

Welsh Democracy

6. Local Government

The fourth tier of democracy is represented by local government: in Wales, 22 unitary local authorities to which 1,257 councillors are elected by the first past the post system every four years. In addition there are 735 community and town councils in Wales that cover 70 per cent of the population and 94 per cent of the land area of Wales. There are approximately 8,000 community and town councillors.

Welsh councils spend approximately £7.5n per annum in total on their services. They employ around 165,000 people, and are responsible for delivering key services to citizens: education, housing, social services, planning, highways and transport, waste management, leisure and cultural services, consumer protection, environmental health, economic development and emergency planning.

Local authorities in Wales are represented by the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), which is also affiliated to the Local Government Association in England.

According to the WLGA, 'the electorate entrusts local councillors with responsibilities for using public resources carefully and fairly, ensuring that their communities are properly represented, and providing day to day services on which they can depend. Councillors are elected to office not only to represent their ward and their constituents. They also have legal obligations to oversee the management of the corporate body of the Council and to assure the highest standards of governance, stewardship and organisational performance in the public interest.'

Evolution of the Local Government System

The Local Government Act 1888 established 13 Welsh county councils and three county boroughs – for Cardiff, Swansea and Newport – a pattern of county government which, apart from the granting of county borough status to Merthyr Tydfil in 1908, lasted until 1974.

The 13 old counties were

- Anglesey
- Caernarfonshire
- Denbighshire
- Flintshire
- Merionethshire
- Montgomeryshire
- Radnorshire
- Breconshire
- Cardiganshire
- Pembrokeshire
- Carmarthenshire
- Glamorgan
- Monmouthshire

In the first elections, held in 1889, there were clear Liberal majorities in 11 of the 13 counties, with 'hung' councils in Breconshire and Radnorshire. Councillors were drawn from a wider spectrum of the population than their English counterparts. The creation in 1894 of rural and urban districts and of parish councils further strengthened the representative nature of local government. Meanwhile, the field of influence of county councils was extended by the Welsh Intermediate Education Act of 1889. This established county joint education committees, most of whose members were county councillors. Following the passage of the 1902 Education Act, which abolished school boards, the county education committees also became responsible for elementary education. The needs of an increasingly complex society imposed further duties upon local authorities, among them the provision of pure water, the supply of electricity and gas, systems of local transport, and working-class housing.

The 1974 Reorganisation

The 1974 reorganisation of local government in England and Wales, replaced the 13 counties and 164 boroughs and urban and rural district councils with a two-tier system comprised of eight counties and 37 districts. This two-tier system divided responsibility with, broadly, the counties controlling strategic functions – structure planning, education and social services - while the districts controlled detailed planning, and housing.

The eight new Welsh counties created were Gwynedd, Clwyd, Powys, Dyfed, Gwent, and Mid, South and West Glamorgan. It was only Gwent – essentially a rebranding of Monmouthshire – which in any way resembled its predecessor.

New County	Old Counties
Gwynedd	Anglesey Caernarfonshire Merionethshire
Clwyd	Denbighshire Flintshire
Powys	Montgomeryshire Radnorshire Breconshire
Dyfed	Cardiganshire Pembrokeshire Carmarthenshire
West Glamorgan	Glamorgan, part Swansea
Mid Glamorgan	Glamorgan, part Merthyr
South Glamorgan	Glamorgan, part Cardiff
Gwent	Monmouthshire Newport

The 1974 reorganisation had few champions. Impoverished Mid Glamorgan resented being hived off from prosperous South Glamorgan, a construct designed to give the Conservatives a chance of controlling a county council in Wales. Powys, which extended almost from Llangollen to Merthyr, was generally regarded as too large. Pembrokeshire resented its division into two districts. There was also a good deal of debate and confusion over responsibilities with, for example, the counties being responsible for social services while the districts controlled housing.

By now Welsh local government was dominated by the Labour Party, which controlled the new south Wales counties and Clwyd following the 1974 local elections. Independents controlled Powys and Dyfed, while Plaid Cymru became the leading party in Gwynedd.

The reorganisation also involved the substitution of 37 districts for the previous 164 boroughs and urban and rural district councils.

1974-96: 37 Welsh District Councils

Gwynedd Aberconwy Anglesey Arfon Dwyfor Meirionnydd	West Glamorgan Lliw Valley Neath Port Talbot Swansea	Dyfed Carmarthen Ceredigion Preseli Pembrokeshire South Pembrokeshire Dinefw Llanelli
Clwyd Alyn and Deesside Colwyn Delyn Glyndwr Rhuddlan Wrexham Maelor	Mid Glamorgan Cynon Valley Merthyr Tydfil Ogwr Rhondda Rhymney Valley Taff-Ely	Gwent Blaenau Gwent Islwyn Monmouth Torfaen Newport
Powys Mongtomery Radnor Brecknock	South Glamorgan Cardiff Vale of Glamorgan	

In addition the civil parishes of Wales were superseded by Communities. These should not be confused with wards – the areas represented by councillors – although many wards have the same name and sometimes the same boundaries as Communities. Wales has 869 Communities, of which 735 have Community or Town Councils. Communities vary greatly both in terms of area – from Rhayader (13,945 ha) to Cefn Fforest (64 ha) – and in population – from Barry (45,053) to Baglan Bay and Margam Moors which have no inhabitants at all.

The 1996 Reorganisation

In 1996 the eight counties and 37 districts were abolished and replaced by 22 unitary authorities, known either as counties or county boroughs. This created a single tier of local authority administration. While there was some satisfaction in rural Wales with the return of such ancient counties as Pembrokeshire and Ceredigion, there was a widespread view that many of the new authorities were too small to effect a strategic approach.

Welsh Local Authorities

North Wales	Population 000s	Population 000s	%	Ranking by pop.
Anglesey	69,012		2.3	20=
Gwynedd	118,207		3.9	14
Conwy	112,032		3.7	15
Denbighshire	97,573		3.3	16
Flintshire	150,967		5.0	6
Wrexham	132,851		4.4	10=
N Wales sub-total		680,642	22.7	
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Mid Wales				
Powys	132,598		4.4	10=
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South West Wales				
Ceredigion	78,047		2.6	19
Pembrokeshire	118,807		4.0	13
Carmarthenshire	180,529		6.0	4
SW Wales sub-total		377,383	12.6	
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Industrial South Wales				
Swansea	229,091		7.6	3
Neath Port Talbot	137,645		4.6	8
Bridgend	134,794		4.5	9
Vale of Glamorgan	124,869		4.2	12
Cardiff	324,821		10.8	1
Rhondda Cynon Taff	234,097		7.8	2
Merthyr Tydfil	55,735		1.9	22
Caerphilly	172,398		5.7	5
Blaenau Gwent	69,097		2.3	20=
Torfaen	91,097		3.0	17
Monmouthshire	88,445		2.9	18
Newport	140,714		4.7	7
Ind. S Wales sub-total		1,802,803	60.2	
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Total population		2,993,426	100	

Six largest authorities

- 1 Cardiff
- 2 Rhondda Cynon Taff
- 3 Swansea
- 4 Carmarthenshire
- 5 Caerphilly
- 6 Flintshire

Six smallest authorities

- 17 Torfaen
- 18 Monmouthshire
- 19 Ceredigion
- 20 Blaenau Gwent
- 20 Anglesey
- 22 Merthyr Tydfil

In 2003 a reorganisation of NHS Wales created 22 Local Health Boards, one of the objectives being to make them coterminous in boundaries with the 22 county councils. This, it was argued, would better enable co-ordination between local authority run social services and the health service. However, the change proved short-lived. In 2009 a further NHS reorganisation created seven new Health Authorities, merging the eight NHS Trusts with the 22 Local Health Boards. Some believe that the structure of local government will follow along similar lines, some time after the 2011 Assembly election. But there is also a strong body of opinion in government that argues against another re-structuring.

Local Government Finance

Local government in Wales is funded from three sources:

- Central Government (that is, the Welsh Government). This accounts for 80 per cent of total local government funding (including the distribution of business rates). It is made up of the Revenue Support Grant and a large number of grants for specific purposes. The ring-fencing, or hypothecation of grants for specific purposes is controversial as it is seen as reducing flexibility and undermining local autonomy.
- Business rates (non-domestic rates). Although these are collected by local councils, the rate is set by central government. Each council passes the amount collected to the Assembly Government, which then re-distributes the money as a grant to councils, according to need. Local government is critical of the 'nationalisation' of business rates which, they say, has weakened the link between councils and local businesses.
- Council tax, which accounts around 20 per cent of total funding. This rate is set by each council individually, and is calculated on the basis of the rateable value of properties in the councils area. However, the Assembly Government has powers to limit or cap council tax increases.

Welsh local authorities spend around £7.5 billion annually on their services. Around 80 per cent of this comes direct from the Welsh Government. This includes the re-distribution of business rates. Only 20 per cent derives from locally collected council tax.

In 2009-10 the average band D council tax for Wales was £1,086 per household, varying between £864 in Pembrokeshire and £1,325 in Blaenau Gwent. The Welsh average of £1,086 was approximately one quarter of the average figure in England of £1,414. Of the £1,086, £894 was for the county councils, £168 for the police authorities, and £24 for the community councils.

Non-domestic rates

All non-domestic rates (i.e. business rates) are remitted to a central pool, which is redistributed by the Assembly Government. The following table gives data on contributions to the central pool, the amount received in the re-distribution and the effective percentage of their own non-domestic rates that are received back from the Assembly Government.

Non-domestic rates contribution and re-distribution 2008-9 £'000s

Council	Contribution	Received	% received back
Anglesey	13,214	18,278	138
Gwynedd	27,635	31,463	114
Conwy	25,156	29,792	118
Denbighshire	19,161	25,469	133
Flintshire	50,103	39,371	79
Wrexham	35,057	34,528	98
Powys	23,127	34,824	151
Ceredigion	14,878	21,268	145
Pembrokeshire	26,578	30,728	116
Carmarthenshire	37,352	47,135	126
Swansea	65,025	60,783	93
Neath Port Talbot	32,772	36,244	111
Bridgend	37,313	34,752	93
Vale of Glamorgan	32,173	31,929	99
Rhondda Cynon Taf	47,178	61,137	130
Merthyr Tydfil	14,359	14,413	100
Caerphilly	29,840	44,269	148
Blaenau Gwent	11,731	18,093	154
Torfaen	20,429	23,679	116
Monmouthshire	19,423	23,079	119
Newport	52,881	35,937	68
Cardiff	151,261	84,030	55

All but seven of the 22 local authorities are net beneficiaries of the redistribution of non-domestic rates. In 2008-9 the seven net contributors made a total net contribution to the pool of £102,483,000 – of which £67,231,000 was generated by Cardiff, which has the lowest retention rate of 55 per cent.

Net contributors of non-domestic rates in Wales 2008-9

County	Contribution	Received	Net Contributed	% received back
Cardiff	151,261	84,030	67,231	55
Newport	52,881	35,937	16,944	68
Flintshire	50,103	39,371	10,732	79
Swansea	65,025	60,783	4,242	93
Bridgend	37,313	34,752	2,561	93
Wrexham	35,057	34,528	509	98
Vale of Glamorgan	32,173	31,929	244	99

The 2008 County Council Elections

The tables below summarise the results of the latest Welsh local elections, held in May 2008. In these elections Labour's near century-long domination of Welsh local politics came to an end. The party lost 122 seats and control of six councils, confirming a trend of secular decline that had been underway for the better part of a decade. In contrast, all the other parties and political groupings made gains. In 1998 16 of the 22 local authorities were controlled by Labour. After 2008, the party controlled only two – Neath Port Talbot and Rhondda Cynon Taf. The political map of Wales is now dominated by councils with 'No Overall Control'. Coalitions are the norm across most of the 22 Welsh counties.

These tables should be read with a health warning. Many seats in Welsh local elections go unopposed, especially those held by Independents in large swathes of rural Wales. However, they give an accurate impression of the relative standing of the parties in May 2008.

Welsh 2008 Local Election Results

	Labour		Con		Plaid		Lib Dem		Other		Control
	Seats	+/-	Seats	+/-	Seats	+/-	Seats	+/-	Seats	+/-	
Anglesey	5	+5	2	+1	8	+2	2	+1	23	-9	IND
Blaenau Gwent	17	-8	0	0	0	0	2	0	23	+8	NOC
Bridgend	27	+5	6	-1	1	0	11	-2	9	-2	NOC
Caerphilly	32	-9	0	0	32	+6	0	0	9	+3	NOC
Cardiff	13	-14	17	+7	7	+4	35	+3	3	+1	NOC
Carmarthen	12	-13	0	0	31	+15	1	+1	30	-3	NOC
Ceredigion	1	0	0	0	19	+3	10	+1	12	-4	NOC
Conwy	7	-5	22	+8	12	+1	4	-1	14	-3	NOC
Denbigh	7	0	18	+9	8	+1	1	+1	13	-11	NOC
Flintshire	22	-13	1	0	1	+1	11	+1	26	+7	NOC
Gwynedd	4	-4	0	0	35	-8	0	0	30	+13	NOC
Merthyr	8	-9	0	0	0	0	6	+6	19	+3	NOC
Monmouth	7	-2	29	+5	1	-1	5	+2	1	-4	CON
Neath Port Talbot	37	+1	0	0	11	+1	4	+2	12	-4	LAB
Newport	19	-8	16	+4	2	+1	6	+3	1	0	NOC
Pembs	5	-6	5	+4	5	0	3	+1	42	+1	IND
Powys	4	+4	9	+9	0	0	15	0	45	-9	IND
RCT	45	-12	1	+1	20	+7	4	+2	5	+2	LAB
Swansea	30	-2	4	0	1	-3	23	+3	14	+2	NOC
Torfaen	18	-16	5	+4	3	+3	2	0	16	+9	NOC
Vale of Glam	13	-3	25	+5	6	-2	0	0	3	0	CON
Wrexham	11	-9	5	+1	4	+4	12	+3	20	+1	NOC
TOTAL	344	-122	173	+62	207	+33	16	+21	378	+6	

Wales local election results: 2008 and 2004 compared

	Lab	Con	Plaid	Lib Dem	Ind/Other
Seats won	344	173	207	162	378
(change on 2004)	(-122)	(+62)	(+33)	(+21)	(+6)
2004 % vote	30.6	11	16.4	13.9	28.1
2008 % vote	26.6	15.6	16.9	12.9	28

The elections deepened and extended the decline of Labour's control of local government that began to accelerate when they were last held in 2004. Then the Liberal Democrats took the initiative in forcing Labour out of power across much of the southern coastal belt, including Swansea, Bridgend and Cardiff, together with Wrexham in the north. Four years later a combination of other political forces, led in the main by non-party groups, forced Labour out of power in much of the territory of its traditional Welsh heartland, including Merthyr, Caerphilly, Blaenau Gwent, Torfaen, and Newport in the south, and Flintshire in the north-east.

Labour now controls just two Welsh counties, Neath Port Talbot and Rhondda Cynon Taf, and runs Bridgend with the help of a couple of Independents, in effect wresting control back from the Liberal Democrats. But even in Rhondda Cynon Taf it lost ground and might have fared a good deal worse had Plaid Cymru found more candidates. Eleven Labour councillors were returned unopposed, while Plaid fell 17 short of fielding a full slate of candidates in a council that it controlled between 1999 and 2004.

With 62 gains across Wales the Conservatives made the most progress of all the parties. The Conservatives now control two councils, Monmouth and the Vale of Glamorgan, and have made significant advances across other parts of Wales. In some instances this has been the result of previous Independent wards showing their true colours, for instance in northern Powys, Conwy and Denbighshire. At the same time the party now has support in some unlikely places such as Torfaen and also won a seat in the Rhondda.

Across much of Wales Plaid Cymru made some advances. Perhaps its major success came in Caerphilly which it now controls with the aid of a diverse group of independents, including Ron Davies, the former Secretary of State for Wales who made a political come-back after a decade in the wilderness. His wife, Lynne Hughes, also won a seat for Plaid Cymru in a neighbouring ward. Elsewhere the party picked up seats in previous barren territory such as Wrexham, Flintshire and Torfaen. It made gains in the Welsh capital, too, making it the largest political grouping at local level within Rhodri Morgan's Cardiff West constituency. Plaid Cymru's advance was checked in its Gwynedd fastness where Llais Gwynedd (Gwynedd Voice), a new group formed in protest at threatened small primary school closures, won 12 seats. However, Plaid remains by some distance the largest party and still, in effect, controls the authority.

The Liberal Democrats tightened their grip on urban Wales, especially Swansea, Cardiff and Wrexham, and even made a foray into Merthyr, winning six seats there from scratch. They also strengthened their grip on Cardiff, which had been targeted by Labour. In the capital the Liberal Democrats increased their strength by three seats to a commanding 35, while Labour fell by 13 seats to just 12. This means that Cardiff is now being run by a coalition of Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru, despite their coming respectively third and fourth in the popular vote – a classic case of the first-part-the-post electoral system delivering a non-proportional result, this time at the expense of Labour.

Elsewhere, a mixed bag of Independent councillors stole ground from Labour, especially in Blaenau Gwent, Torfaen and Flintshire. These are a new brand of Independents, a far cry from the traditional 'non-party' stalwarts of rural Wales and still very much alive in Pembrokeshire and Powys. These are highly political urban creatures grown up in opposition to Labour, whether it be the 'People's Voice' of Blaenau Gwent or the 'People Before Politics' of Merthyr Tydfil.

The results had an immediate impact on Welsh politics. No longer could key decisions within local authorities be framed within just one political party as had been the case for much of the 20th Century. Instead, the deals and compromises that are the everyday currency of politics became subject to agreement across the parties, often within coalitions.