

# Local Government Secretary announces major shake up of council elections and details of new Local Government Bill

The proposals, which form part of a 12 week consultation on electoral reform, are designed to make it easier to vote and easier to be entitled to vote. If enacted, they would amount to the biggest change to the Welsh electoral system since 1970 – when the voting age was lowered to 18.

Under proposals set out in the consultation, 16 and 17 year olds in Wales would be given the right to vote in council elections – under powers transferred to the National Assembly for Wales under the Wales Act.

The consultation also looks ahead to when the UK is due to leave the EU in 2019 and asks whether all foreign citizens normally resident in Wales should have the right to vote in local elections.

Different options to make it easier for people to vote and modernising the voting system are also laid out in the consultation. These include electronic voting at polling stations and remotely, mobile polling stations and voting at places other than polling stations such as supermarkets, local libraries, leisure centres and railway stations.

The consultation also asks whether voting could take place on other days of the week rather than just Thursdays.

Changes would also be made to the voting system itself, with each council being given the option of using a First-Past-the-Post or Single Transferable Vote system. Councils would have to consult with local residents before deciding which system to use.

Following on from a White Paper earlier this year, the Cabinet Secretary has also announced details of a Local Government Bill that would see mandatory regional working between Wales' 22 councils on areas such as economic development, strategic land use planning and strategic transport.

These services will all be undertaken in three large regions: North Wales, Central and South West Wales and South East Wales. There will be scope for sub-regional working as part of these larger groupings.

Councils would also be required to work regionally on other services like education improvement, social services, additional learning needs and other aspects of land-use planning but have more flexibility on the footprint in which they work together.

Certain specific functions would have to be undertaken regionally, for example, social services being aligned with the local health board

boundaries.

Joint Governance Committees, comprising elected members of each constituent local authority, would be set up for each of the 3 regional areas and would oversee the services.

As part of a new, more transparent relationship between people and their councils, it will also become mandatory for local authorities to broadcast their meetings.

In addition to the above there will also be a root and branch review of town and community councils. The evidence-based review will be conducted by a panel chaired by former Assembly Members, Gwenda Thomas and Rhodri Glyn-Thomas. The review will consider what needs to change so that the most local level of government works well and delivers results. The review is expected to start this summer and will take a year.

Cabinet Secretary for Local Government, Mark Drakeford, today joined a workshop to encourage young people to vote held at Llamau's Learning 4 Life in Bridgend. Llamau is the homelessness charity for the most vulnerable Young People and Women in Wales.

Mark Drakeford said:

"Today I'm announcing a Bill and a wholesale package of reforms that will change the way councils work and the way they are elected. We want to make it easier to vote and easier to be entitled to vote.

"There's no reason why 16 and 17 year olds can marry, pay taxes and join the army but can't vote in our elections. There's no reason why, in the twenty-first century, we can carry out all sorts of daily transactions online but can't, as of yet, vote online. That's why we're setting out a number of different ideas to modernise the electoral system and putting out a call for the public to share their ideas with us too.

"More broadly, if we're to achieve real and lasting change in our councils then we have to change the way they work. I have spoken to and consulted widely with councils on how best to do this and we now have a Local Government Bill that will strengthen services through systematic and mandatory regional working and build a new relationship between citizens and their councils.

"I look forward to working with local government on the Bill and I urge everyone to have their say on this bold and pioneering package of electoral reforms we're setting out today."

Director of the Electoral Reform Society Cymru, Jess Blair said:

“The time is right to have this conversation on how we do things differently when it comes to voting and engaging people around politics. This consultation on electoral reform is a welcome step forward and covers a huge amount of things that we believe could genuinely improve the way politics works in Wales.

“The inclusion of votes at 16 in this debate is about what kind of democracy we want to be – one which engages our young people in their futures, and secures a fair franchise.

“And we know it works. Sixteen and 17 year olds threw themselves wholeheartedly into the Scottish referendum, with 75% voting and 97% saying they would vote in future elections.

“Last week we launched our project, Missing Voices, which is looking at the barriers to voting in Wales. Therefore, we are delighted this is happening and believe this is a significant opportunity to have a debate about how we create a healthier democracy.”

Chief Executive of Llamau, Frances Beecher said:

“We’re excited about the proposals from Welsh Government about revitalising the democratic process in Wales and extending the vote to 16 and 17 year olds.

“We work with homeless young people and vulnerable women across Wales. Homeless young people are among the people who are most affected by government policy, but often the most forgotten about. It’s vitally important to us that we make sure that they are able to express their opinion to change the things that are important to them.

“It is only through listening to and counting the views and the opinions of the most vulnerable people in Wales that we can make significant and real change for them. The turnout of 18-25 year olds at the recent general election shows us that young people really are interested in shaping the policies of their country and we need to pay attention to that.”