

How effective are Senedd committees?

Committees are the ‘kitchen’ of a parliament, where a significant amount of work is done, often unseen. But how do we know if they’re working in the best way? How can we measure their effectiveness when the nature and context of their work is so complex?

Last year [Professor Diana Stirbu of London Metropolitan University](#) was commissioned through the Senedd Research Academic Fellowship Scheme to explore the power, influence, and impact of Senedd committees. The aim was to develop a framework to evaluate the effectiveness of committees in the Sixth Senedd.

How was the research done?

Professor Stirbu conducted the research between September 2020 and January 2021. She began by **reviewing the current evidence and literature** on effectiveness of parliamentary committees. This was followed by **field research**, involving **37 interviews** with politicians and officials, three **group discussions**, and three **collaborative workshops**. There were additional interviews with **external and international stakeholders**, and a **feedback session** was held with officials in May 2021.

The current approach

Although Senedd committees don’t currently have an agreed method or criteria for measuring effectiveness, the research discovered existing good practices, such as:

- tracking the acceptance or rejection of recommendations by Welsh Government;
- monitoring the implementation of recommendations, and assessing the outcomes;
- conducting follow-up scrutiny;
- monitoring the level of engagement with stakeholders, and
- annual or legacy reports.

But these practices often happen inconsistently and in isolation. The research therefore found that **evaluation should be integral to committees’ strategic approach, to ensure consistency between objectives, desired long-term impact and outcomes, and committee activity**. This includes goal setting, planning future work, monitoring, tracking progress, and assessing the legacy of work.

To examine how this could be achieved, Professor Stirbu’s research looked specifically at:

- the conditions for **effective committee activity**, and
- the conditions for **effective evaluation and self-reflection** to take place.



What do effective committees look like?

Professor Stirbu found a shared understanding of what effective committees look like. They:

- Have Members who are **fully engaged and interested** in their work;
- Are supported by **excellent services**, have access to **external advice and expertise**, and operate within structures where corporate goals are aligned with committee business;
- Can **strategically plan and manage their work**, with clear goals and purpose. They focus on outcomes, not activities, and have a clear, shared idea of success and how it's evidenced;
- Foster **partnership and joint approaches**, are **evidence-led**, promote **lesson learning**, engage in **evaluation**, self-reflection and continuous improvement;
- Work **transparently and communicate their work effectively** to a wide range of audiences. Their reports are user-friendly, and tell compelling stories about their work and its impact. They have good relationships with a wide and diverse range of stakeholders, which helps them to stay relevant, and
- Are **ambitious and creative in reaching out to new audiences**, designing activities that are fit for purpose and maximise impact, and bring in lived experiences.

How can effective evaluation and self-reflection take place?

The research identified opportunities to support the process of evaluation and improvement:

- A **more coherent data infrastructure and system of collecting and presenting information about committees** (and wider parliamentary activity). This could provide more accessible insights to support internal and external evaluation;
- **Fragmented v. holistic insights** – lots of knowledge is held at an individual level, which could be problematic for more in-depth, cross-cutting, big-picture evaluation;
- Addressing **structural and cultural barriers to Members' engagement in evaluation and self-reflection** (such as time constraints, the perception of navel-gazing, and the need to facilitate discussions effectively);
- Being ambitious but **setting measurable (or at least evidencable) objectives** at a committee level, and more rigorous **follow-up, monitoring, and review of committees' strategic goals** to help them stay relevant and focused on where they can achieve impact;
- More **clarity on and formalisation of internal strategic influencers in parliamentary business** (such as Business Committee, Chairs' Forum, Llywydd's Committee), and **regular reviews of committee organisation**;
- More **meaningful engagement with Government responses**, beyond just acceptance, and
- **External input into evaluation** and regular feedback on committees' work.



Widening public engagement, and diversifying evidence and witnesses

Public engagement and diversity of evidence were cross-cutting themes in the research. It revealed that committees' impact is perceived to depend, to an extent, on the degree to which they communicate effectively with a wide range of stakeholders. But it also found these to be important and standalone committee functions themselves.

Good practice and lessons from the Fifth Senedd included:

- The **Citizen Engagement Team's strategic approach (and guidelines) to supporting committees** with a wide range of documented and tested tools of engagement, such as focus groups, video evidence, surveys, webchats, visits, citizen panels, citizen assembly, roundtable discussions, and more;
- A **genuine strive for meaningful engagement** driven both by Members and officials, and Members' enthusiasm for engaging with and hearing from wider communities;
- **Embedding engagement in committees' strategic approach**, linked with the perception of engagement as a primary rather than supporting role for committees;
- **Digital engagement with stakeholders and witnesses may allow for a more diverse range of evidence**. But further analysis is needed to fully capture lessons from the pandemic and digital exclusion;
- Committee chairs and support teams' efforts to **go beyond the 'usual suspects'** in committee engagement practice, even in the absence of diversity data;
- **Experimenting with different forms of hearing oral evidence** such as citizen panels and roundtable events. Users' experiences can help shape future procedures and empower marginalised and unheard groups to give formal evidence;
- **Informal engagement with stakeholders** to capture genuine views, and instances of **soliciting feedback from stakeholders**.

The barriers to effective engagement and diversifying committees' evidence base included:

- Differing and confusing **interpretations of the concept of 'engagement'** at corporate and committee levels;
- **Audiences for committees' work** do not fall neatly into the audiences defined by the corporate Communication and Engagement Strategy;
- The extent to which committees **strategize their engagement work and the diversification of evidence**;
- **Baselines and benchmarks** – particularly the lack of monitoring of committee witness diversity, and
- A **weak Welsh media** creates a difficult landscape for the Senedd and its committees to communicate their work and stimulate engagement.



What can be done differently in the Sixth Senedd?

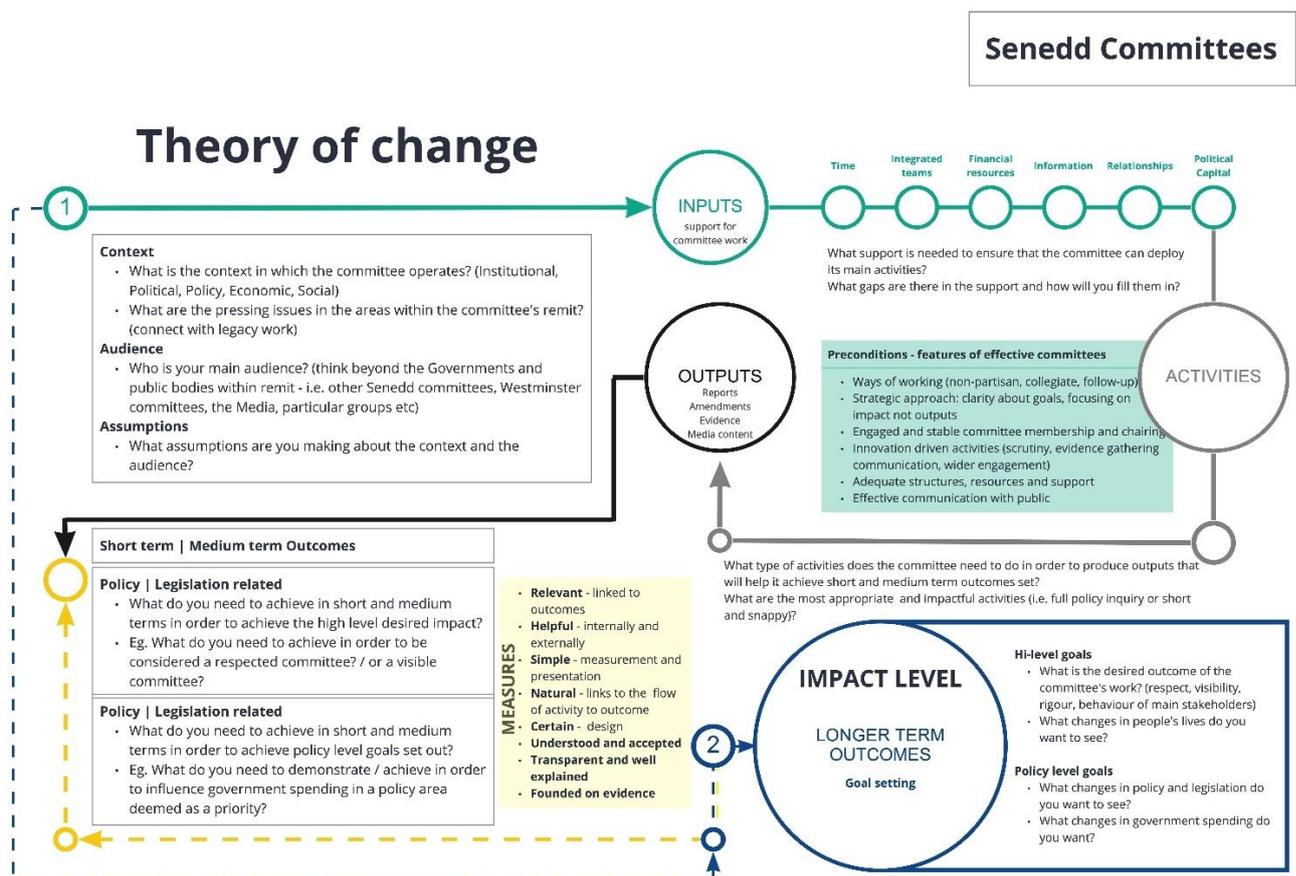
The report recommends that evaluation should be done at three levels:

- by **individual committees** (micro level evaluation);
- at **Senedd corporate level** (macro level evaluation) to ensure a wider perspective, and
- **conducted externally** (meta level evaluation), for a longitudinal, independent perspective.

Professor Stirbu suggests a framework to help committees **ensure coherence between strategic goals, planned activities, and the process of regularly assessing and reviewing their impact and influence.**

This is presented as a ‘**theory of change**’ model, which is a description of why a particular way of working will be effective, showing how change happens in the short, medium and long term to achieve the intended impact.

Professor Stirbu’s proposed template for an ‘**operational and fluid theory of change**’ is outlined in the diagram below.



The research concluded that the measurement framework should start from **long term impact and outcomes**, and outline criteria for assessing committees’ ambition, from which a series of measures and ways of evidencing success (or progress) are developed.

The report also suggests a more formal role for the Chairs' Forum in **deliberating, commissioning and reporting on committees' effectiveness**, while other strategic influencers, like the Business Committee, set guidelines and expectations for committee chairs and Members.

Recommendations

Creating the conditions for effective committees

R.1. Streamline and strengthen accountability lines – this implies consideration and evaluation of committee remits and functions, capacity and resourcing of committees, and clarifying the role of strategic actors in strengthening accountability.

The report recommends that:

- the Business Committee **reviews the merits and potential weaknesses of the theme based and overlapping committee portfolios** as well as the merits and weaknesses inherent to the dual function committee system.
- a more **flexible approach to setting the size and level of support for committees** based on needs and with a future proof approach in mind.
- the Chairs' Forum to **play a more formal and significant role in strengthening and improving committee activity** by acting as a key forum for committee system evaluation and lesson learning.
- the Business Committee to **play a bigger role in advocating for and emphasising the benefits of more stability** in committee membership.
- the Sixth Senedd should consider the **constitutional implications of the lines of accountability (internally and externally)** the committee system establishes, and ensure that arrangements are evaluated.

R.2. Ensure stability in committees' membership to get all Members fully engaged in committee work.

Guidance should be issued to political parties to prioritise committee work and limit turnover in committee membership. The Business Committee can be a possible avenue for this, with support from other strategic actors (the Llywydd, and the Chairs' Forum).

R.3. Experiment more with various approaches to widen participation and engagement. Widening engagement and participation in committees work should be driven by Members and remain a strategic goal for both the Senedd and its committees. Experimentation may include further use of Citizen Assemblies, mini-publics (citizen panels and juries), co-production methods (such as deliberative committees). The report recommends the Sixth Senedd committees use at least one jointly commissioned Citizen Assembly per Senedd electoral term and test the deliberative committees model with one committee.

R.4. Make lived experience central to committees' approach to evidence through 1) adequate resourcing of the engagement teams supporting committees, 2) clear methodological considerations around weighting the value of lived experience in the evidence base and 3) reflecting the lived experience captured and how it informed the committees' work in reports and external communications.



R.5. Make diversity monitoring common practice (engagement activities, evidence, witnesses) and report on year-on-year progress. The report recommends that the Sixth Senedd develops a comprehensive diversity monitoring system, with transparent reporting on year-on-year progress.

R.6. Solicit regular formal feedback from those who engage in committees' work formally or informally (witnesses, individuals, stakeholders). The report recommends that: 1) the Sixth Senedd develops a systematic way of soliciting feedback from external stakeholders that engage in committees' work, and 2) publish this feedback. The feedback should be considered both in individual committees (during strategic review and evaluation work) and in the Chairs' Forum.

R.7. Use the full range of committees' powers to demand improvement from the Welsh Government. Alongside with targeted scrutiny and follow-up work, the report recommends that committees 1) demand Government to report annually on implementation of committees' recommendations, and 2) hold Government to account on how they engage with committees, their work and their recommendations. A possible avenue for this collective scrutiny could be the Scrutiny of the First Minister Committee or the Chairs' Forum.

Creating conditions for effective evaluation

R.8. Embed commitment to evaluation and self-reflection in committees' work (i.e., induction, development opportunities, use of pre-meetings and de-briefing time). The Business Committee should develop (or commission) a guide for effective committee work for Members and for committee Chairs. Similarly, guidelines for committee evaluation should be developed by the Chairs' Forum.

R.9. Adopt a Theory of Change based model to plan, review, evaluate and communicate committees' ambitions and achievements. This will help shift the focus from outputs to outcomes. Training and development opportunities should be made available for Members and officials to familiarise themselves with the theory of change models and other evaluation tools.

R.10. Align corporate strategy with parliamentary business so that it reflects committees' activity. Service level strategies need to reflect parliamentary and committees' business.

R11. Develop a comprehensive Open Parliamentary Data infrastructure. The report recommends the Sixth Senedd establish an Open Parliamentary Data Science Fellowship whose scope would be to develop a proof of concept, develop and test principles and standards underpinning such open data infrastructure, establish user needs in terms of parliamentary data (internal and external), audit existing provisions and possible models, and provide lessons from other parliaments.

R.12. Forge funded partnerships and expand engagement with research-based organisations in Wales and beyond. The report suggests that funded partnerships (through UKRI or other sources) can support capacity for evaluation and assessment in committees.

R.13. Build internal capacity through expansion of internships and fellowships supporting evaluative work of committees.

