

Why moving to STV doesn't mean the end for Independent Councillors in Wales.

If you are an Independent councillor in Wales you will know there has been a big change in Welsh local government, which means councils can now choose which electoral system they use for local elections in their area. The current system comes straight out of the last century and quite frankly it should have stayed there. It's called First Past the Post (FPTP) and it's about winning at all costs and ignoring the nuanced opinion of swathes of people. The alternative, that you can now choose to move to, is called the Single Transferable Vote (STV). It's a fairer, more proportional way of electing our representatives.

Since the local elections last year every councillor in Wales has received our report *Time for Change* which looked at the 2022 Welsh local elections and the case for STV. Our team has also been out and about trying to speak to as many councillors as possible. Not just to give information about the options and the benefits of STV but most importantly to listen to what local representatives, like you, had to say on the changes. We have made sure that Independents are front and centre in these conversations.

If the Independent councillors of Wales were a party, in the last local elections it would have been the second biggest party in the country, winning 309 seats, behind Labour but over 100 seats ahead of Plaid and the Conservatives.

Independent councillors aren't a party though and neither would they want to be.

The point I am trying to make is that Wales has a strong independent tradition in local politics and it is vital that you are fully involved in any changes to local democracy. This is especially true when many of you are worried that a change like this would signal the extinction of your kind.

Let me quickly answer that.

It won't.

In Scotland, every local election since 2007 has been fought using STV. In Northern Ireland they've used it for even longer. In both places positive democratic change was introduced and the next day the apocalypse didn't happen, fairer democracy did.

In 2023 you can still see Scottish Independent councillors alive and well in their natural habitats and by that, I mean, in local government. In fact after the elections last year, there were Independent councillors in 24 of the 32 local authorities, leading three of them and featuring in another six council ruling administrations.

Whenever there is an opportunity for change, there is also an opportunity for misinformation.

Some of you have told us that you can't stand as a true Independent under the new system and can only do so as a slate or list of Independents.

This is not true. Under STV you don't stand on lists. Under STV you vote for a person not a party. Unlike many other forms of PR, STV is purely about the candidate, in fact it takes away power from a party machine and places it into the hands of the voter.

There are suggestions that a new system would be confusing for voters. Any new system takes time to get used to but with proper information for voters that could be mitigated. STV is easy. Instead of an X in a box, under STV you rank the candidates. Your favourite person gets a 1, your second gets a 2 and so on for as many candidates as you like. If you don't like a candidate? You don't rank them.

There's also concern that STV works using multi-member wards. Guidance from the Welsh Government says the number of councillors would number between three and six per ward. It is important to note that there are no six member wards in Scotland or Northern Ireland and it would be highly unlikely that there would be many five member wards in Wales, never mind six.

STV means multi-member wards and that's because to be proportional you need multiple representatives representing people's votes – proper choice for the voter.

Another worry is that multi member wards would mean a loss of connection with your communities. You still represent YOUR community; you still represent people who live in your local area, that's just a bit bigger.

These issues are not insurmountable if we want a fairer democracy.

Do councillors in Scotland care less about the people of their ward because it's larger? Are councillors in multi-member wards in Cardiff or Swansea somehow less in touch with their communities because they share their responsibilities with others? Why would voters in Wales not be able to understand a system that voters in Northern Ireland and Scotland manage easily?

We know when you are on the doorstep, or in your advice surgery, that democracy probably doesn't feature in the top ten issues. That doesn't mean it's not important. In fact it's vital. Our council chambers should mirror the many voices of the communities it has the privilege to represent.

Is local democracy going well when turnout is so poor, where in the last council elections here in Wales over a hundred thousand people didn't get to have a say at all because there was no contest in their ward?

STV rewards candidates and councillors that live and breathe their communities, it rewards people who are seen and get things done.

I asked an Independent councillor in East Renfrewshire in Scotland how he would advise a colleague in Wales to win a council seat using STV. He told me you needed to...

'...establish yourself as the Independent Voice [and] ...put local concerns above party politics, which often constrains party councillors from doing what they really want to fight for [in] their area.'

Sound familiar? It's what Independent councillors from Letterston to Howarden and Llanbedrog to Wyesham are doing right now.

STV isn't a threat to Independent councillors, it's an opportunity. It's a system for the individual that shines a light on and rewards people who work for and within their communities.

People like you.