

Written views from Kevin Davies, National Assembly of Wales**Background**

The Assembly has invested a lot of time and energy in recent years to change the way we engage with citizens. In June 2016, the Assembly Commission committed to 'to engage with all of the people of Wales and champion the Assembly' as one of their three strategic goals for the Fifth Assembly term. Our public engagement work aims to deliver services that connect and engage with all the people of Wales, however, whenever and wherever they choose. We will inform and involve all the people of Wales in the Assembly's work, and introduce ways that empower them as citizens to directly influence and take pride in the legislature's work. Particular attention will be given to developing services that engage those who do not currently engage with the Assembly.

We've made a conscious effort to encourage direct participation in Assembly business by targeting citizens based on issues they are passionate about, and have looked to create an environment that provides opportunities for more and different people to get involved in the Assembly's work, particularly by contributing to committee consultations.

Assembly committees regularly hear from interest groups, charities and membership organisations who provide valuable contributions in scrutinising the work of government. These groups regularly take up the opportunity to 'opt in' to have their say, however the 'opt in' approach alone doesn't always provide us with a diverse range of views, as contributions received through the more traditional consultation methods don't tend to include the opinions and experience of those who work within the relevant sector, or citizens with an interest in or are affected by decisions made on specific matters. At the request of Assembly Members who wish to diversify the range of voices contributing to Assembly business, we now actively seek evidence from those who do not currently engage with the Assembly.

Committee engagement

The purpose of the Assembly's committee engagement activities is to:

- Collect evidence from more diverse audiences
- Build long term engagement, understanding and trust between institution and the people it represents and serves.

Sometimes engagement with these audiences provides committees with an understanding of the wider public's perceptions of an issue, at other times it provides committees with first hand experience of the issue being investigated by arranging activities which specifically seeks involvement from certain groups of public. This provides members with a greater range of evidence to call upon while holding government to account.

Not only does this make scrutiny more robust, it also provides an opportunity for those who may have little or no interest in party politics or political institutions to engage in a formal form of political participation because of their interest in the subject matter. It also provides us with an opportunity to provide participants with

accurate, non-partisan, factual information on the matter. Having taken part, we inform them on how their contribution has been used, [and what action has been taken as a result](#). We hope by providing people with a positive participation experience, that participants are then more likely to take more of an interest in political matters, understand more about the difference between the Assembly and the Government and devolved government, have more confidence to participate in political and social action in the future, and have a better perception of the relevance and representativeness of the Assembly. It also provides an opportunity to foster a longer term relationship between the participant and the institution, and create advocacy where those participants speak more positively of the Assembly and share opportunities to participate with their friends, family and colleagues.

Involving young people directly in Assembly business has been a particular focus which has been achieved primarily through refocusing our youth engagement and education programmes and increased use of digital and social platforms.

Approach to planning

Effective planning is key to delivering effective committee engagement. At the Assembly we developed an 'integrated team' approach to supporting committees – small teams made up of representatives from all the services who provide support to committees one way or another e.g. Committee Service, Research, Legal, Translation and Communications (Outreach).

Each committee is supported by an 'integrated team' which meets weekly to plan and discuss upcoming committee business over the coming weeks and months. This ensures a cohesive approach to planning and delivering committee work which has had a positive effect on the way we plan consultations in particular.

Each team works with committee Members to identify which specific audiences they want to involve in certain inquiries and when to carry out the engagement activity. The nature of the subject matter, the availability of Assembly Members and the engagement preferences of those target audiences are all accounted for when deciding which method, or increasingly, the mixture of methods we agree to engage the target audiences identified.

Methods

A variety of methods have been used to supplement evidence received through the more traditional, formal call for evidence, including:

- Web chats, using Google Hangouts to engage students for an [inquiry into STEM Skills](#)
- [Loomio for an inquiry into Alcohol and Substance Misuse](#) which involved those who have themselves suffered from alcoholism and substance abuse
- [Video evidence](#) to hear the views of small businesses across Wales on the impact that mobile and broadband connectivity has on their business
- An [online survey](#) to hear from passengers on their priorities for the upcoming Rail Franchise and South Wales Metro
- [Focus groups](#) to gather the views of gypsies and travellers on government legislation on housing
- [Events](#) where cancer patients gave evidence to Assembly Members as part of an inquiry scrutinising the Welsh Government's Cancer Delivery Plan
- A citizens reference group contributing to an inquiry of Inter Parliamentary working
- Vignettes with older people as part of scrutiny of Welsh Government legislation on social services

Members are involved in these initiatives when possible. Many of the 60 elected Assembly Members sit on multiple committees, which means that their ability to take part differs depending on their timetables and workload. Assembly Members have welcomed the opportunity to engage with the public in innovative ways and have been happy for engagement activities to take place without them being present if necessary, acting as convenors of conversation, rather than requiring every question and conversation to be directed through them. Where Members are not present, the views expressed are captured and presented to them in a formal committee setting so that information can be used during the scrutiny process and referenced at a later date.

A wide variety of methods have been used as you can see, and more often than not, we use a range of online and offline methods to deliver the consultation engagement objectives.

Some challenges remain. For example, when we seek the views of the wider public through purely online methods the views of the over 60s are underrepresented and securing the appropriate geographical spread for offline engagement comes at a financial cost. To mitigate these issues and risks, we utilise our education and youth engagement teams, our community outreach team and our visitor service team, who engage people of all ages, backgrounds and communities on a daily basis. More often than not, this approach secures a more representative sample. Similarly, embedding the idea that each and every engagement opportunity (online, on the estate and in Welsh community) provides a potential opportunity for third party advocacy widens the reach of committee engagement further.

Empower

At the Assembly we have mostly used digital tools to inform and involve. We have a presence on Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Flickr and Facebook which helps communicate our work. We have recently used Facebook Live for the first time, as a means of enabling a two way conversation on specific issues being scrutinised.

In recent months we have also used digital tools to better enable citizens to help shape and set the agenda.

- One of our committees has used the [Dialogue App](#), asking people for their ideas on the future support for agriculture, land management and rural communities in Wales
- The Culture, Welsh Language and Communications Committee used a mixture of methods, including e-mail, events, Facebook Live and a poll to [decide upon a future inquiry](#)

Impact

By changing our approach we have greatly increased the number of people contributing to Assembly business, and attracted new people who haven't engaged with us in the past.

Committees' engagement projects have shown that the views of those citizens and service users who the Assembly engage in committee scrutiny through less formal methods often confirm the viewpoints of the interest groups who regularly connect with committees. It provides the committee with an additional data set that validates the committee's recommendations to government. On those occasions when contributors express different sets of issues and opinions to those expressed in formal written evidence, it opens new avenues to explore during the scrutiny process, and can lead to different recommendations.

The fourth Assembly's Health and Social Care Committee's final report into Alcohol and Substance Misuse provides a good case study. The Committee's final report included 21 recommendations, 13 of which were based on evidence collated through a mix of a formal call for evidence and new engagement methods and an additional three recommendations based on evidence through engagement work in this instance. The evidence collated through this engagement work strengthened therefore the evidence base of this inquiry's recommendations, besides adding new perspectives to it, clear in the 3 recommendations which would not have been made had this evidence not been collected.

Recently we have started analysing the impact of engagement activities on the participant understanding of the Assembly's role and purpose. Anecdotal evidence suggested those involved in consultations on specific subjects felt more informed about the Assembly's work.

[We tested this assertion](#) with participants who took part in an inquiry into business rates in Wales by providing video evidence. All participants said they would take part in a similar process again if given the opportunity, and felt that they had been provided with an opportunity to express their views. The following statements summarise their views succinctly:

- 'People like me don't have a say in the decisions the National Assembly for Wales makes': none of the participants disagreed with this statement before taking part, compared to 67% who disagreed with the statement having taken part.
- 'I have the confidence and information I need to get involved in politics': half of the participants disagreed with this statement before taking part, where as 88% agreed with this statement after taking part.

Future direction

You may be aware that the Llywydd has set up a Digital News and Information Taskforce, which is looking at ways in which we can use digital technology to better engage with the people of Wales, particularly in light of the challenges faced by changes to media consumption habits and how this contributes to creating a democratic deficit. The findings of the taskforce will have implications for us at the Assembly in terms of the way we approach the production and promotion of our content on our digital estate and through 3rd party platforms, especially as the lines between traditional media, and digital/social media are blurring.

The Assembly Commission's Strategy for the Fifth Assembly recognises that we need to make a step change to be a world class open digital parliament. We have established an internal programme, called mySenedd, to enable us to connect and engage people with trusted parliamentary information, whenever, however and wherever they choose. It will be a key vehicle to help deliver the recommendations of the Taskforce. By the end of the programme, we will provide a much easier, more relevant and personalised experience for all of our users with those people being more engaged and more satisfied with their experience. Alongside all the other ways in which we continuously develop our services, these improvements are designed to increase democratic engagement.

As an example, we recognise that our digital infrastructure does not allow us to easily maintain an ongoing, longer term relationship with those who take part. An important part of this future vision is to develop a system of managing contacts so that individuals receive information and opportunities to participate which relate to issues they feel passionate about. Under this programme we are focusing on ways to better understand people's needs and preferences (both those who already engage and those who don't) in relation to the way they search for and consume our information, which explores some similar issues to which the Commission is doing in its consultation.