

# “A Democracy Observed”

## The Senedd at Work – Aled Edwards

Since 1999, I have made lists of some of the more significant developments in Welsh democracy as they impact on people. I have included them in articles and reports over the years and mentioned some in Tweets. They are neither comprehensive nor complete and are shaped somewhat by personal involvement in some instances. Having been encouraged to put them together in one document, they are set out here as a reminder and as an encouragement to others to participate in our democracy and to vote. Democracy matters because it shapes lives. The developments set out here have shaped Welsh lives quite significantly.

I have not set out to evaluate these initiatives. They have emerged from a complexity of political discourses: government, committees, backbenchers and a variety of other engagements in civic society. Some have emerged from coalitions, arrangements and others have evolved from one political conviction. They are listed here as outcomes.

### Ethics, Values and Priorities

1. **Homeless People** – It was reported in March 2021 that Wales had become the first UK nation to offer vaccine priority to homeless people.
2. **Tax Havens** – It was announced in May 2020 that Wales would deny offshore companies access to economic resilience funding.
3. **Living Wage** – Wales has taken steps to ensure that NHS Wales continues to be a Living Wage employer.
4. **Free School Meals** – It was also reported that Wales had become the first country in the UK to guarantee ongoing funding for children to continue to receive free school meals during the Covid-19 pandemic in April 2020.
5. **Rate Relief** – It was announced in 2020 that relief would not be given to properties with a rateable value of £500,000 and above. It was claimed that smaller companies would be in greater need of support.
6. **Organ Donation** - There may be no greater legislative expression of who we are as a nation than our presumed consent opt-out organ donation law which came into effect in 2015. It could help anyone in these islands who needed a transplant. In 2019/20 the organ donation rate in Wales was the highest in the UK.
7. **Fair Trade** - Wales became the world’s first Fair Trade Nation in 2008. Scotland followed suit in 2013.
8. **Political Cooperation** – Wales offers the UK a diverse pattern of political parties sometimes working with each other. The One Wales coalition agreement in June 2007 brought about the 2011 referendum on law-making powers which delivered a 63.49% ‘yes’ vote.

### Health

9. **Credit Unions** – Wales provided additional funding for Credit Unions in September 2020 building on a stated commitment made much earlier in the One Wales coalition agreement.

10. **Personal Choice for Women** - It was announced in April 2011, that emergency contraception could be obtained without charge from pharmacies across Wales.
11. **Free Access to Health** – Wales has provided free prescriptions since 2007.

### **Social Cohesion**

12. **Bringing Faith Communities Together** - Following 9/11, the humanist Rhodri Morgan, with the other Party leaders at the Assembly, brought Wales' faith communities together in a Forum setting a way of responding to crises, including Covid-19, by deploying public partnerships.

### **Social Care**

13. **Looking After Children** - In 2001, Wales became the first nation in the UK to appoint a Children's Commissioner.
14. **Public Health** - The most pioneering enactment to improve our lives in Wales may have been the April 2007 total banning of smoking in enclosed public areas and workplaces.
15. **Free Parking at NHS Hospitals** - In 2008, following an earlier Welsh decision, the Scottish health secretary, Nicola Sturgeon, announced that Scotland intended to grant free parking at most hospitals.
16. **Care Leavers** - Wales has passed humanitarian legislation aimed at specific vulnerable groups. Since April 2019, care leavers under the age of 25 have been exempt from paying council tax in all areas of Wales. Scotland and Wales have adopted this provision.

### **Environment**

17. **Plastic Bags Charge** - Wales enacted a ground-breaking initiative in 2011 with the imposition of single-use plastic bag charge. By 2015, there had been a 70% decline in their use. One supermarket was able to donate over £500,000 to a cancer research charity because of this Welsh first in the UK.
18. **Recycling** - It was announced in March 2020 that Wales ranked first in the UK for recycling, second in Europe and third in the world. In April 2019, alongside other countries, Wales made a 'climate emergency' declaration.
19. **Tree Planting** - In 2008, the Plant! scheme ensured that for every child born or adopted in Wales a tree is planted. Since 2014, the scheme committed to planting trees in Uganda. Over 300,000 trees have been planted in Wales and over 1,600 families have been helped in Uganda.
20. **Active Travel** – Legislation in 2013 contained provisions requiring local authorities to improve facilities and routes for people to travel by bike or on foot and to map out current and future potential footpaths and cycle paths. Cyclists and walkers will also need to be considered in all new road designs.
21. **Costal Path** - Since 2012, Wales has been able to mark the 870 miles of the Wales Coast Path. It was hailed as the first dedicated footpath in the world to cover the entire length of a country's coastline.
22. **Farming** – In 2004, Welsh farmers were among the first in the UK to receive their 2003 Bovine Balance Payments. The payments were made from the earliest date permitted under

European Commission regulations.

- 23. Rural Issues** - Wales began publishing the monthly rural issues magazine *Gwlad* in 2001.

### Education

- 24. School Curriculum** – A new Welsh School curriculum law was approved by the Senedd in March 2021. The changes will come in from 2022.
- 25. School Meals** – Wales has developed pioneering policies regarding meals for school children. It starts with the 2004 Free Breakfast Initiative through to our more recent Free School Meals extension.
- 26. Additional Learning Needs** – The Welsh Additional Learning Needs legislation received royal assent in 2018 creating a legislative framework to improve the planning and delivery of additional learning provision.
- 27. Autism** – In 2008, Wales was a world leader in establishing a national strategic action plan for ASD. It sought to help an estimated 30,000 people that were either directly or indirectly affected by autism in Wales.
- 28. The Welsh Bacc** – The Welsh Baccalaureate was introduced initially in 2007 with a view to giving a broader experience than traditional learning.
- 29. Scrapping of School Tests** – It was announced in 2004 that tests for 11 and 14-year-olds would be scrapped by 2008.
- 30. School League Tables** – One of the distinct early policies in Wales was the scrapping in 2001 of secondary school league tables.

### Equalities and Human Rights

- 31. Covid-19 and Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Deaths** – Following the publication of the Emmanuel Ogbonna socio-economic Report into the ‘sobering and powerful’ disproportionate number of Covid-19 deaths a response was issued in September 2020. Amongst other responses, a Race Equality Action Plan is being taken forward.
- 32. EU Citizens in Wales** - It was announced in 2020 that funding worth more than £220,000 would be provided for local authorities in Wales to try and tackle barriers to help EU citizens in Wales who may not be aware that they and their families have to apply to the Home Office scheme to protect and continue to live and work in the UK.
- 33. Windrush Generation** – It was announced in 2019, that £40,000 had been allocated to mark Windrush Day in Wales.
- 34. Democracy and Equality** – In 2018, Stonewall named the National Assembly as the UK’s leading employer of LGBT staff in a workplace equality survey.
- 35. Bilingualism** – Legislation is set in law that the Welsh language should be treated no less favourably than the English language in Wales. The Measure also made provision regarding investigating an interference with the freedom to use the Welsh language establishing the office of a Welsh Language Commissioner.
- 36. Welsh Language Education** - In 2011, Wales saw the establishment of *the Coleg Cymraeg Cenedlaethol* with a view to providing Welsh language courses and resources to students.
- 37. Disability** – By 2005, Wales was ahead of the other countries of the UK in announcing that disabled people were to receive designated free travel.

- 38. Refugee Doctors** - In 2002, Wales set up a pioneering refugee doctors training scheme. Currently, 105 have a license to practice from the GMC, 18 are on the GP register and 14 are on the Specialist register. Many of these doctors now serving the NHS are women who have fled persecution.
- 39. Gender Balance** – In 2000, The Welsh cabinet became the first executive body in the western world to boast a majority of women ministers.

### **Older People**

- 40. Older People’s Commissioner** – In 2008, Wales led the way in the UK by appointing an Older People’s Commissioner to safeguard the interests of those who are 60 years of age or over.
- 41. Free Swimming** - Free swimming in Wales was introduced in 2003 providing sessions for those under 16 and over 60 at certain times such as school holidays and weekends. 10 million free sessions were taken up between 2008-2017. The scheme was changed in 2019 focusing on deprived communities.
- 42. Free Bus Passes** - In 2002, Wales became the first country in the UK to introduce free bus travel for older people. There were round 730,000 passes in 2018.

### **Children and Youth**

- 43. Physical Punishment** – In 2022, physical punishment of a child will be against the law in Wales.
- 44. Enabling 16- and 17-year-olds to vote** – In 2021, Wales will take a lead in enabling 16- and 17-year-olds to vote.
- 45. Digital** – It was reported in 2019 that Wales would become one of the first countries in the world to provide schools free access to Microsoft 365 to help people improve their digital skills.
- 46. Youth Parliament** – In 2018, Wales established its own Youth Parliament consisting of sixty members. It seeks to provide young people with a voice in Welsh politics.
- 47. International Children’s Rights** – In 2011, Wales became the first country in the UK to make the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) part of its domestic law.
- 48. Flying Start** - Flying Start was introduced in 2007 as a flagship early years anti-poverty programme delivered by local authorities.
- 49. School Councils** – In 2005, Wales became the first country in the UK to place school councils on a statutory basis.

### **Culture and Sport**

- 50. Senedd Building and Sport** – The Senedd building has become more than a legislature. It has become the place where medal winners, grand slam teams and individual champions such as Geraint Thomas, following his Tour de France win in 2018, are honoured. Thousands attend such receptions. The Senedd also provides a setting for vigils following tragedies and loss of life.
- 51. The Senedd and Culture** – It was estimated that during the Cardiff 2018 National Eisteddfod over 18,000 visitors visited the Senedd building.
- 52. Free Entry into Museums** – By 2012, eleven years after free entry across the board was introduced in Wales, National Museum Wales was able to announce that its seven museums

had clocked 1.69 million visits during 2011-12. Wales led the way in the UK in rolling out this policy.

- 53. Patagonia** – Ties with Welsh speaking communities in Patagonia have been strengthened, working in partnership with the British Council, with the 150<sup>th</sup> celebrations of the first Welsh settlers arriving representing a high mark.

### **Safety**

- 54. The Right to Complain** – Legislation in 2019, brought forward for the first time by an Assembly Committee, made it easier for people to complain to the Ombudsman about public services in Wales.
- 55. Food Hygiene Ratings** – Welsh legislation from 2013 has made it a legal requirement for businesses to display their food hygiene ratings in a prominent place.
- 56. Sprinklers** – In 2011, it was claimed that Wales become the first country in the world to decide that sprinklers should become compulsory in all new homes.
- 57. Anti-human Trafficking** – Wales appointed its first anti-human trafficking co-ordinator in 2011 with a view to protecting people at risk of exploitation.

### **Animal Welfare**

- 58. Animal Welfare** – In 2008, Wales became the first country in the UK to publish official guidance to help animal owners take care of their dogs, cats, horses and donkeys.

### **Looking Ahead**

- 59. Citizens Assembly** – Wales held its first Citizens Assembly July 2019 when almost 60 people from across Wales gathered at Gregynog Hall, Newtown. They considered how people in Wales can shape our future.
- 60. Looking to the Future** – The *Well-being of Future Generations Act* passed in 2015 may give Wales the ambition, permission and legal obligation to improve the nation's social, cultural, environmental and economic well-being.

24 March 2021