

**Y Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb  
a Chyfiawnder Cymdeithasol**

**Equality and Social Justice  
Committee**

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Annwyl Elin,

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

Thank you for inviting us to respond to the review of committee effectiveness. We welcome this important and timely review and hope that its findings will help strengthen scrutiny arrangements and the vitality of the public sphere in Wales in the next Senedd and the long-term.

In the interest of transparency, we should point out that one of our Members, Jane Dodds, was also a member of the Future Senedd Committee, whose recommendations partly inform this review.

Our detailed thoughts are annexed to this letter and are grouped as per the three themes you identified. The Committee has agreed this submission unanimously, which means that they are endorsed by Members drawn from all four of the major political parties elected to the Senedd. We hope that you will give them due consideration and look forward to your report in due course.

Yours sincerely,



Jenny Rathbone MS  
Chair of the Equality and Social Justice Committee  
Welsh Parliament

# Annex

## 1. Committee culture

In the next Senedd, it looks highly likely that a sizeable proportion of its Members will be elected to office for the first time. It is vital that they understand both the written and unwritten rules that underpin our parliament, and its overall ethos, which is rooted in the liberal democratic, pluralist tradition.

Each committee's culture is shaped to an extent by the preferences and predilections of its Chair and members. However, there are certain rules and expectations that all Senedd committees have in common which are fundamental to their effectiveness and have a significant impact on the culture and dynamics of committees. In particular we would emphasise the following:

- **Committees as collaborative spaces:** an essential feature of Senedd committees has been the overarching expectation that they are spaces where Members work together, collaboratively and in good faith to investigate issues, scrutinise policies or legislation and hold the government, public bodies and others to account. Future Seneddau should retain and reinforce this expectation to all Members from the outset.
- **The non-party political nature of committee work:** when Members enter the committee room, they should leave party politics at the door. Plenary is the more appropriate forum for party politics and while disagreements in committees are unavoidable, they should be aired with sincerity and mutual respect.
- **The principle of evidence-based scrutiny:** all committee work, the views, conclusions, and recommendations that a committee makes must be based on the evidence received.

### Agreeing a shared vision

Another aspect that is important in shaping committee culture is agreeing a shared vision. This can be a challenge for any cross-party grouping with members from diverse backgrounds, with different ideas and interests. Our experience suggests that an effective way to overcome this potential obstacle is to hold a strategic planning session early in the committee's lifecycle involving Members and officials and to have discussions facilitated by an external facilitator. We think that this exercise was invaluable in bringing us together as a committee and gave us a clearer sense of direction and purpose ever since. It also provided us with a shared understanding of how to approach our cross-

cutting remit and a subsequent framework for periodic evaluation. We would recommend that all committees adopt a similar approach and for these to be held away from the Senedd estate and with an element of external challenge ideally.

## 2. Organisation of business

Our views with regards to the organisation of business, are informed by how we have operated as a committee as well as our collective knowledge and experience as parliamentarians over many years. In the context of an expanded Senedd of 96 members, we offer the following thoughts.

**Committee functions:** we feel strongly that joint policy and legislation committees improve scrutiny, enable Members to make the connections between the two and acquire subject knowledge and expertise. At the same time, we acknowledge the risk that the government's legislative priorities if concentrated in a particular subject area can crowd out the capacity of a committee to undertake policy scrutiny. The Business Committee should be mindful of this risk when setting remits. On balance, however, we think that joint policy and legislation committees are more effective than the alternative and should be retained in future Seneddau.

**Remits:** we think that our innovative, cross-cutting remit should be renewed in the next Senedd and should encompass broadly the same issues. We have concerns that sometimes differences in ministerial portfolio are used as an excuse to deflect awkward questions and evade accountability. Ultimately, Welsh Ministers are collectively responsible for government decisions and scrutiny by the Welsh Parliament is a key principle in our system of democratic oversight and accountability. We also think that frequent changes to ministerial portfolios are detrimental to long-term decision-making and the effectiveness of government. As highlighted by the Institute for Government, frequent changes to the machinery of government lead to disruption and lost productivity.<sup>1</sup> Given the reduction to 4-year terms in the next Senedd, it is even more important that the Welsh Government commit to keeping portfolios broadly fixed for the duration. This should ensure that there are fewer barriers to scrutiny; and by allowing civil servants to focus on delivery, will improve the overall effectiveness of government.

**Membership:** we favour committees with a smaller membership and consider six to be an optimal number of Members for a joint policy and legislation committee.

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<sup>1</sup> Institute for Government, [Machinery of government changes](#), 3 April 2023

**Timetable:** we have welcomed the flexibility of the current timetable but think that this review should explore its impact on how committees operate, their effectiveness and workload. We think there is value in assessing how often different committees have held meetings specifically and exploring whether the new timetable flexibilities are working as originally intended. In our case, we have made frequent use of our reserve slots. We think that the default assumption that meetings are fortnightly should be inverted so that the presumption is that committees meet every week unless there are reasons not to.

**Meetings on Monday:** unlike most dual function committees, we meet on a Monday and have an alternating pattern of afternoon and all-day slots. We do not consider Monday meetings to have placed excessive additional burdens; however, we did agree not to schedule business any earlier than 10.30am to minimise the need for Members who live further away from having to travel to Cardiff on a Sunday evening. This was an agreed way of working rather than anything more formal, however, we strongly believe that any future Senedd business timetable should ensure equity for Members with regards to where they live. There should also be a cast-iron commitment to protecting Fridays as a constituency day.

### **3. Interactions with committees**

We think that some of the new, innovative approaches adopted during the current Senedd will provide a solid foundation for committees in the next. Several of our inquiries have involved innovative approaches including those listed below.

- **Gender-based violence inquiry:** we established a Reference Group of survivors with lived experience who shared their stories with us and helped provide feedback and advice which shaped the inquiry at every stage. This included informing questioning approaches, commenting on draft recommendations and providing feedback on the Welsh Government response.
- **Inquiry into the disability employment gap:** we took evidence from disabled people through both engagement events and in formal committee meetings ensuring that adjustments were in place to support the needs of witnesses and to get the most out of their evidence sessions. We published the report and summaries in accessible formats including easy read and read aloud formats.
- **British Sign Language (Wales) Bill:** as part of our scrutiny of the Bill we ensured resources were available in British Sign Language (BSL) including guides to the legislative process, all consultation documents and enabled BSL signers to submit their evidence in BSL. In terms

of our proceedings, officials across services have worked with stakeholders and contractors to enable us to break new ground on accessibility. We have changed how committee meetings are run to improve participation and enabled BSL signers to follow proceedings by providing live signing for viewers on Senedd TV and the public gallery during ten out of the eleven public evidence sessions on the Bill. We have also enabled Deaf BSL signers to give evidence to the Committee in BSL through provision of simultaneous translation both in the room and remotely over Zoom.

### **BSL and accessibility**

When our work on the BSL Bill concludes, we will look to evaluate our approach and capture any lessons learned. This Bill, and our work more generally, has given us an insight into the need to consider further how accessible the Senedd is to different audiences. Whilst current approaches are continually evolving, we think there would be benefits to looking at this issue in a more robust and systematic way. We think the Senedd should look to engage directly with audiences, stakeholders and experts with a view to developing a clear and coherent approach. This should include looking at the practical, technical, ethical and resource implications of different approaches in order to identify barriers and provide an evidence base for making decisions in future.

**Attendance:** generally high attendance rates and a general expectation that Members show a commitment to attending committee meetings should be maintained. While reducing the number of Members expected to sit on more than one Committee should be a priority in the next Senedd, we also think that there should be an expectation that all backbench Members sit on a committee.

**Sanctions for non-attendance (without valid reasons):** although valid reasons for non-attendance at committee exist such as ill-health or bereavement, we note that there are few sanctions for non-attendance without a valid reason. In the next Senedd where the direct link between Members and the electorate will be weaker due to the closed list system, measures aimed at ensuring greater accountability will be even more important. Furthermore, the Standards Commissioner in evidence to the Reform Bill Committee expressed concerns about the lack of recourse should a Member decide to stop discharging their duties for a period.<sup>2</sup> We welcome the fact that legislative proposals are being developed in relation to recall. However, we think that consideration should be given to creating sanctions that are directly linked to attendance at committees and/or for behaviour that falls short of the threshold for recalling a Member. In the meantime, routinely publishing attendance data for each Member could constitute a practical step that could be introduced in time for the next Senedd and could help to ensure attendance rates are maintained.

**Hybrid meetings:** we fully support hybrid meetings for almost all types of committee work and agree that hybrid arrangements should continue in future. From an equality and inclusion perspective, enabling witnesses to appear in a format that suits them is vitally important and has helped us to

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<sup>2</sup> Reform Bill Committee, Stage 1 scrutiny of the Senedd (Members and Elections) Bill, 20 September 2025

improve the diversity of evidence we receive particularly with regards to geography. We would have significant concerns regarding the implications for women, people with caring responsibilities, and disabled people in particular, should there be any attempt to curtail the flexibility that hybrid meetings can provide. Furthermore, it is important to note that use of video conferencing by committees long predates the Covid pandemic, and committees have routinely offered this as an option for participation since at least the early 2010s albeit with more limited take-up.

**Instances where in-person attendance is preferable:** notwithstanding our support for the hybrid format, there are instances where in-person attendance by members is preferable: for example, when holding scrutiny sessions with ministers and other public figures or office holders. In terms of witnesses who are not ministers, it is worth noting that we draw a distinction between a scrutiny session (where the figure or office holder is there to be held to account) and evidence gathering sessions more generally. In person attendance should also be mandatory for Stage 2 proceedings.