

Elin Jones AM
Y Llywydd and Chair of the Business Committee

12 November 2019

Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill

Annwyl Elin

Thank you for your letter seeking the Committee's views on the proposed timetable for the Local Government (Wales) Bill. We discussed this at our meeting on 7 November, and concluded that the proposal of allocating twelve sitting weeks for us to undertake our Stage 1 scrutiny is insufficient. For the reasons I have outlined below, we believe that an additional two sitting weeks will be required to undertake the work warranted by such a substantial Bill, and would be grateful if the Business Committee would consider our request of revising the deadline for completion of Stage 1 to 27 March 2020.

The paper submitted to Business Committee sets out that the Bill consists of 172 sections and 13 schedules, which is the largest Bill introduced during this Assembly. Further, as outlined in the paper this will not be a single-issue Bill, but will contain a broad range of provisions covering various aspects relating to local government. These are significant provisions and require detailed scrutiny by the Committee.

Twelve sitting weeks is already a tight timescale for undertaking this work, however we are further restricted by this coinciding with other factors outside of our control. During this period we will also be undertaking our scrutiny and reporting on the Welsh Government's draft budget, and changes to that timetable will have a particularly significant impact for us. Essentially we will need to rearrange our budget scrutiny to accommodate the revised budget timetable, which will in turn reduce the number of committee sessions available to us to scrutinise the Bill. While we will endeavour to do everything within our own capacity to meet the two timetables, agreeing a 14 week Stage 1 would reduce the significant risk of not meeting one of our reporting deadlines or having to request for additional time towards the end of Stage 1. Additionally,

the confirmation of a general election on 12 December will impact on many stakeholders' ability to engage with us on the Bill during the first weeks of the process, which further compounds the difficulties we face.

In practice, the proposed timescale would only allow for a maximum of 6 committee meetings to be allocated for hearing oral evidence, including two with the Minister at the beginning and end of the process. There will be numerous stakeholders from whom we will want to gather evidence, and who will want to engage with our work – notably the WLGA and local authorities, but also town and community councils, fire authorities, electoral organisations, the Auditor General for Wales, Commissioners, trade unions, equality organisations and the voluntary and business sectors. We would also like to undertake citizen engagement work, to ensure the public's voice on these important issues is heard and reflected in our work.

Four committee meetings to take oral evidence on such a broad range of provisions would constrict our ability to hear from many of the stakeholders we would like to. Consequently, we will only be able to undertake the minimum amount of scrutiny required, with our evidence gathering restricted to essential witnesses only; we do not believe this is sufficient to do justice to this important work. We will also need to factor in sufficient time to formulate and consider our report, which I would expect to be considerable in volume.

The Business Committee paper notes that the Committee is not currently considering any other Assembly Bills, however the Welsh Government has indicated that it will be introducing a Housing Bill relating to no fault evictions early in 2020, which we are expecting to be remitted to us. The expected timetable for that Bill will overlap with this Bill at the time we will be considering our draft report and subsequently during the amending stages.

Whilst we appreciate that a twelve week period has become the standard approach for Stage 1 consideration, we believe that a Bill of this size and disparate nature requires additional time. There are precedents for this, in the Fourth and current Assembly terms. We are also concerned that allocating a twelve week period for this Bill could set a precedent for future Bills of this nature.

We understand that, should the Bill be passed by the Assembly, a programme of secondary legislation will be required to implement provisions in advance of the next local government elections in 2022; however, we do not believe this justifies curtailing the Committee's ability to undertake thorough scrutiny of the Bill. Regardless, we do not believe that allocating an additional two weeks for Stage 1 scrutiny would have a significant impact on that work, as it would not prevent



the Assembly from undertaking the amending stages and passing the Bill ahead of summer recess 2020.

We would be grateful if the Business Committee could consider our request for a deadline of 27 March 2020 for completion of Stage 1 proceedings.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John". The letters are cursive and fluid.

John Griffiths

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg.

We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.

