

The Welsh Government should hold a referendum before expanding the size of the Senedd

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 09 Ionawr 2023
Petitions Committee | 09 January 2023

Reference: SR22/4474-5

Petition Number: P-06-1309

Petition title: The Welsh Government should hold a referendum before expanding the size of the Senedd

Text of petition: Welsh Labour in a cooperation agreement with Plaid Cymru are proposing to increase the numbers of Members of the Senedd from 60 to 96. Neither party laid out this number in their manifestos in recent elections. The people of Wales should be asked via a referendum if they want to expand the Senedd, as this proposal will lead to a lack of proportionality in representation. Public services and the NHS in Wales are suffering badly and this should not be the Welsh Government's priority costing Welsh tax payers millions.



1. Background

Since 2004, a series of reports have recommended that the size of the Senedd should increase from its current size of 60 Members. The [Wales Act 2017](#) gave the Senedd powers over its size and electoral arrangements without requiring a referendum. Any Bill introduced on Senedd Reform requires a supermajority (40 of the Senedd's 60 Members) to pass. [Section 64 of the Government of Wales Act 2006](#) gives the Welsh Government the power to hold a poll to ascertain the views of the people of Wales relating to functions of the Welsh Ministers. This is not a mechanism for a direct vote or direct referendum on a particular proposal.

1.1. Expert Panel on Electoral Reform

In February 2017, the Llywydd and Assembly Commission appointed an [Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform](#) to examine whether the Assembly needed more members to fulfil its scrutiny and legislative functions.

The Expert Panel recommended that the Assembly increase in size to at “least 80, and preferably closer to 90, Members”. It found that a 60 Member legislature was small compared to most similar legislatures, and that Members’ time was severely limited due to a lack of capacity.

1.2. Committee on Senedd Electoral Reform

Following the findings of the Expert Panel, the [Committee on Senedd Electoral Reform](#) (CSER) was established to examine options for Senedd reform. The CSER published its findings in September 2020. It recommended that the Senedd should increase in size to between 80 and 90 Members with effect from the 2026 election. It also recommended that [the Single-transferable vote \(STV\)](#) electoral system be used. The Conservative Party did not put forward a Member for the Committee. The Committee was also disrupted by Brexit Party Member, David Rowlands, [resigning](#) before it had concluded its work, as well as by the Covid-19 pandemic.

1.3. The Special Purpose Committee on Senedd Reform

The [Special Purpose Committee on Senedd Reform](#) was established in October 2021, tasked with making recommendations for policy instructions for a Welsh Government Bill on Senedd reform.

The Special Purpose Committee recommended that the Senedd increase in size to 96 Members. It recommended that a closed list proportional representation system be introduced, and 16 new constituencies be created by pairing together existing UK Parliamentary constituencies. The Committee also said the new Senedd should include gender quotas, improved measures around collecting candidate diversity data and procedures for job sharing.

The Conservative representative on the Committee resigned before the Committee's report was agreed. Some of the key recommendations were agreed by a majority on the Committee but not by all Members.

2. Welsh Government action

The First Minister, Mark Drakeford, and the leader of Plaid Cymru, Adam Price, issued a joint statement on 10 May 2022, arguing that the Senedd should have 96 Members and should be elected using a closed list proportional system.

In the Welsh Government's response to this petition, the First Minister said:

"The Wales Act 2017 provided power to the Senedd to change its size, without a referendum. There are many precedents for changes to the number of elected members being made without referenda, including the boundary review changes for the UK Parliament, which will reduce the number of MPs that Wales returns to Westminster from 40 to 32.

A commitment to Senedd reform was an explicit part of the manifestos of both Labour and Plaid Cymru in last year's election. On this basis and given the many precedents for introducing electoral changes without referenda, there are no plans to hold a referendum on any element of Senedd reform."

The Welsh Government will bring forward a Senedd Reform Bill in due course, which will then be debated and scrutinised in the Senedd.

3. Welsh Parliament action

The Senedd debated the Special Purpose Committee's report on 8 June 2022. The Chair of the Committee, Huw Irranca-Davies, said:

"there is no one single unadulterated perfect package of electoral reform that will satisfy everyone. [...] Our committee set out [...] to find proposals

that must win support across the whole Senedd, not to seek some vision of perfection, and thereby sacrifice practicality and delivery by 2026.”

Mr Irranca-Davies said that the Senedd needed more capacity to meet additional responsibilities taken on since the Assembly was first established in 1999. These include primary law-making powers, tax-varying and borrowing powers, additional work created as powers return from the EU post-Brexit, heightened public awareness of the Senedd’s responsibilities caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, and the “not-unrealistic potential of additional future responsibilities”.

Shadow Minister for Constitution, Darren Millar, criticised the proposals, arguing that it was not the right time for an increase in the size of the Senedd. Plaid Cymru's then spokesperson for the constitution, Rhys ab Owen, argued that a larger Senedd was necessary to “scrutinise the Welsh Government more effectively and more efficiently”.

The Senedd **voted in favour** of the motion to accept the recommendations of the Special Purpose Committee’s report, with 40 Members voting for the proposals and 14 voting against. This met the requirements for a ‘supermajority’ of two thirds of the Senedd to allow a Bill on Senedd reform to be introduced.

Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in this briefing is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware that these briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.