

## **WGIR02 Centre for Welsh Politics and Society, Aberystwyth University**

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Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

[Pwyllgor Diwylliant, Cyfathrebu, y Gymraeg, Chwaraeon, a Chysylltiadau Rhyngwladol](#) | [Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport, and International Relations Committee](#)

[Strategaeth Ryngwladol Llywodraeth Cymru](#) | [Welsh Government's International Strategy](#)

Ymateb gan: Ganolfan Gwleidyddiaeth a Chymdeithas Cymru, Prifysgol Aberystwyth | Evidence from: Centre for Welsh Politics and Society, Aberystwyth University

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### **1. What is your relationship, if any, to the International Strategy?**

This consultation submission has been prepared by academics associated with Aberystwyth University's Centre for Welsh Politics and Society, an interdisciplinary research centre with the aim of deepening understanding of contemporary politics and society in Wales in the context of an inter-connected world, supporting and delivering world-class research in the social sciences and contributing to public knowledge, debates and policy development in Wales. It has been produced by Professor Rhys Jones and Dr Elin Royles and it also draws on research produced in collaborations with colleagues at other universities.

The response draws mainly on the findings of research and experience in engaging in projects promoting cross-border connections and collaboration, both funded by the EU (Interreg) and subsequently by the Welsh Government (Agile Cymru). Related research projects include analysing Welsh sub-state diplomacy pre and post-devolution (Royles), Wales' EU paradiplomacy 1992-2021 (Minto, Rowe and Royles) and an ongoing project associated with UK intergovernmental relations in relation to UK-EU relations (Minto, Rowe and Royles).

Relevant reports and academic publications are noted at the end of this submission. Please get in touch if you would like to discuss any of the points made further, or if you would like further information on the associated research.

### **2. What are your views on the Welsh Government's International Strategy – what's worked well and any areas for improvement?**

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The timing of producing the Welsh Government's 2022-25 international strategy was particularly challenging given the scale of uncertainty arising from the implications for Wales of the UK's exit from the EU during the strategy time period and the broader repercussions arising for Wales of the UK's global relationships during this period. Given this context, the Welsh Government is to be commended for the effective basis provided by the strategy for international engagement.

The strategy aims, decisions on the prioritisation of areas of activity and relationships for 2020-2025, and the associated action plans have provided a solid base for action during this period. An annual reporting framework on international relations and the overseas network has also ensured regular reporting on activity, achievements and areas where there has been less progress. The work of the Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport and International Relations Committee and evidence provided to it by the relevant Welsh Government ministers has also been important in this respect.

Welsh Government activity in collaboration with other partners is working well in terms of profile-raising aims, in nurturing relationships and in promoting Welsh culture, particularly through bilateral and multilateral engagement, including through engagement in networks.

A specific example with which we have been associated is in relation to Ireland. It is a positive example of building on opportunities to develop Irish Sea cross-border relations in the context of the EU-funded Interreg programme by establishing Agile Cymru to nurture meaningful linkages for Wales with territories on the Irish Sea. The 'coalition of the willing approach' is important, though there is potential to be more strategic in terms of partners.

Alongside this, the impact of external relations activity in growing the Welsh economy by increasing jobs and investment by attracting inward investment and supporting Welsh exporters was inevitably going to be difficult in the challenging financial and economic climate. Whilst it is valuable to see Welsh Government preparedness to change office locations to improve access to trade and investment opportunities, there are questions to be asked in relation to external activity to grow the economy. UK Government Department for Business and Trade data (2024) point to Wales performing better than only Northern Ireland in terms of the FDI project by UK Region\* with the data pointing that total trade exports between 2018 and 2021 decreased from 28.3 to 23.8.\*\* Are there ways in which external arrangements can be developed to help grow the Welsh economy?

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(\*see <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/dbt-inward-investment-results-2023-to-2024> ;

\*\* see

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/internationaltrade/bulletins/internationaltradeinuknationsregionsandcities/2021> )

### **3. What are your views on the Welsh Government's priority international relationships for 2022-25?**

The priority relationships developed for 2022-25 identified a collection of global connections that were meaningful to Wales, combining important relationships due to sea borders with Wales (e.g. Ireland), existing relationships within the EU and other international links. Seeking to focus on developing priority international relationships was an important step, as was the emphasis on building on pre-existing relationships, and selection of the specific relationships to be prioritised varying in the relative weighting given to various motivations. In parallel, alongside prioritising these relationships, other links and connections have been developed and nurtured, including via networks. Promotional years have also been utilised in order to seek to deepen relationships with key countries.

Going forwards, it would be helpful to

- i. Evaluate the progress and impact of the selected priority international relationships during 2022-2025
- ii. Continue to pursue international and European networking alongside priority international relationships.
- iii. Review the promotional year approach and consider whether bi-annual or tri-annual promotion would be more appropriate in order to develop meaningful relationships and to reap greater benefit from the effort.

### **4. What are your views on the availability of information on the Welsh Government's international activities and delivery of the strategy?**

The information available has certainly increased during the period of this strategy compared to previous periods and this is only beneficial to the Welsh Government's promotion of its international activity both within Wales and beyond. The work of the Senedd Research Team in relation to international and

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EU relations is also important in this respect, including the publication of International Relations Monitoring Reports.

There are gaps however in the availability of information in relation to the Welsh Government's involvement in the UK-EU governance arrangements. The two main agreements establishing UK-EU relations are inevitably associated with devolved matters in a whole host of policy areas and in practice have implications for every Welsh Government department. For instance, the Welsh Government and Senedd are responsible for implementation and compliance in relation to significant parts of TCA in devolved areas and they clearly influence policy-making and regulatory frameworks in Wales.<sup>1</sup> It is difficult to fully appreciate the Welsh Government's level of engagement with the structures, partly as a result of the ad hoc nature of the degree to which they are invited to attend, though also a lack of communication by the Welsh Government. Understanding the degree of engagement often depends on questions from Senedd Committees to relevant Welsh Government Ministers answered either in correspondence or in giving evidence in person, or on information released via Cabinet written statements. Consequently, the Welsh Government could develop more structured ways of communicating information on its activities in relation to the EU, including the intergovernmental relations associated with UK-EU relations.

In relation to the point under 2 regarding international activity to attract business investment and trade, given the significance of this area of activity to the Welsh economy, in the context of future international strategies, it would be helpful for additional information to be available regarding the economic benefits and priorities, potentially supplementing an action plan with annual plans.

**5. In your view, what information on the Welsh Government's international activities should be in the public domain?**

**6. What are your views on how the Welsh Government's international activity is resourced?**

It is important to recognise that whilst it is sometimes difficult to justify external relations activity in the context of significant financial constraints, there are examples where the Welsh Government's international activity is being conducted with relatively limited budget resources compared to similar initiatives.

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For instance, whilst the Agile Cymru programme is extremely important, the amounts of funds, £100,000 for Irish Sea Framework Project (complemented by another £50,000 to support strategic capacity to engage in Horizon Europe), is significantly limited compared to the millions of Euros that were available in the context of the comparable European Interreg programme. The implications is that it is not possible to design and implement comprehensive and strategic projects and it has implications for the type and quality of relationships that can be developed, with the 'coalition of the willing' approach ultimately dependent on good will.

Another example is the budget and staffing of overseas offices such as the Brussels office. In conducting research on engagement with the EU, we have been struck by the Scottish Government office in Brussels' greater numbers of staff and greater budget than the Wales Brussels office. For instance, the Scottish Government's Brussels office budget was £2.35m for 2021-22 and £2.47m for 2022-23. Our understanding it that the data available in the Welsh case was the data on the budget of Welsh Government International and European Offices, provided up to 2018-19 in State of the Estate reports.\* These focused on office running costs and data is not available after 2018-19, with the justification being that the international offices are now in the main co-located at FCDO premises. Therefore, though difficult to draw exact comparisons and potential differences in remit affected by lack of comparable data and availability of data, there are clear examples of Welsh international activity being conducted with moderate levels of staffing and budget.

(\* <https://www.gov.wales/state-estate-report-2018-to-2019> )

## **7. What priorities and priority relationships would you like to see included in the Welsh Government's approach to international relations beyond 2025?**

Greater priority should be given to the following as part of the Welsh Government's approach to international relations beyond 2025.

- Outlining Welsh Government overarching priorities for EU engagement: Given the lack of clarity regarding the nature of the UK's relationship with the EU post-Brexit, previous Welsh Government reluctance to articulate a European strategy is understandable. However, the current context is one of more stable and normalised terms for relations with the EU, new leadership of the Welsh Government, and European developments such as a new European Parliament and a new
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Commission work programme. Our emerging research findings suggest that it is timely to articulate Welsh overarching priorities in relation to the EU in this context given the continuing implications of EU-level developments for policy and law in Wales. It provides an opportunity to be clearer on Welsh Government priorities in influencing the EU, where these fit in relation to TCA structures, issues that are outside the scope of the TCA but have implications for Welsh interests, and with respect to direct engagement with EU institutions in Brussels. This would avoid a situation where such priorities are gleaned from oral evidence to Senedd committees and could be valuable in terms of relationships with the UK Government and with various EU institutions.

- UNESCO: We also see potential in striving for greater international recognition of what Wales is already doing in different policy sectors, including through a greater emphasis on existing and future UNESCO World Heritage Sites. International collaboration in this area is examining the potential for inter-regional UNESCO designation around the theme of Celtic culture and heritage to contribute to international tourism, international collaboration around the theme of heritage, and complements the sustainability agenda in their commitment to the preservation of these sites.
- Work with UK bodies: We appreciate Welsh Government efforts to work closely with different parts of the UK Government, particularly the FCDO, embassies and high commissions, in seeking to ensure that their activities appreciate and take account of Wales. However, there is scope to increase Wales' ability to influence decision-making within UK government departments and UK bodies responsible for promoting the UK internationally. Such aims could be more explicit within the Welsh Government's international strategy alongside the main emphasis on its own more autonomous international activity.

For example, the British Council continues to be extremely important to Wales's international projection and though there are very positive and supportive interpersonal relations with British Council Wales and at the UK level, questions regarding the organisation's effectiveness in promoting Wales remain relevant. A 2014 review of the British Council (FCO 2014, 125)\* stated that: 'some 'devolved' stakeholders also feel that Council global programmes can be too 'London centric'.

Similar questions surrounded whether there was adequate recognition of Wales' potential contribution to UK international goals due to its capacity as a minority

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culture and bilingual nation to enable countries with historically difficult relationships to engage with the UK to engage “in a different way” (House of Commons 2014, 29).\*\* Formal influence on the British Council’s strategic priorities are channelled through the Director in Wales, from the Welsh advisory committee through the UK Regional Director, and direct representation on the BC Board of Trustees by one individual, rotating annually between one of the three devolved administrations’ advisory committee chairs (currently Northern Ireland). Calls for permanent Welsh representation on the British Council Trust have been rejected to date. However, the potential to revise arrangements to strengthen Wales’ (and other devolved governments’) direct representation in British Council strategic decision-making is important and would work to strengthen awareness of Wales within its global network.

A similar need to engage strategically with UK-level bodies has been identified with respect to the UK’s twin Cities Programme, a scheme that has sought to develop stronger collaborations between towns and cities in the UK and India. Early stages of the collaboration were focused on towns and cities in England, with Wales being included in the scheme at a relatively late stage (a collaboration between Aberystwyth and Puducherry). While this is a specific instance, it illustrates a broader point about the need for strengthening Wales’ ability to proactively seek to shape and steer UK-level programmes and initiatives. Overall, it is important that a more strategic approach is developed to ensuring that any limitations in the ability of the Welsh Government to inform and influence the strategic direction of UK Government departments and UK-wide bodies charged with representing the UK as a whole are addressed by increasing Welsh influence in UK decision-making structures. Such developments would be of mutual benefit to the UK Government and devolved governments by facilitating appropriate levels of coordination between the external activities of all constituent parts of the UK.

\*Foreign and Commonwealth Office. 2014. Triennial Review of the British Council. [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/335494/140722\\_PDF\\_of\\_British\\_Council\\_Triennial\\_Review\\_with\\_Annexes\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/335494/140722_PDF_of_British_Council_Triennial_Review_with_Annexes_FINAL.pdf) (accessed June 19, 2015).

\*\*House of Commons. 2014. House of Commons Welsh Affairs Committee, International representation and promotion of Wales by UK Bodies, Second Report of Session 2014-15. London: TSO.

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**8. Are there any other matters you would like to draw to the Committee's attention regarding the Welsh Government's international relations?**

None

**References**

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/21622671.2023.2203176>

Current research in this area, 'Assessing the UK's new intergovernmental relations architecture post-Brexit' Carolyn Rowe, Rachel Minto and Elin Royles, supported by the James Madison Trust.

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