

# WLGA Consultation Response

## Creating A Parliament for Wales



**April 2018**

1. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) represents the 22 local authorities in Wales, and the three national park authorities and the three fire and rescue authorities are associate members.
2. The WLGA is a politically led cross-party organisation, with the leaders from all local authorities determining policy through the Executive Board and the wider WLGA Council. The WLGA also appoints senior members as Spokespersons and Deputy Spokespersons to provide a national lead on policy matters on behalf of local government.
3. The WLGA works closely with and is often advised by professional advisors and professional associations from local government, however, the WLGA is the representative body for local government and provides the collective, political voice of local government in Wales.
4. The WLGA welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Assembly Commission's consultation 'Creating a Parliament for Wales'.

### **Reform of the Assembly**

5. The proposal to increase the current 60 Assembly Members is a matter for the institution itself to consider and justify. In doing so it must demonstrably prove that the current membership is unable to manage the current levels of Assembly business and anticipated future demands effectively.
6. The Assembly must also consider any proposed reforms in the context of the current and ongoing pressures on public finances, the wider challenges faced by front-line services and, crucially, public perception and acceptability of any proposals to increase the number and costs of Assembly Members.
7. The WLGA's priorities are that scarce public resources should be invested in front-line services rather than in administration and governance during this period of financial challenge. A larger Assembly would inevitably see costs increasing (estimated at an additional c£6.6m-£9.6m annually or 0.06-0.08% of the Welsh block grant) and there will therefore be greater expectation on the Assembly to demonstrate efficiencies and value for money in future.

8. The WLGA has previously commented<sup>1</sup> on the recent increases in the Assembly's budget; there has 90% increase in the Assembly Commission's staffing costs from £10.5m in 2007-08 to £19.8m in 2017-18. Contextually, in the same period Welsh local authority budgets have been reduced by over 20%. The WLGA therefore would therefore not support further corresponding increases in Assembly Commission staff should the number of Assembly Members increase.
9. The WLGA notes that the Assembly's Finance Committee also recognises the challenges of balancing investment in front-line services and the costs of the Assembly, commenting in its report on the Assembly Commission Draft Budget 2018-19 that '...at a time when many other public services in Wales are facing extensive and continuing real terms cuts, it is hard to justify any increase in the Assembly's spending.'<sup>2</sup>
10. The Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform<sup>3</sup> previously identified potential improvements to capacity, working practices and prioritisation within the current Assembly arrangements and concluded that these should continue to be made, irrespective of any possible future reforms. The WLGA supports this conclusion.
11. Wales' devolution settlement interconnects all levels of government; it affects intergovernmental and institutional relations between London, Cardiff Bay and Wales' 22 local authorities. The WLGA is strongly of the view that any proposed Assembly reforms should not be at the expense of or undermine the foundations of local democratic representation in Wales.
12. An increase in Assembly Members should not mean a consequent diminution of local democratic representation. In the current economic, financial, public service and post-Brexit environment, Wales more than ever needs a partnership of strong national government working with strong local government; we need a balance of strong national leadership of Wales with strong local leadership of our communities. Local government provides dynamic local leadership and is leading the local public service reform agenda through the city deal and regional developments.
13. Any reforms to the Assembly should be an opportunity to strengthen and extend the devolution settlement to Wales' communities, to embed principles of subsidiarity into legislation and enshrine the European Charter of Local Self Government into statute.
14. The reforms should also provide a clear codification of governance and representation in Wales, which the WLGA has called for since the advent of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-politics-42025925>

<sup>2</sup> Page 9, Paragraph 13 <http://www.assembly.wales/laid%20documents/cr-ld11245/cr-ld11245-e.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> As noted in Chapter 5 of the Expert Panel's Report '*Increasing Capacity without more Members*' in the Expert Panels' report) -

<http://www.assembly.wales/NAfW%20Documents/About%20the%20Assembly%20section%20documents/Expert%20Panel%20on%20Assembly%20Electoral%20Reform/A%20Parliament%20that%20Works%20for%20Wales.pdf>

devolution; it provides an opportunity to outline the respective roles of national and local government, the respective roles and responsibilities of national democratic representatives and local democratic representatives and ensure a greater consistency of expectations around behaviour and conduct.

## **Reform of the Assembly's Electoral Arrangements**

15. The Assembly's preferred electoral system is a matter for the institution itself. Any reforms to the Assembly's electoral arrangements will however have an impact on the democratic alignment and relationships between national representatives and local communities and local authority areas. This could be further complicated and compromised should the Welsh Government's Green Paper reforms to local government boundaries be implemented<sup>4</sup>. Irrespective of the Green Paper, any boundary changes will require significant and detailed administrative work by the Boundary Commission and local authorities' electoral administration teams as well as public consultation and engagement.
16. Reforms to the Assembly's electoral arrangements will have a significant impact on electoral administration, which is managed by local government. The WLGA notes that the Association of Electoral Administrators Wales has provided a detailed and professional response to the consultation.
17. Electoral administration teams' capacity and resources are already under significant pressure, so it is vital therefore that the Welsh Government ensures that reforms are fully funded. Furthermore, the experience and expertise of electoral administrators should be involved in shaping any reforms and the Assembly and Welsh Government should work closely with local government colleagues in planning and implementing any proposed electoral reforms.
18. The WLGA supports electoral administrators' calls for greater clarity, consistency and scheduling around different elections and electoral planning duties; the WLGA would therefore support the alignment of much of the electoral administrative arrangements of the Assembly with those of local government, as per the recent Local Government Electoral Reform White Paper for example consistency of voting ages or entitlement of certain individuals to vote.

## **Other comments**

19. An increase in Assembly business and additional Assembly Members will have an impact on civil society and those public bodies and organisations which already engage, support and work with the Assembly on a regular basis.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Strengthening Local Government – Delivering for People' Green Paper  
<https://beta.gov.wales/sites/default/files/consultations/2018-03/180320-strengthening-local-government-consultation-v1.pdf>

20. The Assembly is an open and accessible institution and engages widely in its business. As the representative body of local government, the WLGA is in regular dialogue and engagement with Assembly Members individually and with the National Assembly corporately; a growth in the workload of inquiries and legislation during recent years has already meant that the WLGA has had to prioritise how and where it can add most value to the Assembly's business.
21. The WLGA is a comparatively small organisation, but as the representative body for local government it is regularly involved in Assembly business. Much of the Assembly's legislation impacts on local communities and most directly affects or is delivered by local government; the WLGA is therefore often one of the first organisations to be invited by Assembly Members or Assembly Committees to provide informal views or to participate in formal evidence sessions on legislation or committee inquiries.
22. It will be increasingly challenging for the WLGA and local government more broadly to meet the Assembly's expectations around engagement, should the Assembly's membership, business and committee structures further expand in the future. The WLGA would welcome early dialogue with Assembly Commission colleagues to ensure that it can continue to be able to engage constructively and effectively with the Assembly and prioritise where it would add most value to the Assembly's legislative, policy development and scrutiny arrangements.

**For Further Information, contact:**

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