

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb hwn i [ymgyngoriad y Pwyllgor Biliau Diwygio](#) ar [Fil Senedd Cymru \(Aelodau ac Etholiadau\)](#).

This response was submitted to the [Reform Bill Committee consultation](#) on the [Senedd Cymru \(Members and Elections\) Bill](#).

SCME423 Ymateb gan: | Response from: David Hedley Williams

CRITIQUE ON SENEDD REFORM BILL

And so, to my critique. I must underline, right from the start, that this is not a party-political piece. I encourage back-benchers of all Parties to put their weight behind it, and send a strong message to the Government:

SIXTY-FOUR

AND NOT A SENEDD MEMBER MORE!!

Which sums up the message of this critique - that there is no sense in the huge expansion proposed for the size of the Senedd.

However, there are at least five strong justifications for making merely marginal adjustments to Senedd Member numbers – each one stronger than the vague and flimsy reasons advanced for swelling numbers to 96. They include: proportionality; cost; value for money; competence; and democratic accountability. A word on each

- Proportionality of Parliamentary representation. Under the existing system with 40 Constituencies, Welsh voters return 40 MP's, 40 Constituency SM's and 20 regional SM's. One Hundred in all, or 2½ elected representatives per constituency: England has 1 MP per constituency. Under the proposal for 64 SM's, that number would still rise slightly to 3 per constituency, that is, 2 SM's and one MP, but it represents a logical and practical response to the reducing of Welsh constituencies to 32. The current proposal in the Bill, with 96 SM's, is that Welsh electors would each be represented by 4 elected representatives. The English figure will remain at one.



- Cost. The costs, if implementation of this part of the Bill were to occur, will fall into two categories. First, the salaries and expenses of the THIRTY SIX new members of the expanded Senedd, and the small army of staff that will be required to assist and service them. Second, the – considerable – cost of adaptations/extensions to the Senedd Chamber and other buildings to house these new workers. The total costs for this are being touted as £100 to £125 million, over, is it 5 years? But cost under-estimation is a built-in facet of all Government budgeting – look at HS2! So, there is little reason for confidence that there'd be much change from £200 million if this the whole Senedd expansion pantomime were allowed to take the stage?
- Value for money. The "Pet Project"/"back-of-a-fag-packet" nature of much Welsh Government policy making, leads to thin, sound-bite driven justifications. The estimated £32 million spent on the recent speed-limit reduction law is largely "justified", without solid proof, mind, on the premise that it would "save lives": 12 per year was the number quoted. Yet how many more actual lives could likely have been saved if that significant sum had been more intelligently invested, in say, Health. Likewise, at a time of extreme financial difficulty for citizens and public bodies alike, there are unquestionably far more productive, sensible and urgent projects in need of the eye-watering millions of pounds that expanding the Senedd will cost - projects which will be of far more benefit to us all. What about removing some of the dreaded RAAC that is compromising school and hospital buildings alike.
- Competence. The way things stand, Welsh Government has of late had some pretty poor performance results. The following list contains only those of which I have experience. There are undoubtedly others.
 - The new speed limit introduction. It was hastily introduced; local authorities are being encouraged to meddle with it, so limits on particular roads may continue to change in the future giving motorists no certainty (despite sanctions beginning on Dec 1st); the trials conducted were all of the same pattern of change – there was no comparison of different possibilities; thus a blanket 25 mph pattern was not explored, though it would have been millions of £££ cheaper and far simpler for drivers to understand and adapt to.

- The Private Renting Sector. Welsh Government interventions here have had the effect of throwing the sector into turmoil, though in public, WG spokespersons remain in denial about this. Despite repeated warnings from industry experts that the changes proposed would drive landlords away, the policy was pursued with enthusiasm.
- The Purchase of Gilestone Farm in Talybont. £4.25 million was spent by WG in acquiring this property, again, it seems on something of a whim. The development remains mired in controversy and is largely unpopular with the local community.
- Introduction of the Welsh Bacc. Again, haste and lack of adequate forward planning has left what is in many ways a good idea without support and recognition from a significant number of major Universities.
- Leasing Scheme Wales. Once again, a good idea but weakly implemented. A pre-requisite to leasing a property on - through the Council – is that one's mortgage provider will acquiesce. WG seems to have failed to run the Scheme past mortgage providers and solicit their support in backing it. As a result, many landlords – like my wife – who hold their properties on buy-to-let mortgages were unable to contribute houses to the scheme. So, it is failing significantly in its objectives.

The idea that more SM's will lead to fewer such issues in the future is fanciful. This is not intended as a criticism of individual Members; rather it is evidence that the whole working system in Cardiff Bay is wrong. When the Senedd was set up there was much made of the proposed committee system which would, we were assured, eliminate the tribal "yah-boo" element that bedevils politics in Westminster. But this promise seems far from being fulfilled. The same yah-boo, behaviour with its petty tantrums and finger pointing is regularly seen in the Chamber, and tribalism seems to hold sway in committee rooms as well. SM's still tend to vote according to the "party line" without knowing exactly what they are voting for. I recently had the opportunity of a long conversation with my local SM, to explore and explain how the new Housing legislation is destroying the Private Renting Sector in Wales – and creating a tragic and expensive crisis of homelessness. Much of what was discussed was total news to the Member, who had been drawn to vote for the measures on the basis, simply, that the Party considered them a good thing. Until these procedural

matters are effectively addressed, and means are found to put voters' needs and priorities at the centre of law-making, adding more Members to the Senedd is a likely recipe for disaster. More SM's may simply mean more counterproductive law like the damaging PRS legislation and the part thought-out way in which the 20mph speed-limit was introduced. SM's need to re-learn the fundamentals of their position. **They are citizens first** and only second are they politicians. Systems that allow them to serve their electors before serving their party hierarchy need to be put in place as a pre-cursor to any other change.

- Democratic Accountability. We all remember the Senedd being established pursuant to a majority – albeit narrow – in a Referendum on the matter back in 1998. Of course, the specific nature of the Senedd thus established, its size, location, etc, did not feature as questions in the Referendum: nonetheless expanding Member numbers **by more than a half** will seem to many to have constitutional implications. For the sake of unity among the citizenry there must be no major numerical change without putting the matter to a new Referendum vote. It would thus be taken out of the party-political sphere, and not become a political football further down the line. This would avoid the danger that proposals to reverse the change might find their way into the manifesto of one or another party at future elections - leading in turn to destabilisation, and to lack of trust in the legitimacy of our political institutions in general.

What underlies all of these points is my settled view that **we already have enough (expensive) democracy.** Community Councils, County Borough Councils, County Councils, the Senedd (at its present size), Westminster. And it is clearly not configured to work effectively in today's world. And adding another 36 Senedd Members to the total and another £200 million to the bill is unlikely to change that. First, we need a fundamental re-think of how we operate the various elements of our democracy and how they should dovetail to deliver a cost effective, and properly functioning service for the tax-payers, who have no way to opt out of paying the huge bills involved. Until these matters are resolved the cost of a vastly increased Senedd will simply be throwing good money after bad. **THE IDEA MUST BE REMOVED FROM THE PROPOSED BILL.**

Thank you.