

Blaenoriaethau ar gyfer y Chweched Senedd / Priorities for the Sixth Senedd

Y Pwyllgor Newid Hinsawdd, yr Amgylchedd a Seilwaith /
Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee
PR27

Ymateb gan Gymdeithas Contractwyr Peirianeg Sifil Cymru /
Evidence from Civil Engineering Contractors Association (CECA) Wales



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Dear Mr Gruffydd,

8th September 2021

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the priorities for the Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee. The scope of the Committee's work programme is extremely broad and challenging. However, as a Chartered Civil Engineer and as Director for the Civil Engineering Contractors Association (CECA) Wales, I am very pleased that infrastructure matters are being considered alongside the challenges of climate change and our environment. With an estimated 17% of global carbon emissions coming from our infrastructure the challenges are significant but the opportunities to make positive changes are huge. However, I do have a general concern that with such a broad range of matters for the committee to consider there may be a risk of focusing largely on environmental and climate change matters at the expense of the infrastructure aspect of its work. I hope this is not the case. If we are to deliver on the high-level aspirations and targets around climate change and improvements to our environment then we need to translate these into actions, activities and progress "on the ground". Having appropriate infrastructure in place will be critical to achieving this and I hope that the committee will be able to focus on "unblocking" any restrictions on delivering lower carbon infrastructure across Wales. With this in mind, a number of my comments relate to the practicalities of delivering on these priorities as much as the priorities themselves.

I note that you are seeking views on the priorities of the Minister and Deputy Minister for Climate Change for the next 12-18 months and, in particular, which of these priorities the Committee should be focusing on over the next year or so. I also note your request for any other subject that should be prioritised over the next 12-18 months.

I have set out my response based on both of these points.

Views on [the Minister and Deputy Minister's priorities for the next 12-18 months](#)

The programme set out by the Minister and Deputy Minister is broad and challenging and whilst there is a clear emphasis on mitigating the impacts of climate change and improving our environment most if not all priorities will require some form of infrastructure.

Climate Change

The priorities set out by the Deputy Minister focus on climate adaptation actions, the requirement of the Climate Change Act to report on actions and future priorities and the support given by the Welsh Government towards innovation in this area. Whilst we agree with these we would hope to see the committee focus on what tangible actions the Welsh Government actually delivers, “on the ground”, to make real and quantifiable differences in reducing climate change impacts, particularly where new infrastructure is needed and/or existing infrastructure is modified or discontinued.

We will shortly be launching our Annual Report on “Decarbonising Our Infrastructure”, a joint public and private sector report, based on the findings from our Annual Conference held in May 2021. The report sets out an action plan of how we believe both public and private sectors need to collaborate far more widely if we are to decarbonise our infrastructure and what actions need to be taken. This could offer the committee a template to measure progress in decarbonising our infrastructure. I will forward a copy to the Committee Secretary when it is published.

Energy

The Deputy Minister’s priorities in this area highlight the partially devolved nature of energy responsibilities but we would hope to see this Committee scrutinise the Welsh Government’s targets for renewable energy, its relationship with the four regions of Wales and the UK Government and how it is utilising its Planning responsibilities to drive a net-zero energy system. This scrutiny should highlight any blockers to progress and how these can be overcome.

We would also like to see the Committee focus on opportunities for local energy grids, particularly in rural areas, based on renewable technologies, which could support, amongst other things, renewable energy facilities for EV charging points. We are already aware of Welsh businesses developing such facilities and, if supported through investment opportunities, could help reduce our carbon footprint whilst delivering employment, business and community development opportunities within Wales’ “green economy”.

Marine Energy Programme

As well as providing the infrastructure we need to mitigate against climate change effects and improve our environment it is important that local companies benefit from investment and that high quality jobs are created for local people along with training and apprenticeships. This is particularly true in relation to marine energy which receives positive publicity but it is unclear how much of this benefits local communities. We would wish to see the Committee take an active interest in this area and to identify how economic and social value can be maximised for local communities.

Net Zero

We would hope to see the Committee scrutinising how the Welsh Government intends to exploit the opportunities in its “net-zero” strategy and how this translates to “real action” at the coalface. Far too often we see well intentioned Welsh Government policies fail to be properly implemented “on the ground” and the touted benefits fail to materialise.

In particular, we would wish to see carbon measures sitting alongside economic and social measures in determining infrastructure investment and that these measures follow through the procurement process so that public and private sector providers of infrastructure are properly rewarded for reducing carbon. We feel that there is a key role for the Committee to play in ensuring that this becomes a reality rather than a “tick box” exercise.

Tree Planting

The commitment to a “Woodland for Wales” Action Plan is welcomed and we would like to see the Committee scrutinise any proposals in relation to commercialising Wales’ timber resources, particularly in relation to the construction sector. This is a complex area which whilst promising exciting opportunities has some very serious constraints, not least the ability to grow “construction quality” timber.

Nature and biodiversity

Investment in infrastructure brings with it opportunities to increase biodiversity across Wales. However, it needs to be an integral part of any justification for investment in infrastructure and needs to be “channelled” through the procurement process with clear indicators to reward those better performing suppliers. Transparency around the “additional benefits” available through infrastructure investment for things such as jobs, training and apprenticeships and environmental improvements remains low at both national and local levels despite many of these issues being Welsh Government Procurement policy for many years. The Committee could play an important role in increasing this transparency which would lead to better recognition of good performers and better value for public money.

Circular Economy

The infrastructure sector, and the broader construction sector, lends itself better than most sectors to the introduction of a truly circular economy. The sector represents 17% of global carbon emissions which is not surprising given the extractive nature of much of the materials used and the equipment needed to build. However, it also means that there are opportunities to make significant improvements particularly as the Welsh public sector spends in the order of £2bn per annum on construction and infrastructure but rarely measures the carbon impact of this investment. A Committee inquiry into the Circular Economy, with the infrastructure sector as a key part of this, could unlock these opportunities.

Environment

The introduction of Sustainable Urban Drainage Systems (SUDS), whilst positive and well-intentioned, has not been implemented well across the public sector and has caused significant disruption and frustration amongst those wishing to promote infrastructure and construction projects across Wales. We would like to see the Committee investigating why this positive environmental initiative is not working well and to make recommendations for change.

Transport

Whilst we welcome the new National Transport Strategy, Llwybr Newydd, please see below for other areas requiring attention.

Digital Infrastructure

Whilst we welcome increased investment in digital infrastructure we would like to see the Committee scrutinising the benefits to local businesses and communities, via social value from these investments.

Digital and Data

Improvements in digital capability are welcomed as are efforts to drive cross-sector collaboration but we would hope to see this extended to collaboration with the private sector so that the full benefits can be realised for Welsh citizens.

Housing

Increased investment in housing retrofit programmes are welcomed but, as with other priority areas, we would like to see the Committee scrutinising the benefits to local businesses and communities, via social value from these investments.

Town Centre Regeneration

As with Housing, we welcome increased investment in town centre regeneration but, as with other priority areas, we would like to see the Committee scrutinising the benefits to local businesses and communities, via social value from these investments.

General observation on the priorities

If progress is to be made across all these priorities then a far more constructive and collaborative approach will be needed between the Welsh and UK Governments given the devolution settlement that exists and the different responsibilities. Whilst current relationships appear, at times, to be tense and adversarial, we need to see an improvement in relationships and more positive cooperation if Welsh citizens are to see improvements in performance in relation to climate change. Increased infrastructure investment to enable these improvements will also be dependent on better relations and we would hope to see this Committee having a role to scrutinise this relationship or recommending that it be dealt with by another Senedd committee.

Other subject areas that should be prioritised over the next 12-18 months

Roads Review

One of the first announcements made by the Deputy Minister for Climate Change was to “pause” the delivery of new road construction projects and to set up a “Review Panel” to advise on a suitable way forward given the “carbon intensive” nature of many of these projects. Whilst this is understandable given the declaration of a climate emergency in 2019 and the launch of the Welsh Government’s National Transport Strategy, Llwybr Newydd, it has created further uncertainty across the infrastructure sector. The Panel is not expected to report for almost 12 months which is a considerable period of time given that it closely follows the 18-24 month period of uncertainty

created by the Burns Review. Given that roads will continue to provide the main transport infrastructure for most people in Wales, whether that be via car (electric or petrol), bus or cycling or for transporting goods, we would like to see the Committee scrutinising the outputs of this Panel as soon as possible, especially given the potential impact on jobs and communities if key planned infrastructure investment do not go ahead. An obvious example of this is the proposed new route in Flintshire.

Burns Review

Whilst the Burns Review into transportation challenges in southeast Wales (and leading on from the cancellation of the M4 Relief Road project) reported some time ago progress in taking forward the recommendations is unclear as are work opportunities for infrastructure businesses. Many of the recommendations, particularly those involving partially or non-devolved functions, such as works to the mainline railway, require significant cooperation between Welsh and UK Governments and it is unclear as to whether progress is being made. We feel that the Committee should be focusing in this area given the significant climate change, environment and infrastructure issues associated with the Burns recommendations. We also feel that as this approach could provide a template for future transportation investment (see Roads Review above) then, as an industry sector, we need clarity for the future so that we can maintain employment across many of Wales' communities.

I trust that these views and observations are helpful to you and your Committee but please contact me should you wish to discuss these matters in greater detail.

Yours sincerely



Ed Evans
Director, CECA Wales/Cymru