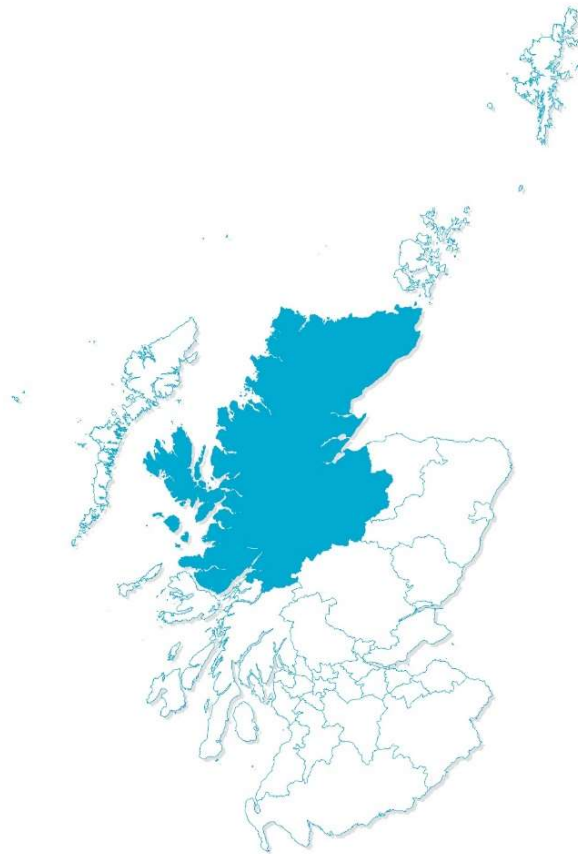




# **Further Review of Electoral Arrangements The Highland Council Area**

**Report to Scottish Ministers**



**March 2026**

**E26002**



## Scottish Ministers

As Boundaries Scotland, we present our Report on the further review of the electoral arrangements for The Highland Council area, in accordance with the provisions of section 17A of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973.

**Prof Ailsa Henderson - Chair**

**Kirsty Mavor - Secretary**

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**March 2026**

## **Background**

1. We completed a review of electoral arrangements for The Highland Council area in June 2021. The review was required under section 20 of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 (the Islands Reviews).
2. The proposals in our report took into account the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 by:
  - making no changes to six existing wards: Cromarty Firth; Eilean a' Cheò; Fort William and Ardnamurchan; Nairn and Cawdor; North, West and Central Sutherland; Thurso and Northwest Caithness.
  - reducing the number of wards with more than 10% variation from electoral parity, improving representation across the area.
  - improving variation from electoral parity in Sutherland, and applying special geographic considerations in Fort William and Ardnamurchan due to remoteness and poor transport links.
  - recognising local community ties in the Black Isle, and making ward boundaries more recognisable around Inverness, Tain and Knoydart.
  - aligning ward boundaries more closely with historical and geographical features, including the Caithness–Sutherland county boundary and the Cairngorms National Park.
  - retaining Eilean a' Cheò as an island ward in compliance with the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 and renaming Caol and Mallaig to reference the Small Isles, recognising island communities.
  - creating two member and five member wards, in line with the flexibility provided in the Scottish Elections (Reform) Act 2020, to support local ties in Sutherland and Dingwall, and create clearer, more identifiable ward boundaries in Inverness and areas to its south.
3. Following submission of our report to Ministers a draft Scottish Statutory Instrument (SSI) was laid in Parliament and the proposals were referred to the Scottish Parliament's Local Government, Housing and Planning (LGHP) Committee.
4. After three meetings (14, 21 and 28 September 2021) in which evidence was taken, the LGHP Committee recommended rejecting the proposals for The Highland Council area. While the Committee commended the work of Boundaries Scotland, it concluded "there were real concerns about the proposals".
5. On 7 October 2021, the Deputy First Minister moved a motion that the SSI regarding the review for The Highland Council area be withdrawn and the Scottish Parliament agreed.

## **Ministerial direction**

6. Section 17(6)(b) of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (the Act) requires the Scottish Ministers to notify Boundaries Scotland that it was required to conduct a further review of the proposals in accordance with section 17A of the Act.
7. Scottish Ministers discharged this obligation by letter dated 18 September 2025. No directions were provided regarding the timing or approach for the further review. Section 17A(2) of the Act states "Boundaries Scotland may determine the manner and extent of the review...".

## Consideration

8. The Commission discussed the Minister's direction to carry out a further review at our meeting of 9 December 2025. We noted our statutory obligation to carry out a further review and agreed to discharge our obligation to do so.
9. It was further agreed at our meeting of 9 December 2025 that, once we had the opportunity to consider relevant background information, we would agree the best approach to the timing of the review and contacting The Highland Council.
10. We therefore requested a paper for our subsequent meeting of 29 January 2026 providing a summary of (a) the original review reports and proposals (b) the Scottish Parliament representations (c) The Highland Council's reaction to the original proposals and concerns raised at the time (d) our response to the proposals being rejected and (e) an assessment of potential engagement approaches with likely timescales.
11. We considered paper BS 210 at our meeting of 29 January 2026 and noted that s17A clearly states that the manner and extent of the further review is at our discretion. We noted that we are required to consider the representations from Parliament. The representations in full were:

"The Committee notes that where the recommendations have been welcomed by local authorities, those authorities have also been very positive about the consultation and engagement work undertaken by Boundaries Scotland. This points to the value of effective dialogue between local authorities and Boundaries Scotland and the Committee would encourage all parties to participate in such conversations in the context of the re-examination of proposals for Argyll and Bute and Highland Council areas with a view to reaching recommendations acceptable to all parties.

The Committee recommends the benefits from building in additional time for discussion with councils in advance of the formal consultation stage of a review should be incorporated into all future reviews of local authority boundaries.

The Committee notes the benefits of digital engagement, but also recognises the challenges it will present to others. The Committee asks that these concerns are taken into account in any future engagement."

The Committee asks the Scottish Government to provide detail of whether the further reviews of the boundaries in Highland and Argyll and Bute will be carried out in as a separate piece of work or as part of a suite of other reviews."
12. After considering the representations the Commission noted our statutory obligation to "reconsider the proposals and make any further or supplementary proposals as it thinks fit." We further noted that an option available to us was to submit a report to Ministers with a notification that we have no further or supplementary proposals to make.

13. We reconsidered the proposals set out in the published report relating to the 2019 Review of The Highland Council area. We examined the Islands Review recommendations and noted the position using 2022 electoral data (as used in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Review of Scottish Parliament Boundaries). We also examined the most recently published ward electorate data (Dec 2024) in relation to the existing boundaries. We looked at this data in a broad sense to try and understand how the current boundaries were performing compared to the recommended boundaries in the Islands Reviews.
14. We considered the four options open to us: (i) radical change to the recommendations made in the Islands Review (resulting in considerable change to boundaries and councillor numbers per ward) (ii) minimal change to the Islands Review (leaving most recommendations as they were and addressing population movement by councillor number changes), (iii) resubmitting our Islands Review recommendations with no change or (iv) proposing that no changes be made to the existing boundaries. We noted that concerns raised at the time of the Islands Reviews prioritised the status quo over our proposals.
15. We noted that the goal of a further review was not to correct for passive malapportionment that might have occurred since the review was submitted (passive malapportionment happens when voting areas become less equal over time because electoral boundaries are not updated as populations change). Instead, it was to evaluate the data available as well as the observations made by various actors at the time the Islands Reviews were carried out.
16. We noted that a further review is not a new review and would be subject to the same methodology as the 5<sup>th</sup> reviews and the Islands Reviews. It would, therefore, also be subject to the same concerns raised by some about methodology regardless of the outcome.
17. The Commission reiterated its commitment to meaningful consultation. Whilst s17A of the Act did not require consultation to take place, we agreed that it would be good practice to do so if there were proposed changes. We noted the importance of engaging in consultation exercises in good faith, and that with the upcoming elections there was limited time in which to carry out meaningful engagement. We also noted the risk of confusing voters by engaging in consultations about local wards immediately after a Scottish Parliament review, as well as before, during or immediately after the 2027 local elections.
18. It was noted that the upcoming Scottish Parliament elections on 7 May 2026 and local government elections on 6 May 2027 meant there was limited time in which a consultation could be carried out before Autumn 2027, since we typically avoid consulting over the summer months or in the months before elections.
19. We agreed that the timing of the ministerial direction to undertake a further review creates challenges in light of the upcoming elections. We noted our legal obligation to discharge our duty in a timely manner and do not believe that agreeing to conduct such a review in December 2025 but waiting to undertake consultation in Autumn 2027 would satisfy this requirement in the eyes of the public.

20. We have previously stated our intention to move to rolling reviews to enhance collaboration and consultation with councils. An intensive period of engagement with councils will precede any shift to a rolling process. This would include a Scotland-wide discussion of a new methodology that meets the legal requirements of boundary reviews and is sensitive to the recognition of community ties. In our view this would provide a better opportunity to discuss how to approach boundary changes, including in The Highland Council area while retaining, for now, the status quo that was desired by councils in 2021.

21. At our 29 January 2026 meeting, we therefore reached the preliminary view that we would not, at this time, submit proposals for change to the electoral arrangements for The Highland Council area. We agreed to notify The Highland Council of this intended approach.

### **Council notification letters**

22. We then asked the Secretariat to draft a letter to The Highland Council formally notifying them of our further review.

23. Our letter dated 25 February 2025 detailed our intended approach of sending a report to the Minister now proposing no change to the existing electoral arrangements for The Highland Council area.

### **Decision**

24. Following completion of our further review, we agreed not to resubmit our proposals from our previous Islands Review report. Further, under section 17A(6)(b)(i) of the Act, we now propose to make no changes to the existing electoral arrangements of The Highland Council area.

25. We expect, when external circumstances allow for a meaningful review, to exercise our discretion to commence a fresh electoral review of The Highland Council area under s16 of the Act. This would properly address any passive malapportionment that has occurred since our last review was submitted in 2021.