SUBMISSION FROM THOMAS F GRAY

1. This paper relates to the Local Elections Inquiry being conducted by the above Committee and the associated call for views on Local Elections. Many issues could be covered but the comments are here confined to the question of the number of Councillors elected in each Ward. In both elections carried out so far under the Single Transferable Vote system, this number has been restricted to either three or four. In East Dunbartonshire Council area uniquely (as far as I can establish) this number was further restricted to three Councillors only in each Ward. I live in this Council area and therefore have had the opportunity to observe what effects this has had on the ground. In summary, I would wish to see the STV system implemented according to the model developed by the Electoral Reform Society, whereby the number of Councillors in Wards is allowed to vary between much wider lower and upper limits, depending on the population density in the areas concerned. In other instances where STV is used, such as in Northern Ireland, the global average number of Councillors per Ward is much greater.

2. The main reason for recommending this change is that it would fulfil the central purpose of the STV system, which is to maximise the number of voters who would be able to recognise and interact with an elected Councillor that he or she had voted for as a first preference. Under a three-member-per-Ward system, around one-quarter or more of those who vote will not be able to make that connection. Increasing the numbers of seats per Ward reduces the typical ‘wasted vote’ figure to 20% in 4-member Wards and 16% in 5-member Wards. The wasted vote figures in East Dunbartonshire elections reflect the 25% or greater figure corresponding to 3-member Wards.

3. There are several other reasons for recommending ‘normal’ implementation of the STV system rather than the restricted number system that has been imposed by the Scottish Parliament, against expert advice.

- Using the present system, it is more difficult to delineate natural Ward boundaries. East Dunbartonshire, for example, features a mix of medium density suburban towns, isolated villages and farming areas. The straitjacket of three-member Wards simply does not work. For example, the historic town of Kirkintilloch is split into three arbitrary areas and other disparate communities have been tacked on to each third. Interestingly, the Kirkintilloch Community Council area comprises a population around the same size as a Council Ward, which indicates where the natural boundaries lie. Moreover, if the STV system is allowed to reach its optimum, as regards minimal wasted votes, parties are accurately represented in the result, regardless of minor changes in boundary locations. Boundaries can therefore be set to reflect natural communities, which could also align with Community Council areas.

- Three members in each Ward means that voters get no choice of candidate within a given political party, as there is no pressure on the respective parties to put up a range of candidates reflecting different shades of opinion. In my own Ward, only one candidate was put forward from each of four parties. As the multi-member Wards in East Dunbartonshire were made up largely by combining three former single-member Wards, there remains a tendency for
councillors to continue to represent their former single-member Wards. Anecdotal evidence suggests that a large proportion of voters do not realise that they now have three councillors they can turn to and not just one. In that sense, nothing much has changed and the many benefits of the STV system to the voter have been lost.

4. As far as I am aware, no properly argued case has been made for the original decision to ignore the recommendations of those who know most about the STV system and to install a version which is entirely different from versions operating elsewhere, most notably in Northern Ireland local elections. It is time this was properly reviewed and modified to provide the benefits to the voter that the system can so easily provide.

5. I have not attempted to address the questions posed in the Call for evidence, but I believe that the points made are highly relevant to the two questions on poor voter turnout and reasons why people do not vote. The main reason why people do not vote in elections generally, is that their perception is that voting is a waste of time and merits only a low priority in things they have to do. This is certainly the case in first-past-the-post elections. The STV system has created an order of magnitude improvement in the sense that a much higher proportion of voters can now recognise that the person they voted for has become an elected councillor. However, the system has been implemented in such a way that this benefit has not yet been widely understood. A large part of this misapprehension comes from the restriction in multi-member Ward numbers.

Thomas G F Gray