

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru / National Assembly for Wales

Y Pwyllgor Busnes / Business Committee

Etifeddiaeth y Pedwerydd Cynulliad / Fourth Assembly Legacy

Tystiolaeth gan Grŵp y Ceidwadwyr Cymreig / Evidence from Welsh Conservatives Group

During the current Assembly, the Presiding Officer and Business Committee have introduced a number of procedural reforms, including changing the deadlines for tabling Oral Assembly Questions, introducing regular Individual Member Debates, and leaders' and spokespeople's questions.

o What impact have these changes had in enabling Members to represent their constituents and hold the government to account?

Welsh Conservatives acknowledge that the Presiding Officer and Business Committee have introduced a number of procedural reforms throughout the Fourth Assembly. We support the decision to extend the tabling deadlines for Oral Assembly Questions and believe that this has enabled Members to raise more topical constituency matters in the Assembly Chamber. We are also supportive of regular Individual Members debates as these have given backbench Members an opportunity to raise issues that may not have otherwise been tabled in Government or Assembly business time. The introduction of spokespeople's questions has also provided more opportunities for scrutiny of Welsh Government policy. However, we have concerns that some policy areas, such as Welsh language and energy are not afforded the same scrutiny level in the Chamber as other policy areas, as the First Minister faces Questions from Party Leaders each week.

Welsh Conservatives have long campaigned for the publication of urgent question bids and therefore welcome the Presiding Officer's decision to publish all requests, along with a decision in each case. We believe this will enhance the National Assembly for Wales' commitment to transparency and send a clear message that this legislature is committed to open government.

For the first time, the committee structure of the Fourth Assembly, combined policy and legislative scrutiny within the same committees.

o How effective has this approach been and how have committees achieved a balance between their policy, financial and legislative scrutiny?

o What changes could be made to committee size and structure in future to make them more effective?

Welsh Conservatives understand that finding the right balance between policy scrutiny and legislative scrutiny can be difficult. We note that some Committees have done very little policy scrutiny because of the amount of legislative scrutiny that they've undertaken. We believe that the Business Committee should seriously consider the Committee structures which were in place in the Third Assembly as separate policy and legislative scrutiny Committees would ensure clear, efficient routes for the delivery of scrutiny and Committees would be able to respond quickly to legislative proposals. We believe that the current system can result in legislation not being spread evenly between subject areas so some committees have had a heavier workload, and that has meant that policy scrutiny has been put aside.

The Business Committee is responsible for setting the Assembly timetable, including scheduling committee meetings. Currently, Plenary meets on Tuesday and Wednesday afternoons, with committees meeting mostly on Tuesday and Wednesday mornings, and Thursdays.

o Does the current Assembly timetable, including the structure of the working week and committee/Plenary slots provide the correct balance in terms of the use of the Assembly's time, allowing it to effectively perform its functions of making laws, representing the people of Wales, and holding the government to account?

The Assembly has a definite timetable for Plenary activity, which provides the public with a clear understanding of what will be discussed in a particular session. We are concerned that any additional Plenary sessions could impede on Members' constituency and regional work and thereby limit their engagement with their constituents and other stakeholders. We believe that there is scope to consider extending the current plenary sessions, to provide more opportunities to scrutinise the Welsh Government and we would welcome any assessment of the impact of extending the current sessions.

The Business Committee is responsible for establishing timetables for committees to consider Bills, and LCMs, in line with Standing Orders.

o Do the current processes for timetabling legislation – including Bills and LCMs – allow for proper scrutiny and engagement by Members and stakeholders? Could it be made more effective?

Welsh Conservatives believe that each piece of legislation should be considered on its own merits and we appreciate that some legislative proposals will require more scrutiny time than others. In the circumstances, we believe that the Business Committee should be flexible in its approach to managing the timetable for legislation.

Unlike its equivalents in many other legislatures, the Assembly's Business Committee combines the role of scheduling Assembly business with that of a 'procedures committee' responsible for considering and proposing changes to the Assembly's Standing Orders and procedures.

o What are the advantages and disadvantages of this dual role, and is there a case for reviewing it?

Members have not expressed any concerns over the dual role of the Business Committee and therefore, we support the dual nature of the Committee.