

Local Government Reform

The Williams Commission

The Williams Commission reported their findings on 20 January 2014. In a 350 page report they made recommendations based around 6 themes:-

- Complexity;
- Scale and capability;
- Governance, scrutiny and delivery;
- Leadership, culture and values;
- Performance and performance management; and
- The role of the Welsh Government

The main points arising from the Report are: -

- **The reorganisation of local authorities by merging the 22 existing authorities into between 10 and 12 larger authorities.** Mergers, rather than redrawing boundaries, has been identified as the preferable method in order to ensure the reorganisation can be facilitated quickly. The Programme for reorganisation should be in place by Easter 2014 and completed by 2017-2018. It has been acknowledged by the Welsh Government that the Easter deadline will not be met.
- Services should be given the opportunity to merge voluntarily once new authorities have been set.
- **Town and Community Councils should also be merged to create larger, more effective bodies.** There are some 736 Town and community councils in Wales. Many are not currently large enough to be effective.
- **The merging of Powys County Council with Powys Teaching Health Board** (Powys would not be merged with any other local authority under the Commission's recommendations).
- **Boundaries of the new local authorities, the health boards, regional transport and education consortia and the Fire and Rescue Authorities should be coterminous.** For example, the boundary between South Wales Fire and Rescue Authority and Mid and West Wales Fire and Rescue Authority should be moved to be in line with the boundary of Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board.
- **The Fire and Rescue Authorities should work together with the Welsh Ambulance Service Trust (WAST)** to coordinate joint responses to incidents, as well as shared facilities. The Fire and Rescue Authorities should also be responsible for the scrutiny of this relationship.
- **The Report does not mention alternative voting systems.** However, the Sunderland Commission (2002), recommended that the Single Transferable Vote was introduced for all multi-member wards by 2008. A proportional voting system fits with the themes outlined in the Williams Commission as a proportional system elects representatives who are more accountable to their electorate. Scotland has been using STV in local elections since 2007. Northern Ireland uses STV for all elections other than Westminster.
- The National Assembly for Wales does not have the powers to change the voting arrangements for local councils, this would have to be done through Westminster (unless the power was devolved).

Further to these recommendations, several other themes arose:

- Scrutiny and audit should be clear and open processes. Its value should be recognised by all. Responding openly to scrutiny must also be a target.
- Annual review of progress should become a priority. Assessment of progress should be based on the **outcomes** achieved.
- We must aim for “best practice” and not “least required”. Wales should be “benchmarking” their performance against comparable services in other jurisdictions. Welsh Government must identify comparable performance data from other countries, establish reliable and accurate means of comparing said data and publish “clear and meaningful” comparisons between Wales and the “best in class” elsewhere.
- Benchmarking should be used within individual organisations as a way of identifying areas for improvement and developing strategies for implementation.
- The report identified 935 public sector bodies in Wales (though this a “conservative best estimate”). There are 736 town and community councils in Wales. In order to keep track of public sector bodies, the Commission recommends a register of public sector bodies in created and maintained by the Welsh Government. This is done in Scotland, and includes details of funding, staff and chief executive pay. In Wales there is 1 public body for every 3200 people. In Scotland, there is 1 public body for every 3900 people. The result of this reorganisation must be that public bodies are large enough to be effective.

1. Does the Williams Commission’s view for reorganisation create a sustainable solution?

Local Government

Wales is considered to have too many councillors (see Figure 4). The Commission on Public Service Governance and Delivery recommendation that the number of councils be reduced from 22 to between 10-12 could potentially still leave Wales with 900 councillors.

Currently, there is a cap of 75 councillors per council. However, the councils vary considerably in population and physical size. Other countries base the number of councillors on population size (Finland) or the number of eligible voters (Sweden).

Figure 1 - Representation at Local Government

Country	No of Councillors	Population*	Ratio
England	18116	53.5 million	1:2953
Scotland	1220	5.3 million	1:4344
Northern Ireland	582	1.8 million	1:3093
Wales	1254	3.1 million	1:1472

*Population figures taken from National Office of Statistics mid 2012 estimates

2. Should the number of representatives we have be controlled by a cap, or based on a minimum numbers?
3. Should the rurality of an area also be a factor in setting the number of elected representatives?
4. Are we content with the level at which services are delivered? Should more be devolved? Should some services be taken back to Cardiff?
5. Is a single template for powers realistic? Should we have a more flexible model which allows powers to be devolved if in the local interest but to remain at a higher level if preferred?
6. What voting system should be used for local government elections?

7. **Should mayors be directly elected? Should council leaders be directly elected?**
8. **Is the current system of electing the whole council on a 5 year cycle the most appropriate?**

Health and Social Care

The relationship between health and social care was outside of the remit of the Williams Commission and therefore no recommendations were made in their report, at least in an all Wales sense.

It was recommended that Powys County Council and Powys Teaching Health Board should be merged. This should create greater opportunities to integrate health and social care, but does not set a precedent.

9. **How can we improve the relationship between health and social care?**
10. **What is the most appropriate level for the management of healthcare?**

Education

Education in Wales has been managed by 4 regional consortia since 2012. The consortia were introduced in order to improve attainment across schools and share best practice. Prior to this, education had been managed by local authorities.

11. **What is the most appropriate level for the management of education?**

Transport

Four regional transport consortia were set up to promote better joint working between local authorities.

12. **What is the most appropriate level for the management of transport?**

Community Representation and Empowerment

There are 735 community and town councils in Wales covering 70% of the population. They are served by approximately 8000 town and community councillors.¹ The Williams Commission notes that Community Councils vary significantly in size, 67% of elections are uncontested and 12% of seats were unfilled. As such only around 20% of community councillors are elected by the public.²

The Williams Commission recommended the merger or enlargement of town and community councils, in order to overcome the issues arising because some councils are too small to deliver services. However, they do not believe that a two-tier system of government should be created.

There are many councils which take a very active role in providing services in their local area with great success. Other areas however, suffer due to lack of engagement.

13. **Are Community/Town Councils the best way to represent people locally?**

¹ One Voice Wales, www.onevoicewales.org.uk/allabout-councils

² Full Report of the Commission on Public Service Governance and Delivery

14. Should community/town councils be based on geographical size/population/communities?

National Parks

National Parks are protected areas due to their beautiful countryside, wildlife and cultural heritage. There are 3 National Parks in Wales: the Brecon Beacons National Park; Pembrokeshire Coast National Park; and Snowdonia National Park. Much of the land in Wales' National Parks is privately owned.

Functions carried out by national parks include:

- Conservation of natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage;
- Promotion of opportunities for public enjoyment;
- Duty foster the economic and social well-being of communities living within the park;
- Consideration of planning applications

15. What role should National Parks have in relation to local governance?