# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE**  | **Conclusion of the Electoral Boundary Review Programme** |
| **DATE**  | **07 December 2021** |
| **BY**  | **Rebecca Evans, MS, Minister for Finance and local Government** |

On 16 June, shortly after taking over responsibility for the local government portfolio, I wrote to members setting out my approach to dealing with the decisions for the 2017 programme of electoral arrangements reviews across Wales. I considered this a priority and committed to making decisions for each of the reviews as soon as possible, to enable local government to have sufficient time to make any changes required, in advance of the local government elections in May 2022.

I have kept members updated on the progress being made through a series of 11 written statements. All decisions, and the Orders required to implement those decisions have now been made. It is now for local government to make the appropriate local arrangements.

The review process is now complete. As with any process, there are those who agree with my decisions and others who do not. This is inevitable when balancing the wide range of information and opinions received for each review.

I have been clear about my intention to reflect on the current arrangements for reviews, listen to feedback from others and identify opportunities for improvement. I am aware of a number of areas which could be explored as part of a wider discussion about future arrangements. These include the timing of the reviews and any resulting changes, and aspects of the review process.

In June 2016, the decision was made that the Commission would undertake reviews of electoral arrangements for all County and County Boroughs within Wales in advance of the 2022 local government elections. The impact of Covid -19 on this programme of reviews could not have been anticipated at that time. In reality, the steps necessary to face the challenges arising from this pandemic resulted in the full set of reviews having to be considered within a short period of time and closer to next years elections than might otherwise have been the case.

While I do not anticipate a similar situation arising in the future, the experience has highlighted the need to re-instate a regular rhythm of reviews where the electoral arrangements for each county or county borough within Wales are reviewed once every ten years. In re-establishing these arrangements, I intend to discuss with the Commission and local authorities the order in which the reviews should be undertaken during the next ten year programme. This will take into account the timing of any planned community reviews.

It has been suggested there should be a period of time prior to an election, where electoral arrangements cannot be changed. Current legislation already prevents electoral review reports being published within the nine month period prior to an ordinary council election. However, there is no equivalent provision about Ministers making decisions during the same period where a report has already been received. While the convention is that no changes should occur within six months of an election, I want to explore this further to see whether we can agree on an appropriate length of time during which changes cannot be made before an election.

In terms of the review process itself, there are established criteria which the Commission is required to consider when undertaking reviews. These include, as far as possible, ensuring consistency in terms of the number of electors to elected members within each electoral ward of the county or County Borough area, establishing and maintaining easily identifiable boundaries and the avoidance of breaking local ties when recommending boundaries for electoral wards.

There are a number of aspects of the approach which have been brought to my attention over the past few months I want to explore further, and these include the following matters.

The elector to member ratio – the Commission is required to ensure the ratio of electors to elected members is ‘as near the same as possible’ across all electoral wards in the county or county borough. However, communities have different characteristics, some sit within areas of deprivation, while others are more affluent, some are rural while others are urban, and there are many other differences such as transport links and historical community ties. I want to explore whether the current approach, principally based on a single ratio, should be made more flexible and responsive to a wider range of community characteristics.

I also want to consider whether we should address seasonal changes in population as part of the reviews. This includes areas where the population expands during term time for example in university towns and cities; and business areas, where there are small numbers of citizens but where elected representatives are key in building relationships with those businesses for the benefit of their communities; and of course areas impacted by high levels of tourism.

There have also been some concerns raised when new recommendations are included in the Commission’s Final Recommendations Reports that were not contained in the Commission’s draft report. I do want to consider whether there is a way of addressing this specific concern without creating further issues.

Another area which resulted in difficulties and delays at the end of the process was the naming of electoral wards, both in English and Welsh. Individuals, not surprisingly, are passionate about these names. There is often a tension between a name which individuals identify with and the proposals put forward, either by the Commission or the Welsh Language Commissioner. I am not convinced this matter is given sufficient attention early enough in the process to ensure the issues are fully explored. It will be important to identify what additional steps can be taken to address this matter before the next review programme commences.

I welcome members’ views on how future arrangements could be improved. I will also be seeking the views of local government, the Commission, and other stakeholders.