Local Government and Communities Committee

Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland’s 5th Electoral Review

Written Submission from East Renfrewshire Council

1.0 Firstly, East Renfrewshire Council would like to thank the Committee for enabling us to have a voice today in relation to the work of the fifth review of electoral arrangements.

2.0 The Committee is asked to note that the methodology used by the Boundary Commission for Scotland for the fifth electoral review did not, in the view of the majority of councils, meet the interests of effective and convenient local government, one of the key areas that the Boundary Commission must take into account by legislation. The application of this new methodology, which was not consulted on and which has never been used elsewhere, has resulted in significant discontent amongst councils (22 councils opposed the ward boundary proposals).

3.0 A high number of councils were concerned that the changes would result in changes in elector to councillor ratios with an adverse impact on communities as a result. Areas with increasing numbers of electors will, in some cases, receive less representation. However there are other councils gaining additional councillors who do not require them (and who are opposed to the additional expense this will bring to council taxpayers) and their population is predicted to decrease. There is a fear amongst councils that these changes will increase the challenge of representing communities and making sure that each has a parity of access to elected members.

4.0 Since 2014, East Renfrewshire Council engaged continually with the Boundary Commission to try to understand the logic behind the change in methodology to include deprivation as a key factor in determining the categorisation of councils and the differing ratios per electorate. This categorisation led to the determination of councillor numbers and subsequent ward design. The Council asked the Boundary Commission for the evidence behind the very sudden change in methodology (occurred within 2 months). The Boundary Commission referred to the evidence of two councils, North Ayrshire and Edinburgh. The Boundary Commission wrote to them in July 2014 to seek information linking deprivation and councillor workload. However the Boundary Commission made the decision to include deprivation in the methodology in December 2013. After the Council asked for the evidence from the Boundary Commission, the limited material provided, properly understood, does not come anywhere near to providing support for the view that there is a sufficiently evidenced link between deprivation and increased councillor workload.

5.0 The following facts are highlighted:

- The 2011 Boundary Commission consultation to determine the approach to the fifth review did not, as previously stated to the Committee, discuss the inclusion of deprivation as a factor in determining councillor numbers.
• The Scottish Local Authorities Remuneration Committee research in 2010 (referred to at the previous Committee by the Boundary Commission) did not use SIMD data for banding of councils and instead used estimated service expenditure.

• Communication from the Boundary Commission during the period 2011 to 2013 (initiation stage) indicated support for the existing methodology with no major changes.

• The sudden change to the methodology for determining councillor numbers took place after changes to the Boundary Commission membership in late 2013. Population density was replaced with deprivation. The inclusion of deprivation led to significant changes for most councils (see fig 1). It is factually incorrect to suggest that the inclusion of deprivation had a marginal effect.

• There was no consultation with councils on this change to the methodology and in fact, the use of deprivation as a factor had already been dismissed as irrelevant at a previous meeting of the Boundary Commission i.e. the month before. The previous methodology was the outcome of a robust cross-council/ Commission working group.

• The rationale behind the change in the methodology has not been sufficiently tested. It would be more reasonable to consider the broad range of factors that might have an impact on councillor workload than to single out deprivation as a key factor.

• Only after the decision was made was research commissioned by the Boundary Commission to determine if deprivation should be a factor. The Commission have stated that this research cannot influence this review and will only be used to inform the Sixth Review (due in 8-12 years). This research was originally due to be published late 2014 then late 2015 and is now due for publication within the next 12 weeks.

• That even if the principle of enhanced representation for deprived areas was accepted, the Boundary Commission have been unable to achieve this, at ward design stage, due to the need to ensure electoral parity and therefore has taken a flawed, inconsistent approach resulting in less electoral representation in many deprived areas.

6.0 2011 Consultation

The responses to the 2011 consultation were published on the Boundary Commission website and factors suggested ranged from geographical size, population dispersion, workload, technology, housing quality, crime, representative roles, rurality, decision making structure, partnership bodies, travel time, remuneration, and public perception. There were 33 responses and only one council at this stage mentioned deprivation as a factor for determining councillor
numbers and this was in addition to several other factors including population distribution and housing. One other council (Glasgow) mentioned it could be used with population diversity and a regional role to categorise different types of councils. However geographical issues were cited as most popular factors.


7.0 Reassurance that previous methodology would remain

An example of this “We consulted with you in 2011 on our intended approach to the first stage of the review, which will be to determine the appropriate number of councillors on each of Scotland’s councils. The responses to that consultation indicated general support for a continuation of our predecessors’ approach of using a formulaic approach to determining the number of councillors, with the formula taking into account the population density and distribution of a council area.” Local Government Boundary Commission June 2013

8.0 The impact of SIMD as a factor in the categorisation of councils

The inclusion of deprivation instead of population density changed the overall councillor numbers for our own Council by 10 per cent. Under the old methodology, East Renfrewshire Council could have retained current councillor numbers. As you can see the changes would have been quite different for many councils and would have reflected real population increases.

9.0 Conclusion
There have been repeated attempts (from our own Council and from SOLACE and COSLA) to engage successfully with the Boundary Commission to discuss our concerns but to no avail. It is also clear that the Commission has been overwhelmed with requests from across Scotland and has struggled to respond to such requests e.g. our Council asked for a local inquiry and we did not receive a response.

The population of East Renfrewshire is increasing due to new house building (3,208 new homes up to 2025) and there are significant levels of migration with a rise in families locating to the area. If the methodology had stayed the same, East Renfrewshire would have retained 20 councillors and, with a growing population, would have been able to sufficiently ensure the provision of an effective and convenient local government. As a Council, we wanted to make sure that any changes provide equal and effective representation for residents and unfortunately we do not believe that this has been achieved under the fifth review.