2026 Welsh Election Review

Findings and recommendations following the 2026 Senedd election

BACKGROUND

The 2026 Welsh Senedd election was the first election under a new voting system and electing a larger number of posts (up from 60 to 96). The new voting system involved new boundaries.

The Welsh Lib Dems went into the contest with one Senedd member, although the notional results for the new boundaries, showing what the results would have been the previous time had they been in place, put the party on zero. Therefore, to come out of the elections once more with one Senedd member was a notional gain of one seat, albeit a smaller proportion of the overall Senedd than before.

The party's vote share, at 4.5%, was up marginally on the time before (+0.1%), but was also its second lowest in the history of Senedd elections.

The next Senedd elections are due in 2030, reverting to four-year terms, although the next elections across Wales will be the all-up council elections in 2027, which will also see a version of automatic voter registration in place. The next Westminster general election will also take place at an unknown date before the 2030 Senedd elections.

APPROACH TAKEN IN THIS REVIEW

This review is based on:

1. A feedback survey which all members in Wales were invited to take part in, along with additional feedback that was sent in by some people;
2. The monthly KPIs collected and tracked by the Welsh Party;
3. Campaign activity data from Connect;
4. The Candidates Review carried out by the Welsh Candidates Sub Committee;
5. A series of individual interviews; and
6. Analysis of both party and external data.

Many thanks to everyone who gave their time to contribute to this review and apologies that it was not possible to follow up on every offer made in the feedback survey to provide further information.

In writing up the review and presenting the recommendations, a deliberate decision has been taken to frame this report around positive recommendations for the future.

This approach therefore also means the review is suitable for wider dissemination in the party. It is an important lesson from a variety of election reviews across the party in the past that the wider the dissemination of a report, the stronger the chances are of its effective implementation. More direct, confidential reviews end up having less impact on helping us learn the right lessons than more widely circulated ones.

In researching this review, a few cases came up where people gave differing accounts of events. It generally has not been necessary to reconcile these accounts as the conclusions remain the same anyway; for example, where there is a difference of opinion over how clearly certain information was communicated, it does not matter exactly how strong the evidence is for each viewpoint as the very existence of different views shows the need for greater clarity in future. Therefore, the review has generally avoided getting bogged down into adjudicating the details of the past, and only done so where necessary to provide clear recommendations for the future.

THE OVERALL PICTURE

There was a widespread range of expectations going into the election, both for what result the party might secure and for what result it was realistically aiming for. However, the overall outcome was not seen as one to trumpet, and there is a widespread acknowledgement that the party must aim to do better in future.

Key findings from the survey were:

- **Campaign quality vs expectations:** 61% said it fell below, 22% met expectations, 16% exceeded.
- **Results vs expectations:** 68% fell below, only 5% exceeded.
- **Message enthusiasm:** 44% unenthused vs 33% enthused, 19% neutral.

Overall, members rated better those in the campaign who were closest to them, and less favourable those who were more distant, e.g. rating local party officers higher than the Welsh Party and that in turn higher than the Federal Party.

Candidate selection was overall seen as a success, securing a full slate of candidates despite the significant increase in the number involved. Generally, selection was seen as taking place promptly, and it was speedy compared with other parties. However, it is worth noting that the party was reluctant to go ahead with selections before all the rules and boundaries were confirmed for sure; this is a more cautious approach than the party has taken for Westminster boundary reviews, for example, and resulted in candidates, at least in target seats, being selected later than they might have.

The central organisation of the nomination and DNO paperwork (to secure the party name and logo on ballot papers) was seen as a success, and something to repeat. There were some views that, to help protect candidate safety, the party should copy other parties in going further in withholding candidate personal home addresses from ballot papers.

Support for candidates was in many ways successful, but there were significant gaps at times, and in particular an absence of a clear, embedded programme to use mid-list candidates to grow the party's campaigning capacity. Candidates, along with staff and other volunteers, felt the party's resources were very stretched.

Views of the party's messaging were much more mixed, with some very strongly expressed negative views. There was widespread agreement that too much of it was settled too late, although disagreement over how that came about and whether the messaging was the right messaging.

Crucial to these differences was different views over how the party should, or shouldn't, talk about the independence issue, though it's notable how little hard data was presented to support different views.

There was a lack of clarity over how messaging decisions were taken and also little was done to explain and sell the logic and evidence behind the messaging. People who needed to use the messaging often felt too little was available, too late.

The party suffered significantly from a two-party squeeze as voters, and media coverage, polarised between Plaid and Reform. Two-party squeezes late in the day of first-past-the-post elections are a common feature, and the party has experience of suffering from, and then learning from, such squeezes. The existence of such a squeeze even in a PR-based election was more of a surprise to many involved, but given the risk of its likely recurrence, learning from previous squeezes is important for future success.

There was no sense of a clear overall plan to which everyone was working as part of the same team. This was partly because there were fundamental questions of approach that remained unresolved, with different people implementing - or attempting to implement - different answers. The processes for taking and communicating core strategic decisions did not work well. Although there was a regular acknowledgement that these improved over time, even by the end of the campaign they were short of where they should have been.

The campaign, both at national and grassroots levels, was short of resources - money, volunteer time and staff time. Although many individuals worked extremely hard, the activity levels in even the most active areas were significantly short of those typically seen in target seats in elections for the Scottish Parliament, the London Assembly or the Westminster Parliament. In addition, in some quarters there does not seem to have been recognition of how low the activity levels were compared with those achieved in comparable campaigns elsewhere in the party. Fundraising, both locally and nationally, was modest compared with other parts of the party.

The target seat campaign is a mixed picture. We found significant variations in what people thought the campaign's objectives were in terms of the number of winning seats, and the way of choosing, tracking and evaluating target seats was significantly less data-driven than for other elections the Liberal Democrats contest. There was often a lack of clarity about how decisions were being made, but also relatively little in the way of resources to move around.

Overall, the teams both at national level and in many seats, even target seats, were inexperienced, with not only many people doing a particular role for their first time but also a substantial minority being new to elections of this sort altogether.

Finally, the net result of all of this in terms of campaign activity on the ground was levels of activity a long way short of the targets that the party sets for winning Westminster campaigns. For example, the total campaign activity levels tracked in the Welsh Party's KPIs in the early months of 2026, typically showed total campaign activity across all five target seats at or below the level that has often been achieved in a single Westminster Parliamentary seat at a similar point in the electoral cycle. For the reasons set out above, it's not helpful or necessary to break this down in this report with more detailed statistical examples. But the basic conclusion is clear and stark, even though it must be accompanied by acknowledgement of how hard many individuals worked.

There were mixed views about the party's digital campaigning, though the possible lessons from it are overshadowed by the limited resources available.

The limited nature of grassroots campaigning also left the party much more vulnerable to a two-party squeeze closer to polling day. The lesson from other elections is that an important part of resisting this is early selection of candidates combined by intensive development of grassroots campaign capacity. While messaging and leadership also have important roles to play, the grassroots basics are essential.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the importance of getting the fundamentals right, and the acknowledged capacity challenges for the Welsh Party, the list of recommendations has been kept deliberately short, to focus on the most important areas for progress and to provide a ready list for people to plan around, and to be held accountable for.

Increasing the Welsh Party's capacity

1. The Welsh Party needs more activists, both at grassroots levels and to operate the party machinery above local level. The two key metrics the party must track are membership and non-member volunteers (e.g. volunteers who deliver a local leaflet round but who are not members), along with the activities being taken at all levels to increase both.
2. A programme of training, templates and action days should be set out to make volunteer and member recruitment and retention a year-round activity, making use of existing party resources where possible. This should include awards at conference for the best performances.
3. The activity should include setting the norm that an annual residents' survey is carried out, as this is a key tool both for campaigning on relevant issues and for building grassroots capacity.

4. A fundraising team, comprising staff and volunteers as appropriate, needs to be created to concentrate on building up the volume of medium and large donors to the Welsh Party. It should draw on the success of the Scottish Party in similar circumstances, and should include one person from outside Wales with a successful fundraising record in the party who can act as a mentor to the team.

5. In addition, the Welsh Party should aim to ensure that a candidate is stood in every council by-election and that as close to a full slate of candidates as possible is stood in the next council elections. Getting to 100% local election candidate coverage in one step is unrealistic, but each local party should be set a target that shows significant progress on last time (or, where a full slate was achieved last time, a continuation of that).

6. Alongside this, the Welsh Party needs to enthusiastically seek out ways of reducing the burden of governance activities where possible in line with our democratic principles. This is a task for the separate governance review being carried out and the focus it is giving to the shortage of people to fulfil all the roles currently required is very welcome. One likely promising avenue is to make it easier for skilled volunteers to contribute across more of Wales rather than just within the existing boundaries of their current local party. Another is to make greater use of deputy/assistant roles to work alongside existing officer posts, both to help share the workload and to help train up future holders of such posts.

7. A quarterly cycle of key activists and staff video calls should be introduced to bring together different parts of the party better and improve common understanding of key decisions and processes. This must include regular updates on messaging, both the data and reasoning behind it and how to apply it.

Candidate selection and support

8. A timetable for Senedd selections should be agreed before the end of this year, including ensuring that likely possible target seats have top candidates in place for at least two and a half years before the Senedd elections.

9. In addition, reselection criteria should be agreed so that if there are changes in boundaries or relevant other rules post-selection, there is a clear agreed set of rules to determine whether or not previous selections need to be redone.

10. A programme of training for approved/selected candidates should be put in place, drawing where possible on the candidate training being provided elsewhere in the party in order to economise on resources, but with a specific focus on fundraising and on helping non-target candidates use their candidacy to improve the party's campaign capacity in their area.

11. There must be a sustained internal communications plan to ensure that potential and selected candidates are clear about what support is and is not made available to them. Although the levels of such support will be very dependent upon resources, clarity and delivery of promises will itself be significant progress.

12. Clear processes and signposting for candidate pastoral support are required, including drawing on the support services made available via the Federal Party for Westminster candidates and ensuring that appropriate concerns can be rapidly raised at the appropriate senior level with the police.

13. The Welsh Party should also review its position on whether the home addresses of candidates should be included on ballot papers in future, and explain and communicate clearly its conclusions.

Getting the messaging right

14. Core messaging decisions need to be taken with data and similar evidence. Funding needs to be sought to test crucial key messaging decisions ahead of them being made. This is the approach we've taken in Scotland and at a Federal level, and helps with both buy-in and getting it right.

15. There needs to be a clear sign-off process, and explicit buy-in from all the key participants. The Welsh Party needs to name the person and/or committee that signs off messaging, on what evidence, by what date - and set that date at least 18 months out, with a review three months out. The leader needs to be fully engaged with the process.

16. The party needs to write a squeeze approach for PR, and test it in advance. The party got squeezed in a proportional election because voters, media and our own teams behaved as if it were FPTP. What replaces it is a proportionality argument the party is uniquely placed to make: in this constituency roughly one vote in ten elects a member, so your vote is not wasted. Nobody in British politics has had to make that argument before. It needs writing and testing now, not improvising in April 2030. The Welsh Party should review what worked in Scotland for this, where we asked for 'peach' votes more explicitly than at any previous election.

Creating an experienced team

17. A Welsh-wide campaign management team should be put in place to oversee the next council, Westminster and Senedd elections. Although there may be necessary changes in some people over those three elections, the intention should be that those who will be managing the next Senedd elections build their experience, and teamwork, through the two previous contests as well.

18. The campaign team must bring together staff, leadership and the voluntary party, with full attendance from all team members expected as the norm. Either the leader or their trusted nominee must be present at all meetings, exceptional circumstances excepted.

A professional targeting operation

19. Clear activity and performance criteria must be set for target seats at the next Senedd elections, adapted from those currently used to determine Westminster Advanced seats and including canvassing, delivery and fundraising.

20. These criteria should be circulated to local parties and (would be) candidates as soon as agreed, so that everyone knows the activity levels required to be a target seat.

21. The number of target seats must flow from performance against their criteria; if a seat does not meet them, it is not a target seat and there must be a clear process for removing target seat status as well as granting it to new seats that are performing well.

22. Decisions on whether a seat meets the criteria and is to be a target seat must be taken based on objective evaluation of the evidence and circumstances, and such decisions must be protected from conflicts of interest. Therefore, the Welsh Party must ensure that such decisions are taken by a pre-agreed group of people, whose membership is chosen mindful of the risks of such conflicts and whose decision making is protected by a clear conflicts of interest policy.

Implementation and review

23. An update on implementing the recommendations of this review should be a regular item at meetings of the Welsh Board, with reporting back to members taking place at Welsh Conference and via the video calls outlined above.