

Adapting STV to remote communities: the Islands Review 2019/21

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This is the first boundary revision following the introduction of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 and Electoral Reform Act (Scotland) 2020. How it is carried out is likely to set precedents for future revisions. My comments are offered as a contribution to setting best practice, promoting as far as possible the empowerment of voters and the representation of their communities. A principal concern is the use of 1 and 2 member wards, which is where these twin aims potentially conflict.

Because I wish to present an overview, I have included brief comments on the Island Councils redistribution, though I appreciate it may be too late for these to be taken into account in the current revisions.

These comments follow on from a paper I submitted in the consultation on the revised legislation in 2017/18, *Community-centred democracy: fine-tuning the STV Council election system*, which is available online¹; I shall refer to it below as *Community-centred democracy*.

1. General considerations

(A) 1 or 2-member wards should be used sparingly:

3-member wards are generally regarded as the smallest to achieve reasonably proportional representation under STV - indeed, the recent McAllister Commission in Wales recommended a minimum of 4. So there is something of a democratic deficit in allowing 2-member wards. They should only be used in cases such as isolated or sparsely inhabited areas where they have a very significant advantage in better representing communities.

(B) Proportionality across a whole council area is important:

Thus having, say, 20% or more of councillors elected in 1 or 2-member seats is more of a concern than just having one or two. However, this is less of a relevant consideration in areas such as the Island Councils that mainly elect Independent candidates because in that circumstance the need for proportional party balance across a council area is less relevant.

(C) Other reasons for avoiding 1-member wards:

While I support having 1-member wards as an option, this should only be for exceptional circumstances; it is socially healthier for a small community to be represented by more than a single voice. The strongest case for a single member

¹<https://www.macs.hw.ac.uk/~denis/stv/fine-tuningSTV.pdf>

ward would be where a small community is completely different in its circumstances from the rest of the council area.

(D) Variance should not be more than +15%:

Allowing 1 or 2 member wards while fitting clearly-defined natural communities inevitably requires greater flexibility in parity than the conventional 10-15%.

Because of the circumstances of the communities (remoteness, often with special minority interests), it is reasonable to err on the generous side in determining break-points. In general it seems reasonable that no ward should be worse off than the Venice Convention limit of +15%. This implies that wards with entitlement above 2.3 councillors should have 3, and wards with entitlement above 1.15 should have 2. Taking also into account the additional reasons against 1-member wards, it would be reasonable to go a little further, and set the minimal entitlement for 2 councillors at simply 'greater than 1.0'²

(E) Dynamic updating:

One of the advantages of a system of multi-member wards based on natural communities is that it can be brought up-to-date each year. While there will continue to be a need for occasional overview boundary revisions, perhaps every 10 or 20 years, parity between wards can be accomplished by changing the number of seats rather than boundaries. This can be done before each election, based on the most recent electoral data; the Appendix (page 5, below) gives R code to demonstrate how easily this can be done. Exceptional boundary revisions would only be needed where a ward's seat entitlement goes outwith the allowed range; to minimise the need for such adjustments, boundary reviews should look at forecast electorates at least 2 elections ahead (e.g. at forecasts for Dec. 2021 and Dec. 2026 for the current review). My reading of §29 of the Electoral Reform Act (Scotland) 2020 is that it would allow the Boundary Commission to adopt this approach.

2. Islands Councils

I was delighted to see that the proposed revised wards for Eilean an-t Siar are in good agreement with what I suggested in Appendix B of *Community-centred democracy*. The only change I would recommend, in line with (D) above, is that Barra (entitlement 1.25) should be allotted 2 councillors rather than 1.

I note that for both Eilean an-t Siar and Shetland a significant proportion of the voters will be in wards with 2 (or fewer) councillors. As noted in (B) above, this is less of a problem in councils such as these that mainly elect Independent candidates because the need for proportional party balance across a council area is not relevant.

²There are, fortunately, no currently proposed wards with entitlements in this range (1.00 - 1.15).

3. Argyll and Bute

I support all the proposals, especially the allotment of 2 members each to the wards whose main islands (in population terms) are Mull and Islay. Possibly Bute should have 3 members rather than 2: although it does not have the remoteness or geographical spread of the other island wards its entitlement is a little over the 2.3 break-point suggested in (D) above.

4. North Ayrshire and Arran

For the general reasons given in (C) and (D), there is a very strong case for giving Arran (entitlement 1.18) two councillors.

5. Highland

Caithness (wards 2-4): The proposed 2-member wards for Wick and Thurso have no justification in terms of representing isolated or sparse communities - to the contrary, they are both urban. Allowing these would set a very bad precedent, as there are many similarly structured communities in other council areas of Scotland, so a policy based on this example would significantly water down the proportionality that is one of the key features of STV (see (A) above). The present ward boundaries for Caithness follow closely the catchment areas of the two local secondary schools, which is a good indication that they are a reasonable fit to local communities, and I see no reason to change them significantly.

Sutherland & Wester Ross (wards 1 and 5): This area, especially its northern and western parts, is very sparsely inhabited. It presently contains the two spatially largest wards in Scotland and the proposed ward 1 makes this problem worse. This is an area where 2-member wards should be considered, and I suggest that the following would offer a better fit to communities: (a) Northwest Sutherland and Ullapool, to consist of the catchment areas of Farr, Kinlochbervie and Ullapool secondary schools; (b) Wester Ross, to consist of the catchment areas of Gairloch and Plockton schools; and (c) East Sutherland, to consist of the catchment areas of Golspie and Dornoch schools. From electoral data and school rolls, I believe these would have respective entitlements 2, 2 and 3. I appreciate that (a) would join parts of Sutherland and Rossshire in defiance of tradition, but I think this is a tradition past its sell-by date; the coastal communities of north and west Sutherland have more in common with Wester Ross than with Golspie or Dornoch.

Culloden and Ardersier (ward 17): This ward, with its rapidly changing electorate, illustrates beautifully the advantage of a system that can easily be brought up-to-date (see (E) above). This ward's entitlement is expected to go from 3

seats in Dec 2018 to 5 in Dec 2024 (more exactly, entitlements are 3.36 and 4.56 respectively). For the next election in 2022 this means that the recommended allocation of 4 seats is almost certainly right, but by the time of the following election it looks very likely the ward will merit 5 seats.

Fort William and Ardnamurchan (ward 20): This is a disparate and geographically very extensive ward. One possibility would be to join the part west of Loch Linnhe to ward 11 (Caol, Mallaig and Small Isles), in exchange for Caol being linked with Fort William and the area south and east of it; it would be interesting to know whether local communities would regard that as giving better links.

If the ward is left unchanged as proposed, I am sympathetic to its being given favoured treatment, but it would be good to rationalise the basis on which that is done. One possibility would be to make explicit allowance for geographic area in a ward's entitlement, as is done in parliamentary allocations in Denmark and Norway. Alternatively, one could have a fixed enhancement, of say 10%, for 'sparse' wards; thus ward 20's current entitlement of 3.39, which should give it 3 seats, would be increased to 3.73, which would entitle it to 4 seats as proposed.

6. Conclusions

The Review's proposals are generally very welcome, in making good use of the new legislation to fit wards better to natural communities. However, there are a number of difficult cases which I hope can be reconsidered, in the light of the principles A-E set out above.

The proposals for 2-member wards are mostly excellent, and I have added a suggestion that they could also help for the very sparsely inhabited area of Sutherland. However, the proposal of 2-member wards for Thurso and Wick has no justification, and would unnecessarily undermine the proportionality of the overall STV system; it would set a very unfortunate precedent for other council areas across Scotland.

Having the flexibility to allow 1-member wards is good. However, the two proposed in this review, Barra and Arran, both have strong cases for being allocated 2 councillors.

Finally, the example of Culloden and Ardersier demonstrates the advantage of what I have called 'dynamic updating', and I hope it may be possible to consider integrating this option into future boundary reviews.

Appendix; calculation of allocation of seats

R code for the calculation of seat allocations, to show how these can be revised almost instantaneously when electorate numbers are updated. Boundaries only need to be reconsidered if the calculation shows that some ward's entitlement has gone outwith the permitted range (1-5 or 2-5 as appropriate).

```
# function alloc() to allocate numbers of seats for given quota (qu)
# minimises proportional variance, subject to +15% maximum
# (this function could of course be modified to fit different criteria if desired)
alloc=function(qu,elec){
ns=numeric(); ent=numeric()
for(j in 1:length(elec)){
  en=elec[[j]]/qu
  k=1
  while(en>min(k*1.15,sqrt(k*(k+1)))){k=k+1}
  ns[[j]]=k; ent[[j]]=en
}
list(ns=ns,ent=ent)
}

# data
ward=c("Sutherland","Caithness","Wick","Thurso", "W Ross & Lochalsh",
"Cromarty Firth","Tain, E Ross & Edderton","Dingwall & Seaforth","Black Isle",
"Eilean a'Cheo","Caol, Mallaig & S Isles","Aird","Inverness NW","Inverness SE",
"Inverness SW","Inverness SE","Culloden & Ardersier","Nairn & Cawdor",
"Badenoch & Strathspey","Fort Wm & Ardnamurchan")
e18=c(10791,8489,5484,5925,7388,9643,7355,12178,8895,8579,7003,8250,14091,
10081,11250,9910,8521,10425,10637,8646)
e24=c(10436,8046,5290,5596,7024,9529,7083,12538,8683,8299,7150,8187,14140,
9620,12691,9926,11781,10047,11310,8567)

elec=e24          # numbers of electors (2024 forecast)
nw=length(elec)  # number of wards
nt=72            # total number of councillors

# calculation, finding quota that gives allocation ns such that sum(ns)=nt
q1=sum(elec)/(nt+nc); n1=sum(alloc(q1,elec)$ns)
q2=sum(elec)/(nt-nc); n2=sum(alloc(q2,elec)$ns)
qu=c(q1,q2); na=c(n1,n2)
nn=na[[1]]
while(nn!=nt){
  qn=mean(qu)
  alc=alloc(qn,elec)
  nn=sum(alc$ns)
  qu[[1+{nn<nt}]] =qn
  na[[1+{nn<nt}]] =nn
}

# print results
result=matrix(c(alc$ns,elec),nrow=20,ncol=2,dimnames=list(ward=ward,n=c("cllrs","elec")))
cbind(result,round(alc$ent,2))
```

Note: Using this code for 2024 data exactly reproduces the Commission's proposed allocations for Highland Council, except (as expected) for wards 17 and 20.