

Committee on Assembly Electoral Reform
Electoral systems and boundaries
ESB 12 Pembrokeshire County Council

To: Dawn Bowden AM, Chair, Committee on Assembly Electoral Reform

Via email: SeneddReform@assembly.wales

Dear Dawn

Inquiry into electoral systems and boundaries

Thank you for your letter of 8 January 2020 highlighting your inquiry into electoral systems and boundaries: invitation to respond to consultation.

A response from Pembrokeshire County Council is set out below. We are one of 22 unitary authorities in Wales and have a population of around 125,000 people. We have used the Terms of Reference to structure our response.

Examining the implications of the electoral systems and boundaries recommended by the Expert Panel for democratic representation in Wales, and considering how the principles identified by the Expert Panel might be weighted to ensure that the Assembly's electoral arrangements are appropriate to the Welsh context;

We are supportive in principle of changes that enable the Assembly to more accurately reflect the diverse nature of society in Wales. We consider that whatever system is used, it should enjoy the confidence of voters.

We do not have a fixed view on which electoral system should be used for the Assembly, but we note that STV is the preferred system of the Expert Panel and that STV could be used by Councils if the provisions of the LGE Bill are enacted (and our view on the LGE Bill proposals is that it is not appropriate for local authorities to choose their own electoral system). There appears to be a 'head of steam' building behind STV as the system of choice for Welsh elections.

We note that there are a number of practical details to be worked through for STV to work effectively and we would urge early engagement with voters as there are a number of practical differences to the current systems used including the ability to vote for more than one candidate.

Exploring public sentiment and understanding of the Assembly's current electoral arrangements and boundaries and the options recommended by the Expert Panel;

We are not convinced that the Assembly's current electoral arrangements are well understood. There will be a need for a considerable amount of engagement on both the principles of reform as well as any detailed proposals.

We agree with the Expert Panel that there is a case for do-coupling the Assembly's constituencies from those used for Westminster elections. We note that Welsh Government is not proposing changes to local government boundaries (though accept that these may occur through voluntary mergers) and therefore LA boundaries offer a stable and sustainable geography.

We agree with the Association of Electoral Administrators that early and meaningful engagement with their members is necessary.

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Considering the implications for political parties in Wales of changing the electoral system and boundary models;

We do not have a comment on this area. However, we consider it is important that electors are not left with the perception that changes to the electoral system are being driven by their ability to systematically advantage or disadvantage particular political parties. If this were to happen, it risks undermining voters' confidence.

We note that adopting a STV system reduces parties' ability to determine which candidate is elected compared with the current system

Exploring the principles and practicalities of establishing boundary review arrangements for Assembly electoral areas;

We support establishing boundary review arrangements for Assembly electoral areas.

There are challenges to elections not being run on coterminous boundaries and boundaries crossing local authorities will increase risk to the successful delivery of a poll. They also risk increasing voter confusion in relation to who is responsible for administering their election with different Councils administering different elements of the process.

Considering the cost and resource implications of reforming the electoral system and Assembly boundaries.

Changes to electoral systems and boundaries will increase costs, both in the short and longer term. As such we would seek a commitment from Welsh Government and the Assembly to fully fund any new burden/initiative resulting from legislative reforms.