

# **Senedd Cymru (Members and Elections) Bill**

## Welsh Youth Parliament Focus Group

November 2023

### **Background**

1. On 6 November 2023, three Welsh Youth Parliament Members (“WYPMs”) participated in a focus group as part of the Reform Bill Committee’s consideration of the general principles of the Senedd Cymru (Members and Elections) Bill.<sup>1</sup>
2. WYPMs were provided with background information<sup>2</sup> on the Bill and were asked to think about the following questions in advance of the focus group:
  - Question 1: What do you think about the new voting system? For example, do you think people will understand the new way they will cast their votes? Will it make a difference to whether the election result is fair?
  - Question 2: What do you think about increasing the number of Members from 60 to 96? For example, from your experience as a Member of the Welsh Youth Parliament, do you think it will make a difference to the way that Members do their work or who stands for election?
  - Question 3: Would any of the changes in the Bill make you more or less likely to want to stand for election as a Member of the Senedd? For example, if Members serve for four years not five, or Members and candidates have to live in Wales. Is there anything else that could be done to make the Senedd more representative and diverse?

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<sup>1</sup> The invitation was extended to all WYPMs and three male WYPMs participated.

<sup>2</sup> The information provided to WYPMs was also published, together with an online form, to enable WYPMs who could not attend the focus group and any other children or young people to share their views in writing.

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**3.** A summary of the focus group discussion is set out below. Reference to an issue or view does not necessarily represent endorsement either by all participants or by the Committee.

### **Changing the way that Members of the Senedd are elected**

**4.** All participants supported a proportional representation voting system but they didn't favour the closed list system proposed in the Bill. They agreed that being able to vote for an individual candidate is an important principle and felt the closed list system would mean less choice for voters. For example, if a voter supported a party but not a particular individual in that party.

**5.** Concerns were expressed that the closed list system and increased size of the constituencies would take away localised democracy and give more power to parties centrally rather than to voters. One participant suggested an alternative voting system, consisting of 32 smaller constituencies, with three seats in each constituency, elected using a single transferable vote system.

### **Increasing the size of the Senedd to 96 Members**

**6.** Participants were supportive of an increase in the number of Members, recognising the responsibilities of Members, the volume of work involved and the possibility of that workload increasing if more powers are devolved. It was felt that the Senedd is not carrying out its role as well as it could be, as its size requires Members to sit on multiple committees and this does not provide good scrutiny. They suggested an increase to at least 80 Members and felt the proposed increase to 96 Members was reasonable.

**7.** Participants acknowledged that many people don't support the proposal to increase the number of politicians and suggested that more needs to be done to improve people's understanding of the powers and responsibilities of the Senedd and the role of Members as legislators and decision makers.

### **Requiring Members of the Senedd and anyone standing for election to the Senedd to live in Wales**

**8.** Participants were in favour of requiring Members and candidates to live in Wales and said it should go further by requiring them to live or work in the constituency they represent or stand for election. They did not feel the requirement to live in Wales would influence their decision to stand for election, as long as they understood the system.

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**9.** The Committee explained that the requirement also means the next candidate on a party's list must live in Wales at the point that a vacancy arises between elections, highlighting that candidates may have since relocated outside Wales. In a closed list system, most participants felt it was reasonable to use the relevant election as the point of reference for residency or to provide time for the reserve candidate to move back to Wales.

### **Decreasing the length of time between Senedd elections from five to four years**

**10.** All participants supported elections taking place every four years as it would provide more opportunities to vote as well as improving diversity and encouraging more people to stand. Again the participants did not think a shorter four year term would make a difference to their decision to stand for election.

### **Vacancies**

**11.** Some participants favoured vacancies being filled through by-elections, rather than the next candidate on the list, as they didn't feel it was right to go back in time given how much can change in a four year term.

**12.** Where there are no candidates left on a party's list, it was suggested that the party should be able to nominate a person to take up the vacancy rather than leaving a seat vacant until the next election.

### **Increasing the maximum number of Welsh Ministers from 12 to 17 (with potential to increase to 19)**

**13.** One participant felt the number of Welsh Ministers should be based on the powers devolved at any given time rather than being set in law. They supported the number being increased.

**14.** Another participant highlighted that collective ministerial responsibility means that increasing the number of Welsh Ministers would provide the Welsh Government with a larger number of reliable votes.

### **Diversity of candidates for election to the Senedd**

**15.** Participants acknowledged that a closed list system would encourage more diversity in the Senedd and discussed the anticipated legislative proposals to require political parties to put forward an equal number of male and female candidates for election to the Senedd.

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**16.** Participants said that they thought that the Senedd's reputation for strong representation of women had been achieved organically without gender quotas. They felt that this was an appropriate approach. The Committee explained that some political parties had already taken positive action to increase women's representation (such as twinning constituencies, all women shortlists or zipping regional candidate lists) and that this had contributed to women's representation in the Senedd.

**17.** Participants were concerned that gender quotas could diminish the position of women, felt that voters should be offered the best representative rather than one that fits a particular characteristic, and noted that it would be more difficult for smaller parties to stand candidates. They also highlighted that diversity includes different viewpoints and backgrounds not just gender.

### **Job sharing**

**18.** Participants were unsure about the principle and practicality of Member job sharing, felt that the proposal lacked clarity and emphasised the need for consistency between the two people sharing the role.