

Agenda Supplement – Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and International Relations Committee

Meeting Venue:

Committee Room 3, Senedd

Meeting date: 26 February 2026

Meeting time: 10.00

For further information contact:

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Hybrid – Supplement 1

Please note the documents below are in addition to those published in the main Agenda and Reports pack for this Meeting

3.5 Access to student finance for performing arts degrees in England

(Pages 1 – 3)

Attached Documents:

Correspondence from Thomasine Tomkins: Raising concerns about access to student finance for performing arts degrees in England – 23 February 2026



Agenda Item 3.5

Appeal to the Welsh Government Culture Committee regarding funding for Welsh domicile students for this years intake on specialised courses.

We are a social enterprise based in North Wales providing Arts, Circus and Events providing weekly classes, outreach and performances for young people, creating volunteer, work experience and career pathways, with an annual unique participation averaging 5,000. I am the founding director, and the founder of Y Festri Community Arts Charity that owns a building in Llanberis run entirely by volunteers to instigate the arts in our community in Llanberis, which CircoArts primarily runs from.

We are urgently appealing to you as we have recently discovered that 3 of our students who are following in the footsteps of previous students hoping to study the BA in Contemporary Circus and Physical Theatre at Circomedia wont receive funding from Student Finance Wales. They found out only 2 weeks ago, as they waited for auditions, that they no longer qualify for Student Finance Wales funding because of OfS status and designation no longer applies, when Circomedia previously borrowed it from their partner university Bath Spa. It seemed recent news to them too.

We appealed to Circomedia who have given a considered response that they are unable to apply. West Midlands Circus Centre is an alternative degree but only in Aerial and Acrobatics, have also discovered the same status would apply for Welsh domicile students, and the appeal process takes 5 months minimum and would only receive $\frac{2}{3}$ of the course fees. National Centre for Circus Arts isn't effected but the higher cost of living in London is unattainable for our students.

Bath Spa has failed to give us a statement. We have discovered that potential Circomedia BTEC students under our umbrella in the circus community would be effected too. We have appealed to Senedd Ministers, MEDR and SWF but in the short time frame, none have not responded yet. Siân Gwenllian AM is supporting our cause.

Circomedia has enjoyed a high intake of Welsh domicile students, last year 5 out of 8 graduates were Welsh, many leaving with distinctions, so are concerned about the future sustainability of the course. NoFit State Circus based in Wales, that tours internationally, has funding from Arts Council Wales that says they should employ a % of Welsh Circus graduates, so they are concerned. One of our young people, now at the age of 27 is not only one of our directors but head rigger at NoFit State after studying at Circomedia. We have employed Welsh graduates to teach at our weekly classes, outreach and performances, bringing those skills back to Wales and inspiring the next generation.

We are urgently appealing because the new stipulations have been discovered at a late stage in our students applying for courses, some having this been a dream since they were 8 years old, some have changed their lives to follow this path, and all who wouldn't be able to attend the course without funding due to low family income. Our students have physically committed to intense training and rehearsals, supported by our tutors and Y Festri, many adults giving time

and free space (through donations from our community) to help these young people on their journey.

Since we have gone to the press, we have heard from distraught parents of future BTEC students and we heard that one student on the 2nd year FDA at Circomedia won't get funding for the final BA year. We hear that dance, musical theatre and drama courses are being effected. We heard that environmental courses delivered in Wales are effected too, so we don't believe that it's the arts being targeted, it's specialised courses. Hopes and dreams are being dashed, leaving futures uncertain for a generation who have already struggled with rural cultural deprivation and financial insecurity. Coming from a nation that celebrates the arts it is unfair that these students will hit a glass ceiling without the higher level of training that can't be found in Wales. This effects not just our individual students, but has an impact regionally, and nationally on the circus sector, with international implications.

We desperately ask if there could be any way a temporary status of designation could be applied for this year's intake, giving these young people a chance at the higher education they thought they could apply for.

We suggest that :-

A temporary designation or ministerial discretion for 2026 Welsh entrants while regulatory clarification is reviewed.

This prevents an immediate lost cohort.

Could Welsh student regulations be amended so that courses validated by a recognised UK university are eligible for designation, even where delivery is by a partner provider that is not separately registered with OfS or Medr — provided quality assurance and oversight meet agreed standards?

Why this works:

- It treats the validating university's regulatory status as sufficient.
- It protects specialist providers operating under recognised universities.
- It resolves the structural technicality without requiring Circomedia to become a university.

We also plead that the designation OfS process be streamlined because the time between auditions and September doesn't allow enough time for a new application to be processed.

That Medr establish a streamlined designation pathway for small, specialist, high-quality providers delivering validated degrees, where there is no equivalent provision in Wales.

Why this works:

- **Recognises that niche courses (circus, dance, specialist theatre, possibly some AI or environmental micro-providers) don't fit large-institution regulatory models.**
- **Prevents Welsh students being excluded from nationally scarce provision.**
- **Keeps oversight intact but proportionate.**

We hope you will consider our appeal alongside the appeal from the Musical Theatr and Dance appeal. We have been supporting their petition which stands at 8,277 signatures this morning, and have a petition from the circus sector which was released last week, standing at 1,337.

Yours sincerely
Thomasine Tomkins

CircoArts and Y Festri

