

Pwyllgor Newid Hinsawdd, yr Amgylchedd a Seilwaith /
Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee
Blaenoriaethau ar gyfer y Chweched Senedd / Priorities for the Sixth Senedd
PR 110
Ymateb gan Yr Athro Richard Cowell / Evidence from Professor Richard Cowell

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Introduction

I am delighted to have the opportunity to present evidence at this Committee session on setting priorities for the Sixth Senedd. This written statement is offered in support of my contribution to the oral evidence session, scheduled for 30th September 2021. It is offered in a personal capacity, rather than representing the collective view of Cardiff University.

With the IPCC issuing a ‘code red’ on our collective need to address climate change, and the 2020s being the ‘decade of action’ for addressing the climate and nature crises, there has never been a more important moment for the Committee, to ensure that the Welsh Government is held to, and is delivering on, objectives that are commensurate with the challenges ahead. The urgency of the situation should affect the priorities of the Committee in two ways:

- In the lines of questioning pursued
- In the substantive areas that might be scrutinised

I deal with each of these in turn

Process priorities - lines of questioning for climate and nature crises

The context of climate and nature crises, and the requirement for demonstrable action in the next decade, elevates the salience of the following lines of questioning.

Time compression. It is important to establish when proposed measures are likely to deliver, to ask suitably critical questions of measures with no immediate prospect of delivery, and to recognise the merits of quickly scaling back or halting activities that exacerbate adverse effects on climate change and biodiversity.

Comprehensiveness. The need to achieve net zero elevates the importance of understanding the total climate and material effects of projects and policies - e.g. the embedded carbon of construction projects and the underlying resource demands – and bringing them into the frame.

The importance of recognising time compression, and looking at projects comprehensively, should recast the way in which infrastructure in particular is considered. Often, infrastructural agendas are characterised by shopping lists of ‘must haves’ and exhortations to deliver them faster. The requirement for rapid, demonstrable progress on climate change and biodiversity decline means that development-led shopping lists should be subject to closer scrutiny. It also means recognising the potential positive value of strategies that call a halt to potentially damaging infrastructure strategies – the Welsh Government’s suspension of new roads scheme is a good example. It also means that policy strategies with few short-term adverse impacts, and which act quickly, such as those reliant on efficiency (of energy or other resources) and behavioural change become of particular importance.

Substantive areas

In addition to these general points, I suggest the following substantive priorities.

1) A ‘net zero’ target for nature and a governance framework for delivering it

The inception of ‘net zero’ legislation for climate change is one of the most important pieces of recent public policy. It attains this importance by deriving from science-informed goals of the environmental state we need to reach, by being specific and time limited, and by being backed by strong governance machinery that assist in holding governments to account. If the results are not always comfortable for government, this may be a sign that it is working.

A key priority is to provide the same for nature and biodiversity. Wales needs firm targets that are substantively meaningful, derived from the levels of biodiversity conservation that need to be achieved for long-term sustainability, with time frames that align with this. This means a departure from most conventional policy arrangements for nature conservation and policy, which tend to pursue incremental improvements from the status quo ex ante, and therefore often fall short. Effective targets also facilitate the work of oversight, scrutiny and regulatory action, for Wales’s Future Generations Commission and proposed office of environmental protection. The EU, England and Scotland are to introduce legally binding nature-related targets, within the context of the forthcoming revision to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity. This priority also entails giving close scrutiny to ‘proxy targets’ that might not necessarily deliver the required environmental outcomes (e.g. for tree-planting, or simply increasing areas under protective designations).

2) Corporate ownership of nature/biodiversity targets

Corporate ‘ownership’ of nature/biodiversity targets across Welsh Government is also critical, for example how firmly nature- and climate-related targets are instituted in the operation of the planning system, and how multiple departmental areas with land use responsibility work together. This matters because it is vital that planning decisions are taken which support the delivery of nature and biodiversity objectives; ditto other, infrastructural sectors like transport, and systems of agri-environment support. But it is also matters when it comes to how nature restoration and enhancement are financed. It may be that spatial planning provides an important arena for mapping key areas for action (Nature Networks, for example), but evidence shows that planning-related mechanisms like planning gain will fail to fund the levels of enhancement necessary to achieve the required environmental outcomes.

3) Looking for synergies between targets

A key quality of more natural, green spaces is their potential multi-functionality or, to use a contemporary concept, their capacity to deliver multiple ‘eco-system services’. Usually such multi-functionality is considered at the local, site-specific level. But, there is under-exploited traction in examining the synergies for nature/biodiversity between different strategic targets. To give some examples, nature/biodiversity could be the beneficiary of (i) more strongly precautionary, ecologically-led approaches to reducing flood risk and climate change adaptation, or (ii) greater emphasis on land-based solutions to climate change (e.g. peatland carbon storage, afforestation).

In addition to the above, there are a number of complex policy areas where decisions taken in the next few years may affect future carbon ‘lock-in’ for Wales for decades ahead.

4) The appropriate role for Hydrogen in future energy systems

One pressing debate concerns the role of Hydrogen, as an energy source that can substitute for fossil fuels. Given the different carbon balances associated with ‘green’ (renewable energy-derived) and ‘blue’ hydrogen, and the specific set of risks associated with hydrogen, it is vital to scrutinise what roles hydrogen might and should play in future energy systems. As with previous energy questions, there is a risk that the approach in Wales is to see hydrogen purely in terms of jobs-generating investments, and to be relatively mute on these strategic environmental and energy system questions.

5) Decarbonising heating in buildings

With the UK government prevaricating on whether and when to ban the installation of gas boilers on new homes, the challenges of retrofitting existing buildings’ heating systems, and evolving debates about the relative merits of all-electric solutions or substituting hydrogen for natural gas, it is vital to accelerate informed, Wales-level dialogue on this issue, and to put the Welsh Government’s approach under scrutiny. Despite its centrality to ‘net zero’,

the subject was not mentioned in the Welsh Government's 30th July 2021 response to the committee.

6) The devolution settlement, post-Brexit and the environment

While the following may fall outwith the CCEI Committee's remit, narrowly construed, there is a series of issues where the ability of Wales to achieve its environmental objectives is contingent on the presence and influence of the Welsh Government and other Welsh institutions in various UK government arenas:

- The negotiation and content of trade agreements
- In the implementation of the Internal Market Act (the subject of a current Judicial Review, pursued by the Welsh Government)