

## Statement by the Chair on the Committee's inquiry into human rights in Wales

Diolch Llywydd. I am pleased to inform Members that today the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee is launching a call for evidence for our forthcoming inquiry on human rights in Wales.

Over the summer we consulted stakeholders about what they felt should be our strategic priorities. A number of organisations, including Stonewall Cymru, Children in Wales and the Bevan Foundation, wanted us to undertake work on human rights. They highlighted areas of concern, such as the impact of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union, as well as the UK Government's proposals to change domestic legislation.

I expect human rights to be a key part of our approach to many, if not all, of the inquiries undertaken by the Committee. This is certainly true of our work to date. On Monday, we published our first report, on our post-legislative scrutiny of the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Wales Act 2015. We made a range of recommendations, including ensuring that teaching about healthy relationships is delivered in all schools as part of the new curriculum being put in place following the Donaldson review. The Committee was influenced by the view of the National Adviser, who told us that the curriculum should include compulsory preventative programmes on all forms of violence, grounded in a gender equality and human rights framework.

The Committee is currently undertaking an inquiry on refugees and asylum seekers in Wales. We have visited service providers and service users in Cardiff and Swansea, and we started taking oral evidence last week. It is becoming clear that a key issue for refugees and asylum seekers, and the services which support them, is understanding and enforcing their rights.

The week before last we visited Glasgow and Edinburgh. We wanted to compare approaches to supporting refugees and asylum seekers in Scotland and Wales. We also had a very fruitful meeting with the Convenor of the Equalities and Human Rights Committee of the Scottish Parliament, Christina McKelvie MSP. There is significant potential for collaborative work on human rights and range of other issues. I look forward to further dialogue with Christina and our counterparts across the UK and beyond. I will keep Members informed as these relationships develop.

But let me return, Llywydd, to the inquiry we are launching today. I would be grateful if Members would draw this work to the attention of people in their constituencies and regions. I am very happy to provide further information and materials to help Members publicise the inquiry and encourage feedback. I would encourage you to discuss your specific needs with the official supporting the Committee. The wider the range of evidence, the more equipped the Committee will be to make recommendations and hold the Government to account on this issue.

The closing date for our consultation is the tenth of February. We expect to be able to hold oral evidence sessions in March, before the Easter Recess.

Human rights is a broad and complex topic. For our first piece of specific work on this issue, the Committee has decided on a focused and high-level approach. In taking this approach, we want to build on previous work in this area. In particular, we want to follow up on the Fourth Assembly's Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee inquiry in 2013 into the future of equality and human rights in Wales. We will also be building on the expert discussion held in 2014 by the Equality and Human Rights Commission. This covered issues such as the current devolution settlement in relation to human rights, the approach to human rights in Welsh legislation, good and poor practice, and developing the human rights agenda in Wales.



Our terms of reference have three components.

First, we want to examine the impact of the UK's withdrawal from European Union on human rights protection in Wales. Human rights are protected by a complex collection of laws and treaties. I am sure Members are aware that the UK's withdrawal from the EU does not automatically affect the UK's status as a signatory to the European Convention on Human Rights. That is because the Convention is an international treaty distinct from the EU Treaties and EU Charter on Fundamental Rights. I am very keen that our inquiry should link up with the work that is already underway on this issue by the UK Parliament's Joint Committee on Human Rights as well as by the Scottish Parliament's Equalities and Human Rights Committee. I will liaise closely with the Chair of the External Affairs and Additional Legislation Committee as this work develops.

Second, we want to assess the impact of the UK Government's proposal to repeal the Human Rights Act 1998 and replace it with a UK Bill of Rights.

Human rights is a key part of both the devolution settlement and the UK constitution. Our understanding is that the UK Government remains committed to replacing the Human Rights Act 1998 with a British Bill of Rights, which would curtail the role of the European Court of Human Rights. The Attorney General appeared to indicate last week that this could be delayed while the UK Government deals with other matters. We will be seeking clarification of the timetable.

Meanwhile, I welcome the assurances given to the Committee by the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Children in September, when he told us that he would keep Members informed of any concrete proposals from the UK Government. I share his view that the National Assembly should be fully engaged in any consultation which affects the human rights of the people of Wales. There will clearly be a role for the Constitutional and Legislative Affairs Committee in examining any such proposals. I hope that the preliminary policy work of our Committee will inform such consideration.



The third and final component of this inquiry is public perceptions about human rights in Wales. We are particularly interested in how understandable and relevant they are to Welsh people. We want to know what people think about the relevance of human rights in everyday Welsh life, and the role of public bodies in engaging and informing the public about their rights. This is especially important given the different approach to human rights in Wales, for example in the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011.

Llywydd, I see the work the Committee is launching today as part of a rights-based approach to scrutiny throughout the Fifth Assembly. I expect our work programme to combine explicitly human rights focused inquiries with examining the broad range of topics within our remit from a rights perspective. This inquiry will set the strategic context for that approach. I would be happy to answer any questions which Members may have, to help us shape the inquiry.

