

Pembrokeshire Association of Voluntary Services

Your local county voluntary council

11. Campaigning and influencing

11.4 Assembly business and committees



Overview

This information sheet gives an introduction to how the National Assembly for Wales conducts its business. This includes the role and purpose of plenary sessions; how Assembly committees work and the opportunities for the third sector to influence these.

Introduction

The way in which the National Assembly for Wales conducts its business is set out in the Standing Orders. The Standing Orders are essentially a set of rules providing the framework for how the Assembly should operate. The Business Committee of the National Assembly is responsible for scheduling the Assembly's work and must allow time for plenary meetings, committee meetings and meetings of political parties. An essential part of the Assembly Members' (AMs) role is to scrutinise the work of the Welsh Assembly Government and hold it to account. Another key element of their job is to make decisions about policies and priorities. All of this work is done during Plenary sessions. Scrutiny of policy and legislation is also undertaken by Assembly Members in committee meetings.

Plenary Sessions

Plenary is a meeting attended by all Assembly Members. It takes place on Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons in the Siambr. The Presiding Officer publishes an agenda for each meeting which allocates time to Government, Non-Government and Assembly business. The agenda for Plenary is published as part of the Business Notice on the Assembly website. This is normally available approximately two weeks in advance and it is useful to consult the forward timetable as it can give you an opportunity to prepare relevant briefings for AMs if a topic of interest to you is coming up. The Business Notice also lists details of forthcoming committee meetings.

For each week that the Assembly meets in plenary time is allocated to Oral Questions to the First Minister, other Welsh Ministers, the Counsel General and the Assembly Commission. In addition Assembly Members can contribute to statements and debates and vote on tabled motions and amendments. Voting on motions is the way in which the National Assembly makes its decisions. There is also a member-proposed short debate each week at the end of Wednesday's plenary; the Presiding Officer holds a ballot and the successful

Member proposes a topic. As the Assembly has increased legislative power, Assembly Members can also consider and amend proposed legislation known as Legislative Competence Orders and Assembly Measures. Such legislation can only be enacted by resolution of the Assembly in plenary.

Members of the public are able watch plenary sessions from the public gallery above the Siambr. Plenary is also broadcast live on S4C2 and can be viewed on 'Senedd TV' via the National Assembly for Wales' website. The "Record of Proceedings" which is a verbatim record of Plenary business is published bilingually on the National Assembly website within 24 hours of each plenary session.

Third sector opportunities

There are various ways in which third sector organisations can use plenary proceedings to further their campaigning and influencing work. Some of these are:

- **Questions:** Organisations can ask backbench AMs to ask a question to a Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) Minister during one of the question time slots. The First Minister answers questions on a weekly basis and the other Ministers answer questions on a 4 weekly basis. Questions must be approved by the Presiding Officer and need to be tabled at least 5 days before they need to be answered. This is an opportunity for organisations to elicit a statement from the relevant WAG minister on their issues on or get an update on the progress of a particular policy. It is also a chance to

highlight any reports that you have published or campaigns that you have launched.

- **Short debates:** Organisations may wish to suggest potential topics for short debates to individual AMs or political parties. If an AM supports your suggestion and their name is chosen in the ballot then your issue will be debated in plenary. No decisions are made on the back of these debates but they can be useful opportunities to highlight issues and campaigns.
- **Briefings:** It is always worth looking at the forthcoming business in plenary to see if there are any debates imminent on issues relevant to your organisation. If something is coming up you may wish to write a briefing paper summarising your organisation's perspective on the issues and send it to AMs. In writing a briefing it is essential that it is kept short and succinct to maximise the chance of AMs reading it. It is also worth sending it to AM's researchers if you have their contact details. It is good practice to send the same briefing to all AMs of all parties to ensure that you are not being party political and keeping within charity commission guidelines. It is also useful if your briefing contains evidence and facts that support your arguments. AMs may then use the contents of the briefing if they get chance to speak during the debate. If the debate is critical to your organisations work you may also wish to consider meeting with some sympathetic AMs beforehand to brief them in person.

Outside of plenary there is also the opportunity for Assembly Members to table Statements of Opinion. Statements of Opinion can be tabled by any Assembly Member, other than a Member of the Government, on matters affecting Wales. Statements of Opinion may be supported, opposed or subject to comment. Organisations can lobby Assembly Members to table a Statement of Opinion relating to a specific issue or campaign and it can be an effective way to bring these issues to the attention of other AMs. All statements of opinion are published on the Assembly website.

Committees

An Assembly Committee is a group of Assembly Members who meet regularly to scrutinise policy and legislation. Committees are generally 'party-balanced' reflecting the number of Assembly Members representing each party within the Assembly. Welsh Assembly Government Ministers do not sit on committees but are regularly called to give evidence to the committees that are scrutinising their portfolio areas. Most committees meet in public. Committees in the Assembly carry out many functions: some scrutinise the policies of the Welsh Assembly Government and hold Ministers to account; some examine proposed legislation; and others have specific functions allocated to them by the Assembly or its Standing Orders. Details of the remit and responsibilities of each committee along with committee membership and contact details for the committee clerks can be found on the National Assembly for Wales' website.

There are four main types of Committees:

Scrutiny Committees these have the power to examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) and associated public bodies. They can undertake inquiries into different policy areas and then make recommendations to the WAG, the WAG can then respond to this as it sees fit. Each committee looks at different policy areas depending upon its remit.

The current Assembly scrutiny committees are: Children & Young People; Communities & Culture; Enterprise & Learning; Health, Wellbeing & Local Government; and Sustainability.

Mandatory Committees these are compulsory committees with specific roles that must exist in line with the Standing Orders of the Assembly.

The current mandatory Assembly committees are: Audit; Business; Finance; Equality of Opportunity; European & External Affairs; Standards of Conduct and Committee for Scrutiny of the First Minister.

Regional Committees these may exist in each electoral region if the Assembly votes to do so. These committees would be concerned with matters particular to the region.

Legislation Committees there are five legislation committees which look at all Legislative Competence Orders and Assembly Measure proposals. Their role is to scrutinise these proposals and report back to the Assembly.

Committees may also form sub-committees to examine a particular issue – these are normally time limited and cease to exist once their work is completed.

Transcripts are available for all public scrutiny, legislation and mandatory committee meetings. Draft transcripts are published within five working days of the meeting, and final versions within 10 working days, on the appropriate committee's web pages.

Third sector opportunities to influence committees

Third sector organisations can be a very useful resource for committees as they are required to undertake detailed scrutiny of a variety of topics and can benefit from external expert evidence. When committees undertake an inquiry they will publish a call for evidence which third sector organisations may wish to respond to. They will also take oral evidence from external stakeholders and this can be a very good way of raising your issues at Assembly level. It is worth monitoring the committee web pages for announcements of future inquiries but it is also worth contacting the committee clerks of the committees relevant to your work and trying to establish a positive relationship with them. You may wish to give the Clerks a brief outline of your

work and your contact details so that when inquiries are announced they will send you the information and may ask you to give oral evidence – the oral evidence sessions often take place while the inquiry evidence gathering is still on going so it is useful for the Clerk to be aware of your organisation from the outset as it may assist your chances of getting an oral evidence slot.

The Committee Chairs can also be influential in terms of deciding what inquiries the committee will hold and what issues they should address. It is worth knowing who Chairs the committee relevant to your area of interest (it may come under the remit of more than one committee) and which AMs are members of the committee. All of this information can be found on the committee web pages.

Further information

Voices for Change Cymru is a WCVA project supported by the Big Lottery Fund. There are now more opportunities than ever to make your voice heard and this project provides services to help third sector organisations influence policy and legislation at local and national levels.

Tel: 0800 2888 329
vfcc@wcva.org.uk
www.voicesforchangecymru.org.uk

National Assembly for Wales website
www.assemblywales.org

Business notice – forthcoming plenary and committee business
www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-business-notice.htm

Record of Proceedings
www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-record-of-proceedings.htm

Committee web pages
www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-committees.htm

Senedd TV
www.senedd.tv/

Statements of Opinion
www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-guide-docs-pub/bus-business-documents/bus-business-documents-state-opinion.htm

Disclaimer

The information provided in this sheet is intended for guidance only. It is not a substitute for professional advice and we cannot accept any responsibility for loss occasioned as a result of any person acting or refraining from acting upon it.

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