



HOW PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT CAN STRENGTHEN THE WORK OF PARLIAMENTARY COMMITTEES: LEARNING LESSONS FROM THE EXPERIENCE OF THE WELSH PARLIAMENT

Public engagement remains an underexplored area of parliamentary activity, although Parliaments worldwide have intensified their efforts to redefine their relationship with their respective publics of late. They have done so by improving their public information provisions, external communications, outreach and education initiatives, as well as the ways in which they consult with a wide range of communities, individuals and organised stakeholders, and the extent to which they reflect the public's voice in their deliberations and outputs. The recent *Inter-Parliamentary Union Global Parliamentary Report*¹ (2022) makes a strong case for the centrality of public engagement in parliamentary activity, but also, more broadly, in the context of representative democracy as a whole: *'Public engagement matters because it is mutually beneficial for communities, for Parliaments as institutions and for individual Members of Parliament (MPs). It enables Parliaments to create better laws and policies by tapping into wider sources of information. It cultivates knowledge in communities and improves the quality of decision-making. It also allows closer monitoring of policy implementation. And in doing so, it sustains representative democracy in a rapidly changing world'* (page 14).

Nevertheless, there are still questions regarding the effectiveness of public engagement (how we measure and maximise impact), as well as the extent to which Parliaments successfully manage to reach out to and engage with a wide range of individuals, going beyond the 'usual suspects', and diversify the range of evidence they tap into. These preoccupations framed the terms of reference of the Welsh Parliament's 2020-21 Academic fellowship on developing a framework for measuring the effectiveness of its Committees, which resulted in the publication of the *'Power, Influence and Impact of the Senedd Committees'* Report² in November 2021. This article presents findings from this work, as it relates to the public engagement function of the Welsh Parliament.

The effectiveness of Welsh Parliament Committees

The Welsh Parliament³, also known as Senedd Cymru, is a relatively new Parliament – it was established in 1999, as part of a wider constitutional reform program in the United Kingdom. It is

a small (currently 60 elected Members)⁴, unicameral Parliament, whose leitmotif over the past 20 years has been continuous institutional learning as it has gradually acquired more powers and competences, and as it has transformed its structure and operations in order to reflect the changes in its constitutional arrangements.

Its Committee system, which has also seen significant transformations, departs from the Westminster model of separating the legislation and government oversight functions; instead, policy and legislation Committees fulfil a dual role, much akin to functional organisation of Committees in some continental European countries. However, distinctly from other Parliaments, the Welsh Committees are quite unique in the fact that they are very small (6 Members), and that their portfolios don't mirror Executive departments, but span over broad thematic policy areas.

Committees are central to the legislative, scrutiny and representation role of Parliaments, being sometimes described as the 'engine room' of Parliaments. Therefore, the debates about their ability to affect change (government agenda and priorities, government policy, spending, legislative proposals, and, more broadly, beyond government) have shaped existing approaches to measuring effectiveness. But the concept of effectiveness in parliamentary settings is notoriously difficult to operationalise and measure. At a corporate organisational level, the Senedd Commission, the body responsible for the provision of property, staff and services required to enable the Welsh Parliament to function, employs the following definition: *'being effective is being focussed on goals, priorities and implementation'*.⁵ But this doesn't fully account for the political nature of parliamentary activity. As such, effectiveness in parliamentary settings needs to account not only for the achievement of set goals and aspirations but also for the constitutional arrangements underpinning the formal set of powers and the strength of parliamentary actors, their de facto political influence⁶, as well as the extent to which they can affect change over government activity and beyond.

The *Power, Impact and Influence Report* found that effective Committees rely on fully engaged and interested Members and are



Above: The main Chamber at Senedd Cymru.

supported by excellent services. They have access to external advice and expertise, and operate within a coherent corporate strategic framework where goals and aspirations are aligned with adequate resources and capabilities that feed into Committees' activities.

Moreover, effectiveness relies on strategic planning that focuses on outcomes, not activities, and on developing a shared sense of what success looks like. Effective Committee work is informed by a diverse range of evidence, made possible by embedded practices of evaluation and self-reflection that promotes lesson learning. Lastly, effective Committees promote good relationships with stakeholders, work transparently and communicate effectively to a wide range of audiences, accounting for the different needs of different audiences. Their engagement activities are innovative in reaching out to new audiences, and are designed purposefully to bring the lived experiences of citizens in the Committees' work.

Whilst this represents the collective understanding for what it means to work effectively as a Committee from the perspective of the institutional actors that the author engaged with during 2020 and 2021, the links between public engagement and strengthening Committees' work can be further explored.

Public engagement in the Welsh Parliament Committees

Public engagement in the Welsh Parliament has been highly institutionalised at strategic level, operational level (both corporate and parliamentary business)⁷, and has featured as a strategic goal in successive Commission's strategies. The Communication and Engagement Strategy sets out the overall engagement framework, types of audiences and key performance indicators. Committees in the Welsh Parliament are supported by integrated teams comprising of Clerks, researchers, communication and engagement specialists, lawyers and translators; hence public engagement is fully embedded in the wider integrated Committee support services.

The Citizen Engagement Team facilitates Committees' engagement with diverse audiences, focusing on bringing lived experience into the evidence base of Committee work, by using a range of methodologies and tools (i.e., focus groups, surveys, in-depth interviews, discussion forums) documented in the Engagement Toolkit.⁸ Following the first Wales Citizen Assembly in July 2019, which looked at the question of how people in Wales can shape their future through the work of the Welsh Parliament, it became even more important to embed more deliberative engagement into the work of Committees.⁹ Whilst there is still a long way to go in terms of fully embedding the lived experience into Committee practice, or in terms of reaching beyond the usual suspects, or the general public recognition and visibility of their work, the Welsh Parliament Committees offer interesting lessons of how public engagement can enhance Committees' effectiveness.

Five ways in which public engagement supports Committees' effectiveness

The *Power, Impact and Influence Report* identifies some areas of good practice in public engagement in the Welsh Parliament, particularly around adopting a strategic approach to engagement, embedding support through integrated support services, focusing on fitness for purpose of engagement activities and on evaluating impact. Coupled with internal case studies on impact of engagement activities, some presented at the International Parliamentary Engagement Network seminar in February 2022 by the Welsh Parliament representatives¹⁰, this article identifies five ways in which public engagement contributes to Committees' effectiveness:

1. **Enhancing the evidence base by highlighting gaps in government consultations.** One of the important contributions made by the Welsh Parliament Committees in a few instances



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was to bring forward and evidence ‘missing voices’ from government consultations. For example, the Environment, Infrastructure and Skills Committees in the 5th term (2016-21), conducted a series of broader engagement activities (focus groups and a survey) as part of the post-legislative scrutiny of the *Wales Active Travel Act 2013*.¹¹ These activities brought to light the missing perspectives of those who do not engage in cycle or walk to work, thus supporting a better understanding of barriers to active travel. This eventually led to an acknowledgement of the Committee’s efforts to engage more broadly by one of the major stakeholders in the consultation, as well as to a Committee recommendation (subsequently accepted by the Government) that *‘the Welsh Government should lead a lessons learned exercise on Active Travel consultation to seek best practice and capture innovative ways of reaching people who do not currently walk or cycle’*.¹²

- 2. Enhancing the evidence base by bringing the lived experience of people in Committees’ deliberations and evidence base.** The way that Committees mediate knowledge is critical to the role they play in improving the evidence base of their work as well as the work of the government. Often, the official data and expert evidence informing the deliberation of policy makers, does not reflect or engage directly with the lived experiences of those affected. In its inquiry into rough sleeping in Wales in 2017, the Equalities, Local Government and Communities Committee collected evidence from a range of organisations that support rough sleepers and from experts. Perhaps more importantly, the Committee *‘heard from people who have first-hand experience of life on the streets but have since been supported into accommodation. They gave moving accounts of how they ended up sleeping rough’*.¹³ This demonstrates that such approaches humanise debates around complex issues, such as rough sleeping, but they also provide a useful direct exposure of political representatives to real life problems of marginalised groups or individuals.
- 3. Innovative engagement can lead to powerful exhibits evidencing the scale of existing issues, can galvanise the media and lead to positive responses from the government.** This was evidenced by the Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee inquiry into the state of roads in Wales in 2018, where the Committee, supported by the Citizen Engagement team, invited citizens to enter a photography competition to capture on camera people’s depiction of the state of roads in Wales, with the winner having their image on the report cover and featured in an exhibition as a further incentive. Hon. Russel George, MS, the Chair of the Committee, noted in the forward to the subsequent report¹⁴ that *‘We received a cross section of images, some funny, some breathtakingly beautiful, and others highlighting pitifully poor pavements. [...] I was pleased to learn that some of these holes have been filled since the pictures were taken.’* This innovative piece of engagement generated a significant amount of media coverage across the UK and in Wales.
- 4. Legitimising democratic deliberation by involving stakeholders and the general public in setting Committees’ priorities.** Involving the public and stakeholders in the early stages of strategic planning by inviting ideas on what should guide the

Committee’s forward working programme can be a powerful tool to ensure the relevance of Committees. In the Welsh Parliament, some Committees¹⁵ enter a consultation stage as early as their establishment in a new parliamentary term and set their agendas taking into account the views expressed by the public and/or stakeholders. Some have used social media to crowdsource ideas, while others have used more formal type of consultation to do so.

- 5. Enhancing Committees’ public profile and the relationship between Committees and the public.** One of the main sources of influence for Committees lies in their ability to command respect from government and stakeholders. In Wales, we have learnt that the way that Committees engage with the wider public and stakeholders (at scale or more targeted), communicate their work and the impact of their work effectively, and follow up on their inquiries is essential to building that profile and respect.

To conclude, public engagement is central to the work of the Welsh Parliament’s Committees across all dimensions: informing, listening and involving different audiences. A high degree of institutionalisation at strategic and operational level means that engagement is embedded in the work of the institution and has the potential to strengthen the work of Committees, from supporting the scrutiny process to enhancing the profile and visibility of their work. Whilst the Welsh Parliament has not got everything perfect just yet in terms of engaging with a diverse audience and making its work relevant across the whole of Wales, one lesson for other Legislatures around the world would be that engagement strategies should not be static, but account for changing supply and demand factors within the political ecosystem.

References:

- ¹ Inter Parliamentary Union (2022) *Global Parliamentary Report. Public Engagement in the work of Parliament.*
- ² Stirbu, D. (2021). *Power, Influence and Impact of the Senedd Committees. Developing a framework for measuring committees’ effectiveness.* Report Commissioned by the Welsh Parliament.
- ³ Previously known as the National Assembly for Wales
- ⁴ The current program of constitutional reforms in Wales includes proposals to enlarge the size of the Welsh Parliament to 96 Members.
- ⁵ Senedd/Assembly Commission (2016) *Organizational Efficiency and Effectiveness. Review of the Assembly’s Commission Approach*
- ⁶ Monk, D. (2010). *A framework for evaluating the performance of committees in Westminster Parliaments.* *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 16(1), 1-13.
- ⁷ Stirbu, D. S., & McAllister, L. (2018). *Chronicling National Assembly committees as markers of institutional change.* *The Journal of Legislative Studies*, 24(3), 373-393.
- ⁸ Citizen Engagement Team (2014). *The Public Engagement Toolkit.* The Welsh Parliament.
- ⁹ The Welsh Parliament (2019). *Our first Citizens’ Assembly reports back.*
- ¹⁰ International Parliamentary Engagement Network Seminar, 22 February.
- ¹¹ Environment, Infrastructure and Skills Committee (2018). *Report on Post Legislative Scrutiny of the Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013.*
- ¹² Welsh Government (2018). *Written Response by the Welsh Government to the post legislative scrutiny report of the Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013.*
- ¹³ Equalities, Local Government and Communities Committees (2018), *Life on the streets: preventing and tackling rough sleeping in Wales*, page 5.
- ¹⁴ Economy, Infrastructure and Skills Committee (2018), *The state of roads in Wales*, page 5.
- ¹⁵ See for example the Children, Young People and Education Committee consultation to set its priorities.
- ¹⁶ Institute for Government (2015). *Select Committees under Scrutiny.* IfG: London.