

Manon Antoniazzi  
Chief Executive and Clerk  
National Assembly for Wales  
Cardiff Bay  
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28 April 2020

Dear Manon,

### **Procurement of a citizens' assembly**

As you are aware, the Assembly Commission agreed in January that funds should be made available to enable the Committee on Assembly Electoral Reform to procure a citizens' assembly to inform its work. The Committee still firmly believes in the importance of robust, deliberative public engagement on the size of the legislature and how Members are elected. However, we have reluctantly concluded that it is not possible for us to continue with the procurement of a citizens' assembly within the context of the COVID-19 public health emergency.

The citizens' assembly methodology is well-established and well-respected as a mechanism for careful and informed deliberation and for developing consensus on sensitive, complex and controversial matters. For this reason, throughout our work, we have placed significant priority on holding a citizens' assembly to enable a representative group of people from across Wales to come together to learn about, discuss and reach consensus on matters relating to the capacity of the Assembly and how its Members are elected.

Our initial intention was to invite 40 participants to attend events at the Senedd over two weekends in July. During the weekend events, participants would have had the opportunity to hear directly from experts, to ask questions about the issues under consideration, and to discuss these matters with one another in order to reach their own conclusions on the capacity of a 60-Member Assembly to effectively fulfil its responsibilities to the people of Wales. In mid-March, in light of initial government guidance in respect of social distancing and self-isolation we postponed the events to early September hoping that it would still be possible to undertake this important engagement work. However, since we took this decision, the situation has changed considerably: social distancing, self-isolation, shielding and quarantine restrictions are more stringent, and may reasonably be expected to remain in place for much longer than was then anticipated.



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At the heart of the citizens' assembly methodology are representativeness and inclusivity. For example, we would want to ensure that voices were heard from across Wales, from across all age groups, from people from a range of backgrounds and from people with and without disabilities. We believe that holding such an event under the current circumstances—when some or all of the population may continue to be subject to shielding, self-isolating or social distancing restrictions for some weeks or months to come, and when the resources and energies of the Assembly and the Welsh Government are rightly focused on combating the COVID-19 pandemic—would put this inclusivity at risk.

The Assembly and its committees have a duty to ensure the safety of those who attend or deliver events on the estate or to inform Assembly business. We are not, under current circumstances, in a position to be assured that proceeding with the procurement of a citizens' assembly to take place in September would be in accordance with this duty, or that it would be consistent with the important role the Assembly has to play in publicly modelling the behaviour expected in wider society during the pandemic.

We have considered whether technology could be used to facilitate a virtual, citizens' assembly-style event. However, we have concluded that a virtual event of this nature could compromise the methodological robustness, the deliberative nature, the representativeness and the inclusivity of the tried, tested and respected citizens' assembly approach. We do not, therefore, believe that it would sufficiently meet our objective of seeking to understand and listen to the public's informed views on the matters within our remit.

Therefore, while we are grateful to the Assembly Commission for allocating the funds which would have enabled us to procure a citizens' assembly to explore these important matters, we have reluctantly concluded that the current circumstances mean that we are not able to proceed with the procurement exercise at this time. We will not, therefore, be drawing down the funds allocated to us in the Commission's budget for 2020-21. Nevertheless, we remain of the view that robust, deliberative public engagement on these matters would be valuable to informing any reform of the institution, and will reflect further on this issue in our report in due course.

Yours sincerely,



**Dawn Bowden AM**  
**Chair**  
**Committee on Assembly Electoral Reform**

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg.

We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.

