

The Association of Electoral Administrators



Response to the National Assembly for Wales consultation on electoral systems and boundaries

Organisation: Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA). A joint response from the National AEA and the Wales Branch of the AEA.

Summary of Organisation: The Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) was founded in 1987 and is the professional body representing the interests of electoral administrators in the United Kingdom. It is a non-governmental and non-partisan body and has just under 2,000 members, the majority of whom are employed by local authorities to provide electoral registration and election services. There are eleven regional branches of the Association covering the United Kingdom one of which is Wales.

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Responses to the terms of reference:

Examine the recommendations of the Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform relating to electoral systems and boundaries, and the principles underpinning them, by:

- **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;**

The AEA is supportive of any changes introduced to encourage a Senedd that more accurately reflects the diverse nature of society in Wales. However, it is a matter for Welsh Government and the Senedd as to how they would wish to implement this.

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

The Expert Panel have recommended three electoral systems which could be suitable for use in Wales.

The AEA maintains a neutral stance on this as we believe it is for the Senedd to make decisions of this nature.

We would recommend that in introducing any changes to the voting system, that careful consideration should be given to the potential risk of voter confusion that comes with different voting systems. Additionally, consideration should be given to the risks that

The Association of Electoral Administrators



will be introduced and the challenges different voting systems will bring to administering polls using the different systems.

There will be a need to ensure that an effective public awareness campaign is undertaken ahead of any specific event.

Furthermore, we would also encourage the Senedd to consider how Returning Officers and their staff will be able to effectively plan for and resource any electoral change.

We would call on the Senedd to work closely with the electoral community in Wales in implementing any new electoral system to ensure consistency, ideally using the Wales Electoral Co-ordination Board.

The AEA supports any measures that, after full and proper evaluation, enhance public confidence in democratic systems, are deliverable and do not add unnecessary bureaucracy, cost and risk into the process. We would urge the Senedd to consider these factors when making their final decision on electoral change.

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

No comment - this is not a matter for the AEA and is for the political parties to answer.

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

The Senedd and UK Parliamentary boundaries have generally mirrored each other and are well established. The diverging of the Senedd and UK Parliamentary boundaries will inevitably create administrative difficulties and voter confusion.

Consideration needs to be given to the complexity that comes with introducing different electoral systems for different election types. This is in addition to the challenges of elections not being run on coterminous boundaries. 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.

We support establishing boundary review arrangements for Senedd electoral areas. In our statement on the 2019 UK Parliamentary general election, we addressed the challenges of setting a legislative timeframe for such reviews that cannot be extended when unscheduled electoral events are required. We stated:

We believe that the UK Government should introduce changes to legislation so that, in the event of an unscheduled UK national poll or referendum, local authorities may extend their polling district and polling places review.

We would ask the Senedd to ensure any arrangements are flexible enough to allow processes to be administered even when other priorities occur.

- **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 the Welsh Government and the Senedd to fully fund any new burden/initiative resulting from legislative reforms. We would also ask them to fully engage with the electoral community in relation to the

The Association of Electoral Administrators



planning, developing and implementation of any new mechanisms or processes, including the drafting of legislation.

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