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Llywydd

5 October 2020

Annwyl Lywydd

Establishment of 'task and finish' committees under Standing Order 16.5

The Committee on Senedd Electoral Reform was established by the Senedd in September 2019 to undertake a specific task: to explore the recommendations made by the Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform. In accordance with the motion agreed by the Senedd, the Committee will be dissolved following the Plenary debate on our final report, *Senedd reform: the next steps*, on 7 October 2020. As the use of Standing Order 16.5 to establish additional 'task and finish' committees has been relatively infrequent to date, I write to offer some brief reflections on our experience.

- 1. Balancing clarity of remit with flexibility of approach:** The motion that established the Committee specified clearly the task the Senedd wished us to complete, but gave us flexibility over the way in which we approached our work and the timescales within which we worked. This enabled us to identify our own priorities as a Committee, take into account Committee members' own expertise and interests, and to respond flexibly to the unprecedented circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. We would encourage the Senedd to take a similar approach again should it establish any further task and finish committees.
- 2. Strategic planning:** We began our work programme by receiving technical briefings on key issues within our remit, and by holding a facilitated strategy session to develop a shared understanding of our strategic objectives and agree our ways of working. Our strategic objectives underpinned the development of our work programme, helped to keep our inquiries focused on our key aims, shaped our public communications, and provided us with a framework to assist us in making decisions



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on how to adapt our plans in response to the pandemic and changing political circumstances. We would encourage other 'task and finish' committees established under Standing Order 16.5 to take time at the outset of their work for strategic planning.

- 3. Access to resources and deliberative engagement approaches:** Like other Senedd committees, the Committee has been supported during its work by an integrated team of officials and—subject to the development of robust business cases to ensure the efficient and proper use of public money—has been able to access financial and other resources from the Senedd Commission. The constitutionally significant and politically sensitive nature of the issues within our remit led us to conclude that detailed deliberative engagement with the public would both assist our work and enhance our conclusions. While the COVID-19 pandemic meant we could not ultimately proceed as we had planned, we were particularly grateful to the Senedd Commission for agreeing to allocate substantial resources to enable us to seek to procure a citizens' assembly. We would encourage the Commission to continue to look favourably and flexibly at requests from Senedd committees for funding to enable them to move at pace when appropriate to use innovative and deliberative means to engage the public.
- 4. Political consensus and participation:** Senedd committees generally operate on the basis of consensus. Outside of the legislative scrutiny process, voting in Senedd committees is rare. Committee members may occasionally record minority views on specific matters where a unanimous committee position cannot be reached, but the vast majority of reports and recommendations reflect cross-party consensus views. The ability and willingness of Members to work together in this way enables committees to bring to bear a cross-party political perspective on complex and sensitive issues and evidence. However, the strength of Senedd committees' contributions can be undermined if their memberships are not drawn from across the Siambr. It is a matter for each political group to determine how it chooses to engage in the business of the Senedd. However, under Standing Order 16.5, additional committees can only be established on the basis of majority decisions of the Senedd. We would encourage all political groups to respect any decisions made by the Sixth Senedd to establish additional committees, and to engage positively and constructively in their work.
- 5. Impact on the capacity of the Senedd and its Members:** A key conclusion of the Committee's work was that the Senedd, with only 60 Members, faces significant capacity challenges in respect of its role in holding the Welsh Government to account. Clearly, establishing an additional Senedd committee, even for a time-



limited period, places additional strains on the capacity of the institution and particularly on those Members who are appointed to it. Should the Sixth Senedd decide to establish any 'task and finish' committees, we would encourage the Business Committee of the time to follow the example of the Fifth Senedd's Business Committee by allocating such committees weekly slots within the formal Senedd timetable to give them as much flexibility as possible in the way they approach their work.

- 6. Follow up, accountability and responsibility in the longer term:** A key element in the impact and influence of Senedd committees is their ability to identify issues, make recommendations, and follow up to assess what progress has been made. Committees are able to hold the Welsh Government or other decision makers to account over time, keep the spotlight on priority areas, and drive change where they believe it is needed. By their nature, 'task and finish' committees are unable to hold the relevant decision makers to account over time or conduct follow up work to assess whether their recommendations have been implemented. While such committees may be appropriate to deal with specific matters, particularly if those issues are time-sensitive or feed into wider processes, consideration may also need to be given to where within the main committee structure responsibility for the relevant matters rests to ensure that matters receive appropriate focus and follow up in the longer term. Given the constitutional and democratic significance of the matters within our remit, we would encourage the Sixth Senedd to ensure that there is clarity about which committee has responsibility for oversight of the Senedd's electoral arrangements.

I hope that these reflections will be of assistance to you, and to any review Business Committee undertakes of procedures as we approach the end of the Fifth Senedd.

Yours sincerely



Dawn Bowden MS
Chair, Committee on Senedd Electoral Reform

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg | We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.

