

European and External Affairs Committee
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National Assembly for Wales
European and External Affairs Committee
Legacy Report
March 2011

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Information on the Committee, its membership, its remit and previous publications can be found at: <http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-committees/bus-committees-third1/bus-committees-third-ur-home.htm>

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1. Overview – Taking a Strategic Approach

1. The European and External Affairs Committee (EEAC) was established in the 3rd Assembly under Standing Order 18, its remit being to “consider and report on any matters relevant to the exercise by the First Minister, Welsh Ministers, the Counsel General or the Assembly of any of their functions relating to the European Union or external affairs.”

2. The Committee met a minimum of 13 and a maximum of 16 times per year during the last three years of the 3rd Assembly. Members recognised the importance of intervening at the earliest possible stage of development of European proposals, and selecting inquiry topics according to significance to Wales; the Committee’s power to influence and the resources required for scrutiny.

3. From January 2009 the Committee adopted a strategic approach to its work with four strategic themes:

- Scrutiny of the Welsh Government, including monitoring implementation of EU existing legislation, its position on new EU proposals and its position on external affairs;
- Pursuing key strategic EC proposals;
- Monitoring specific on-going European legislative proposals including subsidiarity implications;
- Understanding and participation - including the National Assembly for Wales’ approach to external relations.

Added together, and successfully delivered, this approach would raise the profile of EU and wider issues.

4. The European Commission’s annual work programme was the starting point for identifying most priorities for scrutiny. The Committee also agreed that it would seek cooperation from the Welsh Government and/or other legislatures in screening UK government explanatory memoranda for devolved interests and subsidiarity implications.

5. The Committee’s approach has enabled it to give high visibility to Welsh concerns at the European level, and provided a platform for elected Members and Welsh stakeholders to get their sixpenny worth

of contribution at the critical early stage of policy formulation to head off the adverse and promote the positive potential for Wales. This has included direct dialogue with the European institutions, including European Commissioners such as the Commissioner for Financial Programming and Budget.

Work Priorities 2007-2011

Scrutiny Inquiries

European Investment Bank (EIB)

6. In 2007 the Committee explored the opportunities offered by the European Investment Bank for funding infrastructure projects in Wales, and lessons to be learnt from other UK and European regions. The Committee took further evidence from the EIB in May 2010 on loan instruments, as part of its inquiry into the future of Cohesion Policy.

Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) Health Check

7. On 20 May 2008 the European Commission published proposals to amend the delivery of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) for the period 2009-2013, as part of its CAP 'Health Check'. The Committee took evidence from the European Commission, the Welsh Minister for Agriculture, farming unions and other key stakeholders and adopted a report in October 2008.

All-Wales Programme Monitoring Committee

8. The All-Wales Programme Monitoring Committee (PMC) is responsible for monitoring the implementation of the Structural Funds Programmes for Convergence and Regional Competitiveness and Employment (ERDF and ESF) in Wales. The Chair of the PMC, Jeff Cuthbert AM, also a Member of EEAC, provided the Committee with regular formal updates on the PMC's work, supported by officials from the Welsh European Funding Office and members of the PMC.

The Treaty of Lisbon and Subsidiarity Monitoring

9. The Committee monitored the progress of negotiations towards the Treaty of Lisbon, which was ratified in December 2009. Of particular interest was the strengthened subsidiarity protocol in the Treaty, which for the first time gave recognition to a formal role in the EU decision-making process for 'regional parliaments' like the National Assembly for Wales. The Committee undertook a Subsidiarity inquiry in advance of the Treaty coming into force. Evidence was taken from Andrew Duff MEP, the Secretary General of the Committee of the

Regions, the European Commission and Cardiff University, and a report was published in March 2009¹.

10. The Welsh Government initially rejected the Committee's recommendations to:

“make available in a timely manner all UK Government Explanatory Memoranda on European legislative and policy proposals of relevance to Wales”; and to

“...produce for the Committee a Welsh Assembly Government version of each Explanatory Memorandum, explaining its views on all new proposals that have devolved consequences and the implications they will have for Wales.”

11. Agreement was subsequently reached in May 2010 for the Welsh Government to provide the information required to facilitate the Committee's part in the EU legislative scrutiny process. The Welsh Government began to forward final Explanatory Memoranda (EMs) that included its views on subsidiarity matters, to the National Assembly for Wales, at the same time as these were provided by HMG to the UK Parliament. The EMs were e-mailed to an in-box managed by the Members' Research Service, enabling the relevant Committee(s) to be alerted to any potential subsidiarity concerns.

12. The Committee continued to consider the operation of the Subsidiarity 'early warning system' throughout 2010, including the position of the UK national parliament and the approaches being adopted by other regional parliaments in Europe². The Committee welcomed continued good relations between the staff of the European Committees of the UK legislatures in exchanging information on scrutiny matters. The Committee planned to review the operation of the Assembly's Subsidiarity monitoring mechanisms at its final meeting on 22 March 2011.

13. As part of a review of the Assembly's Standing Orders in advance of the 4th Assembly, the Committee sought a recognition of 'plenary-type' powers for the European and External Affairs Committee (or its equivalent in the 4th Assembly) to submit formal views to the UK Parliament on subsidiarity matters on behalf of the National Assembly

¹ <http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-committees/bus-committees-other-committees/bus-committees-third-eur-home/bus-committees-third-eur-report.htm>

² EUR(3)-11-10: Paper 2

for Wales, and a recognised emergency or exceptional circumstances procedure to be adopted to cover those occasions when the 8-week consultation timeframe coincides with Assembly recess periods, i.e. for the function of reporting on a Subsidiarity concern to be delegated to the Chair of the responsible Committee. On 9 November the Assembly's Business Committee met in public to consider Standing Orders relating to Committee Business, and agreed, *in principle*, to proposed changes to Standing Orders to that effect. The Business Committee's report on the Review of Standing Orders is expected to be published by mid-March, after the 3 March referendum on Assembly powers. The report is due to be considered in plenary session before dissolution, with a two-thirds majority required for agreement.

Draft Directive on Patients' Rights in Cross-border Healthcare

14. The Committee's report was published in July 2009³. Its seven recommendations covered issues including prior authorisation, patient redress, and the importance of the UK Government taking account of the specific characteristics of the devolved healthcare system in Wales. The Welsh Government's response was laid on 30 September, giving an assurance that the Welsh position was being considered in planning for transposition of the final Directive. A plenary debate was held on 7 October 2009. Progress updates were received from the Welsh Government Minister for Health and Social Services and the Head of the Assembly's EU Office.

The Future of EU Cohesion Policy

15. While the Committee has no direct responsibility for scrutinising the delivery of Structural Funds or the terms for qualification to get assistance from them, the Committee engaged early in the debate on EU funding post-2013 and has conducted an ongoing inquiry, which started in January 2009. This inquiry incorporated scrutiny of the development of the successor to the Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs, the **Europe 2020 Strategy**, and the **EU Budget Review**.

16. Christine Chapman AM, Assembly representative on the Committee of the Regions, presented an Opinion on the future of the Lisbon Strategy that was adopted in December 2009. The Committee

³ http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-committees/bus-committees-other-committees/bus-committees-third-eur-home/eur_inquiries.htm

also took evidence from the Deputy First Minister on the Welsh Government's engagement with the Lisbon strategy. Following publication of the draft EU2020 economic strategy for consultation, in December 2009 the Committee Chair wrote to President Barroso to express the Committee's concern about the lack of recognition in the strategy both of the important role of regional parliaments like the National Assembly for Wales, and of the importance of an EU-wide Cohesion Policy.

17. A first interim report on the future of Cohesion Policy was published in December 2009⁴ and the Committee began a second phase of evidence gathering from March 2010. A second report was published in July 2010⁵, jointly with a report by the Assembly's Enterprise and Learning Committee on how the current 2007-2013 Structural Funds Programmes are being implemented in Wales⁶.

18. The inquiry was the focus of a formal meeting held at the Committee of the Regions in Brussels on St David's Day, 1 March 2010, with evidence from Welsh MEPs and the Chair of the European Parliament's Regional Development Committee, Professor Danuta Hübner MEP.

19. Recommendations were made to the Welsh Government, the European Commission, the European Parliament and members of European bodies and networks. The Welsh Government was asked to clarify how it would be making the case to the UK Coalition Government for continuation of an EU-wide Cohesion Policy, i.e. no 'renationalisation' of funding for West Wales and the Valleys as a flagging region within a 'rich' Member State, with continued access to Convergence support for qualifying regions, and transitional funding arrangements for improving regions. The report also called for prioritisation of training and skills in 'STEM' subjects (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), as part of a wider strategy to meet Welsh and EU-level objectives on higher level skills training and increasing R&D and innovation.

⁴ <http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-committees/bus-committees-other-committees/bus-committees-third-eur-home/bus-committees-third-eur-report.htm>

⁵ <http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-committees/bus-committees-other-committees/bus-committees-third-eur-home/bus-committees-third-eur-report.htm>

⁶ <http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-committees/bus-committees-scrutiny-committees/bus-committees-third-els-home.htm>

20. The plenary debate on the report on 10 November 2010 demonstrated the high level of consensus within Wales regarding the future policy. On 18 January 2011, officials from the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and HM Treasury confirmed that the UK Government's position was not to oppose continued support for poorer regions of richer Member States for the funding period 2014-2020, with Member States having more flexibility in how the policy was applied. This was also in the context of the UK Government's efforts to contain the future EU Budget and keep it below inflation for the next Financial Perspective. The Committee strongly recommends that negotiations on the future EU Budget and the funding elements within it are held under scrutiny by the 4th Assembly.

21. The EEAC inquiry into the future of Cohesion Policy should also be considered in the context of related work on Welsh participation in other EU funding programmes⁷, and inquiries by the Rural Development Sub-Committee on reform to the CAP⁸, and the Enterprise and Learning Committee on implementation of Structural Funds 2007-2013.

European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion 2010

22. This inquiry looked at the participation of the Welsh Government and Welsh organisations in the European Year for Combating Poverty and Social Exclusion 2010. The report was published in May 2010⁹ and debated in plenary on 22 September 2010. Most recommendations focused on securing a strong legacy from this European Year 2010 and linking activities to existing Welsh policy initiatives for combating poverty and social exclusion. The Welsh Government accepted a request to report on its plans for future years, including the European Year for Volunteering 2011, and to allocate time for annual debate of each European Year. On 8 March the Committee will receive an update from the Minister for Social Justice and Local Government on the 2010 activities and plans for 2011.

⁷ <http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-committees/bus-committees-other-committees/bus-committees-third-eur-home/bus-committees-third-eur-report.htm>

⁸ <http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-committees/bus-committees-scrutiny-committees/bus-committees-third-rd-home.htm>

⁹ <http://www.assemblywales.org/bus-home/bus-committees/bus-committees-other-committees/bus-committees-third-eur-home/bus-committees-third-eur-report.htm>

Welsh participation in EU programmes for research, innovation and lifelong learning

23. This inquiry focused on the three largest funding streams outside Structural Funds and the Common Agricultural Policy, namely the Seventh Framework Research Programme for Research & Development (FP7), the Lifelong Learning Programmes and the Competitiveness and Innovation Framework Programme (CIP). The Committee sought to understand the extent of Welsh involvement in the programmes, the barriers and benefits, and to provide any policy recommendations. Evidence was taken from the Welsh Government, the Chief Scientific Advisor for Wales, and from the higher education, local government, business and third sectors. The Committee appointed an expert adviser, Dr Liz Mills, to provide additional support, and reported on 17 February 2010. Key recommendations were for the Welsh Government to review its strategy for Welsh participation in all EU funding programmes; to improve complementarity between the different funding streams; and to look at which models could work best to support and 'broker' project participation. The Committee's current expectation is that the Welsh Government will be in a position to respond before dissolution. The Committee will be expecting the response to concentrate on how to get wider adoption of already existing good practice in Wales and to give the areas of below par Welsh success special remedial attention.

The Priorities of the EU Presidencies

24. The main task of the country holding the Presidency of the Council of the European Union is to organise and manage the work of the Council, and to play an important role in negotiations with the other institutions of the Union, especially the European Parliament which, like the Council, has to give its assent to most European legislation.

25. The Presidency rotates every six months, albeit under the new Lisbon Treaty 'trio' system. Hungary currently holds the Presidency as part of a 'trio' which also includes Spain and Belgium. This is the first time three presidencies have performed their functions in accordance with the Treaty of Lisbon. It has been a regular practice of the Committee to receive an update on the priorities of each EU Presidency from its Ambassador in the UK. On 15 February 2011, the Hungarian Ambassador to the UK attended Committee to discuss progress. The

Committee has previously discussed EU Presidency priorities with the Ambassadors of: Slovenia (February 2008); Czech Republic (February 2009); Sweden (July 2009); Spain (February 2010); and Belgium (October 2010). Poland takes over the Presidency in July 2011.

Welsh MEPs and Committee of the Regions (COR) Representatives

26. Standing Order 18.2 specifically states:

“Members of the European Parliament representing Wales and the Assembly’s representatives on the Committee of the Regions may attend and, with the permission of the chair, speak at the Committee’s meetings, but they may not vote.”

27. The Committee made efforts to engage with both MEPs and all four Welsh representatives on the COR (two nominated by the Welsh Local Government Association and two by the National Assembly for Wales), who adopt a ‘Team Wales’ approach to their work in Brussels.

28. Regular updates were received on COR Members’ activities, most recently on 1 February 2011. Formal engagement with MEPs has historically been more difficult due to clashes between European Parliament and Assembly business. Welsh MEPs participated in a formal meeting in Brussels in March 2010, and took part in Cardiff meetings via video conference where possible.

National Assembly for Wales EU Office in Brussels

29. The Assembly’s EU Office in Brussels is co-located with Welsh Government, local government and higher education representatives in Wales House. The Head of the EU Office provided a regular briefing to Members for each formal Committee meeting, as well as producing a public-facing bi-monthly bulletin, called ‘Europe Matters’, highlighting all the Assembly’s Europe-related activities. The Head of the EU Office also briefed the Committee on the strategic priorities arising from the European Commission’s Annual Work Programme, monitoring developments on proposals and issues of significance to Wales, assisting the Committee in identifying witnesses for its inquiry work and regularly participating in meetings.

External affairs

30. The Committee’s strategic approach identified specific areas for scrutiny, including the Welsh Assembly Government’s engagement in external affairs and its work to raise the profile of Wales

internationally, and the National Assembly for Wales's engagement in external relations.

31. On 12 January 2010, the Committee was presented with an overview of the approaches of the Welsh Government and the National Assembly for Wales to international relations. The paper noted the 'One Wales' commitment to supporting the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, including through the Wales for Africa programme. In June 2010, the Committee held a meeting focusing on international matters, including the Wales for Africa International Development Summit. Evidence was taken from the Head of International Sustainable Development and Wales for Africa in the Welsh Government, the Small and Medium-sized Development Organisations in Wales Network (SMIDOS), and Oxfam Cymru. This underlined the success of the work carried out in Wales and Africa, and the value of the support provided by the Welsh Government, as well as a number of challenges, concerns, and suggestions for improvements.

32. On International Women's Day, 8 March 2011, the Committee received a presentation from the President and co-founders of Positive Women, a Welsh-based charity working to empower women in Swaziland affected by HIV and AIDS, Lord McConnell, who is patron of Positive Women, also attended the meeting and spoke about the Scotland Malawi Partnership and the role that devolved nations could play in tackling international development issues, global poverty and injustice.

33. Over the course of the third Assembly, the Committee has also received regular updates from Members representing the Assembly on the following external bodies: the Conference of European Regional Legislative Assemblies (CALRE), the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly, and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA).

Global Citizenship

34. In 2009, the Committee took evidence from Europe Direct centres and from CILT Cymru (a centre of expertise on language teaching) on the Welsh Government's consultation on promoting foreign languages and the promotion of related EU programmes. Correspondence with Ministers followed to raise a number of issues about how young people in Wales are encouraged to be 'active global citizens' and live and work abroad.

Scrutiny of the First Minister and Welsh Ministers on EU and External Affairs

35. Throughout the Assembly, the Committee received regular reports from the First Minister on EU and external affairs developments of significance to Wales. These general scrutiny sessions were held approximately three times per year (once per term). Other Welsh Ministers were also invited in to give evidence to specific inquiries.

36. The Rt Hon Rhodri Morgan AM attended Committee for the last time in December 2009 before stepping down as First Minister, and subsequently took over as Committee Chair in January 2010. The incoming First Minister, Carwyn Jones AM, continued to attend regularly to discuss European and external affairs issues until the end of the 3rd Assembly (May 2010, November 2010 and 15 February 2011). Recent discussions included Cohesion Policy, the EU Budget Review, CAP reform, the economic and financial situation including implications of the Eurozone crisis for Wales, and how Wales is represented internationally.

Relations with other legislatures

The Clerks of the various European Committees in the UK legislatures liaise and cooperate closely on scrutiny matters and in particular on Subsidiarity monitoring. The EC-UK Forum of Chairs of the five Committees dealing with European issues in the UK meet in private on a regular basis, usually every six months, to discuss issues of common interest.

Priorities for the 4th Assembly

The following issues are recommended for scrutiny in the 4th Assembly:

European Union

EU Budget - Proposals for the Multi-Annual Financial Framework from 2014

37. The publication of the EU Budget Review in October 2010 marked the beginning of Member State negotiations on the next EU 'Financial Perspective' post-2013. The European Commission is expected to publish proposals for the next Multi-Annual Financial Framework in **June 2011**. There is currently debate about whether the framework will continue the current 7-year programming period, ie 2014-2020, or whether it will be replaced by a 10-year programming period with the possibility of a mid-term review after five years. Critical issues will be the overall size of the budget, and how that budget will be shared between the various funding programmes, e.g. Cohesion Policy (including 'Structural Funds'), the Common Agricultural Policy, the Framework Programme for Research and Technological Development and so on. It will be important to scrutinise these budgetary proposals and the progress of negotiations.

Cohesion Policy

38. The European Commission's proposals are expected to come forward following proposals on the Multi-Annual Financial Framework in June 2011. The European Commission's 5th Report on Economic, Territorial and Social Cohesion indicates the overall policy arguments, and the UK Government, Welsh Government and other Welsh stakeholder bodies have responded. Members of the 4th Assembly should monitor developments with key aspects such as conditionality, the urban dimension and the development of an 'intermediate' objective for regions coming out of 'Convergence' status. These issues were all covered in a letter sent from the Committee Chair to the UK Minister on 1 March 2011¹⁰.

¹⁰ EUR(3)-04-11: Paper 8

39. Strong engagement with the Welsh Government and Welsh representatives in Brussels should also continue, supporting the 'Team Wales' approach that has been adopted so far to ensure the best deal for Wales.

Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)

40. The CAP is currently the largest element of the EU Budget and the Assembly's Rural Development Sub-Committee was actively involved in scrutinising the direction of CAP reform proposals during the 3rd Assembly. The Commission's proposals on CAP are expected in the second half of 2011 and are a priority issue for the 4th Assembly.

EU Funding programmes for Research, innovation and lifelong learning

41. The Committee is particularly exercised about the need for Wales in every respect to participate in the ongoing consultations by the European Commission on the development of future funding programmes for research, innovation and lifelong learning. Access to research funding is particularly important to help boost research capacity in Wales. This is an important area for continued attention. The Committee's recommendations are strongly linked to future scrutiny of Welsh Government measures to secure economic recovery and the creation and protection of intellectual property in Wales and in partnerships involving Welsh universities and companies.

Europe 2020 Strategy

42. The European Commission has published Communications on the seven 'Flagship initiatives' in the Europe 2020 Strategy, and begun to publish legislative proposals for implementation. Economic governance measures are an important aspect of the strategy, including bringing together the National Reform Programmes of Member States (reports on structural reform progress under the Europe 2020 Strategy) and the Stability and Convergence Programmes (part of the Stability and Growth Pact for Member States in the Eurozone) into something called the "European Semester".

43. As the start of this new cycle of EU economic governance, the European Commission published its 'Annual Growth Survey' (AGS) in January. The AGS sets out its ten policy priorities for 2011. The UK's National Reform Programme is due to be submitted in April 2011. It

will be important for the Assembly to assess the implications of developments in macro-economic policy at the European level, and the approach adopted by the UK in its NRP, for economic recovery in Wales and the ability to achieve the headline targets set in the Europe 2020 Strategy.

Subsidiarity Monitoring

44. The European and External Affairs Committee had an important coordinating role during the 3rd Assembly. Scrutiny arrangements in the 4th Assembly should take account of the need for coordination, and the best mechanisms to achieve this within the future Committee structure. The Scottish Parliament has recently adopted an EU scrutiny strategy to be piloted in the next Parliament, which includes the appointment of EU reporters on its various subject Committees.

45. The Committee has welcomed the undertaking by the Welsh Government to provide it with views on European proposals, including in particular subsidiarity concerns, given that the Committee has had an important role under the Treaty of Lisbon, as a 'regional parliament' in liaising with the 'national parliament' Committees. The Committee will review the progress of Subsidiarity monitoring at its 22 March meeting and its conclusions should inform action in the 4th Assembly.

Responding to Emerging EU Priorities

46. Committee(s) responsible for scrutiny of EU issues and proposals in the 4th Assembly are advised to give attention to the following:

- **European Commission Work Programme** - To identify those strategic priorities for Wales emerging from the EC Annual Legislative and Work Programme, usually published every autumn. The 2011 Work Programme was last considered by the Committee on 8 March 2011 and the paper presented identified the potential priority areas for future scrutiny¹¹;
- **EU Presidencies** - The practice of inviting in the Ambassador to the UK of the Member State taking over Presidency of the Council of the EU is a useful mechanism

¹¹ EUR(3)-04-11: Paper 2

to understand the progress of EU priorities and is unaffected by the new trio system.

- **European Years** - The progress of the European Year for Volunteering 2011, and plans for future European Years 2012 and beyond.

International and External Affairs

47. The Assembly Commission agreed an International Strategy for the 4th Assembly in November 2010, and a work programme will be developed in line with its four strategic themes:

- citizen participation
- e-democracy
- effective scrutiny of Government
- sustainable and transparent democracy.

48. The responsible Committee(s) of the 4th Assembly may wish to scrutinise this area of work, and receive reports on the National Assembly for Wales' external affairs activities, in addition to holding the Welsh Government to account in this area of responsibility. In particular the Committee is keen that work is undertaken to explore how the National Assembly for Wales and Welsh Government can support Welsh-based international development organisations; a key example of which would be Positive Women working in Swaziland; and share best practice in international development, taking account of the approach taken by the Scotland Malawi Partnership. The Committee would also welcome a plenary debate to explore how the 4th Assembly can best support developing countries.

Lessons Learnt and Best Practice

The following points should be taken into consideration by the Committee(s) responsible for European and external affairs in the 4th Assembly:

- **Value of the strategic approach¹² to work planning** - the strategic approach has allowed the Committee to focus its efforts on the critical issues of most importance

¹² EUR(3)-01-09: Paper 5; EUR(3)-01-01: Paper 6

to Wales, at the earliest stage for influence and taking account of the available capacity of Members and officials;

- **Role of the Brussels office** – strong representation in Brussels facilitates the strategic approach, allows for ‘intelligence-gathering’ and monitoring of developments. It assists in liaison with Welsh representatives in Brussels, including the four Welsh MEPs, and key figures in the European institutions, bodies and networks, including Brussels-based representatives of other European regions;
- **Use of video conferencing** – The Committee used video conferencing on a regular basis to take formal evidence from key figures in Brussels and Strasbourg, as well as from UK Government officials in London, the European Parliament Office in Scotland, and Universities in North Wales. The quality of external technical facilities varies, and the Committee has been particularly grateful to the Committee of the Regions for allowing use of its facilities on occasion, including to allow the Head of the Assembly’s EU Office to participate in meetings;
- **Trilingual meeting** – the Committee’s meeting on 15 February 2011 was the first using tri-lingual simultaneous translation – to take evidence in French from the President of the Conference of Peripheral Maritime Regions, also President of the Regional Council of Brittany, a region with which Wales has a Memorandum of Understanding. Details of the technical arrangements necessary for this meeting are recorded in the procedures bulletin.
- **Visits to Brussels** – the use of video conferencing does not entirely replace the value of regular visits to Brussels for face-to-face meetings and the Assembly’s Business Committee has agreed to several such visits, both for formal and informal meetings. The timing of visits can present difficulties as it relies on Members’ availability outside other Assembly business, but the information gathered has significantly added to the quality of Committee scrutiny;
- **Engagement with Welsh MEPs** – participation by Welsh MEPs in Committee business has improved during the course of the 3rd Assembly. Close links with the MEPs

must be maintained and nurtured in the 4th Assembly, not least to support the 'Team Wales' approach of the four MEPs to representing Welsh interests in Europe. Clashes between the business of the Assembly and European Parliament have always been a barrier to formal participation, and it would be helpful if consideration could be given to maximising opportunities for engagement within the business timetable of the 4th Assembly.

- **Engagement with the European Commission Office in Wales** - The Head of the European Commission Office in Wales regularly attends the Committee's meetings and provides occasional updates on the Commission's activities in Wales;
- **Holding the Welsh Government to account** - Regular scrutiny of the First Minister, whose portfolio covers Europe and External Affairs, has been an important aspect of the Committee's work and allowed dialogue on critical issues. The Committee has specifically asked for feedback on Welsh Ministers' involvement in European Council meetings. Alongside the general scrutiny sessions with the Minister responsible for European issues, other Welsh Ministers have provided evidence to specific inquiries.