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Chair of Finance Committee
Senedd Cymru
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4 November 2020

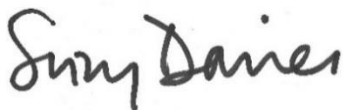
Dear Llyr

Thank you for your Committee's **Report on the Scrutiny of the Senedd Commission Draft Budget 2021-2022**, published on 21 October 2020. The Commission's response to the Finance Committee's recommendations is detailed in **Annex 1**.

I would like to thank the Committee for its scrutiny and I look forward to the debate on the Commission's budget motion next week.

I also welcome the Committee's conclusion. The Commission's approach is always to try to operate with openness, transparency and clarity, if there is any further information your Committee would like to have, please do not hesitate to let me know.

Yours sincerely



Suzy Davies

cc Senedd Commissioners, Manon Antoniazzi, Nia Morgan

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg / We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English



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Annex 1

Finance Committee Recommendations

Recommendation 1. The Committee recommends that additional information is provided on the costs and savings identified as a result of Covid-19, for the period up until the end of September. Additionally, the Committee would welcome a final update on the position at the end of this financial year.

Accepted.

An update on the financial implications of COVID-19 as at 30 September 2020 accompanies this letter. We will provide a final update for 2020-21 following the external audit for this financial year.

Recommendation 2. The Committee recommends that the Commission attends an evidence session with the Finance Committee in February 2021 to consider how long term projects have been prioritised and planned, including whether the new Sustainability plan and targets that are due to be in place from 2021 onwards will be implemented and how they are intended to influence decision making and funding.

Accepted.

We welcome the opportunity to share our long-term priorities and sustainability plans and targets with the Committee.

Recommendation 3. The Committee recommends that an annual report on the Voluntary Exit Scheme is provided to the Finance Committee in the Sixth Senedd and for the next financial year, to enable the Commission to demonstrate the value for money of this scheme.

Agreed in Principle.

A report on the Voluntary Exit Scheme accompanies this letter.

This report outlines the workforce benefits that have arisen from the VES. As noted in the report all posts, apart from one, have been reestablished/redistributed in the 18 months since the 2018-19 scheme.

The report evidences that benefits e.g. from changes to service area structures and from new skills introduced since the VES, have already been 'realised'. Any future benefits will solely arise from financial savings of staff being recruited at lower points within the salary structure. This annual benefit will diminish over time as staff progress up their pay band.

The Commission does not therefore intend to revisit the outcomes of this 2018-19 scheme as the October 2020 report provides a comprehensive summary of the overall outcomes and benefits.



Recommendation 4. The Committee recommends that, if a supplementary budget is required to reflect annual leave accrual, it should be accompanied by an assessment of any additional costs, alongside an update on sickness absence levels and the impact of the pandemic on staff welfare.

Agreed.

We will provide the Committee, as in previous years, with a copy of the Supplementary Budget Explanatory Memorandum before it is laid before the Senedd and incorporated into the Welsh Government budget.

At the same time, we will provide the Committee with commentary assessing whether there are any risks of additional costs being carried forward into 2021-22, alongside an update on sickness levels and the impact of the pandemic on staff welfare.

Recommendation 5. The Committee recommends that the Commission's communication plan clearly explains how priorities are set, how these will be measured and achieved, and how the plan seeks to raise the profile of work in Committees and the Senedd.

Agreed.

The Commission has supported a new communications and engagement strategy which focuses on the work of the committees. Whenever a committee launches an investigation into a policy area or service, the Citizen Engagement teams will work with them to find people with lived experience of those services.

By using that evidence of people with lived experience of services, we aim to show how the work of committees relates to the everyday lives of citizens. Further information is included in the Communications and engagement strategy outline provided in **Annex 2**.

Recommendation 6. The Committee recommends that the Commission pays particular attention to ensuring that engagement with those who are digitally excluded, difficult to reach, or unlikely to interact with the Senedd are at the forefront of its communication plan.

Agreed.

We have been developing our virtual engagement activities as face-to-face events have become more difficult during the current restrictions. A part of this we have also ensure



that we don't ignore those who are digitally excluded. Our online focus group work also includes phone sessions for those without secure broadband connections, or who would rather not engage in a virtual setting. Anecdotal evidence suggests this has real benefits, making it easier for people to find the time to take part, and eliminating the need to travel. We are also holding a series of virtual events in November considering the public's views on how we should emerge from the pandemic. It is early days, and we will be gathering evidence over the coming weeks to measure the success of these activities

Recommendation 7. The Committee recommends that the report on the Voluntary Exit Scheme should include additional details as to how the restructure of the Communications Directorate fits in with the aims of the scheme.

Agreed.

A report on the Voluntary Exit Scheme accompanies this letter and includes additional detail on the Communications Directorate..

Recommendation 8. The Committee recommends additional detail is provided to clarify the resources the Commission currently has available to support the Senedd in the EU transition period, the additional specialist resources referred to in evidence and how these resources will be accessed.

Agreed.

The Commission resources dedicated to support the Senedd in the EU Transition period are as follows:

- EU Transition Co-ordination – an additional responsibility allowance for a member of Commission staff who undertakes EU Transition co-ordination duties, in addition to his existing role (currently approved to end 31 December 2020). The EU Transition Coordinator maintains an overview of work strands being delivered relating to EU exit across the Senedd Commission, ensuring there is no overlap, and that gaps/delays are identified.
- The Brexit Academic Research Framework – this allows the Senedd to buy-in short-notice specialist expertise from a pool of academics and experts as needed. This expertise supplements the work of Senedd Research on highly specialist topics. To date, 25 pieces totalling 80 days work have been commissioned, examples of which include: the replacement of the EU Emissions Trading System; Future scenarios post-Brexit; the UK EEA-EFTA agreement and issues for Wales related to the UK-Japan agreement. The fund to support the Framework during 2020-21 and 2021-22 is £20,000 per annum with some potential for virement from the total £40,000 academic engagement fund in the 2021-22 draft budget if required.



- Business as usual - activity to support the Senedd during the EU transition period is also undertaken by other staff within the Commission as part of normal business. Activity is particularly focussed on the clerking teams supporting the EAAL and LJC Committees, the Senedd Research External and Constitutional Affairs team, Legal Services, and other part of the Commission, such as Translation and Reporting Service and Communications. Existing learning and development budgets will also be drawn on to provide expert and specialist training to staff working in these areas.



Annex 2 - COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY OUTLINE

Purpose and summary

1.The Commission's strategy for 2016-21 sets as a strategic goal "to engage with all the people of Wales and champion the Senedd" as well as to "communicate outwardly the work of the Commission"

2.Since taking up my post in September 2019, I've been working on a strategy to improve how we communicate and engage with the people of Wales in line with the Commission's strategic goals. In order to do that some changes are being made to the structure of the Communications and Engagement Directorate.

3.This paper outlines how those changes will impact the work of the Senedd and how it will change the work of the Commission. It will mean a much greater focus on social media as a means of speaking with and involving the public in our work.

Background

4. As the Senedd Commission's first Director of Communications and Engagement I've been tasked with making sure we deliver the strategic objective to Engage with the People of Wales and champion the Senedd. Much of the work we do is already making an impact towards this, but I want us to focus more relentlessly on telling the people of Wales what happens here, and involving them in our work.

5. Over the past four years the Commission has received three reports with a focus on engagement. They all outline similar challenges for our engagement and communications strategy; namely that social media should be at the heart of the Senedd's communications strategy and that citizens should be at the heart of everything we do.

6. The size of the task ahead is most starkly laid out by the 2018 Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement which shows that citizens in Wales have the lowest score in the UK on "Interest in politics", "Knowledge of politics", and in their belief that "getting involved is effective".

7. The relative weakness of the media landscape in Wales is well documented, but not insurmountable. Through more targeted use of social media, we can tell the story of what the Senedd does in a way which reaches out and engages with citizens.

In all news and media organisations with a strong social media presence, the key to engaging audiences is to have strong, engaging case studies as part of their reports; a way for the public to be interested in a story and engage with an article.



The Strategy

8. The strategy has four key drivers:

- a. The Citizen has to be placed at the core of everything the Senedd does.
- b. Digital communications must be placed at the centre of the Senedd's operations as a means of facilitating and democratising the engagement process.
- c. Communications must be streamlined and consistent - simple, engaging brand messages targeted at specific demographic groups.
- d. A 'Digital First' operation and culture; and to continuously improve upon digital competency, skill sets and delivery mechanisms.

The Citizen has to be placed at the core of everything the Senedd does.

9. Two years ago, Leighton Andrews said in his report that the Senedd should look at itself as a content producer. *"The aim should be to put people - rather than the organisation and its processes - at the heart of topical news stories and aim for an emotional connection."* This forms the basis of the new strategy.

10. We need to overcome the challenges posed by Wales' limited media infrastructure, rapid changes to the way people get and share news, and low levels of understanding of a (still) relatively new and changing constitution situation. This can be done by greatly enhancing and focusing on our social media output.

11. Through the work of the engagement team, committee inquiries often gather evidence by visiting all parts of Wales to hear the experience of people who are using particular services. This often involves compelling "real life" case studies of how services have helped or had a negative impact on their lives.

12. The information forms part of committees' deliberations, and is included in their reports published some weeks later, but might not be used in any other way. This needs to change.

13. We will use these evidence gathering sessions as a means of showing what the Senedd does to scrutinise the role of the Welsh Government and act as a voice for the public.



14. After filming interviews with those who give evidence, we will share their stories on our social media feeds as quickly as possible after the event. It will be edited and will have an accompanying article which can be targeted to different areas and to different demographics.

15. We have recently started using a new online engagement tool which makes it much easier for the public to contribute to the inquiries of committees. This will be embedded in our articles so that anyone who is interested in our case studies will be directed to the website and can give their views.

16. We will make it as easy as possible for citizens to participate in the work of the Senedd

Digital communications must be placed at the centre of the Senedd's operations as a means of facilitating and democratising the engagement process

17. The Communications team is currently working on a social media strategy for each channel (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram etc) so that we can tailor our output to the different demographics using different social media platforms.

18. Conversations with several Senedd Members reveals a real appetite for enhancing their social media profiles. Many Members make good use of platforms such as Facebook to engage and communicate with voters. **As we look ahead to the ongoing support we offer to Members in future, we will consider how greater training could be provided so that social media plays a more pivotal role in how MSs interact with the electorate.**

19. Building on the improvements which have already taken place we will ensure that Senedd TV is used more widely as a digital communication tool, including broadcasting events which take place at the Senedd

Communications must be streamlined and consistent - simple, engaging brand messages targeted at specific demographic groups

20. We will develop a clear "brand" for the Senedd, based on the idea of being "your voice"; a place where the concerns and issues important to the public are raised and discussed.

21. This will help us to build a bond with the public and nurture a relationship of trust.



22. We will develop a warmer, friendlier tone of voice for our social media platforms and website, whilst respecting the significance of our law-making and scrutinising work. We will be clear, concise and jargon-free.

23. By undertaking new market research we will be able to build a new suite of target audiences which will form the basis of our core messaging strategy.

24. The Senedd has not commissioned or gathered any audience insight for some time, and this makes it difficult for us to confidently recognise our audiences and target our messages accordingly. The media and digital landscape, consumer habits, and attitudes are changing rapidly. Therefore, we will work with a reputable external provider to gather current audience insight.



25. The current communications strategy (2016-20) has identified 4 audiences:

- **“Political professionals”**: employed to participate in the democratic system. The group can include elected representatives, political journalists, public sector officials and also public affairs or policy professionals who are employed to promote their clients’ or organisation’s political objectives.
- **“Political Activists”**: socially motivated to engage in the political process and forms an essential part of our customer base. They are informed and knowledgeable, hungry for information and opportunities to participate and influence the Senedd’s work. This group is not employed to participate in the democratic process, but is primarily made up of those who participate in political or social action. Existing data suggests that the proportion of the population that share these group characteristics is far smaller in Wales (4%)¹ in comparison with other parts of the UK (20% in Scotland) and UK averages (32%)².
- **“Political Observers”**: tend to access political news and information on a weekly basis and sometimes or rarely talk about politics with their friends, family and work colleagues. They may have some interest in specific political issues but tend not to take part in more formal, high level political activity such as contact their elected representative, attend meetings or rallies.
- **“The Politically Apathetic”**: this group is considered to have little or no interest in political issues, declare low levels of interest in political news and they never discuss politics with friends, relatives or fellow workers.

26. The new strategy will focus on the **“Political Observers”** and **“Political Apathetic”** which is likely to include the majority of voters.

27. In order to target those audiences most efficiently and successfully we will need to understand what they think of the Senedd.

28. With a busy 18 months ahead with major campaigns to deliver e.g. Name Change, Votes at 16 and the 2021 Welsh General Election, our communication efforts will need to



be as effective as possible. **We will base our efforts on evidence through robust data and current insights.**

29. This project would directly feed into the Commission's goal to *Engage with all the people of Wales and Champion the Senedd*. **We will build the profile of the Senedd, its work and its evolution into a parliament ahead of the 2021 Welsh General Election.**

30. The research will also support the development work around the new website and our efforts around social media, giving us additional insights to develop new approaches to content creation and audience engagement.

A 'Digital First' operation and culture; and to continuously improve upon digital competency, skill sets and delivery mechanisms.

31. In order to implement all these changes we will be creating a new team within the Communications Directorate whose sole focus will be on improving our social media strategy.

32. This will lead to the creation of new roles including a Head of Social Media and a Social Media Manager. They will work closely with the Engagement team as well as the News team to ensure that the evidence gathered by Senedd Committees can be used to inform, involve and engage with the public.

33. The team will not only lead on our social media output but also ensure that other teams across the organisation will increase their focus on social media as a way of engaging and communicating with the public.

34. The team could also be supported by a member of the Translation service to ensure that all our output can be published bilingually as quickly as possible.

35. The Covid pandemic has made face-to-face engagement activities impossible. At the same time it has enabled us to enhance our virtual provisions. Anecdotal evidence suggests this has real benefits, making it easier for people to find the time to take part, and eliminating the need to travel.

36. The Engagement team has redirected staff and resources towards improving our digital services, such as virtual tours and schools engagement work. We are also holding a series of virtual events in November considering the public's views on how we should emerge



from the pandemic. It is early days, and we will be gathering evidence over the coming weeks to measure the success of these activities.

37. While developing and improving our virtual resources, we are also mindful not to leave behind those who are digitally excluded. As we prepare focus group work for Committees as well as our own research work, we have held sessions over the phone as well as online so that we can hear from as many citizens as possible.

