

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FOR WALES' RULES FOR THE OPERATION OF CROSS PARTY GROUPS

1. Introduction

Cross-Party Groups are widely recognised as a valuable part of the democratic process. It is equally important that there is openness and transparency in the way that groups operate.

These rules for the operation of Cross-Party Groups replace the 'Presiding Officers' Guidelines on the Formation of Cross-Party Groups', which were made on 10 March 2004.

All existing Assembly Cross-Party Groups are subject to these new Rules from the date on which they come into effect.

2. Definition and Status

The purpose of Assembly Cross-Party Groups is to provide a forum for Assembly Members from different parties to meet in order to consider and discuss shared interests in particular subjects.

Cross-Party Groups are not formal Assembly groupings and are not, therefore, bound by any of the Assembly's Standing Orders. They have no formal role in policy development.

Cross-Party Groups may be set up by Members in respect of any subject area relevant to the Assembly, but should not attempt to replicate the functional areas covered by Assembly committees, nor do they have any of the powers of an Assembly Committee (e.g. they cannot summon witnesses or Ministers to attend meetings or to provide documentation, and they cannot use the National Assembly for Wales logo or branding).

3. Membership

A Group must include Members from at least three political party groups represented within the Assembly.

Groups may also include members from outside the Assembly. Membership of individuals from outside the Assembly is at the discretion of the Group.

4. Election of Office Holders

Each group should elect a Chair and a Secretary.

The Chair of the Group must be an Assembly Member. The Group's Secretary may be an Assembly Member, an Assembly Member's

Support Staff, or an individual from outside the Assembly. However, in the case of the group appointing a Secretary who is not an Assembly Member, that person must not act without the prior approval of the Chair of the Group, and all notices, correspondence, documentation and other arrangements relating to the activities of the Group must be issued in the name of the Chair.

A group must normally meet to elect its office-holders. It is expected that office holders will initially be elected at an inaugural annual general meeting. However, office holders may also be elected at other meetings of the group. Following any election of an office-holder, the Chair of the group should notify the change within four weeks, using the registration form at annex A.

5. Registration

Following the holding of an inaugural AGM or election of office-holders by another means, Cross-Party Groups should register using the appropriate registration form. The form must be signed by the group's Chair and list the membership, which must include at least two other Assembly Members from two other party groups within the Assembly, and names of all Members of the group who are not Assembly Members.

The details on the registration forms will be published by Assembly Commission officials on the relevant Cross-Party Groups' section of the Assembly's website.

For the purposes of holding an Annual General Meeting, existing Assembly Cross-Party Groups will be expected to hold an AGM within 12 months of the date of these rules coming into effect. Groups registered after this date will be expected to hold an AGM within 12 months of registration.

6. Re-registration of Cross-Party Groups after a period of dissolution

Groups must re-register at the start of each new Assembly following elections.

7. Recording changes

The Chair of the group is responsible for notifying any changes to group details, including changes to office holders, by submitting an amended registration form. Changes should be notified within four weeks of coming into effect, and will be published on the relevant Cross-Party Groups' section of the Assembly's website.

Holding Meetings

8. Use of Assembly Facilities and resources

Cross-Party Groups do not take precedence over formal Assembly business and so will have access to the Assembly's accommodation facilities only subject to availability.

Assembly Building room bookings for Cross-Party Group meetings must be made by the Chair of the Group. That Assembly Member will also be responsible for all meeting arrangements including meeting and escorting external members of the Group within the Assembly Building.

Cross-Party Groups do not have access to any of the Assembly Commission staffing services such as committee services, with the exception of Welsh to English simultaneous interpretation at meetings held on the Assembly Estate. This may be provided if requested by the Chair of the Group.

Cross-Party Groups must respect the limitations on the use of Assembly facilities and resources. Members may make reasonable use of the Assembly's telephone, fax, photocopying, IT facilities and Assembly stationery in pursuit of Cross-Party business or in order to fulfil the requirements of these rules, e.g. to provide information for publication on the Assembly's website.

The Chair of the Cross-Party Group will be responsible for ensuring that the group complies with the rules on use of Assembly facilities and resources. Outside organisations and individuals associated with Cross-Party Groups are not entitled to use the Assembly's resources.

9. Provision of information in the Official Languages of the Assembly

All information provided by the Assembly Commission about Cross-Party Groups that is required to be published on the National Assembly for Wales' website under these rules, will be available in English and Welsh subject to the provisions of the National Assembly for Wales (Official Languages) Act 2012 and related Assembly Commission Official Languages Scheme. This includes membership, meeting dates and venues, minutes of all meetings including the Annual General Meeting, and the annual financial statement.

Arrangements for translating any Cross-Party Group documentation that is not required to be published on the Assembly's website must be made by the Cross-Party Group itself.

10. Assembly Access Fund

The Access Fund has been established to ensure that Assembly Members have the necessary support to engage with constituents with diverse needs, and provide additional support to disabled Members and disabled support staff.

The Access Fund may not be used for the provision of text translation into the Assembly's official languages or Welsh to English interpretation for Member-sponsored events which are organised by external bodies.

If the Chair of a Cross Party Group considers that the CPG needs support to allow it to engage with constituents with diverse needs, for example to interpret a language that is not an official language of the Assembly, and this support cannot be provided from within the group's own membership, then they may wish to submit a business case to Members' Business Support for access to the Fund. Full guidance on the Access Fund can be found on the Members' Intranet. In submitting a business case for financial support the Chair should give consideration to the status of Cross-Party Groups, which do not constitute formal Assembly proceedings.

11. Advance Notice of Meetings

It will normally be for the Chair of the Group to undertake publicising meeting times, venues etc. If this is delegated to the group's Secretary, then that person must only act with the prior approval of the Chair of the Group, and all notices, correspondence, documentation and other arrangements relating to the activities of the Group must be issued in the name of the Chair.

The Chair of the Group should provide details of meeting times and venues to the designated Assembly Commission officials in order for these to be published on the Cross-Party Groups section of the website.

12. Financial Rules and Registering Interests

There will be no Assembly budget to cover the running costs of Cross-Party Groups, with the exception of provisions under sections 8-10 above. The members of the group must meet any other such costs themselves.

Cross-Party Groups must bear in mind the integrity of the Assembly in considering the acceptance of any monies, gifts, hospitality etc. from outside bodies. In particular, individual Members are required to comply with the rules on registration and declaration of financial interests in connection with any activity they undertake within, or on behalf of, Cross-Party Groups – as set out in Standing Order 2.

In particular Section 5 of the Annex to Standing Order 2 sets out the registrable interests. This includes; “(iv) gifts, hospitality, material benefits or advantage above a value specified in any resolution of the Assembly..” and “(v) any remuneration or other material benefit which a Member....receives from any public or private company or other body which has tendered for, is tendering for, or has, a contract with the Assembly.”

The Assembly resolved on 10 May 2006 that the specified financial values above which gifts, hospitality and any other benefits must be registered/declared is 0.5 per cent of the basic gross annual Assembly salary for an Assembly Member. Under the current Determination this amounts to anything over £269.26 (0.5% of £53,852).

An Assembly Member who takes part in Assembly proceedings without having complied with the rules on registration of interests commits a criminal offence under section 36 of the Government of Wales Act 2006.

In addition to the requirement for individual Members of Cross-Party Groups to register any monies, gifts, hospitality or other benefits from outside bodies in the Assembly’s Register of Interests (in accordance with Standing Order 2), the Cross-Party Group’s Annual Report should list all benefits received by the group as a whole, or its individual Members, from outside bodies. This includes any secretariat or other support or services provided to the group.

Members are also reminded of the provisions of Standing Order 2.8, which prohibits lobbying for reward or recognition and which, under Section 36 of the Government of Wales Act is a criminal offence. Lobbying for reward and recognition is defined in Standing Orders as advocating or initiating “any cause or matter on behalf of any body or individual in any proceedings of the Assembly, or “urging any other Member to advocate or initiate any cause or matter in any such proceedings, in return for any payment or benefit in kind, direct or indirect, which the Member, or to the Member’s knowledge his or her spouse, has received or expects to receive.”

13. Annual General Meeting and Annual Report and Financial Statement

The Chair of the Cross-Party Group must call an Annual General Meeting (AGM) of the group every 12 months, at which the group must nominate and vote for office holders (see ‘Election of Office Holders’ section above). The election of office holders must take place formally at the AGM even if office holder(s) have already been appointed at a recent meeting.

The first meeting of the group will be its inaugural AGM. After each subsequent AGM the Chair of the Cross-Party Group must, within 6 weeks, issue an Annual Report and Financial Statement. This report must include:

- The membership of the group and names of its office-holders;
- the number of times the group has met since the last AGM, who attended, and a summary of the issues discussed;
- all professional lobbyists, and voluntary or charitable organisations with whom the group has met during the preceding year;
- an Annual Financial Statement setting out the group's expenses, benefits and hospitality received. The statement must include a breakdown of costs of all goods and services provided, and benefits received, and the names of the provider(s).

The Annual Report and Financial Statement must be published on the Cross-Party Groups' section of the Assembly's website.

14. Minutes of Meetings

The Chair of the Cross-Party Group will be responsible for ensuring that the minutes of every meeting of the group are provided to the designated Assembly Commission officials within four weeks of the meeting taking place. The minutes must include details of where the meeting was held, who attended the meeting, including the names and titles of group office-holders such as the Chair and Secretary, group Members and external visitors or guests, and a brief description of the issues discussed. The minutes will be published on the relevant Cross-Party Groups' section of the Assembly's website.

15. Compliance with the Rules

While all Assembly Members who are members of a Cross-Party Group have a responsibility to ensure that the group conducts itself properly, the Chair of the Group, as signatory of the registration form, will be held primarily responsible for ensuring that the group complies with the rules.

Failure to comply with, or contravention of the rules on Cross-Party Groups covering registration, election of office-holders, holding of AGMs or provision of information required by the rules, could lead to withdrawal of recognition of the group on the authority of the Presiding Officer (the group would be de-registered and all details removed from the Assembly's website).

Any Member who has a concern about the interpretation of the Rules should consult the Assembly Commission official(s) responsible for handling registration of Cross-Party Groups in the first instance.

Any complaint concerning personal standards of conduct, the proper use of Assembly resources and/or the proper registration of interests in accordance with Standing Order 2, in relation to a Member's involvement in Cross-Party Group activity, will be handled by the Standards Commissioner and Standards of Conduct Committee in accordance with the National Assembly for Wales' Procedure for Dealing with Complaints against Assembly Members. This may lead to sanctions being imposed on an individual Member.

The Standards of Conduct Committee may from time to time consider a paper from the Commission officials dealing with the registration of information about the activities of Cross-Party Groups, and if necessary make recommendations to the Presiding Officer concerning compliance with these rules.

Agreed by Assembly resolution on 26 June 2013