

Wales Council for Voluntary Action

Supporting charities, volunteers and communities

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 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 (who can be any Member other than a member of the Government) proposes a topic. The Assembly can also make legislation in the 20 devolved policy areas. Assembly Members consider and amend Bills leading to Acts of the Assembly. Such legislation can only be enacted by resolution of the Assembly in plenary.

Members of the public are able watch plenary and committee sessions from the public galleries in the Senedd. Plenary and Committee sessions can also be viewed on 'Senedd TV' (via the National Assembly for Wales' website) or the Democracy Live pages of the BBC website. The "Record of Proceedings" which is a verbatim record of Plenary business is published 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 Welsh Government minister on their issues 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. You can also contact the opposition political parties and ask them to consider raising your issue in one of their opposition debate slots.

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 helpful for your briefing to contain 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 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 Government and hold Ministers to account and 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.

The Assembly's rule book (Standing Orders) states that the Assembly must establish committees with the power to:

- examine the expenditure, administration and policy of the government and associated public bodies;
- examine legislation;
- undertake other specific functions (more later); and
- consider any matter affecting Wales

Some of the committees have been established to undertake specific functions. They are:

- Business Committee – responsible for the organisation of Assembly Business
- Standards of Conduct Committee
- Public Accounts Committee
- Finance Committee
- Constitutional and Legislative Affairs Committee
- Petitions Committee

The rest undertake scrutiny inquiries into the impact of government policies and activities and scrutinise proposed legislation. They are:

- Children and Young People Committee
- Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee

- Enterprise and Business Committee
- Environment and Sustainability Committee
- Health and Social Care Committee

Transcripts are available for all 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.

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www.voicesforchangecymru.org.uk

National Assembly for Wales website

www.cynulliadcymru.org

Business notice – forthcoming plenary and committee business

www.cynulliadcymru.org/bus-home/bus-business-notice.htm

Record of Proceedings

www.cynulliadcymru.org/bus-home/bus-record-of-proceedings.htm

Committee web pages

www.cynulliadcymru.org/bus-home/bus-committees.htm

Senedd TV

www.senedd.tv/

Statements of Opinion

www.cynulliadcymru.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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