



The network for environmental, countryside and heritage NGOs In Wales

## Assembly Reform

*January 2020*

### Summary

Wales Environment Link supports the case for increasing the number of Assembly Members in Wales for the following reasons:

- Assembly Members are spread thinly between too many Committees;
- Having such a limited number of AMs has a detrimental impact on their ability to undertake effective policy and legislative scrutiny, making it difficult for them to build up expertise in important areas of policy; and
- Wales may not be able to accept further devolved powers, and continue to develop politically, if the Assembly does not increase in size.

### **The capacity of the Assembly, how it fulfils its responsibilities, and the impact it has**

The National Assembly for Wales has the smallest number of political representatives of any country in the UK. The Expert Panel's report demonstrates the impact this has on their ability to participate in committees by comparing Wales with Scotland. The percentage of AMs that sit on 2 or 3 committees is 42% and 12% respectively, compared with 29% of MSPs that sit on 2 committees and 4% on three committees in Scotland.<sup>1</sup> We believe Assembly Members are spread too thinly amongst scrutiny committees and this has a detrimental impact on Assembly Members' capacity to gain expertise in important areas of policy, such as the environment. It also impacts negatively on their ability to effectively scrutinise Welsh Government policy and legislation.

We note that the Expert Panel reported that "anecdotally, we understand from Members that time available to them to prepare for meetings is limited to the extent that they may be unable to engage with the evidence or issues in sufficient depth."<sup>2</sup> With the addition of further law making powers and the removal of overarching scrutiny mechanisms at an EU level, the role of the Assembly in holding the Welsh Government to account on future environmental policy and legislation will be even more important than it currently is, and workload in this area is likely to increase post-Brexit. Therefore, WEL agrees with the Expert Panel's recommendation that the number of Members should be increased to between 80 and 90 Members.

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<sup>1</sup> [A Parliament that Works for Wales](#), Table 5, p78

<sup>2</sup> [A Parliament that Works for Wales](#), p80

## **CAER(5)-4-20 Paper to note 1**

We appreciate that this comes with a significant cost, but we strongly believe that the costs of poor environmental policy and legislation that could be passed if there is not enough resource to support effective scrutiny would be far higher. Our environment needs strong laws and policy to be in place and properly implemented. We need our Assembly Members to have the capacity to learn about these issues fully and hold the Welsh Government to account if they are not being addressed. The opportunity costs are the biggest concern for the environmental NGO sector in Wales if our Assembly Members are stretched too thin to carry out their roles effectively. We agree with the Expert Panel's view that "Even marginal improvements in the scrutiny of the Welsh Government's expenditure could reap significant dividends to the taxpayer as a result of improved legislation, policy and decision-making."

### **Any alternative measures that could be taken in the short term to ensure the Assembly has the capacity it needs to carry out its representative, scrutiny and legislative functions.**

WEL has noted with interest the comprehensive review of alternative measures that the Expert Panel detailed in their report. It appears to us that many capacity building measures have already been introduced and those that haven't been introduced have been dismissed due to questions about how democratic they are. Fundamentally, if the workload of the Assembly continues to increase then the number of Assembly Members will need to increase, otherwise it will become a barrier to further devolution of powers. We believe it is already an impediment to effective scrutiny.

**Wales Environment Link (WEL)** is a network of environmental, countryside and heritage Non-Governmental Organisations in Wales, most of whom have an all-Wales remit. WEL is a respected intermediary body connecting the government and the environmental NGO sector in Wales. Our vision is a healthy, sustainably managed environment and countryside with safeguarded heritage in which the people of Wales and future generations can prosper.

This paper represents the consensus view of a group of WEL members working in this specialist area. Members may also produce information individually in order to raise more detailed issues that are important to their particular organisation.



Baltic House, Mount Stuart Square Cardiff, CF10 5FH  
Tŷ Baltic, Sgwâr Mount Stuart, Caerdydd, CF10 5FH

Tel: 02920 497 509

[www.waleslink.org](http://www.waleslink.org)

Registered Charity Number / Rhif Elusen Gofrestredig: 1022675

Chair / Cadeirydd: Roger Thomas

Joint Directors / Cyd-Gyfarwyddwyr: Susan Evans & Karen Whitfield