

CABINET STATEMENT

Written Statement: Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill

Julie James AM , Minister for Housing and Local Government

The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill has today been introduced to the National Assembly for Wales together with its Explanatory Memorandum and Regulatory Impact Assessment.

The Bill, contains provisions which have been subject to extensive consultation. It contains provisions to enable electoral reform and establishes a new governance framework for local government.

The Bill will extend the franchise to 16 and 17 year-olds and foreign citizens legally resident in Wales for local government elections; improve processes for voter registration, and amend the rules covering who is able to stand as a candidate at local government elections and who is not. It will enable local authorities to choose their voting system for elections, and will put the local government electoral cycle on a five year cycle.

The Welsh Government is changing the governance framework for local government to better enable innovation, transparency and local ownership for driving up service delivery outcomes and standards across Wales.

The Bill will introduce a new system for improving performance and governance based on self-assessment and peer review, including the

consolidation of the Welsh Ministers' support and intervention powers. Powers to facilitate voluntary mergers of principal councils and restructuring a principal area are included in the Bill, should these be required.

A key recommendation of the Working Group on Local Government was the need for more consistent mechanisms and structures to support regional working and collaboration. The Bill will therefore make provision for corporate joint committees to be established. These will be formed from the membership of the constituent local authorities to ensure democratic accountability. Local authorities will be able to request they are established in relation to any of their functions. Welsh Ministers will be able to establish them in a limited number of functional areas set out in the Bill.

The Bill will also provide a general power of competence for principal councils and eligible community councils to enable them to take advantage of a wider range of options to work in the best interests of their communities.

Amongst other measures included in the Bill aimed at increasing public participation in local democracy and improving transparency, principal councils will be required to prepare, consult on, publish and keep under review a 'public participation strategy'. They will also be required to publish a guide to their constitution which explains in ordinary language the content of their constitution.

Provision is made in the Bill relating to the leadership of principal councils, including encouraging greater diversity amongst executive members through enabling job-sharing and providing for assistants to the executive.

The Bill also includes a number of provisions relating to local government finance aimed at reducing opportunities for avoidance behaviour relating to non-domestic rates and changes to the council tax system in Wales.

Taking the opportunity afforded by the Bill, other provisions relating to a range of matters aimed at strengthening and modernising the operation of local government are included, such as information sharing between regulators, the abolition of community polls and their replacement with a petition scheme, performance and governance arrangements for fire and rescue authorities, the process of appointing the chief executive to the Local

Democracy and Boundary Commission for Wales and increased flexibility for Public Service Boards.

I shall be making a Legislative Statement in Plenary tomorrow and I look forward to the Assembly's consideration of the Bill over the coming months.

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