

Dawn Bowden AM  
Chair, Committee on Assembly Electoral Reform

29 January 2020

Dear Dawn,

### **Potential implications for committees of any change in the Assembly's size**

Thank you for your letter of 16 December 2019 requesting the Children Young People and Education Committee's view on the potential implications for Assembly committees of any change in the size of the Assembly. As a member of our Committee, you are aware that we discussed this matter during our meeting on 16 January 2020. For the purpose of the record, I note that you have not contributed to the views expressed in this letter given your role as Chair of the Committee on Assembly Electoral Reform.

Further to our discussions we would like to highlight the following points in response to the questions you posed:

- **The increase in the Assembly's powers**

Despite the significant increase in the Assembly's legislative and financial powers over the last 20 years, no corresponding increase has occurred in the number of Assembly Members. We believe that this has spread us more thinly in terms of our capacity to hold the government to account, particularly after the number of office holders (e.g. Welsh Ministers/Presiding Officers) is deducted from the total number of AMs available to populate the committee system.

With the addition of legislative powers and more recent fiscal powers, our responsibilities as committees have rightly increased. Nevertheless, our committees are now the smallest they have ever been. While we do not believe that there is necessarily a correlation between the size of a committee and its effectiveness, our current membership of six—coupled with the wider challenges detailed overleaf—leaves us stretched to do justice to the areas within our remit while fulfilling our wider responsibilities as AMs.



## ▪ **Membership of multiple committees**

All Children, Young People and Education Committee members either sit on, or chair, at least one other Assembly Committee. This is in contrast to many other legislatures, where parliamentarians are expected to sit on one committee at most.

Due to our membership of multiple committees, the time and space we have to develop expert and in-depth knowledge of our areas of work is limited. Despite our best efforts, this can lead to more superficial scrutiny than we might otherwise hope to deliver and can hinder our ability to pursue particular areas of specialism.

Being a member of multiple committees can also lead to a greater reliance on support provided by Commission and Assembly Member support staff, due to the lack of time available to do our own preparatory and/or follow-up work. However, should the Assembly ultimately decide to increase its size, we would emphasise the need to guard against:

- overwhelming that additional capacity by overloading work programmes;
- any increase in Members' expertise creating an insatiable appetite for yet more detailed information and support from others.

## ▪ **Committee capacity to cover all areas in our remit**

Within the limits of the Assembly's current size, to be able to hold the government to account across all the areas and functions for which it has responsibility, many committees have broader remits than counterparts in other parliaments. We believe wholeheartedly in the importance of a dedicated committee for children and young people, but the breadth of areas which we are responsible for scrutinising presents frequent challenges.

We are approached regularly with ideas for inquiries and important pieces of work. While we recognise that demand is always likely to outstrip our capacity, during this Assembly, there have been a number of subject areas we would have been keen to pursue had more time and space been available to undertake our committee work alongside our wider responsibilities as Assembly Members.

Furthermore, while recognising the very valuable benefits the current model of dual responsibility for legislative and policy scrutiny can provide in terms of the application of subject knowledge, juggling both is a significant challenge. With legislative timetables often unpredictable on the one hand, but subject to fixed deadlines that are beyond the



Committee's control on the other, our wider programme can be disrupted significantly by the referral of a Bill for scrutiny.

While this may be a symptom of our committee model rather than our size, with fewer than 45 Members available to populate committees that cover such a breadth of areas and responsibilities, we believe we will ultimately come up against the same challenge of capacity regardless of the committee system we adopt.


- **Capacity to undertake meaningful public engagement**

Engaging with the general public should be a key part of our work as committees, and as individual Assembly Members. While we strive to adopt innovative methods to maximise our ability to engage with the people of Wales, we believe that face-to-face contact is often necessary. We believe that our size, on occasion, has hindered our ability to spread this work between us, and to travel to different corners of Wales to seek the input of our citizens into our committee work.

- **The relative balance between plenary and committee time**

We recognise that even if the decision to increase the size of the Assembly is taken, changes are unlikely to come into force during the next Assembly. As such, we believe that consideration ought to be given to the overall division of formal Assembly time between plenary and committee business to ensure that this is an optimal use of the 60 Assembly Members we have.

Yours sincerely,



**Lynne Neagle AC / AM**  
**Cadeirydd / Chair**

