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Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

Children, Young People and Education Committee

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03 February 2022

Review of the committee timetable and committee remits

Dear Elin,

Thank you for your letter dated 7 January 2022 seeking our views on the review of committee timetable and remits. We discussed this letter at our meeting on 20 January.

We note that you do not expect committees to consult with stakeholders. As part of our consultation on the Committee's priorities over the summer recess, the FSB provided their views on the timetable, which is enclosed.

Timetable – status quo

To what extent does the current approach to the committee timetable provide sufficient time for committees to undertake their work effectively?

As the Committee tasked with the first Stage 1 scrutiny of the 6th Senedd, we believe we bring an important perspective on how effectively the current timetable can accommodate work with timeframes which are outside of the Committee's control.

It is worth noting that the introduction of the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Bill came at the same time as other core activity, where we had limited discretion on when it could be done:

- Annual scrutiny of Estyn;
- Annual scrutiny of the Children's Commissioner for Wales;
- Annual scrutiny of Qualifications Wales;
- Scrutiny of the Skills and Education LCM;
- Pre-appointment hearing for the preferred candidate for the next Children's Commissioner for Wales; and

- Scrutiny of the Welsh Government's draft budget.

This meant that we have had to request a number of additional meetings (five in total since October). All of our requests have been agreed by Business Committee. Two of these requests were for meetings in one of the "protected" weeks.

In December, the volume of work meant that we had three meetings within the space of 10 days, two of which were lengthy, starting with pre-meetings before 9am and not finishing until later in the afternoon. They all had extensive Committee papers to accompany the meeting.

The current timetable therefore has provided us with the opportunity to undertake our work. However, this has only been because Business Committee agreed our requests for additional meetings and because we have used the maximum capacity of the slot allocated to us.

[To what extent does the current approach to the committee timetable provide sufficient flexibility to meet peaks in committee workloads and / or future business requirements for additional committee capacity?](#)

As noted above, there has been flexibility, but it has been dependent on Business Committee agreeing individual requests. The time involved in that approval process can cause delays to finalising the forward work programme. Our current experience is that this has been manageable as it has been to accommodate business where we have advance notice (for example Bill scrutiny). However, we are aware that it could cause potential issues if we needed to meet urgently.

Additionally, if the meetings are outside the Committee's scheduled slot that can cause issues with members being able to attend, and general diary management. This is less of an issue when we know far enough in advance, but if issues arise unexpectedly, that could cause challenges. It is important for us to have certainty about committee meetings dates, to ensure we can plan and manage our workloads and diaries accordingly. (This also relates to the next question.)

[To what extent does the current approach to the committee timetable provide an appropriate balance between the time Members spend on committee work \(in and outside committee meetings\) and their wider responsibilities?](#)

Some of us sit on multiple committees, others only sit on this Committee. Therefore we have a range of experiences. As the question notes, it is important to consider that as well as the time spent in a Committee meeting, there is also the time spent preparing (which depending on the items being considered can be extensive) and time following up on matters after meetings.

In our discussions, we reflected on the challenges of long virtual meetings, and the impact that can have. We have primarily met virtually, although two of our meetings have been in a hybrid format. At the moment, we have been using the maximum of our slot more often than not, with most meetings starting with pre-meetings before 9, and usually running until at least 2:30pm, and on occasion past 3pm. We all noted the challenges that come with long virtual meetings, however, we acknowledged that the amount of core business meant that sometimes there was no other option.

We discussed that the challenges of long Committee meetings are different to long Plenary meetings, where Members may not attend or contribute to all items. However, the size of committees means that all members need to attend and actively engage in all business. This can be challenging, and due

to the wider responsibilities on Members, has meant that there have been times towards the end of meetings where we are only just quorate.

Timetable – alternatives to the status quo

What changes could be made to the committee timetable to improve committee effectiveness, whilst maintaining flexibility to accommodate additional committee business, and an appropriate balance between the time Members spend on committee work (in and outside committee meetings) and their wider responsibilities?

On balance, after discussion, our preference would be to keep fortnightly committee meetings, but with the option to meet in the “off” weeks in the same scheduled slot, without the need to seek Business Committee agreement. We believe this would give us greater flexibility in how we schedule business, for example being able to adjust our business at a meeting, with short notice, which would enable us to respond to urgent or pressing business, or to ensure a better balance across our committee meetings and avoiding the challenges which can stem from meetings which can be up to six hours or longer.

Whatever changes are made to the timetable, we would want to ensure that it does not result in any reduction in time available to our Committee to undertake our work.

If changes are to be made to the timetable, when should these changes be implemented?

We note the challenges of deciding when best to implement any changes, and how that can take account of committees’ forward work programmes. There is a specific issue for us, as arrangements need to be made for Stage 2 proceedings for the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Bill. The dates need to be agreed before the Stage 1 debate in early March. We will be writing separately to the Business Committee on this matter, but we note that the current preferred dates both for the Committee and the Welsh Government is in line with our preferred model of working.

Remits

Do you believe there is a need to adjust the remit of your committee? For example, to balance work across committees, and/or to improve lines of accountability.

We are satisfied with the remit. One of our strategic priorities is to work with other Senedd committees, and so far, we have taken up opportunities to do this, even if it has not involved holding joint meetings.

We note that in the last Senedd, the previous Chair of the CYPE Committee sat on the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee. We understand that this was felt to be a particularly effective way of managing the shared areas of interest across the two committees. As we share the same Committee slot with the Health and Social Care Committee, this means there is no shared membership. Whilst we understand that putting both committees in the same slot was done with the intention of helping to facilitate more joint working across committees, in this instance, we note that it has actually made this more difficult. It has also caused logistical issues at certain points when both committees have been calling upon the same ministers at the same time (such as for budget scrutiny.)

I hope this information is helpful for the review, and we look forward to the findings.

Yours sincerely,

Jayne Bryant

Jayne Bryant MS
Chair

Enc: Letter from FSB, 25 August 2021

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg.

We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.



Arbenigwyr mewn Busnes
Experts in Business

25 August 2021

Children, Education and Young People Committee
Senedd
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Dear Ms. Bryant

RE: Priorities for the Committee

FSB Wales is the authoritative voice of businesses in Wales, with around 10,000 members. It campaigns for a better social, political, and economic environment in which to work and do business. With a strong grassroots structure, a Wales Policy Unit and dedicated Welsh staff to deal with Welsh institutions, media and politicians, FSB Wales makes its members' voices heard at the heart of the decision-making process.

FSB welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee's call for views on its priorities. Committees serve a vital role in providing scrutiny of the government, in providing a key role in influencing policy development, and as a constructive engagement point for evidence and understanding between the legislature and civil society, including our role in representing small businesses.

With continuing issues arising from Covid-19, the possibility of further disruptions, and the legacy of the damage the pandemic has wrought alongside the impetus to build an economic recovery, the role of committees will be of even more importance this term.

As such, insofar as possible, it is important that the Senedd's capacity and abilities are used to the full in this process, and that the structure allows committees – and their Chairs - to be agile and able to respond quickly to events this Winter, as well as in providing scrutiny and policy development for the challenges ahead. It is in the spirit of supporting this democratic process and committees as the engine room of Welsh democracy that we respond to this consultation.

The Committee covers areas of priority for FSB Wales and we look forward to working with you over the coming term.

Ways of Working

We note that the new Committees structure includes the following:

- The Sixth Senedd has for the moment opted for smaller membership in committees (4-6).
- This should allow members to build more specialism, but at the cost of more diverse voices in each committee (as was the case with larger committees).
- It is important to push for the advantages of building focused specialism is nurtured and maximised, but the diversity and small pool is mitigated (e.g., through cross-committee working).



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Potentially, this structure could allow for more agility which as there may well remain issues arising requiring quick reaction, policy response and scrutiny over the next period, could be extremely useful. This would require significant autonomy for committees to pursue their own path and ways of working.

However, the decision has also been taken to cut the number of committee meetings to be fortnightly rather than weekly.

- Smaller committees should allow MSs being able to populate across them better, but fewer meetings do not seem to add value in this respect.
- There are also dangers to scrutiny and policy development – the role of scrutiny (legislative and non-legislative) as we open up after Covid is important, with myriad issues across all policy areas important. Committees have an important role in this respect and halving the time for scrutiny in a stroke makes little sense. This is a particular issue for small business issues, as we are concerned that vital areas of economic recovery may not be properly addressed or scrutinised.
- There is a danger that the pressure will force committees to focus on necessary legislative scrutiny alone, while relegating wider scrutiny and policy inquiries to the margins (including on business issues and day to day issues around Covid, for example).
- Some committees have wide and disparate subject areas, and there is a danger that whole policy areas will be relegated to the side-lines.
- As well as being the engine room of democratic scrutiny of Government, committees are a vital interface for contact and policy evidence from civil society – there is a danger that the pool of evidence is further narrowed, and a focus is on the narrower ‘usual suspects’ providing evidence posing a danger of group-think and less diverse views being taken in oral evidence.
- As noted above, committees will need to be agile in continuing to respond to Covid and the various issues raised by the pandemic will continue to impact for the Senedd term. These limits on their work may mitigate against that and undermine responsive policy development and scrutiny. As such, it makes sense to allow autonomy for Committees to pursue their own ways of working, including additional meeting and inquiries. As such, the two-week meetings should be seen as a baseline rather than a ceiling for activity and scrutiny.

Cross-committee working will be vital to mitigate against small committees meaning a greater focus but a danger of silo working and loss of diverse offices bringing in a range of policy field lenses and understanding how they intersect. We therefore encourage cross committee inquiries as a minimum (and suggestions later in paper on subjects that span committees).

It is also possible to look at ways as a regular way of working and ensuring policy span through MSs from different committees could sit as non-voting ‘guests’ or bringing committee expertise and lens to particular meetings (e.g., climate change members sitting in on discussions on housing capital spending policy).

This way of working will also be important in terms of scrutiny of the substance and operation of Welsh Government – through the Climate Change Ministry as a central organising department looking to ensure cross departmental and holistic working, it is important that Senedd is able to mirror this and provide adequate scrutiny across policy areas accordingly.



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Business concerns sit across many departments, and within intersecting policy subjects so cross-committee working is important for FSB and our members.

Recommendations

- *That committees are allowed freedom (as decided unanimously by all their members) to look at the fortnightly meetings as a baseline and so can organise more meetings as suits them or for specific inquiries.*
- *We would urge a view to cross committee working on intersecting subject areas and inquiries – and that these can be on top of the fortnightly meetings.*
- *To mitigate against small committees being a small pool we would urge that committees can co-opt other MSs (including possibly spokespeople retain a right to attend and question) as non-voting members for individual sessions, and to be encouraged and incentivised to do so. These could also be as members of other committees to encourage cross sectoral views.*
- *It is vital, with continuing uncertainty on Covid over the Winter months (as well as ongoing issues and its legacy) that Committees are able to react with agility to raise issues, conduct inquiries and scrutinise reactively and quickly as needed. Committees and their Chairs should be able to do this with as much autonomy as possible over their schedules and ways of working (with necessary checks of unanimity in committee as appropriate).*

FSB's key policy areas of work for the Committee

A key area of work here is scrutiny and policy development around the *Guarantee of Offer for Education, Employment or Training to under 25s* in the Programme for Government. Currently we are not aware of greater detail. It is important for our members to understand if this is to be a meaningful offer how it relates to training and apprenticeships and how any scheme would be easily accessed and used by SMEs across the whole of Wales, in order to ensure that opportunities are available to young people and to businesses with proper support.

The role of entrepreneurship in education, how it aligns with the wider curriculum and its aims of making 'informed and critical citizens' is an ongoing interest, as well as how we understand the changing needs of the next generation of young entrepreneurs and business support mechanisms required to help provide opportunities for them. The role of work-related experiences and the practical experiential side of education, as well as the fostering of key skills is also a key concern for SMEs, and in future entrepreneurship.

FSB have upcoming work on Generation Z entrepreneurship, which we will share with the committee when available.

Subject areas for Joint working with other committees

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Our suggestions above advocate a dynamic and agile role in co-working and cross committee working, utilising all the backbench capacity and capabilities as much as possible, and reducing possible silos in policy scrutiny and development. The following list gives some indications of possible areas of work, although this is not exhaustive list, and priorities will be necessarily shaped by wider issues of Welsh Government priorities and external factors such as Covid-19 and Brexit. Working iteratively with other committees will also shape framing of subject areas, and we believe this would generally be positive for inquiries and scrutiny.

Subject area	Possible partner committee(s)
<i>Implications and opportunities of Guarantee of Offer for Education, Employment or Training to under 25s</i>	Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee
Entrepreneurship and Young People – including Business Support, Entrepreneurship in Education and next generation of entrepreneurs	Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee

FSB Wales would welcome the opportunity to discuss this issue with your officials, should you deem it useful.

Yours sincerely,

Ben Cottam
Head of Wales
FSB