

Hold a referendum seeking approval from the people to increase Assembly members by 36

Y Pwyllgor Deisebau | 11 Medi 2023
Petitions Committee | 11 September 2023

Reference: SR23/6132/7

Petition Number: P-06-1355

Petition title: Hold a referendum seeking approval from the people to increase Senedd members by 36

Text of petition: While many are struggling to feed and heat themselves, politicians in Cardiff Bay are demanding that we taxpayers fund an extra 36 expensive Senedd Members, their additional staff and associated trappings of power.



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

The Committee on Senedd Electoral Reform (CSER) was established to examine the findings of the Expert Panel, and to look at options for Senedd reform. The Committee 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. 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:

"A commitment to Senedd reform was included in the manifestos of Welsh Labour, Plaid Cymru and the Welsh Liberal Democrat political parties at the 2021 Senedd election.

The Wales Act 2017 devolved powers in relation to Senedd elections, including the electoral system, conduct, franchise and registration. This included power for the Senedd to legislate to change its size, and without requirement for a referendum.

Similarly, a referendum has not been required in the reduction of Wales's MPs from 40 to 32, as a result of boundary reform changes being introduced in Westminster. [...]

A clear and compelling case for Senedd reform has been repeatedly made in a series of expert panel and commission reports. [...] The roles and responsibilities of the Senedd have grown considerably [since its creation in 1999]. The Senedd now makes laws, sets taxes and holds the Welsh Government to account in some of the areas which have the greatest impact on people's lives.

It is essential that it is appropriately sized to be able to effectively carry out its scrutiny functions and hold the Government to account."

~~As part of its upcoming legislative programme,~~ the Welsh Government has announced that a Senedd reform Bill will be introduced in the autumn. A separate Bill will be brought forward to introduce gender quotas for candidates for election to 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.

The Senedd will scrutinise the upcoming Senedd reform Bill, which is expected to be introduced early in the autumn term.

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.