

**ERS Cymru written evidence
Constitutional and Legislative Affairs Committee consultation on
the Senedd and Elections (Wales) Bill**

The general principles of the Senedd and Elections (Wales) Bill and whether there is a need for legislation to deliver the Bill's stated policy objectives;

As a piece of legislation the Senedd and Elections Bill is groundbreaking in its delivery of Votes at 16 for the first time in Wales. The extension of the voting age is a key opportunity for reinvigorating our democracy and engaging young people at a critical time in their life.

While we are eminently supportive of the changes to the voting age included in this piece of legislation we are disappointed that other potential avenues of assembly reform have yet to be explored. The size of the assembly is an issue that affects the working of the Senedd in all its roles and it is imperative that we do not see that issue kicked into the long grass. An extension of the franchise would lead to an additional number of people on the electoral roll, meaning more pressure on Assembly Members when they are already under strain. We hope that this legislation is just the first step in a journey of assembly reform.

In terms of the disqualification clauses included in part four of the Bill, while we have no particular view on dual membership itself we are very concerned that given the limitations in the capacity of the assembly 'double jobbing' adds extra strain for AMs. Additional roles, such as membership of the House of Lords, could detract from that.

We take no view on the name of the Assembly, however would urge the Assembly Commission to ensure the change is well communicated to the electorate. Current levels of engagement with the Senedd are lower than perhaps those of other institutions and a renaming should be considered as a chance to communicate the work of the institution to members of the public.

Potential barriers to the implementation of the provisions and whether the Bill takes account of them;

Extending the franchise

A fundamental part of this Bill extends the right to vote in Assembly elections to 16 and 17 year olds. As previously stated we are very supportive of the introduction of Votes at 16 in Wales, however it is imperative that this is delivered effectively.

Our most recent example of the extension of the vote was in Scotland, where turnout for 16 and 17 year olds (75%) in the Scottish Referendum was actually higher than their 18-24 year old counterparts (54%). While they were still less likely to vote than those aged 35 and above¹, this kind of engagement from younger voters was clearly something to be celebrated.

Research undertaken by Dr Jan Eichhorn at the University of Edinburgh has also shown engagement has extended beyond the referendum. In a comparison of 16 and 17 year old Scots with their English, Northern Irish and Welsh counterparts in a survey ahead of the 2015 General Election showed that Scottish participants showed substantially higher levels of engagement with democracy including beyond voting, for example by signing petitions, and engage with a greater range of information sources about politics².

Yet, it isn't true to say that Welsh young people will match up with Scottish young voters just due to the extension of the franchise itself.

Firstly, it would be unfair to compare a Senedd election to a Scottish Parliamentary election, which in 2016 saw a 10% higher turnout, let alone with a referendum on such a critical issue as Scottish Independence.

Secondly, the extension of the vote in itself doesn't guarantee deeper engagement. The key to a successful extension of the franchise is the potential it gives us to reach first time voters with the information they need and thereby create a positive habit of voting, which can last a lifetime.

Citizenship education

Improving citizenship education will play a vital role in ensuring we see the full benefits of votes at 16. A more informed electorate means a better public debate.

Across the UK, as Dr Andy Mycock and Professor Jonathan Tonge have pointed out political education has seemed to follow the extension of the vote rather than preceding it³. We have a chance here to do things differently and create a cohort of young voters who are more likely to turnout to vote, more likely to vote in the future and are ultimately more informed than the vast majority of voters currently are.

¹ <http://blog.whatscotlandthinks.org/2014/12/many-16-17-year-olds-voted/>

² <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/votes-at-16-new-evidence-from-scotland/>

³

<https://theconversation.com/votes-for-16-year-olds-should-be-based-on-wider-evidence-not-just-a-need-for-participation-90898>

The role of political education in ensuring a high turnout for 16 and 17 year olds in the Scottish referendum should not be underplayed, and should be an example that Wales can build on. While we have warned of comparing the Scottish Referendum to any Welsh election, in the Scottish Local Elections in 2017, the Electoral Commission reported similar levels of turnout for 16 and 17 year olds to 18-24 year olds⁴.

As part of their campaign to correspond with the extension of the franchise the Electoral Commission produced a Ready to Vote pack, which was distributed to schools prior to the election. Over 80% of schools in Scotland used that pack with their students ahead of polling day⁵.

A report by the d|part Think Tank for political participation by Dr Jan Eichhorn argued that political discussion in class was vital to young people's engagement, in a way that conversations with no other groups (e.g. parents) could replicate⁶. It also found that a civics lesson in itself was not enough to drive political understanding or increase propensity to vote, stating:

*“The decisive factor was not whether young people had taken Modern Studies, but whether they had actively discussed the referendum in class (though in many instances Modern Studies classes could provide this space). Schools therefore need to provide the space for young people to actively discuss politics in an informed way.”*⁷

This is certainly something ERS found with our project, 'Our Voices Heard', which spoke with 200 young people across Wales about political education. When asked for their ideas on how to improve the current dispensation, which each class then voted on, in addition to putting statutory political education on the curriculum, young people called for things such as debate and discussion and experience in running a campaign⁸.

Legislation on local elections

Alongside the passage of the Bill through this Assembly, a clear and effective plan should be developed around reaching potential attainers, ensuring they join the register, and to give them the information they need to become voters. We must take advantage of the positive effects of extending the franchise, including the captive audience of young people in Welsh schools which could make registering and informing voters easier.

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<https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/find-information-by-subject/elections-and-referendums/past-elections-and-referendums/scottish-council-elections-2017#franchise>

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https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/233673/Scottish-Council-elections-2017.pdf

⁶ http://politischepartizipation.de/images/downloads/dpart_Eichhorn_16VotingAge_Briefing.pdf

⁷ *Ibid.*

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<https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/publications/our-voices-heard-young-peoples-ideas-for-political-education-in-wales/>

Given the plans by the Welsh Government to also extend the franchise for local elections in 2022 this would best be delivered in conjunction between the Assembly and Welsh Government. This is especially pertinent given the new curriculum being developed by the Minister for Education, which builds on the recommendations by Professor Sir Graham Donaldson that Wales should develop “Ethical and informed citizens”.

However, we remain concerned about the apparent delays in the introduction of legislation to extend the franchise for local elections. While the elections do take place a year later than the assembly elections, it is vitally important that EROs are given the best chance to get attainers on the register and for political education and information campaigns to begin being rolled out as soon as possible.

Measures to ensure block registration in schools and colleges should also be considered in legislation in order to maximise the chances of ensuring a high turnout for younger voters.

We recommend the following additional measures to try to mitigate the barriers that might stop the successful implementation of this Bill:

- The development and delivery of an effective and far reaching information campaign, to go alongside the increased rollout of political education in Welsh schools, to include civic education lessons and space to debate and discuss current affairs in other classes.
- That the Welsh Government and Assembly Commission work in close partnership on the delivery of this Bill.
- That measures to extend the vote in local government elections are brought forward as soon as possible to ensure a coherence between the campaigns for the assembly elections and local elections, with plans to reform other parts of elections (e.g. automatic registration) to apply to both local elections and Senedd elections.

We welcome the proposed changes and hope they are the starting point - not the end goal - to improving political engagement in Wales. Additional measures, including those to increase the size of the Assembly, should not be kicked into the long grass.

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