



# **Reviewing Committee Effectiveness in the Sixth Senedd**

Consultation Response - the Institute of Welsh Affairs  
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## **Introduction**

The Institute of Welsh Affairs is Wales' leading think tank, independent of government and political parties. By bringing together experts from all backgrounds, we conceive ambitious and informed ideas which secure political commitments to improve our democracy and our economy. Established pre-devolution in 1987, we have informed, challenged and supported the continued evolution of Wales' parliament and government.

We provide platforms for debate, opportunities for people to make their voices heard and agenda-setting research. We are funded by our members, income from our events and training sessions, and supported by trusts, foundations and other funding bodies. We are a proud signatory to the Zero Racism Wales pledge and a Living Wage employer.

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## **Interactions with Senedd Committees**

During the 6th Senedd, the IWA gave evidence regularly, both in person and remotely. We have provided evidence to a number of committees including: Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs; Equality and Social Justice; Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport and International Relations; Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure; Local Government and Housing; and Standards of Conduct. Furthermore, during this period, the IWA have also submitted written evidence to a range of committees, and have given oral evidence to the House of Commons Welsh Affairs Select Committee, which could provide further context to our response. Finally, we consistently monitor and view relevant committee sessions, so we can provide our perspective on other sessions we did not attend.

As such, the IWA are in a good position to provide an informed insight into the committee process during the 6th Senedd. Importantly, this insight includes engaging with a broad range of committees, including committee inquiries, in their role in scrutinising legislation and public sector performance, and in special purpose (or Task and Finish) committees.

At the outset, it is important to acknowledge the unique context Senedd committees operate within and will, to an extent, continue to operate in after the election of an enlarged Senedd in 2026. We have a unicameral system, where all scrutiny and debate is carried out by Members. The size of the Senedd itself requires many Members to sit on more than one committee at a time (a feature likely to continue, albeit in a more limited way post-2026 election). Senedd committees, mirroring ministerial responsibilities, also have a broad set of responsibilities and focus areas. They also undertake both policy and legislative functions. As a result, the committee system, and Members' capacity, resources and time, are under



significant strain. Whilst Senedd expansion is an ideal moment to consider tackling some of these practical challenges, it will not alleviate them completely. Our considerations are therefore aimed at making the system work as best as it can, whilst acknowledging the realities noted above.

### **IWA Reflections**

Our experience with engaging with multiple different committees is positive. Communication between committee staff, ourselves, other organisations giving evidence and Members themselves have always been clear, concise and purposeful.

Ahead of appearing in front of a committee, we have typically been given long notice, with clear expectations set out from committee staff. Committee staff have also always been generous in offering their time and insight in setting out what is expected ahead of a session and what the areas of questioning are likely to be. This has consistently put us in a strong position to prepare to give accurate, reliable and well-researched evidence. We have also taken part in briefing calls with other organisations giving evidence. This has been useful in identifying areas of inquiry and where we as an organisation fit into the range of perspectives committees are seeking to hear from.

Similarly, when submitting written evidence to a committee, typically through the open consultation process, the format for what is expected as well as the timescales are always clearly communicated. We do accept that the IWA are in a privileged position to understand and know the process well, which may exclude other stakeholders from contributing. For example, organisations and individuals have different understanding of the importance of the committee system and its influence on public policy, as well as the existence of evidence sessions and public consultations and how to access and engage with them.

When engaging with committees directly, the experience is respectful and purposeful. Members are typically engaged in their line of questioning as well as our responses. This is most evident when follow-ups and supplementary questions are asked on specific topics, showing that the session is more than a *question and answer* format, and more of a *discussion*. These, in our experience, are the most purposeful sessions, and, as such, provide the best insight and evidence. This was the case when we provided evidence to the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee inquiry on post-EU funding arrangements.

In our experience, two specific examples of when a committee's actions impinge on the evidence received include:

- Cases when individual Members go beyond the scope and remit of the particular evidence session. We find this leads to poor evidence received and breaking the flow of a session.

Secondly, where committee work focuses on subjects which are outside of the remit of devolved parliament or government. This could be the case for specific questions in evidence sessions, entire inquiries or reports. Senedd committee time, given the inherent limits it faces, is best used to focus on areas it can influence, shape or alter.

### **Hybrid working**

We are supportive of hybrid working for committee sessions, primarily as it enables Members to spend more time in the communities they are elected to serve and represent.

This is particularly important given committee business is often undertaken on a Thursday, a day otherwise free from plenary commitments. We do, however, reflect that hybrid meetings can be less engaging and free-flowing than sessions where all Members and participants are in attendance in person. Fully in-person sessions we have taken part in have enabled the best dialogue between Members and those giving evidence. This has typically resulted in stronger evidence being provided and with Members most able to ask follow-up and supplementary questions. In our view, hybrid format works, but is less effective, and should therefore be the exception rather than the norm for committee sessions.

We have also taken part in fully remote committee sessions. We found these to be the least engaging and useful. That is not to say that fully remote sessions shouldn't be permitted, merely that they should be the method of last resort, and used for specific purposes.

### **Committee Culture**

The culture of committees is robust and effective. As stated above, committee clerks and support staff ensure that those giving evidence are well briefed and prepared to give evidence. The Senedd committee team are adept at preparing participants ahead of an oral session (this is particularly the case for those who are new to the process).

Committees are also a platform of most of the in-depth policy analysis in the Senedd. In addition they enable cross-party collaboration and co-working which is, understandably, absent from the rest of the Siambwr. This less-partisan approach of committees has created a culture of respect across the political spectrum. That the vast majority of committee reports are signed off by all members is evidence of this. With electoral reform for the 2026 elections likely to bring in a broader diversity of party representation, upholding this principle will be vital to ensure their effectiveness. Not only does this culture improve the work of the committees specifically, but also has a halo effect on the rest of Senedd business, with mutually respectful relationships established across party lines.

With an influx of new Members into the Senedd, deliberate work must be taken to ensure that this culture of collaboration is maintained and further entrenched. Making an explicit set of norms, standards and behaviours would be useful in helping to embed this culture during the 7th Senedd. Current Members, a number of whom are vastly experienced, would be best placed to inform and implement this. The process and guidelines should be communicated during the Member induction process.

Innovations implemented during the 6th Senedd to externally communicate committees' areas of focus should be continued. Regular updates on committees' work, such as those published by the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee (for example [Summer-Autumn 2025](#)) are useful in providing a sense of purpose and clarity of their work. Likewise is the publication of forward work programmes for each Senedd term.

Similarly, we support committees holding open consultations to establish their areas of focus, as has been undertaken by the [Climate Change, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee](#) during the 6th Senedd. This provides clear ways of aligning committees' work with the priorities of external stakeholders. As committees have such large remits and heavy workloads, these mechanisms enable Members to select the most pressing issues to spend

their valuable time on. Enabling external organisations to contribute to the work programmes of committees benefits their work.

### **Enhancing Engagement and Outreach**

We think there are more ways that the committee system could aim to bring in further expertise into the process. Increasing the amount of committee work undertaken outside of the Senedd could be fruitful, when relevant and purposeful. For example, visits to projects, communities, businesses as well as meeting in different parts of Wales can all help to bring the committees' work to life and bring them closer to the lived experience of communities on behalf of which they are scrutinising policy.

Some ways of building further engagement could be:

- Hosting regular stakeholder meetings with key partners in a committee's remit. For example, the Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee could establish a regular group of organisations to discuss key issues and inform the purpose and work programme of the committee. Such an approach would help to embed Welsh Government's principle of social partnership into the bloodstream of the Senedd itself.
- Committees are an opportunity to practically embed deliberative democratic methods. The IWA have been at the forefront of the discussion on applying deliberative democratic methods in a devolved setting, through our report '[Fostering Democratic Innovations in Wales: Lessons from around the world.](#)' These approaches are currently being explored by Welsh Government's [Innovating Democracy Advisory Group](#). There is potential in the next Senedd for committees to lead the way in integrating deliberative methods into their work. Such an approach *could* lead to the appointment of a citizens assembly or panel aligned to a committee's remit. This representative group of individuals from across Wales could help to ensure that citizen voice is entrenched in the priorities, scrutiny and recommendations of the committee. There is more scope for experimentation with different forms of taking oral evidence, with roundtables, collaborative sessions, creative methods, citizens panels, and online participative methods, amongst others.
- Increasing the number of external visits that take place could build further engagement with the committee system. Visiting successful projects, experiencing the areas Members are scrutinising or inquiring about could increase the transparency, engagement and inclusion of their work.
- The IWA's 2020 report '[Missing Links](#)' lays out the importance of improving inter-parliamentary relations between the UK's parliaments. The report found that:

*'Effective inter-parliamentary relations therefore currently happen in an ad hoc and informal way, because they rely on individual members and committees to drive them. The public should reasonably expect this collaboration to be a routine and consistent feature of how the UK works.'*

This remains the case, and in our asymmetrical model of devolution, with the lines between devolved and reserved policy matters consistently blurred, more proactive engagement between Senedd committees and their counterparts across the UK could increase the standard of scrutiny. This engagement should cut across the remits of most Senedd committees but also enable a cross-cutting focus on scrutinising intergovernmental relations across the UK.

## **Organisation of Committee Business**

### *Linking to Ministerial Responsibilities*

We support the current constitution of committees, mirroring ministerial portfolios. Of course, this may change in the 7th Senedd, with the number of Ministers Welsh Government can appoint increasing from 12 to 17. There is an opportunity to expand the number of committees to match this increase, yet the number of Members, post reform, is unlikely to make this workable whilst limiting them to sit on one committee each.

### *Dual Function*

We support the dual function approach, whereby committees undertake both policy and legislative scrutiny. This is essential due to the size of the Senedd and the broad range of devolved powers. There are not enough Members in the Senedd (and still won't be post 2026 reforms) for smaller, more focussed committees. It is also important, in the IWA's view, that Senedd expansion supports backbench Members who sit on no committee. The current committee system does not enable this and neither would any increase in the number of committees or membership, with all non-government Members required to have a committee role.

Having said that, most committees are overworked and this can stymie inquiry into critical areas within their remit. Due to the large and broad workload of committees, much of their work is determined in the first year of their establishment. This means that emerging areas worthy of inquiry are potentially left unaddressed.

However, significant amounts of workload leads to committee business being gummed up with too many areas to address. That these reflect large portfolio areas held by Welsh Government Ministers rather reflects the wider issue of a lack of detailed scrutiny. This heavy workload has a tangible impact on the work committees do undertake, with some sessions hindered by a lack of adequate time for Members to prepare, resulting in poor questioning and summary reports which are not as strong as they could be given more time.

We have seen examples of committee inquiries which are a particularly poor use of time and resources. This is typically the case where their remit is broad and where significant areas of an issue are reserved to Westminster. Such inquiries result in overly broad recommendations which don't impact Welsh Government policy or its legislative programme.

Whilst such arguments are necessary and reflect Welsh Government's stretched budget, resource and capacity, there is a certain need for further debate which focuses more radically on how we spend the money we *do* have. We would like to see this improve in the 7th Senedd, with committees providing a stronger guiding hand to organisations looking to respond to consultations and inquiries.

### *Effectiveness on government policy*

There is little public indication on the impact and effectiveness of Senedd committees' impact and effectiveness on shaping public policy and delivery. This is particularly the case with inquiries.

Furthermore, there seems to be little attempt to measure the outputs and impact of committees' recommendations. There is a vital need to research into this specific area. Impacting legislation and policy are the essential purpose of committees; if they do not do this, it undermines the entire system.

#### *Committee Chairs, Make-up and Constitution*

The current model of determining committee Chairs and make-up appears to be effective, resulting in a make-up which largely reflects the Senedd as a whole. Given the size of the Senedd, however, alterations to committees composition have been consistent due to party reshuffles, which is damaging to committees work. Such flux is, however, likely to continue in the 7th Senedd.

We also support, as was the case in the 6th Senedd, the creation of specific *Task and Finish* committees to oversee major pieces of legislation, or reform to the Senedd itself (such as the Reform Bill Committee). Whether or not further reform to the Senedd will be on the agenda of the next Senedd remains to be seen. But, should it become a focus of future legislation, we would support a similar approach, namely, specific committees to explore key issues and principles.

Organisation of committee business is strong and we support that many committees now undertake open calls to help determine their inquiry areas over a Senedd term. We would support this continuing as this provides the forum for external input in determining their programmes of work and priorities.

#### *Committee Size and number*

The current size of committees is a reflection of the size of the Senedd itself.

For instance, we have experienced evidence sessions where only two Members are present. We have also attended sessions where multiple Members are absent. This speaks to the larger challenges of Welsh democracy: a parliament too small to oversee rapidly expanding powers and responsibilities, timetabling under strain, and, relatedly, Members who are overworked and practically unable to effectively carry out all elements of their role.

Furthermore, Members do not have the capacity and resources to properly scrutinise legislation or undertake policy inquiries. This leaves Members strongly reliant on external evidence and expertise to inform policymaking: this is particularly the case with committees where Members have less professional experience of a topic such as Health and Social Care (which is vitally important, given this committee scrutinises around 50% of Welsh Government's entire budget). This is a weakness and a strength. It is notable that in the Senedd, external organisations have a key role to play in policy scrutiny and legislation through the committee system. Our voices are heard and have an impact - this is undoubtedly a strength. When it comes to legislation, however, there are few organisations who have in-depth knowledge of applying and drafting effective legislation. However, this shouldn't make up for the lack of experience and adequate time for Members to take their own view on the evidence presented.



Whilst this is surely a result of an overstretched Senedd, with a number of Members sitting on more than one committee, this has a distinct impact on the level of scrutiny, and thus the value of evidence gained from panelists.

Although the size and composition of committees reflects the size of the Senedd as it currently sits, this often impedes outcomes. That some significant committees have as few Members as four clearly limits their ability to undertake their work to the depth and standard required.

During the next Senedd we would certainly like to see an end to Members sitting on more than one committee at a time.

### **Conclusion**

Senedd expansion and reform represents the rare opportunity to rethink how the committee system functions. Yet, an increase in Members is not enough to create a *perfect* system. It is therefore important to consider how we can best work within the existing system to ensure it is fit for delivering its vital purpose.

The IWA look forward to working with all committees during the next Senedd term to support their vital scrutiny and legislative functions. We hope that ahead of this time, the Senedd has the opportunity to truly consider implementing reforms which could improve the system. We also recognise the limitations of the system itself as well as the workloads and experience of individual Members.