

Standards of Conduct Committee inquiry into **Cross-Party Groups**

Welsh Labour Group response

September 2022

The Welsh Labour Group of the Senedd welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback as part of the Committee's inquiry into Cross Party Groups.

We believe that Cross-Party Groups continue to offer Members a valuable opportunity to engage with a wide range of public policy areas as well as the organisations and individuals involved in those areas.

This engagement helps to raise the profile of those subject areas in the Senedd and inform the work of Members in formal business and in their constituencies or regions.

Please find below the Group's views on the four questions contained in the consultation document:

1. What are your views on the arrangements for Cross-Party Groups in the Senedd?

We believe that the current arrangements, including the 'Rules for the operation of Cross-Party Groups' broadly continue to strike the right balance between transparency and practicality for those running and participating in CPGs.

The reporting timeframes which are contained in the rules also remain appropriate and reasonable, in our view.

The ability to meet virtually in recent years has been of huge benefit to CPGs, ensuring more people can attend, opening up more time slots for meetings and eliminating the need for many stakeholders to travel long distances in order to attend.

We believe that the option to hold CPG meetings either virtually or in hybrid format should remain open to all such groups.

With regards to the management of CPG meetings, we would be opposed to any proposal that MS offices should be expected to act as secretariats for these groups.

Members often chair several CPGs and any expectation that their staff should routinely act as the secretariat for them would place substantial additional pressures on Member offices at a time when they are already facing heavy workloads and insufficient resources.

We strongly believe that the secretariat of these groups should remain with stakeholders, who bring valuable contacts and expertise to this arena.

2. Have you got any concerns or encountered any problems with the arrangements? If so what?

The use of virtual meetings of CPGs, while very welcome in many ways, does pose a challenge in terms of ensuing Welsh to English translation at all meetings.

Welsh to English translation is routinely available for face to face meetings within the Senedd but has been notably absent in virtual CPG meetings.

We believe this should be addressed in a systemic way. We would welcome further work with CPGs and their secretariats to ensure that the resources or technical solutions are put in place to ensure all meetings have bilingual translation.

The Group would also welcome further work to promote the work of CPGs and to make it easier to find details of meetings.

At the moment, this is mainly done through email invitations, which can sometimes be lost among the multitude of emails Members receive each day.

We feel that placing details on a central calendar which might help to encourage attendance, make it easier for secretariats to avoid clashes with other CPGs or Senedd events and help to make the co-ordination of busy Member diaries easier for all involved.

Options could include adding full details of CPG meetings to the Senedd Calendar on the intranet and / or external website, which would bring all meetings together in one easily accessible place.

3. Do the current rules reflect the functions and responsibilities of Cross-Party Groups, as you understand them?

While we believe that on the whole the rules are fair, comprehensive and proportionate, there are a few areas we feel should be addressed.

In terms of the threshold for the formation of CPGs, we believe the requirement to have Members from at least three party groups may have unintended consequences in the current and future Senedds.

In the last Senedd this requirement did not cause any difficulties due to the number of Party Groups which were formed during the five year term.

However, in this Senedd we only have three Party groups and therefore every party group can essentially veto the creation of a CPG under the current rules.

In our view, cross-party groups were designed to bring together Members from different Groups and perspectives across the Senedd, but not necessarily all Groups or perspectives. They are deliberately called 'Cross Party' and not 'All Party' groups for this reason.

While the need for broad support to establish a CPG remains an important prerequisite, the current rules make this objective difficult where one party group can essentially stop others from contributing to our democratic process through the work of CPGs.

For example, there may be instances in the future where there is a proposal to establish a cross Party Group on an important social issue, but this may not be acceptable to one of the three Groups represented in the Senedd.

This one Group may also only represent a small minority of the Senedd's total membership, while the overwhelming majority of Members might be in favour of establishing the CPG in question.

In order to address these concerns, we would suggest that the rules are reformed to reduce the number of people required to form a CPG from

Members of at least three political groupings to Members of more than two political parties.

We believe this should include independent Members or Members who represent another political party which does not meet the Senedd's threshold for forming an official party group (currently three Members).

We feel it is an important principle that independent Members or Members of a party who do not meet the threshold to form a group are not excluded and have an ability to contribute to the formation of CPGs.

This would also help to address possible future circumstances in which a greater number of independent Members or Members of smaller parties are elected to the Senedd.

In terms of the financial rules, the fact that CPGs are not considered to be a formal part of our work as Members can also cause some issues.

This rule means that any travel or other CPG related expenditure by Members cannot be claimed from their allowances.

As a result, Members may be deterred from fully engaging in some of the work of CPGs, such as travel to an external visit arranged by the group which might involve substantial travel or an overnight stay.

It also means there is a danger that CPGs become reliant on external funding. Such a reliance may reduce the transparency of CPGs, or inadvertently expose Members or indeed the Senedd to reputational risk.

We believe the current guidelines on Extended Travel for Members, as set out in the Determination, provide a model for a different system which could be applied to the rules for CPGs.

More generally, while we of course fully accept the need to have robust rules in place on financial matters, in reality the majority of financial support received by most CPGs often does not extend beyond funding refreshments for meetings.

4. Are there any further steps that could be taken to increase transparency for Cross-Party Groups? If so, what?

The Group believes that more needs to be done to ensure that CPG meetings are well advertised and open to all, rather than being closed meetings attended by a small number of “usual suspects”. This would, in our view, improve transparency.

The Register of Cross Party Groups on the Senedd’s website contains very limited details such as the overall aim of CPGs and the names of the Chair, Members and Secretaries, but the page is lacking in important details and is somewhat hidden away.

This page does not, for example, appear to contain details of the next meetings/s of CPGs or even the contact details for the secretariats.

As well as our suggestion of a centrally maintained calendar as outlined in our response to question 2 above, we feel that Member and Senedd social media channels could be utilised more to promote upcoming CPG meetings as could information screens in the public areas of the Senedd.