ROCP 09, Dr Thora Tenbrink, Professor of Linguistics and Director of the Places of Climate Change Research Centre

Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Pwyllgor Newid Hinsawdd, yr Amgylchedd a Seilwaith | **Climate Change, Environment, and Infrastructure Committee**

Adolygiad o flaenoriaethau'r Pwyllgor ar gyfer y Chweched Senedd | Review of the Committee's priorities for the Sixth Senedd

Ymateb gan Dr Thora Tenbrink | Evidence from Dr Thora Tenbrink

Your views

1. What are your views on the Committee's three strategic priorities: Climate Change; Sustainable Communities: and Protecting and enhancing the natural environment?

They are extremely important. In fact I think there is very little that is more important than these three topics, especially in combination. Climate change threatens our livelihoods in more ways than most people are aware: it could hit us through heat, flood, draught, excessive migration, civil unrest and war; social injustice is enhanced and global food distribution severely threatened. Becoming more resilient locally and protecting the natural environment is absolutely essential.

The three areas are interconnected through the notion of Place Attachment, which is at the heart of my research in linguistics and discourse analysis. People are concerned about their local environment because they are attached to it (see http://bangor.ac.uk/plocc). They will act to protect it from climate change threats if they know how and are offered pathways of doing that. If governments support climate-relevant local positive action, people will respond - as long as the action is in line with their personal everyday concerns.

2. To what extent are the Committee's three strategic priorities still relevant, reflecting on social, economic and environmental developments since they were set at the start of the Sixth Senedd?

They are more relevant than ever, as climate change effects are now becoming evident and tangible around the globe. Maybe not so much in Wales directly, but people do travel and watch the news. Knowing that their own local area contributes to climate mitigation is important and strengthens place attachment.

Economically, there is an opportunity here to capitalise on the increased awareness of the need to live in a more sustainable way, e.g., by creating sustainable energy resources and enhancing sustainable retail practices, such as reducing waste. With local energy sources in place, communities will be more resilient, the country will be less dependent on importing fossil fuels, and we won't be supporting the big fossil fuel companies anymore – who have lied to us about the known consequences for decades, and are still profiting.

3. What are your view on the Committee's detailed priorities/outline programme of work for Years 3 to 5 of the Sixth Senedd (set out in its report, Priorities for the Sixth Senedd?

I can't speak to the programme details, but I will emphasise that it is absolutely essential to involve communities directly. People do not respond happily to any changes that they feel have been imposed on them – their voices need to be heard throughout the process. This means more than online available consultation periods that most people will be unaware of – it requires events, social media campaigns, postal messaging etc., making sure that people are reached in a variety of ways, fitting in with their communication practices. Locals know best what works in their place and what changes would be most acceptable. They are the experts on their community. This needs to be recognised and integrated in all decision processes.
It also needs to be noted just how important the Welsh language can be in this context. Some people would never engage with a discussion if the discussion is predominantly English. Conversely, some people will engage much more if they perceive an action as something that will also support the Welsh language. For many Welsh speakers, place attachment is directly connected with Welsh identity and cannot be separated.

4. To what extent are the Committee's detailed priorities/outline programme of work still relevant, reflecting on social, economic and environmental developments since they were set at the start of the Sixth Senedd?

There needs to be more consideration of sustainable public and private transport: affordable and frequent bus systems using electric vehicles, as well as cycle routes that make using the bike truly more attractive than driving. If cycle paths are simply attached to main roads (with lots of signs and barriers making cyclists stop), they are neither efficient nor attractive and only a few enthusiasts will use them. In the Netherlands and Denmark, there are excellent examples of how the infrastructure has changed to ensure that the bike is frequently the most efficient and nicer option: separate bike paths that are comfortable, safe and often quicker than the main traffic routes.

People do enjoy car-free areas – especially within larger towns and cities this could be considered in much more depth. This would free up spaces for lovely green pedestrian zones with attractive shopping areas, places to sit, relax and meet people, trees that provide cooling and oxygen, waterways that enhance flood resilience, and more.

5. Are there any other matters related to the Committee's priorities/work programme/ways of working that you would like to comment on?

There are various academic-led transdisciplinary projects underway or being planned that connect directly with these strategic priorities. It is important that there'll be alignment as things develop.

6. Other information

I am currently developing a transdisciplinary project proposal (i.e., will apply for funding) with a view to supporting community-led developments of smart local energy systems. I believe this is directly relevant for your three priority areas, in combination.

Our pan-Wales consortium will adopt a hyper-local approach that envisions a web interface (or app) that empowers communities to implement renewable energy systems. The interface would allow local climate activists, community groups, councils and other stakeholders to enter a postcode to gather information about local environmental features – basically a list of options of 'what would work here', e.g., where could we recover energy, can we build a solar farm, would wind energy be feasible, or what else might work here – plus other place-based information that would be useful for teaming up locally (and finding viable solutions, practically and financially) to initiate community energy projects that suit the place. The interface would have a workflow rather than being static, guiding people through various steps with information that is tailored as much as possible to what they need at each stage. Crucially it would offer many further options beyond the obvious, supporting energy security for Wales through a mix of different smart local energy systems.

The motivating insight behind it is that plenty of scientific solutions are available by now, and various place-based case studies have been carried out, but we still do not see climate mitigations happening everywhere – and community groups who are highly motivated do not always know where to start. So this is about communicating climate solutions in a way that is accessible and suitable for the people on the ground – those who can put it to use.

I'd be happy to stay in contact with the committee around these issues to ensure conceptual alignment and mutual updates.

Additional submission:

I have previously submitted some responses to the above. Here, I wanted to inform you about a small-scale survey that we recently conducted to find out about people's reactions to a range of more stringent environmental laws in the EU as compared to the UK. While our findings were qualitative and by no means representative, they do strongly suggest that stringent environmental laws may not be viewed as a threat to freedom if people recognise their value and necessity for the planet's future. People overwhelmingly agreed that meaningful laws in support of the environment must be reinforced as much as possible, rather than leaving it up to individuals to follow some advice or not.

This is very much in line with other research that I'm currently conducting on people's buy-in to place-based environmental schemes initiated by governmental agencies: the more they are involved and informed about what's going on and why, the more they will support even those schemes that may mean some inconvenience to them personally. However they do want their voices heard, and be able to make adjustments to local actions where feasible.

I'm sure this is not new to you as a phenomenon, but it can't be emphasised enough! It's this tension between imposing regulations and allowing individuals to live as they wish. Communication and empowerment to co-develop solutions that work in practice is the key.