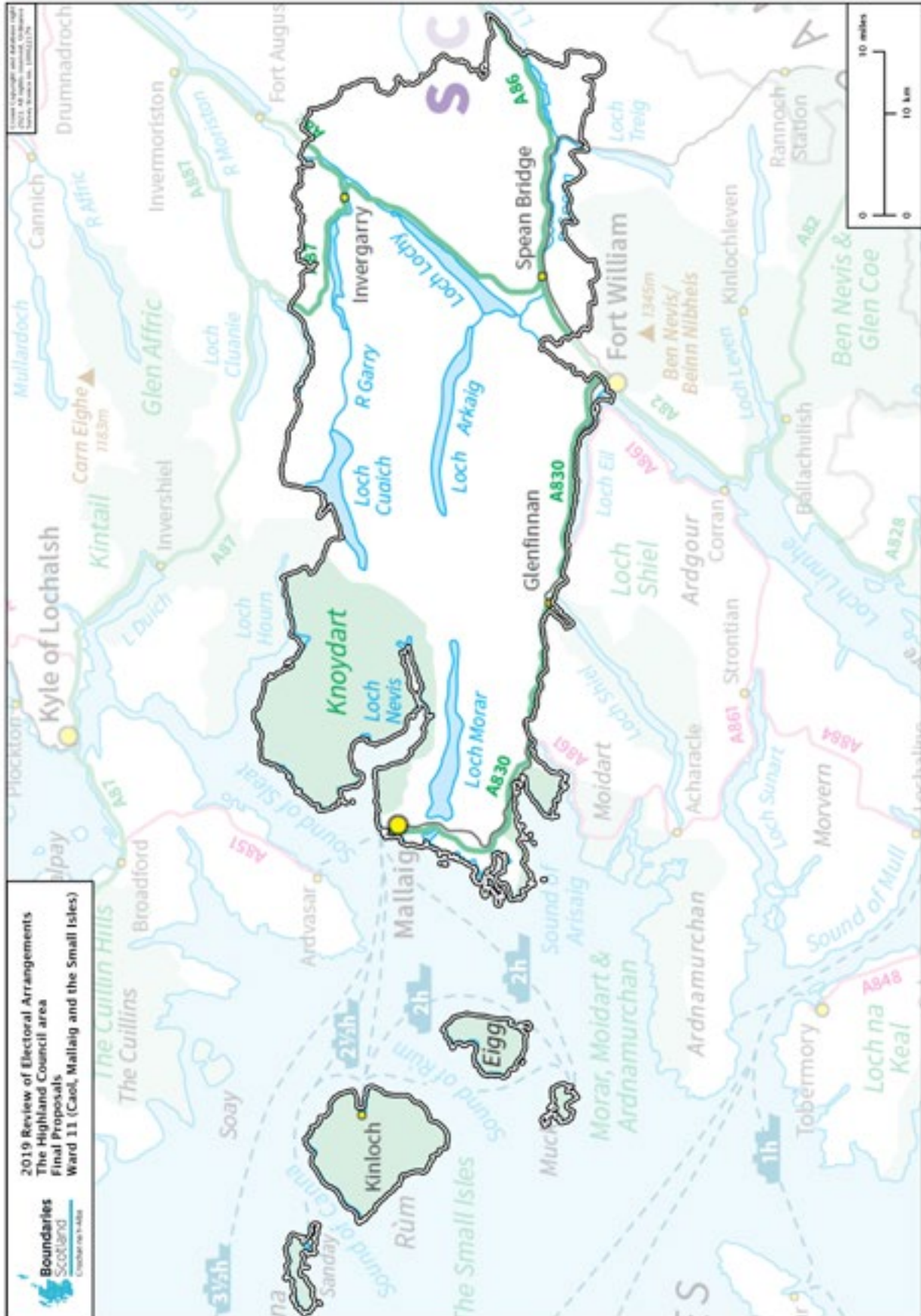
Ward 10 Eilean a' Chèo – 3 councillors

Our proposals retain the boundary and name of the existing Eilean a' Chèo ward. Councillors in this ward are forecast to represent 8.6% more electors than absolute parity would require.



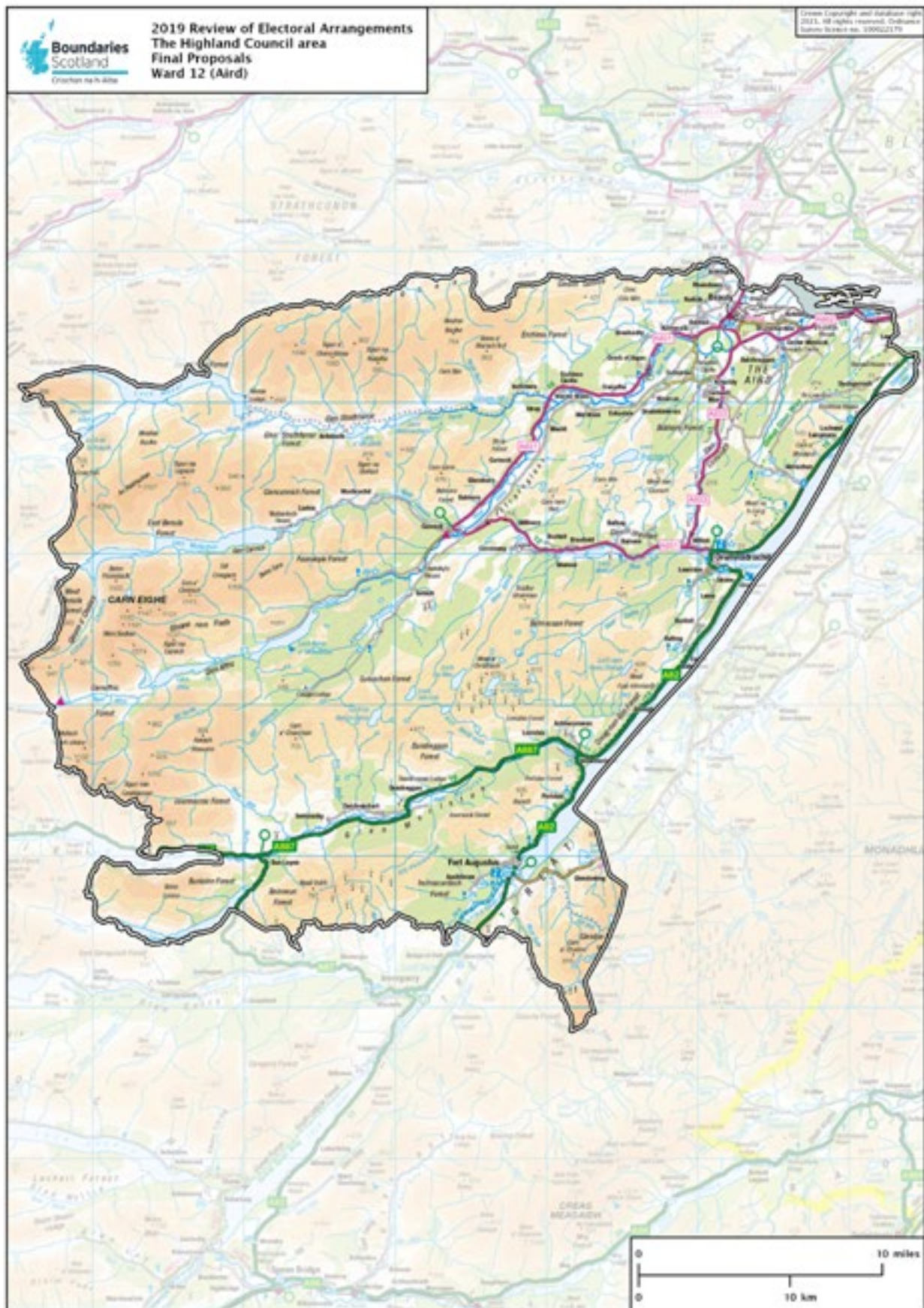
Ward 11 Caol, Mallaig and the Small Isles – 3 councillors

Our proposals make a minor change to the existing Caol and Mallaig ward boundary at Knoydart. The ward name is amended from the existing Caol and Mallaig to Caol, Mallaig and the Small Isles, to recognise the island communities of Canna, Eigg, Muck and Rum within the ward. Councillors in this ward are forecast to represent 6.4% fewer electors than absolute parity would require.



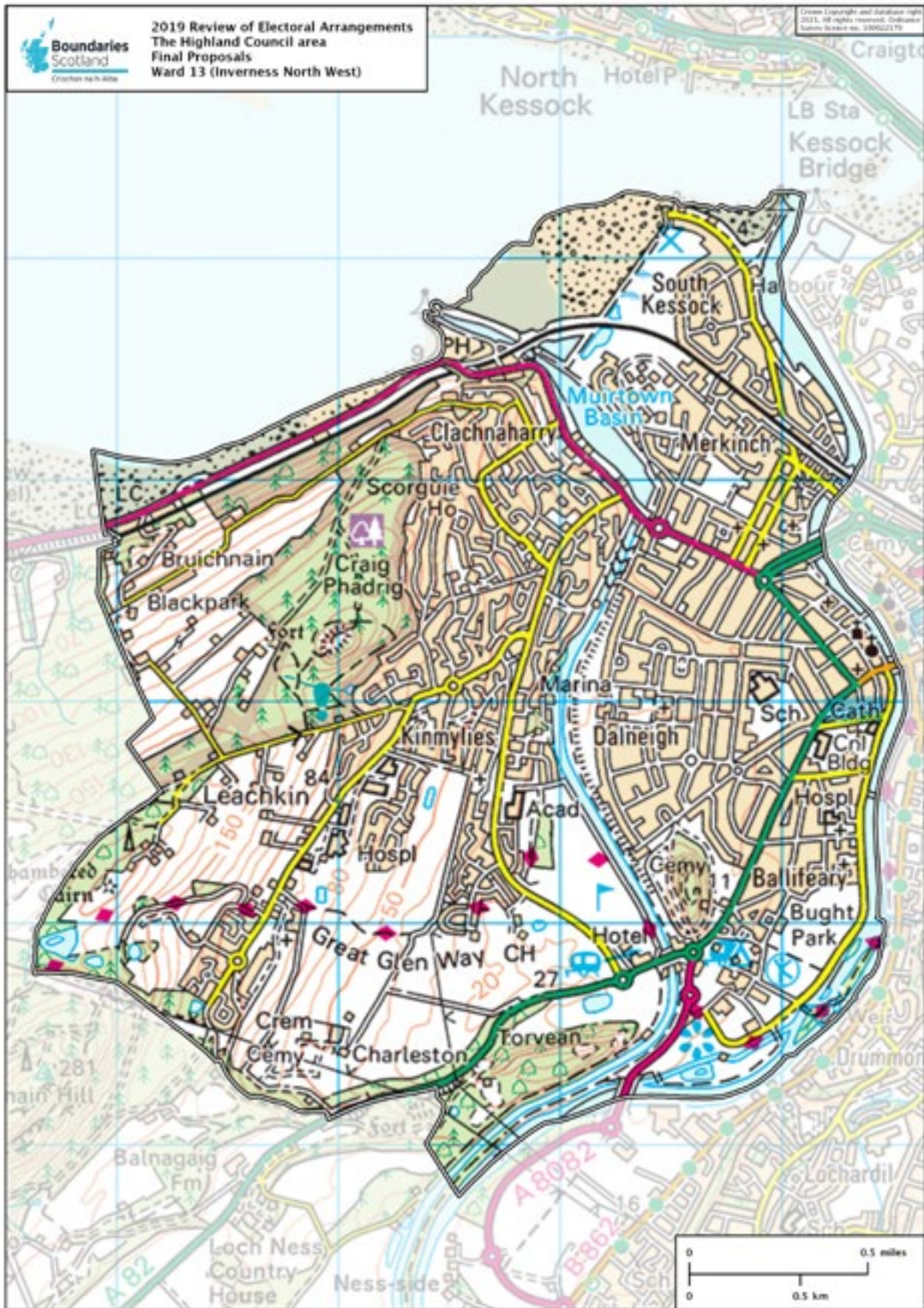
Ward 12 Aird – 3 councillors

Our proposals follow the existing Aird and Loch Ness ward boundary to the west of Loch Ness but the ward's eastern boundary follows the centre of Loch Ness to create a more easily identifiable ward boundary. Councillors in this ward are forecast to represent 7.3% more electors than absolute parity would require.



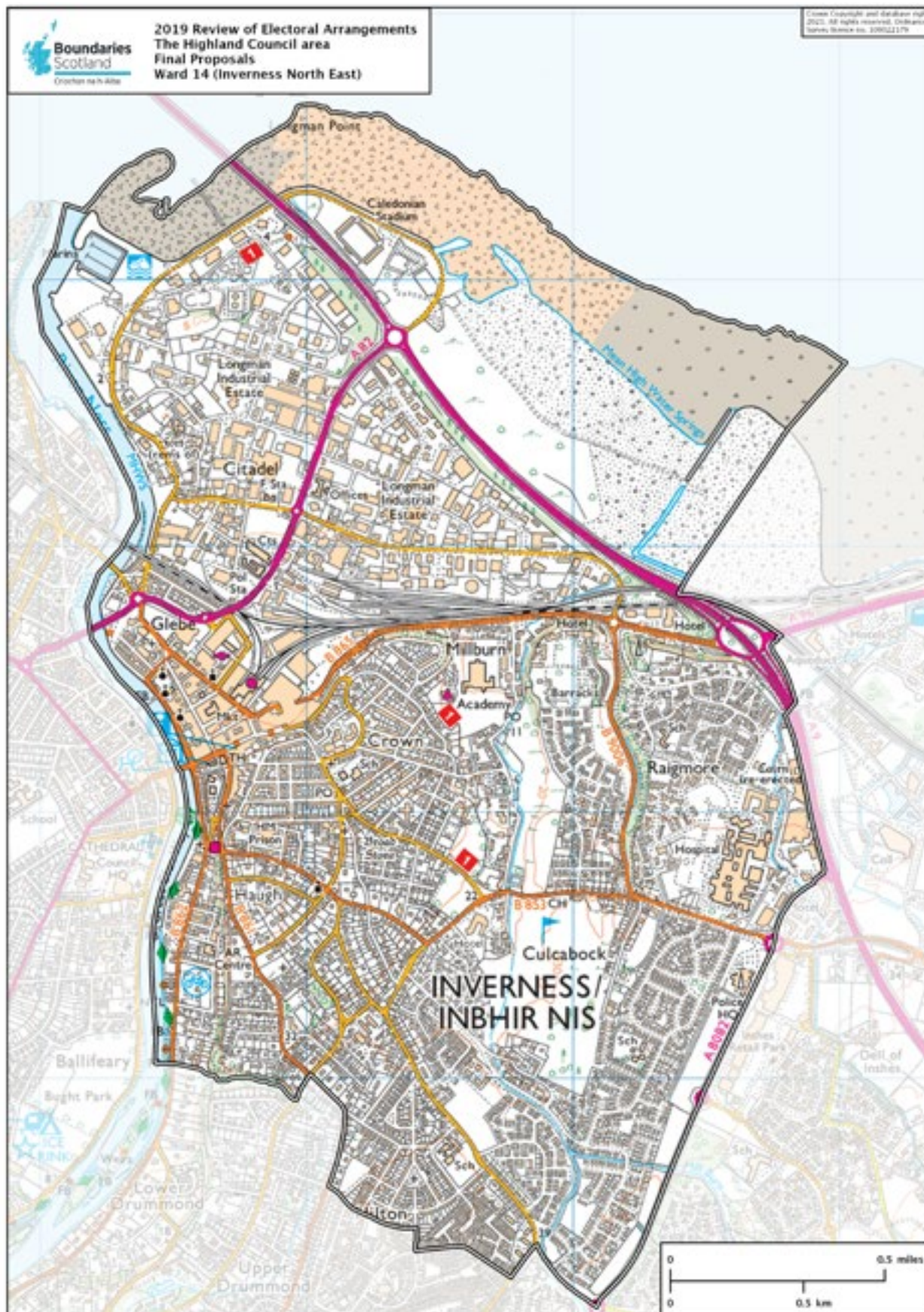
Ward 13 Inverness North West – 5 councillors

Our proposals contain the whole of the existing Inverness West ward and part of the existing Inverness Central ward. The ward boundary follows the River Ness to create a more easily identifiable ward boundary. Councillors in this ward are forecast to represent 11.0% more electors than absolute parity would require.



Ward 14 Inverness North East - 4 councillors

Our proposals contain most of the existing Inverness Millburn ward, except Inverness Retail and Business Park, and part of the existing Inverness Central ward. The ward boundary follows the River Ness to create a more easily identifiable ward boundary. Councillors in this ward are forecast to represent 5.6% fewer electors than absolute parity would require.



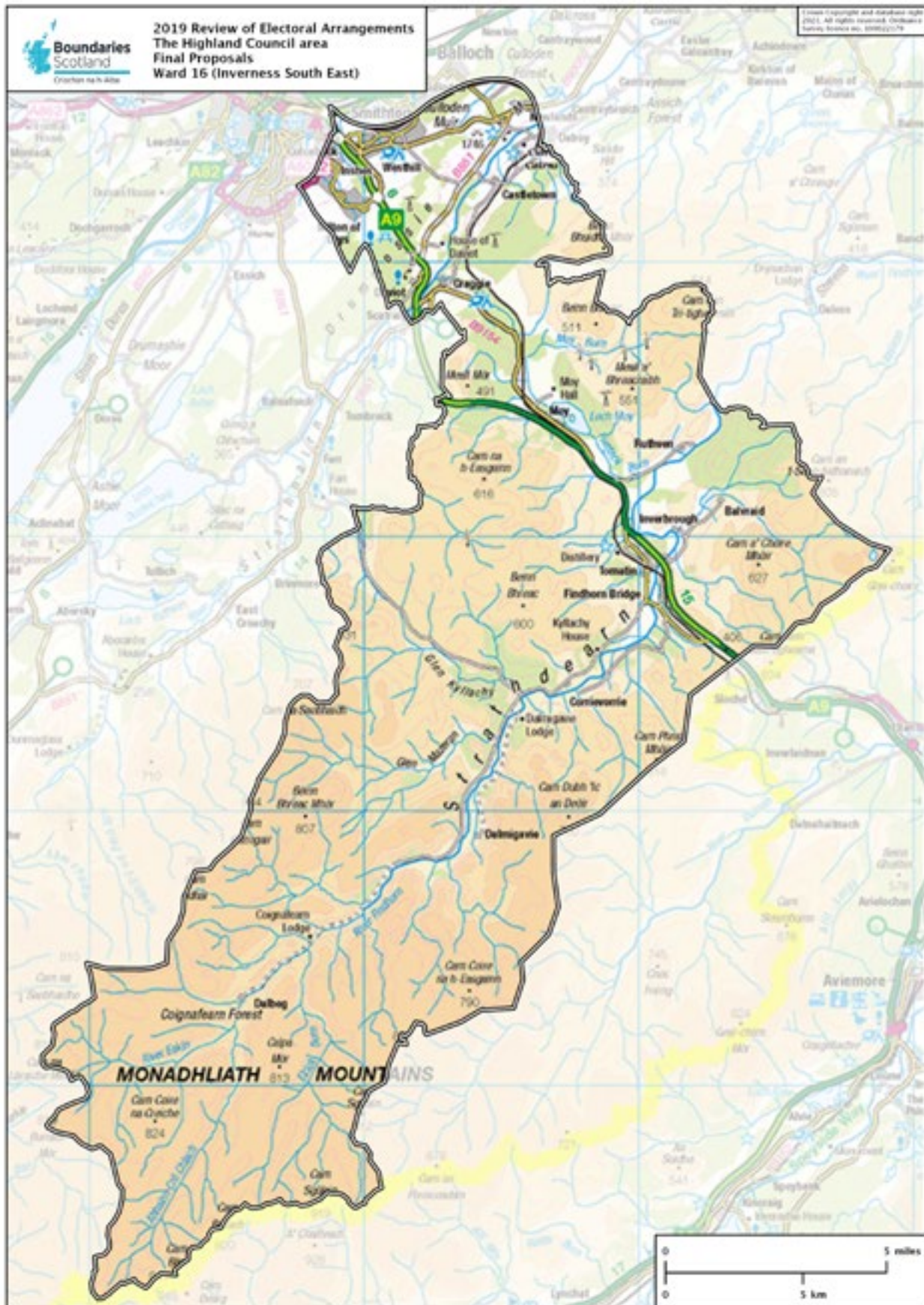
Ward 15 Inverness South West – 5 councillors

Our proposals extend the existing Inverness Ness-Side ward southwards and include the area to the east of Loch Ness. The ward's western boundary now follows the centre of Loch Ness reflecting the boundary further north in the River Ness and creates a more easily identifiable ward boundary. Councillors in this ward are forecast to represent 0.5% fewer electors than absolute parity would require.



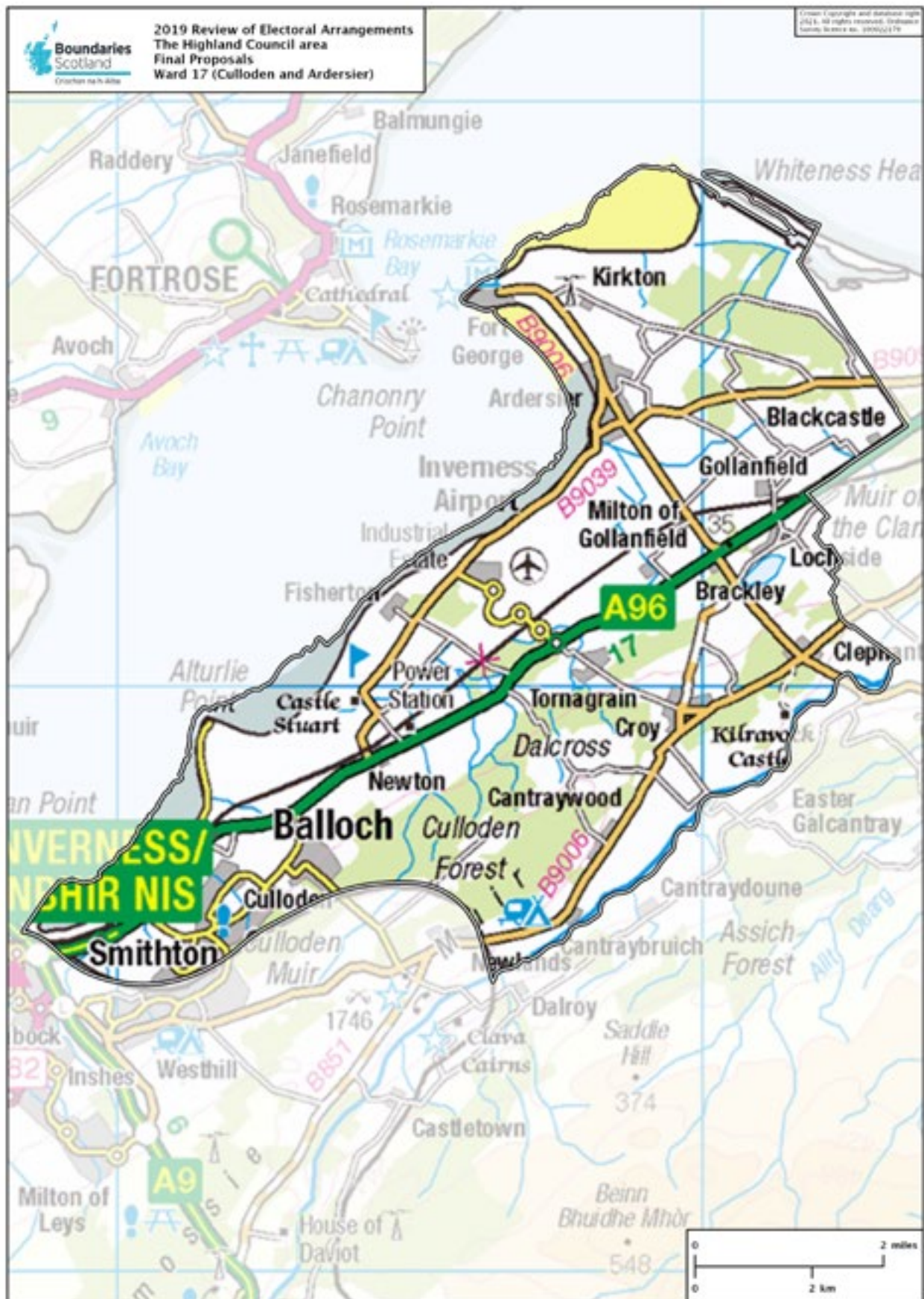
Ward 16 Inverness South East – 4 councillors

Our proposals retain most of the existing Inverness South ward, except for an area to the west of Fairways Golf Course in Inverness. Councillors in this ward are forecast to represent 2.6% fewer electors than absolute parity would require.



Ward 17 Culloden and Ardersier – 3 councillors

Our proposals retain the existing Culloden and Ardersier ward with the exception of the Inverness Retail and Business Park. Councillors in this ward are forecast to represent 54.2% more electors than absolute parity would require.



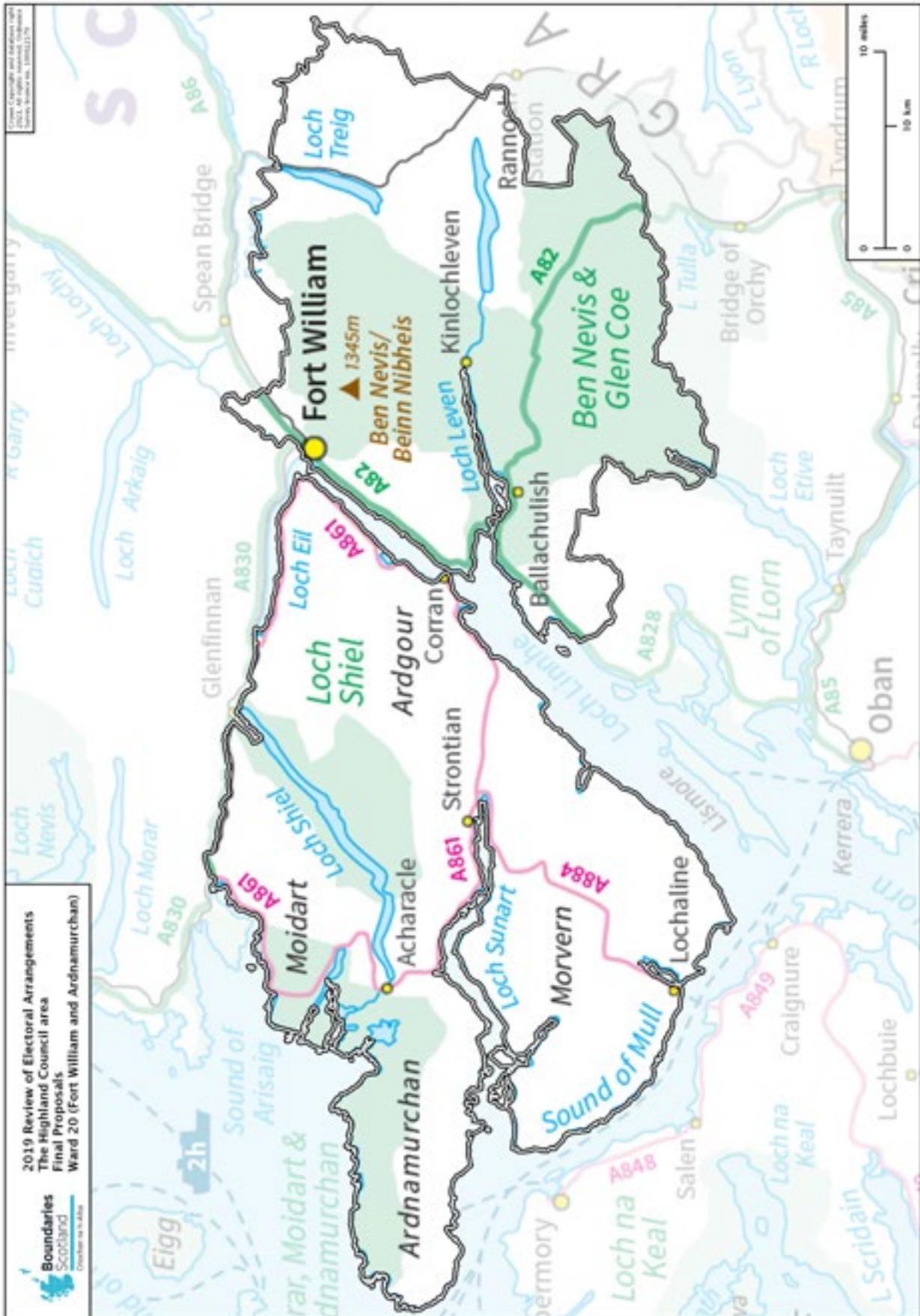
Ward 19 Badenoch and Strathspey – 4 councillors

Our proposals retain the name and number of councillors in the existing Badenoch and Strathspey ward. We have amended the boundary in a small area at Laggan to follow the Cairngorm National Park boundary. Councillors in this ward are forecast to represent 11.0% more electors than absolute parity would require.



Ward 20 Fort William and Ardnamurchan – 4 councillors

Our proposals retain the existing Fort William and Ardnamurchan ward, with the name, boundary and number of councillors to remain unchanged. Councillors in this ward are forecast to represent 15.9% fewer electors than absolute parity would require.



Part 2 Background

Who we are

3. Boundaries Scotland¹ is an independent, non-political statutory body responsible for carrying out reviews of councillor numbers and electoral wards for council areas.
4. Under the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (as amended) we undertake reviews to ensure effective and convenient local government and electoral fairness, which means that each councillor should represent broadly the same number of electors. Councillors represent electoral areas called wards.
5. The Commission is also responsible for carrying out reviews of council area boundaries and of constituencies and regions for the Scottish Parliament.

Why we conduct electoral reviews

6. We conduct electoral reviews at intervals of no more than 15 years and take account of the factors set out in the 1973 Act (as amended by subsequent legislation). These say we must ensure that the number of electors per councillor in each ward are as nearly as may be the same. Subject to this, we must have regard to local ties that would be broken by fixing a particular boundary and to the desirability of fixing boundaries that are easily identifiable. Of these, local ties are more important.
7. We may depart from the strict application of electoral parity to reflect special geographical considerations.
8. The population of any council area is constantly changing, with people moving into or out of areas as well as within the same area. As a result of these changes, some councillors may represent considerably more or fewer electors than others. Such variations in levels of representation are one of the reasons that we carry out electoral reviews.
9. This Review of The Highland Council area is required under section 20 of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018. This Act recognises the importance of the Scottish islands and the particular opportunities and challenges that apply to them. It offers additional flexibility allowing us to create wards that elect one or two councillors in wards which contain inhabited islands as well as the two three, four or five councillor wards permitted elsewhere in Scotland following the amendments made to section 1 of the Local Governance (Scotland) Act 2004 by section 4 of the Scottish Elections (Reform) Act 2020 which took effect from 14 May 2021.
10. The Highland Council area was last reviewed during our 5th Reviews of Electoral Arrangements which reported in 2016. The current electoral arrangements in The Highland Council area were introduced in 2017 and were used for local government elections in May 2017.

¹ We conducted this Review as the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland but have submitted our final recommendations and report to Ministers as Boundaries Scotland following the commencement of the relevant section of Scottish Elections (Reform) Act 2020. Part 4 of the Act amended our name to reflect our added responsibilities for reviewing Scottish Parliament boundaries.

How we work

Effective and convenient local government

11. Effective and convenient local government is the fundamental consideration for proposals arising from any of our reviews.
12. Among the factors we recognise as contributing to effective and convenient local government are:
 - the ability of councils to manage and deliver all of the services they are responsible for in an efficient manner;
 - the ability of individual councillors to carry out their functions including representing the residents in their area; and
 - the ability of residents to access services and participate in local democracy readily and conveniently.

Determining councillor numbers

13. We agreed at our meeting of 4 December 2017 to adopt the same methodology for councillor numbers for this Review as that used during our 5th Reviews of Electoral Arrangements. At that meeting we considered Paper 2429 (Islands Review: councillor numbers methodology) and agreed that, building on our research into councillor role and workload, we were broadly comfortable with the councillor number methodology, though would give further consideration to the role of councils in suggesting what its number of councillors should be and why. We agreed to consider a degree of flexibility over the number of councillors a council may have in order to assist with ward design, noting that we used such flexibility a number of times during the 5th Reviews.
14. We decide the number of councillors for each council area by placing it into a category with other similar councils. The categories we use are based on available data on population distribution and socio-economic conditions from the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD). This Index includes a range of factors including data on: income, employment, education, health, access to services, crime and housing. The categorisation reflects the characteristics of the council area as a whole and the ratio for each category applies across the whole council area to ensure electoral fairness and compliance with the legislation. In determining the appropriate ratio for each category we also have regard to the minimum and maximum number of councillors required for a council to conduct its business and discharge its duties effectively.
15. Reflecting the process outlined above, for this Review we have applied the same ratio of councillors to electors of 1:2,800 in The Highland Council area as we applied during our 5th Reviews.
16. We are aware that a large change of councillor numbers might be disruptive so we incorporated a 10% change rule. This means that we will not propose increasing or decreasing the total number of councillors in any council area by more than 10% unless there is a strong case for doing so.
17. When we come to propose designs for wards we may move away from the exact number of councillors proposed by the methodology, if doing so means creating a pattern of wards that better meets the needs of the council area for effective and convenient local government.

Determining ward boundaries

18. Once we have determined the proposals for the number of councillors, the next stage of the review is to consider proposals for ward boundaries and councillors per ward.

Councillors per ward

19. As mentioned previously, for this Review each ward within The Highland Council area can return between one and five councillors if it contains an inhabited island in whole or part and between two and five councillors for a mainland ward. Use of 2- and 5-member wards throughout Scotland, in addition to the existing 3- or 4-member wards, was introduced by the Scottish Elections (Reform) Act 2020 from 14 May 2021.
20. The Bill that became the 2020 Act had not been enacted at the point we commenced our review. However, we were aware of the progress of the Bill and were open to use of a 5-member ward if the ward design process had suggested this would help meet the legislative requirements of the review.
21. The choice of the number of councillors for each ward depends on the overall pattern of wards we feel best meets all the legislative requirements which apply.

Electoral parity

22. One of the principal aims of a review is to ensure a good level of electoral parity. This means, as far as possible, having the same number of electors per councillor in all wards of a council area. The legislation gives priority to electoral parity over other factors in ward design so we cannot use different ratios of electors to councillors within a council area.
23. Applying absolute electoral parity for a review, the number of electors for each ward in The Highland Council area would be:
 - 1 councillor ward = 2,800 electors
 - 2 councillor ward = 5,600 electors
 - 3 councillor ward = 8,400 electors
 - 4 councillor ward = 11,200 electors
 - 5 councillor ward = 14,000 electors
24. Best practice and previous reviews suggest an electorate within 10% of absolute electoral parity is acceptable. This is also suggested by the Venice Commission's 'Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters'². This means, for example, a 3-councillor ward could have between 7,560 and 9,240 electors, while a 4-councillor ward could have between 10,080 and 12,320 electors. This is intended to provide a reasonable degree of flexibility in most circumstances.
25. In designing wards, we aim to allow effective and convenient local government and to take account of local circumstances. We will consider moving away from electoral parity within the terms of the legislation if we consider special geographical considerations apply.

Special geographical considerations

26. We can move away from strict adherence to electoral parity for a ward where there are special geographical considerations that make it desirable to do so. Such considerations include areas where transport and communication links are slow, infrequent or subject to interference by the weather and seasons. Examples include distinct island communities, sparsely populated areas and remote areas.

² ['Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters', Venice Commission, 2002](#)

Electorate change

27. When aiming for electoral parity we take into account the likely change in the number or distribution of the local government electorate over a five-year period from the start of the Review.
28. To do this, we collected data from The Highland Council on expected new residential development and demolition within its area over the five-year period. Using this data, combined with data on the average number of electors per household in the area, and population projections for the same period from the National Records of Scotland, we calculate a forecast of electorate for the five-year period.

Local ties

29. When designing wards, we aim to reflect local ties, and in particular we aim to avoid breaking local ties. According to the legislation, however, electoral parity must outweigh local ties.
30. For some, local ties could be defined by their community council area, school catchment area, or historical areas. For island communities we may consider transport links to the mainland or other islands.
31. Major roads could be seen to be the focus of an area if they are the location of shops or community facilities which people visit regularly. Alternatively, roads or rivers or other natural features could be seen as physical barriers marking the boundary between different communities. In sparsely populated areas, we may have to combine two or more distinct and separate communities within a single ward. Here we would also consider how the communities interact with each other.

Easily identifiable boundaries

32. The legislation requires us to take into account the desirability of fixing boundaries that are and will remain easily identifiable.
33. In urban areas, a case can be made to define ward boundaries along roads since they are likely to remain clearly identifiable, and are unlikely to be straddled by new dwellings. As an alternative, drawing a boundary along the rear fences between houses will result in neighbours across a street being in the same ward, which may better reflect local ties.
34. In rural areas, natural features may be appropriate where a ward boundary is required. Field boundaries may also be used while recognising that they may be subject to change, particularly in the case of fences. In upland areas, a watershed may be an appropriate ward boundary feature, particularly along narrow, well-defined ridges.
35. Where there is a conflict between the desirability of fixing boundaries that are and will remain easily identifiable and local ties which would be broken by the fixing of any particular boundary, the legislation requires us to give greater weight to local ties.

Ward names

36. When considering ward names we may use an existing ward name where there is a successor ward that is recognisably similar and aim to propose ward names that are reasonably short rather than attempt to describe an area exhaustively. We also welcome local views when proposing ward names.

Consultation

37. As required by the legislation, we consulted The Highland Council for a period of two months before consulting publicly.
38. All responses to our consultations are fully considered by the Commission. When considering consultation responses from the Council and others we took full account of our obligations in terms of the legislative framework within which we work.
39. This means that even a well-articulated proposal for change may not be accepted if it does not allow compliance with the legislation (either as it stands or in light of any forthcoming amendments). For example, suggestions which would require change to boundaries between council areas cannot be taken forward as part of a review of electoral arrangements. We are also unable to pursue suggestions which disregard the need to consider parity across a council area as a whole.
40. Where suggestions do comply with the legislative framework we look to see the weight of the argument and supporting evidence. For example, suggestions for alternative boundaries which are felt to better reflect community ties will carry more weight if there is supporting information explaining the community issues involved and any local support that has been canvassed. Evidence in support of a more easily identified boundary might include explanation of the suggested boundary features and an explanation of why it is a feature that divides rather than links communities. Evidence in support of special geographical considerations would include explanation of the factors affecting councillors' representation of and engagement with ward residents.

Reporting arrangements

41. Our Final Proposals arising from this Review are to be laid before the Scottish Parliament and may be implemented by regulations made by Scottish Ministers (which, depending on the content of the proposals, may be subject to the negative or affirmative procedure) under revised procedures introduced by the Scottish Elections (Reform) Act 2020.
42. We have planned our work so that our proposals from this Review will, if implemented in accordance with those revised procedures, be ready for the local government elections expected in May 2022.

Part 3 Conducting the Review

Review Stages

43. We followed the timetable laid out below for this Review.

Stage	Date
Commission formally announced start of the Review.	January 2019
Commission met with The Highland Council to provide background to the Reviews and discuss its approach.	October 2019
Commission developed proposals on councillor numbers and ward boundaries.	February 2020 – April 2020
2-month statutory consultation with the Council on councillor numbers and ward boundaries.	July 2020 – September 2020
12-week public consultation on councillor numbers and ward boundaries.	November 2020 – January 2021
Commission considered all comments submitted and developed its Final Proposals.	From March 2021
Final Proposals and Report submitted to Scottish Ministers.	June 2021

Consultation

44. We consulted with The Highland Council on our proposals for a period of over two months from 16 July to 30 September 2020.

45. We considered how best to publicise our 12-week public consultation and we: issued a news release; placed newspaper advertisements in the *Inverness Courier*, *Highland News*, *Ross-shire Journal*, *North Star*, *Strathspey & Badenoch Herald*, *John O’Groat Journal*, *Caithness Courier*, *Northern Times*, *Press & Journal*, *Oban Times* and *Ullapool News*; wrote to over 90 Community Councils; sent posters and further information regarding the Review to 20 display points (such as community centres and libraries); and paid for social media advertising on Facebook and Twitter. The materials encouraged those interested to respond to the consultation via the Commission’s consultation site. Our public consultation ran from 4 November 2020 to 26 January 2021.

Existing electoral arrangements

46. At the start of this Review, The Highland Council area was represented by 74 councillors in ten 3-member wards and eleven 4-member wards.

47. The electorates and associated variation from electoral parity for the existing electoral arrangements are shown in the table below.

48. The 5-year forecast electorate in The Highland Council area shows an increase from 183,541 in 2018 to 185,943 in 2024.

Existing electoral arrangements						
Ward No.	Ward Name	Cllrs	Electorate (Dec 2018)	Variation from electoral parity %	Forecast Electorate (2024)	Forecast variation from electoral parity %
1	North, West and Central Sutherland	3	4,833	-35.0%	4,578	-39.3%
2	Thurso and Northwest Caithness	4	10,083	1.6%	9,543	-5.1%
3	Wick and East Caithness	4	9,815	-1.1%	9,389	-6.6%
4	East Sutherland and Edderton	3	6,263	-15.8%	6,183	-18.0%
5	Wester Ross, Strathpeffer and Lochalsh	4	9,895	-0.3%	9,441	-6.1%
6	Cromarty Firth	4	9,643	-2.8%	9,529	-5.2%
7	Tain and Easter Ross	3	7,050	-5.3%	6,758	-10.4%
8	Dingwall and Seaforth	4	10,063	1.4%	10,490	4.4%
9	Black Isle	3	8,503	14.3%	8,314	10.3%
10	Eilean a' Chèò	4	8,579	-13.5%	8,299	-17.4%
11	Caol and Mallaig	3	7,003	-5.9%	7,150	-5.1%
12	Aird and Loch Ness	4	9,716	-2.1%	9,585	-4.6%
13	Inverness West	3	8,178	9.9%	8,526	13.1%
14	Inverness Central	3	8,641	16.1%	8,224	9.1%
15	Inverness Ness-Side	3	8,151	9.5%	9,257	22.8%
16	Inverness Millburn	3	7,634	2.6%	7,494	-0.6%
17	Culloden and Ardersier	3	8,240	10.7%	11,297	49.9%
18	Nairn and Cawdor	4	10,425	5.1%	10,047	0.0%
19	Inverness South	4	11,543	16.3%	11,962	19.0%
20	Badenoch and Strathspey	4	10,637	7.2%	11,310	12.5%
21	Fort William and Ardnamurchan	4	8,646	-12.9%	8,567	-14.8%
		74	183,541		185,943	

49. The existing electoral arrangements in The Highland Council area contain eleven wards with forecast variation from electoral parity of 10% or more: Badenoch and Strathspey (12.5%); Black Isle (10.3%); Culloden and Ardersier (49.9%); East Sutherland and Edderton (-18.0%); Eilean a' Chèo (-17.4%); Fort William and Ardnamurchan (-14.8%); Inverness South (19.0%); Inverness West (13.1%); Inverness Ness-Side (22.8%); North, West and Central Sutherland (-39.3%); and Tain and Easter Ross (-10.4%);
50. The 5th Reviews' methodology placed Highland in the same category of electors per councillor, as one of the most rural council areas with below average deprivation, with a ratio of 2,800:1.
51. We adopted the same methodology for determining councillor numbers as we had used during our 5th Reviews which divided the total electorate by 2,800 and applied a 10% cap on change, which resulted in 72 councillors for The Highland Council area. The 5th Reviews recognised special geographic circumstances in the area during ward design and our final proposals then recommended 74 councillors.
52. Applying the Commission's methodology to the existing councillor numbers of 74 would result in 67 councillors and could be seen as a significant change in councillor numbers within a short 5-year period (80 councillors in early 2017 to 67 by 2022). We therefore agreed to apply our methodology to the higher baseline of 80 councillors which was the number applicable before the 5th Reviews.

Initial Proposals – Consultation with The Highland Council

53. We considered five options for our Initial Proposals at our meetings of 4 February 2020 and 7 April 2020, (Papers 2520 and 2527). The option we selected:
- took account of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 and retained Eilean a' Chèo as an island ward, and renamed Caol and Mallaig to include a reference to the Small Isles and so recognise the island communities within the ward. We considered special geographical circumstances as they apply to Skye and concluded that the level of forecast variation from electoral parity with 4 councillors (-20% with a total of 72 councillors) was not justifiable and therefore proposed a 3 member Eilean a' Chèo ward, a reduction of one member from the existing ward;
 - took account of the Scottish Elections (Reform) Act that allowed the use of 2-member and 5-member wards to design wards that considered local ties in Caithness and Dingwall and created more easily identifiable ward boundaries in Inverness and to the south of Inverness;
 - made no changes to the boundaries of six of the existing wards, Badenoch and Strathspey, Caol, Mallaig and the Small Isles (previously named Caol and Mallaig), Cromarty Firth; Eilean a' Chèo; Fort William and Ardnamurchan, and, Nairn and Cawdor;
 - reduced variation from electoral parity in Caithness and Sutherland whilst recognising historical boundaries in the area;
 - considered special geographic circumstances in relation to variation from electoral parity in the proposed Fort William and Ardnamurchan ward due to its remoteness and poor transport links;
 - recognised local community ties in the Black Isle, Thurso and Wick; and
 - took account of the expected electorate growth in the proposed Culloden and Ardersier ward.
54. We agreed to consult The Highland Council on an electoral arrangement which proposed 72 councillors with two 2-member wards, seven 3-member wards, eight 4-member wards and three 5-member wards.

55. The electorates and associated variation from parity for the Initial Proposals council consultation are shown in the table below.

Initial Proposals for consultation with The Highland Council						
Ward No.	Ward Name	Cllrs	Electorate (Dec 2018)	Variation from electoral parity %	Forecast Electorate (2024)	Forecast Variation from electoral parity %
1	Sutherland	4	10,791	5.8	10,436	1.0
2	Caithness	3	8,489	11.0	8,046	3.9
3	Wick	2	5,484	7.6	5,290	2.4
4	Thurso	2	5,925	16.2	5,596	8.3
5	Wester Ross and Lochalsh	3	7,388	-3.4	7,024	-9.3
6	Cromarty Firth	4	9,643	-5.4	9,529	-7.8
7	Tain, Easter Ross and Edderton	3	7,355	-3.8	7,083	-8.6
8	Dingwall and Seaforth	5	12,178	-4.5	12,538	-2.9
9	Black Isle	3	8,895	16.3	8,683	12.1
10	Eilean a' Chèò	3	8,579	12.2	8,299	7.1
11	Caol, Mallaig and the Small Isles	3	7,003	-8.4	7,150	-7.7
12	Aird	3	8,250	7.9	8,187	5.7
13	Inverness North West	5	14,091	10.6	14,140	9.5
14	Inverness North East	4	10,081	-1.1	9,620	-6.9
15	Inverness South West	5	11,250	-11.7	12,691	-1.7
16	Inverness South East	4	9,910	-2.8	9,926	-3.9
17	Culloden and Ardersier	4	8,521	-16.4	11,781	14.0
18	Nairn and Cawdor	4	10,425	2.2	10,047	-2.7
19	Badenoch and Strathspey	4	10,637	4.3	11,310	9.5
20	Fort William and Ardnamurchan	4	8,646	-15.2	8,567	-17.1
		72	183,541		185,943	

56. We consulted on our Initial Proposals with The Highland Council for a two-month period from 16 July to 30 September 2020.

57. The Highland Council did not respond to this formal consultation. We were aware that our proposals were discussed at The Highland Council meeting of 10 September 2020 where members agreed to “reject these proposals in their entirety as they stand” and “approach the Scottish Government to review the remit of the Boundary Commission in regard to rural Authorities to lift the cap on total councillor numbers and provide for greater discretion in the application of parity ratios”. We decided that there were no grounds to amend our Initial Proposals for our public consultation. This was agreed at our meeting of 12 October 2020 (Paper 2535).

Initial Proposals – Public Consultation

58. Our Initial Proposals were unchanged from the public consultation and are as described above under Initial Proposals – Consultation with The Highland Council.
59. The public consultation on our Initial Proposals for The Highland Council area ran for a 12-week period from 4 November 2020 to 26 January 2021.
60. During the public consultation we publicised the review as outlined in paragraph 45.
61. There were 276 responses, including a petition with over 1,000 signatures, to the public consultation for The Highland Council area.

Final Proposals

62. In developing our Final Proposals we considered carefully all responses received during the public consultation.
63. The majority of responses received: opposed the review; opposed a reduction in councillor numbers in Caithness, Sutherland, Skye and Wester Ross; opposed the proposed ward boundaries in Caithness, Sutherland, Wester Ross and Loch Ness, and, expressed a belief that Inverness was gaining more representation at the expense of rural areas. There was also some support for the proposals particularly where there was no change to the existing electoral arrangements.
64. The Highland Council responded during the public consultation. They opposed the review, rejecting the proposals and stating the Commission should: only conduct a review of inhabited island wards and not mainland wards; adopt the same ratio for determining councillor numbers in island council areas (1:800), in remote and rural areas within Highland; retain a 4-member Skye ward; apply special geographical circumstances consistently across the council area; and retain the existing number of councillors in Caithness and Sutherland.
65. Included in the Council response were comments from individual councillors on each ward which we gave consideration to. There was some support from councillors for our proposed boundaries by: Black Isle; Culloden; Dingwall; Fort William; Inverness; Nairn; Badenoch and Strathspey; and Tain. Councillors also made some minor suggestions which we were able to consider adopting if they took account of the rules under which we work. As a result we have amended the ward boundary by Laggan to follow the Cairngorm National Park boundary and placed Knoydart within a single ward. Our Final Proposals also reverted to the existing Caithness and Sutherland ward boundaries. In other areas there were no compelling arguments presented which persuaded us of alternatives which offered better electoral arrangements in the council area.
66. There were a number of suggestions received that were outwith the legislation for this review. We cannot apply two different ratios of electors per councillor within the same council area because the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (as amended) states we must ensure “the number of electors per councillor in each ward are as nearly as may be the same”. Nor does a review of electoral arrangements consider revision of boundaries between council areas. The Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 states the Commission must undertake the review of electoral arrangements in The Highland Council area as soon as practicable. It was not therefore open to us to delay or defer our review.
67. Responses which opposed the review principally argued that rural areas were losing representation while Inverness was gaining representation. However nearly a half of Highland’s electorate live within Inverness and the Beaully Firth-Moray Firth area and this is reflected in the number of councillors representing this area.

68. In Caithness and Sutherland we noted the weight of opposition against the 2-member Wick and Thurso ward boundaries and the concern expressed over the level of reduction in councillor numbers in a remote and rural part of the council area. While we must have regard to parity and the other legislative factors we concluded that reverting to the existing ward boundaries and allowing for 13 councillors across Caithness and Sutherland rather than 11 in our Initial Proposals offered acceptable electoral arrangements in this area. We could not justify the wide variation from electoral parity of a 3-member North, West and Central Sutherland ward. We have also adopted a suggestion to better reflect the historical county boundary between Caithness and Sutherland. Historically the county boundary had been used as a ward boundary and created a more easily identifiable ward boundary by following a hill-line.
69. In Skye we considered applying special geographical circumstances with a 4-member ward but concluded that Skye's connectivity to the mainland did not justify the level of forecast variation from electoral parity that would arise with 4 councillors (-20%) and therefore proposed a 3-member Eilean a' Chèo ward. Some respondents questioned our 5-year electorate forecasts in Skye. If the electorate of the ward does increase significantly in the future, legislation provides us with the option of an Interim Review to further consider the number of councillors in this ward.
70. In Wester Ross we considered there was some support for placing Strathpeffer within a Dingwall ward. The proposals may break Highland Council's Area Committee boundaries but it would be open to the Council to re-align these with our proposed ward boundaries.
71. In Aird and Loch Ness, while a number of respondents preferred the status quo there were no compelling arguments that persuaded us that we should revert to the existing boundaries with the consequential impacts for ward design in other parts of the council area.
72. In developing our Final Proposals we took full account of the legislative factors governing our work and these are summarised below.

Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 and Scottish Elections (Reform) Act 2020

73. In developing our proposals we recognised the flexibility of the Scottish Elections (Reform) Act 2021 which allowed us to propose 5-member wards by Dingwall and Inverness to reflect community ties and establish easily identifiable boundaries in the wards concerned.
74. Section 17(3) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 requires us to include in our report an explanation of the use of a 2-member ward if that ward does not contain an inhabited island, wholly or in part. The only ward this applies to is ward 1, North, West and Central Sutherland, where we received strong support for retaining the existing ward boundaries. In the interest of respecting community ties we have retained the existing boundaries and propose a 2-member ward to ensure acceptable electoral parity.
75. We had earlier consulted on 2-member wards in Thurso and Wick but reverted to the existing ward boundaries in Caithness following feedback during our public consultation.
76. Our proposals retain Eilean a' Chèo as a single island ward to reflect its island identity. We recognised the inhabited islands of Canna, Eigg, Muck and Rum by naming the ward they are part of "Caol, Mallaig and the Small Isles".

Electoral Parity and Special Geographical Considerations

77. We believe our Final Proposals meet the legislative requirement to ensure that the number of electors per councillor within a council area are as nearly as may be the same.
78. Seven of our proposed wards are over 10% of forecast variation from electoral parity. At the start of the review eleven of the existing wards had forecast variation from electoral parity over 10%.
79. In our Fort William and Ardnamurchan ward we considered special geographical circumstances applied due to its remoteness and poor transport links and we therefore propose to retain four councillors.
80. We had considered a 4-member Culloden and Ardersier ward during our consultations. In reaching our Final Proposals, we noted the very high forecast electorate growth but agreed that a number of factors, including the Covid pandemic, made it likely that that the forecast growth would only be achieved over a longer period than first anticipated and that a 3-member ward was therefore acceptable at this time. If the electorate of the ward does increase substantially in the future, legislation provides us with the option of an Interim Review to further consider the number of councillors in this ward.
81. We considered that Skye's special geographic circumstances did not apply to an extent which could justify the large variation from electoral parity which would result from a 4-member Eilean a' Chèo ward. We noted that some had questioned our electorate forecast for Skye and the legislation provides us with the option of an Interim Review to further consider the number of councillors in this ward if there is a significant increase in electors on Skye.
82. In Sutherland we believed that forecast variation from electoral parity in the proposed North, West and Central Sutherland ward was unacceptably high with a 3-member ward so proposed a 2-member ward. We considered improving electoral parity between the North, West and Central Sutherland ward and East Sutherland ward but could not achieve this without breaking local community ties.

Avoidance of breaking local ties

83. Our proposals retain six of the existing ward boundaries: Cromarty Firth; Eilean a' Chèo; Fort William and Ardnamurchan; Nairn and Cawdor; North, West and Central Sutherland; and Thurso and Northwest Caithness.
84. We retained the existing ward boundaries in Sutherland to maintain local ties in the area.
85. In the Black Isle we reverted to a recognised historical boundary which improved local ties in the area and adopted a previous ward boundary from 2007 to 2017.
86. Our proposals place Knoydart within a single ward to avoid breaking local ties in a remote, isolated area.
86. We minimised change to the proposed East Sutherland ward and Wick and East Caithness ward boundaries by following the historical Caithness–Sutherland county boundary.
88. By Fort Augustus we have avoided breaking local ties by extending our proposed ward boundary to follow historical ward boundaries, natural features and a community council area boundary.

Easily identifiable boundaries

89. The proposals retain six of the existing ward boundaries preserving easily identifiable ward boundaries.
90. We have better aligned our ward boundaries by Helmsdale by following the historical Caithness–Sutherland county boundary and hilltops.
91. We have made a minor change by Laggan to align ward boundaries with the Cairngorm National Park boundary.
92. In Inverness we have created more easily identifiable ward boundaries by using the River Ness.
93. To the south of Inverness we have adopted the centre of Loch Ness as a more easily identifiable ward boundary.
94. We have used the Dornoch Firth as ward boundary by placing Edderton with Tain. Previously a ward extended over the Firth, placing Edderton with Sutherland.

Conclusion

95. At our meetings of 11 March, 14 April and 13 May 2021 we considered Papers 2553, 2557 and 2561 respectively and the views expressed by respondents to our consultations before agreeing our Final Proposals for The Highland Council area as set out in Part 1.
96. In considering responses to our consultations we have acted in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, the Local Governance (Scotland) Act 2004, and the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973. Certain of those provisions are amended by the Scottish Elections (Reform) Act 2020, and following its enactment (it received Royal Assent on 8 July 2020) we were aware that our proposals would be submitted after their commencement. We have, therefore, exercised our functions, where we have considered it to be necessary or expedient, in anticipation of those provisions in the 2020 Act being commenced in order to give full effect to those provisions at the time our Report is submitted.
97. When developing our Final Proposals we considered the issues raised and suggestions made during our consultations. We agreed that the information we had available was sufficient to reach a decision for The Highland Council area and that there was not a need for further consultation or a local inquiry.
98. We believe that our proposals fully meet all requirements of the legislation and provide for effective and convenient local government for The Highland Council area.
99. All papers and minutes of meetings relating to our consideration of The Highland Council area are available on our website: www.boundaries.scot.
100. The timetable for this Review of electoral arrangements and index of our meetings, papers and minutes concerning The Highland Council area is at Appendix B.
101. A digitised description of the ward boundaries in the form of GIS shapefiles has been securely stored on digital media storage at the date of publication of our report.
102. Our report has also been deposited for public inspection at offices designated by the Council and a news release announcing the publication of our report has also been issued.
103. Our report is available on our website at www.boundaries.scot.

Appendix A

Legislation governing our work as of 14 May 2021

1. The legislative framework for these reviews is set out in the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, as amended. In particular, section 28 and Schedule 6 sets out the rules to be observed:

Schedule 6 – Rules to be observed in considering electoral arrangements

1 (1) This schedule applies to the consideration by Scottish Ministers or the Boundary Commission of electoral arrangements for election of councillors of local government areas.

(2) Having regard to any change in the number or distribution of electors of a local government area likely to take place within the period of five years immediately following the consideration, the number calculated by dividing the number of local government electors in each electoral ward of that local government area by the number of councillors to be returned in that ward shall be, as nearly as may be, the same.

(3) Subject to sub-paragraph (2) above, in considering the electoral arrangements referred to in sub-paragraph (1) above regard shall be had to –

- (a) the desirability of fixing boundaries which are and will remain easily identifiable;
- (b) any local ties which would be broken by the fixing of any particular boundary but if, in any case, there is a conflict between those criteria, greater weight shall be given to the latter.

2. The strict application of the rule stated in paragraph 1(2) above may be departed from in any area where special geographical considerations appear to render a departure desirable.

2. The requirement for this review at this time is set out in the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018:

20 Review of wards in certain local government areas

(1) As soon as practicable after the commencement of this section, the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland (“Boundary Commission”) must—

- (a) review the electoral arrangements for each local government area mentioned in subsection (2), for the purpose of considering future electoral arrangements for those areas, and
- (b) formulate proposals for those arrangements.

(2) The local government areas are the areas of—

- (a) Argyll and Bute Council,
- (b) Comhairle nan Eilean Siar,
- (c) Highland Council,
- (d) North Ayrshire Council,
- (e) Orkney Islands Council,
- (f) Shetland Islands Council.

3. With regards to numbers of councillors per ward allowed, section 1 of the Local Governance (Scotland) Act 2004, as amended by the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 and the Scottish Elections (Reform) Act 2020 provides:

1 Electoral wards

(1) Each local government area shall be divided into electoral wards; and there shall be a separate election for each electoral ward.

(2) The number of councillors to be returned in an electoral ward shall be two, three, four or five, as determined by order made under section 17 of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (c. 65) (“the 1973 Act”) (regulations giving effect to proposals made by Boundaries Scotland after, in particular, complying with the duty in section 28(2), and schedule 6, of the 1973 Act).

(2A) But, in relation to an electoral ward consisting wholly or partly of one or more inhabited islands (within the meaning of section 1(2) of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018), an order made under section 17 of the 1973 Act may determine that the number of councillors to be returned is one.

(3) Different numbers may be determined in relation to different electoral wards.

Appendix B

Index of meeting papers and Commission meetings

Date	Meeting Papers
4 December 2017	Paper 2429 Islands Reviews: councillor numbers methodology
4 February 2020	Paper 2520 Review of Electoral Arrangements: The Highland Council area – preliminary consideration of Initial Proposals
7 April 2020	Paper 2527 Review of Electoral Arrangements: The Highland Council area – agree Initial Proposals
16 July to 30 September 2020	2-month statutory consultation period with The Highland Council
12 October 2020	Paper 2535 Islands Reviews: consideration of Initial Proposals for The Highland Council area
4 November 2020 to 26 January 2021	12-week public consultation period
11 March 2021	Paper 2553 Islands Reviews: Final Proposals for The Highland Council area – consideration of responses to public consultation
14 April 2021	Paper 2557 Islands Reviews: Final Proposals for The Highland Council area – consideration of responses to public consultation
13 May 2021	Paper 2561 Islands Reviews: Final Proposals for The Highland Council area – consideration of responses to public consultation
June 2021	Commission submits its reports to Scottish Ministers

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