

# How can the youth service best influence the Assembly? Wayne David takes a look.



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**The creation of the National Assembly heralds the dawn of a new political era for Wales, bringing with it greater opportunities for the people of Wales to participate in the political process. The Assembly facilitates a new style of politics, very different from the political atmosphere of Westminster. There has never been a better opportunity for individuals, groups and organisations to play a part in forming public policy. Nor have there been so many opportunities for individuals, groups and organisations to interface with the government of Wales and decision-makers generally.**

To influence the Assembly we have to understand how the Assembly works. The starting point is the Assembly's system of representation. In total there are 60 Assembly Members (AMs). 40 represent each of the constituencies used for Westminster elections and 20 additional AMs represent the five electoral regions of Wales. The 40 constituency representatives are elected by "first-passed-the-post" and the so-called additional AMs are elected using a form of Proportional Representation.

The result is that instead of having a single elected representative, every elector can call upon the services of up to five elected representatives who come from across the political spectrum, rather than one political party. It is important to keep this in mind. While the constituency AMs are busy establishing their constituency offices and dealing with specific local issues, the regional AMs tend to

have greater flexibility in terms of time and their interests because they represent bigger and more diverse electoral regions.

It is important to be aware of the Assembly's decision making processes and the potential avenues through which the youth service might wish to make contact with the National Assembly.

The majority of decisions in the Assembly are made by the Government or Executive. From the point of view of the youth service in Wales, two members of the Executive are crucial - Tom Middlehurst AM, who is the Secretary responsible for post 16 education and training, with responsibility also for the youth service, and Rosemary Butler AM, who is responsible for pre 16 education, schools and early learning. In terms of overall, all-Wales decisions affecting the youth service, it is essential that a close and constructive dialogue is established and maintained with both these Assembly Secretaries.

While the Assembly Secretaries may have overall responsibility for decision making in the Assembly, they are not taking decisions in isolation. The Secretaries are strongly influenced in their deliberations by the Assembly's Subject Committees. This means a more inclusive approach to the decision-making process and ensures that all the political parties and individual Members can and do have a real opportunity to influence the work of the Assembly. Much of the day-to-day work of the Assembly focuses around these Subject Committees. At a Welsh level therefore, the youth service should establish strong relationships with the individual Members of the subject committees to inform policy development and the decision making process. There should also be an on-going dialogue with the Chairs of the two education committees - Cynog Dafis Post 16, and William Graham Pre 16.

Another useful point at which the youth service can interface with the Assembly is through the four Regional Committees. These Com-

mittees provide the Assembly with an opportunity to engage with members of the public. The Regional Committee meetings take place in public and will provide an opportunity for AMs to learn about actual developments within a region.

In the longer term, youth organisations may seek to develop links with key AMs on an individual basis. It is important for individuals and organisations in the youth service not to underestimate the influence of individual Assembly Members. The youth service should not fall into the trap of thinking that it is only the senior Assembly politicians who are worth talking to. The more understanding that AMs have of the youth service in Wales, the more likely it is that they will wish to contribute to any debate on future policy affecting the youth service. It will therefore prove worthwhile to provide your local AMs with briefings on your work, the youth service and the issues affecting it.

The relationship with AMs should not be built on crude lobbying; there needs to be the development of a mutually beneficial two-way relationship, where the support of the AM will result from being provided with good quality information. It is very important that when providing such briefings, the youth service presents a core message and that it speaks with one voice. The approach to the AM may focus on a variety of issues but there must be an underlying and central theme. If there are a multitude of different messages being presented to AMs, there is a possibility that if they are not familiar with the issues, confusion may arise and, as a consequence, opportunities will be missed.

It is also important that contact is made with the relevant Member for the matter you wish to raise. Specific local issues, such as your local youth club, might be best addressed to your constituency AM, while regional matters might be best addressed to your regional representatives.