

## Wales in 2023

2023 began with a succession of crises for leaders in Welsh public life. In January, the BBC aired a documentary examining allegations of sexism and sexual misconduct within the Welsh Rugby Union (WRU), prompting an external review of the organisation, as well as major institutional reforms. At the end of January, Steve Phillips resigned as WRU Chief Executive, while in March over 97% of delegates at an Emergency General Meeting voted in favour of proposals to modernise the WRU's governance, including through the appointment of an Independent Non-Executive Director as Chair.

A similar crisis would also afflict Plaid Cymru (the Welsh nationalist party). Following a series of allegations about bullying and sexual misconduct within Plaid Cymru, a working group was established in December 2022 to examine the party's internal culture. The working group's report, and its emphasis on leadership failings within the party, resulted immediately in Adam Price, the party's leader, facing questions about his future. While Price initially sought to rebuff these questions, suggesting resignation would be an abdication of responsibility, little over a week later he announced his departure. Following a brief interregnum where the party was led on an interim basis by Llyr Huws Gruffydd (a North Wales regional MS since 2011), Rhun ap Iorwerth was elected unopposed as the new Plaid leader in June.

While Plaid is under new leadership, its Cooperation Agreement with the Labour run Welsh Government remains in place. However, over the course of 2023 the relationship between the two parties in the Senedd became increasingly fractious. This has been particularly evident in the world of health policy – in March Plaid Cymru's then Health Spokesman Rhun ap Iorwerth publicly urged the First Minister to sack the Health Minister, Eluned Morgan; several months later, in October, his questions (now as Plaid leader) about the use of agency workers in the health and care sector would see him clash with the First Minister during First Ministers Questions. Mr ap Iorwerth has confirmed that the Cooperation Agreement will not be renewed when it ends next year.

Overall, 2023 has been a torrid year for the Welsh NHS: at the beginning of the year, the Betsi Cadwaladr Health Board in North Wales was placed back into special measures for the second time in three years, following a damning report by Audit Wales (the Welsh Audit Office). The year continued to bring further challenges for the health service. In April, the Ambulance Service reported its second worst ever response times, in September waiting lists for NHS treatment in Wales reached a new record high, and that same month the BBC suggested that major overspends were likely to arise across the seven local Health Boards.

Health was just one policy field where the Welsh Government found itself buffeted by events. In Transport, 2023 marked the introduction of a new default speed limit of 20 miles per hour in the busiest residential and urban roads (in lieu of the previous 30mph speed limit). At the time of

writing, over 466,000 individuals have signed an e-petition objecting to the policy in the Senedd Petition Committee's website, far in excess of the 10,000 signature threshold for the Committee to consider holding a debate on the floor of the Senedd. The row over the new speed limits even saw the Welsh Conservative group table a motion of no confidence in the Deputy Minister responsible for the policy, Lee Waters – the motion was defeated by 42 votes to 16.

On the railways, the situation was little easier for the Government. The Office for Rail and Road reported that between January and July 2023, stations in Wales had the highest rate of cancelled services in Great Britain. In April, the independent watchdog for rail users, *Transport Focus*, wrote to Transport for Wales (TfW) to call for urgent improvements in reliability, while TfW was ranked the worst operator in terms of customer satisfaction in a survey of British rail users. Even the Deputy Minister for Transport, Lee Waters publicly acknowledged at a rail conference in Cardiff that the “day-to-day reality facing many rail passengers in Wales has been pretty bleak for a while.”

In December came the PISA international educational survey results. The survey made grim reading. While all four UK nations saw a decline in their scores when compared to the previous PISA survey in 2018, Wales recording its lowest ever scores for maths, reading and science, coming bottom of the four UK nations and by a wider margin than in 2018.

In a year of leadership changes it is perhaps fitting that 2023 closed with the most prominent figure in Welsh public life confirming his departure. On 13 December, five years to the day since he became First Minister, Mark Drakeford announced that he would resign from his office in March 2024.