



Assembly Line?

The Experiences and Development
of new Assembly Members



Matt Korris

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Acknowledgements

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Introduction

On the evening of Thursday May 5 2011, 23 men and women discovered that they had been elected for the first time to the National Assembly for Wales. In one fell swoop the membership of over a third of the Assembly had changed, the greatest turnover of representation since the institution was founded in 1999. Within a week Assembly Members (AMs) would take their seats at the first sitting of the Fourth Assembly, and be expected – by the public, their party and the media – to hit the ground running as effective representatives.

But what is it like to make that rapid transition from being a member of the public to being an elected Member of the Assembly? How do AMs learn the ropes in a new and challenging political environment? How do they decide what they are going to do and how they are going to do it? And do they have the resources to carry out their role effectively? How do they balance the expectations and demands of their constituents, their party, the media and others? What are they hoping to achieve, and how does the reality of the experience match up to their expectations? In short, what is it like to be a Member of the National Assembly during their earliest months in office?

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As the Assembly nears its 15th anniversary in 2014, the question of the experience of new AMs has added pertinence. It is still a relatively new democratic institution but in its short life it has undergone considerable change in its powers and structures, and there is a live debate underway – both inside and outside the Senedd¹ – about the need for further reform. With this Fourth Assembly being referred to by some as a ‘transitional Assembly’² the views of Assembly Members will be crucial to shaping any future changes. From the outset the Assembly aspired to be different from Westminster; not just in its structures and processes but also in seeking to establish a more open and consensual politics, and inclusive and family-friendly working culture. So what do the new Members think about the way the Assembly operates and the powers at its disposal? What would they like to see changed? And how do they feel their role is perceived both by the public and the media?

Since the summer of 2011 the Hansard Society has been monitoring the role and work of the new AMs through surveys, interviews, and personal observation of their work, supplemented by discussions with Assembly staff, to try and answer these questions. Details of the research methodology can be found in the appendix. Kindly supported in

1 See, Commission on Devolution in Wales, <http://commissionondevolutioninwales.independent.gov.uk/>, and Wales Online, ‘Plaid Cymru leader dubs First Minister’s Questions ‘pantomime farce’’, <http://bit.ly/10i8O1F>
 2 Remuneration Board (March 2011), *Fit for Purpose*, http://www.assemblywales.org/rb_report_final_version_-_english.pdf, p.35.

part by the Assembly Commission, this study forms part of a wider comparative study the Society has conducted into the experiences of newly elected representatives at Westminster, Holyrood and the Dáil Éireann, the full results of which will be published later in 2013. In the meantime, this briefing paper sets out the core findings of our research into the stark realities of life as an elected member in Cardiff Bay. Like most other elected roles, there is no real job description; indeed, as this research shows, it is a job that perhaps defies a job description.

The new AMs: their backgrounds and the road to Cardiff Bay

The new intake

Of the 23 new Members following the 2011 elections 15 were men and eight were women,³ with an average age of 49.⁴

Party	New AMs	Total AMs
Labour	12	30
Conservative	5	14
Plaid Cymru	3	11
Lib Dem	3	5

While they may be new to the Assembly, they are not new to politics or elected office; two AMs (Julie Morgan and Simon Thomas) had served as MPs at Westminster, and 11 had been local councillors. On average, the new AMs have been members of their respective parties for 25 years, and for some, becoming an AM had been a long-term ambition.

'I suppose really since devolution became reality I always said I wanted to be in the National Assembly for Wales'⁵

'This is a job I actually dreamt of when I was a young person, thinking if only there was a parliament for Wales. We could be there, we could discuss Welsh laws. I did dream of that and I'm here so I can relax and be happy really'

However, politics is far from being their only prior experience. Six lawyers and five teachers or university lecturers are the other noticeable contingents, while AMs' past professional backgrounds also include the fields of journalism, social work, charity and community work, business, housing and policing.

³ There were originally 16 men and seven women as a result of the elections on May 5 2011, However on May 17 it was discovered that two of the new AMs, John Dixon and Aled Roberts, held public offices that disqualified them from election to the Assembly. They were removed from office on May 27, however following an investigation by the Assembly Standards Commissioner, the Assembly voted to re-admit Aled Roberts on July 6. John Dixon was replaced by Eluned Parrott, the second person on the Liberal Democrat slate for South Wales Central, on the same day.

⁴ Average of the 19 new AMs who identified their age in response to the survey or those who make it available publicly.

⁵ All quotes are from interviews or survey responses from new Assembly Members unless otherwise stated.

The range of backgrounds is also reflected in the change of salaries of the new AMs. One half of the survey respondents reported that the AM salary of £53,852 represented a salary increase, while for the other half it was a decrease or no change from their previous employment. While two AMs had seen a salary increase of £30,000 a year or more, another two had seen a salary decrease of £30,000 a year or more. This however was not a source of complaint, and was only mentioned once during the course of interviews.

'I took a substantial drop in salary when I became an Assembly Member, and so that's a great sacrifice. But it's something I've always wanted to do and I decided I would do that in deference to my role at the Assembly'

Why become an AM?

I thought it's time to make a difference. It sounds very corny when you say that about trying to make a difference but that's how I felt about it

'I thought I could do a good job for the area I represent'

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A desire to help people from their local area and an aspiration to make a positive difference for Wales were the main motivations for the new Assembly Members seeking office. For those with MP or local government backgrounds especially, the prior experience and satisfaction of helping constituents was often referred to.

There was also an extent to which standing as an AM had been a long-standing ambition, and the 2011 election happened to be the right moment for them personally and politically. For others, it felt like the only moment:

'If I'm blunt, it probably came along earlier than I wanted it to...I realised that if I didn't go for it this time, the opportunity might not arise again'

'That feeling of not wanting to turn your back on an opportunity and regret it later. A feeling of not wanting to regret not having a go at this'

All the new AMs felt they had skills and experience that they could put to good use serving the people of Wales. Communication and listening skills, legal experience, knowledge of local government and specific policy areas were commonly referred to, along with personal attributes such as dedication, honesty and fairness. When asked later what skills or experience they had found transferable from previous occupations, there were a range of answers that can be broadly categorised as:

- Communication and listening skills
- People skills
- Committee and procedural experience
- Research skills
- Legal expertise
- Advocacy
- Organisational

'A sixth sense with regards to detecting problematic issues!'

The road to the Senedd

'It's a long old path you tread...so you certainly don't embark on it lightly'

Prior to fulfilling these ambitions though, Assembly Members face the challenge of first seeking selection for a seat or regional list, and then fighting an election. The majority had been selected on or before October 2010, giving them at least a full six months of campaign time in the run up to the elections in May 2011, a period many described as exhausting.

As well as the effort involved in reaching the Assembly, there are also cost considerations. The new AMs report average costs of £1,200 for seeking selection and a further £2,900 for contesting the election itself. The bulk of this money, for both selection and election, is spent on travel (to or within the constituency/region) and on communications (letters, newsletters, phone bills etc.). During the period between selection and election, and particularly in the last few months of the campaign, a number of AMs also incurred loss of earnings that contributed towards their costs.

	Average (mean)	Average (median)
Cost of seeking selection	£1,200 ⁵	£600
Cost of seeking election	£2,900	£2,750

These costs are dramatically lower than the costs incurred by the new MPs at Westminster, where our research has found reported costs are 10-20 times greater, but they still raise some concerns about the accessibility of public office to those who have limited resources. Would-be Assembly Members need flexibility in their work and home lives to seek selection, need to be able to give up their jobs (in most circumstances) to fight the election itself, and need to be able to invest around £4,000 of their own money in the process. Clearly, not every aspirant Assembly Member in Wales will have such resources

at their disposal. If membership of the Assembly is therefore to be fully accessible to people regardless of financial means then **the political parties and the independent Remuneration Board need to consider if and how candidates can be supported with selection and election in the future.**

Arriving at the Senedd

'Elation, excitement, apprehension'

'I was really very, very tired; as we all were actually'

'Delighted, absolutely delighted, but dazed, very dazed'

Induction

The new AMs arrived at Cardiff Bay with a mixture of excitement, trepidation and post-election exhaustion. In interviews some suggested that it would be beneficial to have a few days break between the election and starting at the Assembly, although others were keen to get started and were well aware that they had already begun to receive correspondence from constituents that needed a response.

They were welcomed to the Assembly with a personalised service designed by Assembly staff. Each of the 23 new AMs were assigned a personal staff 'guide' to help them navigate their first weeks in office. A welcome briefing was organised for all new Members as well as briefings in the Chamber. Each Member was provided with a Handbook, maps, and a Key Issues For the Fourth Assembly guide⁷ modelled on that produced for new MPs at Westminster a year earlier.⁸

A range of induction sessions was offered covering issues as diverse as understanding plenary and committee work, an introduction to research and information services, Freedom of Information and petitions, engaging the public in the work of the legislature, standards and registration of interests, and the role of the media lobby. Attendance was mixed, with only the sessions which were essential to the new AMs guaranteed good attendance; these included meetings in the Chamber to set up ICT accounts and individual appointments with the Members Business Services to arrange pay, expenses and staffing arrangements. While Assembly officials had originally designed an unstructured, flexible programme for new Members, they acknowledged that a more structured approach might have been beneficial.

Turnout notwithstanding, the new AMs were very positive about the induction provided by the Assembly and their parties.

⁷ National Assembly for Wales Research Service (May 2011), *Key Issues for the Fourth Assembly*, <http://www.assemblywales.org/11-026.pdf>
⁸ House of Commons Library (May 2010), *Key Issues for the new Parliament 2010*, <http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/key-issues-for-the-new-parliament/>

'First class, absolutely first class'

'They were really friendly and helpful. They did everything they could and the staff individually bent over backwards to help me out and to try and make sure I was up and running quickly'

'The first thing that happens when you arrive is you get an awful lot of information chucked at you, both from the political group point of view and certainly from the Assembly, the commission, the administration side of things. So it's really absorbing all that and then you had to absorb the IT; it all came in a bit of a rush, but it was well done, I have no criticism of the way it was done'

All but one of the AMs responding to the survey said they were 'very or 'fairly satisfied' with the Members' welcome pack and the Assembly Member Handbook; and 83% were satisfied with each of the induction programme, IT and communications provision, and the arrangements made for office accommodation and related facilities. The Assembly's initiative of assigning each Member an institutional official as a personal 'guide' attracted slightly less support: only 66% were satisfied with this approach. This was not because the guides were unhelpful, but rather because Members are more inclined to rely on support from fellow Members, their party or their staff.

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From whom have you sought advice since the election regarding the role and responsibilities of an AM?	
Current AMs	100%
Party staff	75%
Assembly staff	67%
Former AMs	42%
Family/friends	33%
Current MPs	25%
Former MPs	17%

There is an understandable reluctance on the part of Assembly officials to guide AMs, as their role is to support them in their work, not to prescribe what they should do or how they should do it. Neutral officials do not command the same level of influence with newly elected Members as do their peer group, namely their current colleagues. **Future induction programmes might therefore be improved by better capturing this source of knowledge, experience and influence in the future through some form of mentoring system.** Beyond the staff 'guide' system mentoring was not a formal part of the Assembly's induction programme. Political parties offer some mentoring but this is often ad hoc and highly dependent on the personal willingness of a few sitting Members to offer pastoral support for their new colleagues. However, officials often find it difficult to engage party groups – both before and after an election – in planning induction and

training programmes. Party groups did provide some induction sessions for new members covering procedural issues and internal party matters, and 75% of new AMs expressed satisfaction with what their party offered. But more could and should be done by parties to work constructively with officials to develop, co-ordinate and prioritise induction and professional development programmes and the use of mentors, perhaps supported by independent external bodies and professional training providers could help to break down barriers and encourage greater learning and participation.

'I kind of expected to be told what a good Assembly Member's office looked like. I wasn't expecting it to be enforced in any way but I was expecting some kind of guidance about an average Assembly Member...although the Assembly staff are very helpful, theirs is a very academic induction, and without the practical induction that my own staff gave me I think I would have struggled a lot longer'

One area where dissatisfaction was evident from the interviews was a feeling that there had been a gap right at the beginning of the induction in terms of practicalities – the design and running of an AM's office. New AMs arrive in Cardiff Bay to an office empty of everything except furniture and computers. **Rather than being allocated essentially an empty office, an early practical 'starter pack' provided to each Member in their offices from day one would have helped**, containing things like headed notepaper, business cards, envelopes, basic office materials (pens, paper clips, stapler etc.). Those AMs who had inherited staff from their predecessors were better off in this respect, as staff experience is immensely valuable in the early days for arranging the operation of the office, handling communication, arranging a filing system, ordering stationery and so forth, but for those AMs without such support, the task can seem overwhelming. For those who also have to set up a constituency office – finding a location, arranging furniture, telephone lines, computers and hiring the staff to use them – the challenge is doubled. The Members Business Service team is on hand to help AMs recruit staff – providing template job adverts, contracts, and assistance with interviews if required – and will allow the speedy recruitment of staff on temporary contracts to help AMs at the outset. These services appear to be well-used and appreciated by Members.

Issues were raised about the scale of the induction provided, but there was division between new Members who felt there was too much, particularly in a short space of time, and those who felt there was too little. This emphasises the considerable challenge of getting the balance right for the learning needs of a diverse group of individuals with different levels of knowledge and experience.

'The Commission was as helpful as they could be, as were the support members of the party...but as they have been involved for so many years, perhaps there is a difficulty in appreciating...the stupid things really, like when questions are

submitted, like when you have details of amendments. You basically have to work that out for yourself'

'It's a huge amount of information to take in and also you're terrified that you're going to do it all wrong. So you do need to have it in that first week but you definitely need to have another one two weeks later when you've found your feet'

Assembly officials acknowledged the difficulty of balancing too much and too little information, and high principles vs. practical details in designing the induction programme. The experience of the early days in office can be overwhelming for new AMs and even those sessions and materials the Assembly provided can get overlooked. For example, a number of AMs said that having maps of the Assembly buildings would help them in the early days, apparently unaware that these had been provided in the initial induction pack.

These are incredibly challenging issues to get right, especially in a pressured political environment with limited time available. The Assembly's programme was clearly well regarded by AMs and it has also provided valuable lessons that officials can build on in the future.

- 14 Other practical complaints during this period arose around the expenses and the business arrangements for establishing constituency or regional offices. There was a restriction on the £5,000 setup budget for constituency office furniture which stipulated that it had to come from a single supplier, which some AMs felt impeded their ability to get value for money. It was a similar story with IT provision; one AM remarked on how a piece of new equipment had arrived broken and there was then a long wait for it to be sent back and a replacement to arrive, when it could have been purchased from a nearby shop instead. There were also complaints about the length of time it took for Assembly IT staff to service new constituency offices, particularly in north Wales, although some of the delay also related to the connection of BT telephone lines.

'The greatest frustration I had was with some of the more mundane stuff. I think some of the support around the constituency offices and things needs looking at...in the panic about expenses, they've gone over to a more regulated system which appears to be exceedingly bureaucratic and does not represent value for money'

Expenses were also an issue when it came to accommodation. For those AMs representing constituencies or regions too far from Cardiff to commute, financial support is available for rented accommodation in the city.⁹ However a number of the new AMs were dissatisfied

with the properties available in Cardiff at the £700 per month limit and it appears that the perspective of the independent Remuneration Board, the body responsible for setting AMs' expenses, of a week-day 'bolt-hole' accommodation did not meet some new AMs' expectations.

Preparing for office

Speaking to new AMs, it becomes clear how important the induction and the early days in office are to understanding the role. While most had gained some knowledge about the Assembly – primarily from their party – and sought advice from other AMs before the election, there was a general consensus that it would be difficult to adequately prepare yourself for the role beforehand. That said, many AMs do not appear to have spent much time, if any, watching the Assembly (live, on TV, or online) before they were elected in order to familiarise themselves with this aspect of the job they were seeking.

'You could be prepared to become an AM, but the conditions for this are difficult. It's possibly in theory, shadowing etc. but most people are not in the position to do that. Scope is limited for opportunity'

'There are elements of it you can learn...the constituency work and the media work you can acquire before you get here. The processes and the procedures you can't prepare for. The only way you can build up that base is to experience it'

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Those with a local government background seem to have felt more confident coming into the role than those without, although not all of that knowledge of elected office has necessarily been helpful, as the differences between the Assembly and a local council have sometimes been the source of confusion and frustration, for example in the inability of committees to call civil servants to give evidence to them.

From where did you acquire your knowledge of the Assembly and Welsh government?	
From my party	100%
Research in my own time	75%
Formal education	50%
Previous employment	50%
From the media	42%

From whom did you seek advice before the election regarding the role and responsibilities of an AM?	
Current AMs	75%
Former AMs	42%

Current MPs	42%
Former MPs	25%
Family/friends	42%
Party staff	42%
Did not seek advice before the election	17%

'I think you can only really learn once you've got here because it's not really as you expect it to be. I genuinely don't know what I did expect it to be, even though I did know some of the other Members'

Others were clear that even with induction and support, entering a new and complicated workplace would always involve an extended period of gradual learning.

'To understand the full workings, and the main characters, the main players, the main actors, it's taken me 12 months'

'I was in charge of where I was before, very much so, [and you go to being] like a new girl at school. That was a very odd feeling, very odd'

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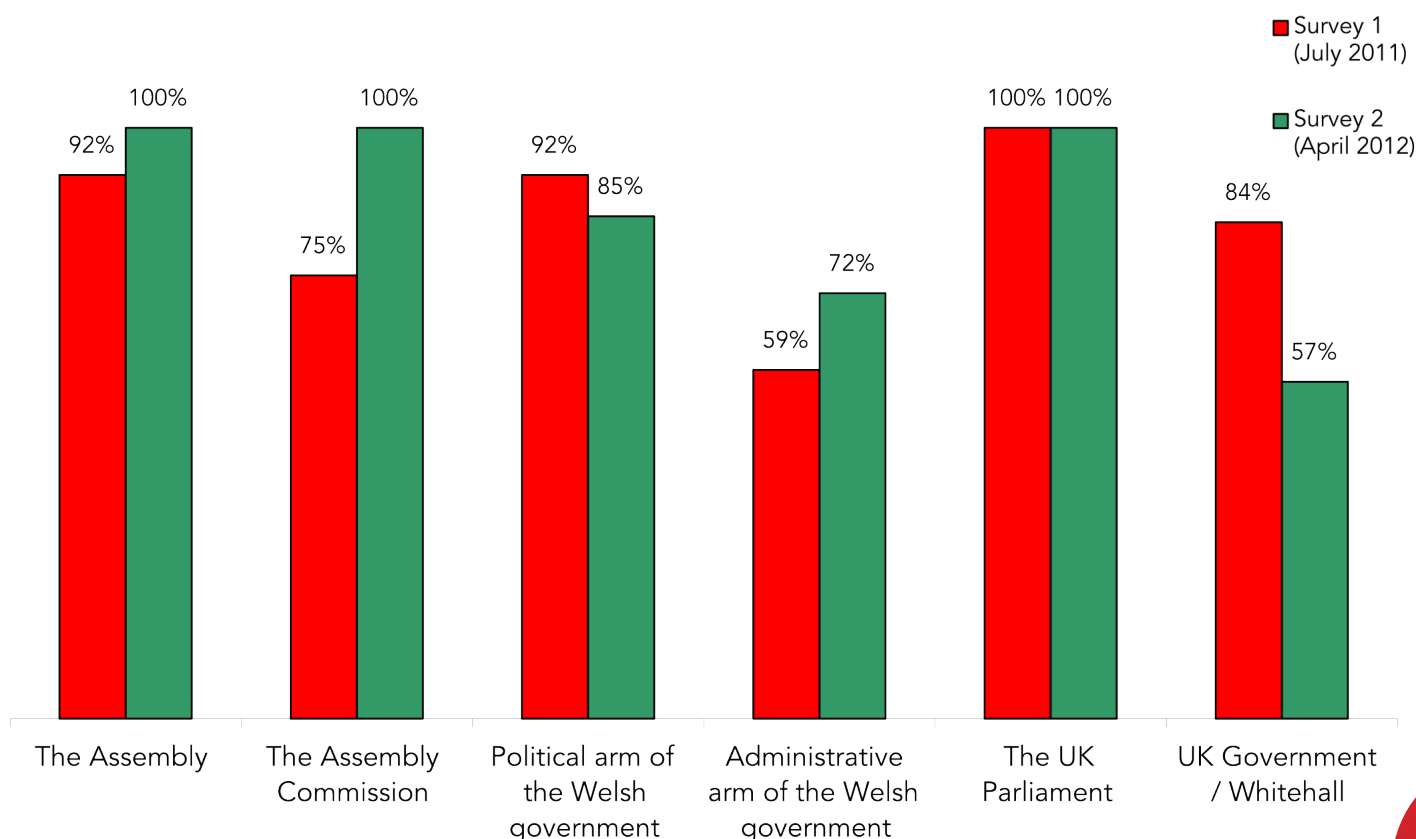
When asked whether there were knowledge or skills that they wish they had acquired before becoming an AM, a wide range of answers were given; from policy areas to Assembly procedures, scrutiny processes to staff management, IT skills to another foreign language. All of which underscores the range of skills and experience new AMs feel the job requires.

Understanding and advice

Responding to the first survey in July 2011, after the induction had taken place, most new AMs felt they understood the Assembly, the Assembly Commission and the political arm of the Welsh government. Less well understood was the administrative/civil service arm of government, which almost half the new AMs said they knew 'not very much' about.

Over the course of the first year in office, reported levels of knowledge increased in most areas, with AMs increasingly confident about the Assembly and the context it works within. The subject that remains the source of some confusion is the operation of the UK government from Whitehall, and in the context of greater devolution of powers it would be valuable for future training sessions to examine the practicalities of the relationship between Cardiff and London.

How much, if anything, do you feel you know about how each of the following work? (% 'a great deal' or 'a fair amount')



Further training

Ongoing training programmes are in place for all Assembly Members, provided by Assembly staff or outside experts, sometimes on an individual basis but more often delivered through the committee structure. This has included sessions with legal experts on effective questioning and legislative scrutiny – the latter reflecting the need to build the skills base of Members as the Assembly takes on new legislative powers. These sessions have reportedly been well-received by AMs, but have attracted criticism in some quarters for the subject matter they have covered and their cost.¹⁰ This criticism is both unfair to Members and unhelpful to the Assembly as a whole. **Training and development provision is commonplace in most work environments, and to deny AMs the opportunity to improve their scrutiny of government and their service to constituents seems perverse. People from a range of backgrounds will have a range of skills, and expecting every politician to arrive 'fully-formed' at election is unrealistic and would restrict representation only to those who have spent many years working in politics.**

'I think some basic presentation, media training, could be given to brand new Members because it does feel different. It's not the same as being on a hustings'

¹⁰ See, BBC News, 'Welsh assembly: David Melding defends £10,000 training for AMs', <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-19706883>; Wales Online, 'Outcry over £10k spent training AMs 'how to ask questions'', <http://bit.ly/11M7dGi>

Most AMs (86%) reported having had Continuing Professional Development (CPD) training in their previous occupations, and the majority (71%) supported the suggestion that politicians should be required to undertake CPD.

All the new AMs responding to the second survey reported having undertaken further training from the Assembly, with two-fifths (43%) also saying they had had additional support from their party as well. Assembly officials report that a significant number of Members now come forward with their own support requests, which is perceived to be a successful outcome from the induction programme. Again, as with induction, the use of mentors and independent external bodies to provide sessions could help to encourage and facilitate greater learning. A varied approach to provision might also help through the use of experiential learning modules, role-play and simulation, all of which might better engage the interest of Members and encourage them to widen their attitudinal horizons.

The new Assembly Members recognised a variety of areas where they felt they could potentially benefit from additional training. The one issue on which there was broad agreement on the need for improvement was financial scrutiny, which was also an area where AMs expressed dissatisfaction with the functioning of the Assembly (see page 24).

In light of this, **the Assembly should prioritise financial scrutiny training in its future programmes and look at what additional support might be given to Members and committees to help them with the technical aspects of scrutiny.**

In what areas, if any, do you feel you would benefit from additional support? (tick all that apply)	
Financial scrutiny	71%
Data protection / FoI	43%
Operation of Welsh government	29%
Time management	29%
Personal I.T. usage	29%
Dealing with the media	14%
UK Parliament / UK government	14%
Managing staff	14%
Assembly procedures	14%
Dealing with constituents	0%

The role and work of a new Assembly Member

'I thought I had a very clear idea of what Assembly Members do, but I had a very skewed idea really of the amount of time you spend doing various bits of it. What I know now about the balance is not what I expected it to be when I came here'

'Oh God yes. More than just a job absolutely, I mean it's not nine to five. Plus we all live in various areas quite distant from Cardiff. I spend two hours travelling there and probably an hour and a half travelling back on a daily basis so it's a long day, it's more than a job. You've got to be on the ball, you've got to prepare of an evening, it's a hell of a job actually'

Working hours and division of time

The working life of an Assembly Member is framed by long hours and the challenge of dividing time between many competing priorities. Two months into the job, new AMs reported working on average 49 hours a week, plus an additional 9 hours travel. After almost a year in post, this had increased to on average 57 hours a week plus travel.

The nature of the representative role means that the new AMs spend roughly 65% of their time in Cardiff Bay and 35% in their constituency/region while the Assembly is in session. During recess, the balance is 15% in Cardiff Bay and 85% in the constituency/region.

57 average working hours per week for new AMs after one year

New AMs' time is split fairly evenly between debates in the Chamber, committee work, constituency casework and constituency meetings and events, so while the majority of their working week is spent at the Assembly, the focus of their work is split fairly evenly between Assembly and constituency focused tasks.

How do you perceive your time will be divided between the following activities?	
	Mean averages
Debating Chamber	22%
Constituency casework	21%

Committees	21%
Constituency meetings/events	18%
Local campaigning	13%
National campaigning	7%

This is perhaps not surprising, as the bulk of constituency correspondence and casework arrives with Assembly Members by email and can be dealt with just as well from the Assembly as anywhere else – not least because the computers at AMs' desks in the Chamber allow AMs to keep abreast of their inbox during plenary sessions.

How would you estimate the proportion of your casework/communication that is received via the following methods?	
Email	53%
Post	19%
Telephone	12%
Surgery/meetings	11%
Websites/social media	8%
Fax	0%

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While the new AMs are running roughly four surgeries a month, on top of seven or eight other local public engagements, these account for only approximately a tenth of their overall correspondence and casework. This emphasises the scale of the communications challenge they face, with AMs reporting many hundreds of emails arriving in their inbox each week.

	Mean average	Median average
Average number of surgeries per month	3.8	3
Average number of public engagements per month	8.2	6.5
Average number of hours canvassing	5.8	5

To support their work, and particularly to help manage the communications load, Assembly Members have resources provided by the Assembly for them to employ up to three members of staff. Most members choose to split their staff with, in general, one staff member working at the Assembly and the other two based in their constituency/regional office. **Most AMs are satisfied with their staffing arrangements, and while some would like more capacity in the constituency office for handling casework, they recognise when challenged that this may simply beget more casework.**

Location, location, location

The location of an AM's constituency or region has a significant impact on how they do their job and how they feel about it. New AMs representing areas around Cardiff really appreciate the flexibility it gives them to divide their time between their constituency and Assembly roles throughout the week and the ability to spend more time with their families.

'Absolutely, I genuinely don't think I could do this if I wasn't [representing an area near Cardiff]'

'I thought before I was elected that being a Cardiff Assembly Member would be a big advantage, I've come to the conclusion that it is an even bigger advantage than I had anticipated in that you have so much more flexibility with your time, in my circumstances – and someone whose constituency is even three quarters of an hour away from here because I can do both jobs at once most days if I need to. If I need to do a constituency thing on a plenary day you can almost always find a way of doing it'

AMs receive lots of requests for meetings in the constituency and one drawback for those nearer to Cardiff is that they inevitably face greater expectation to attend than those whose constituencies are further away. Overall though, it still appears to be advantageous for AMs in this position.

There was little evidence to suggest much difference in the ways that constituency and regional AMs approach the role. While regional AMs face a significant challenge to establish an identity across a large area, and will usually need to travel more (five or six hundred miles a month according to one regional AM), the remaining practicalities of the job are very similar. Some constituency AMs appear to envy their regional colleagues, in the belief that they have less casework to manage, although regional AMs question this, as they find that their constituents treat them as another potential avenue of assistance when looking for redress.

Prioritising

'I think the main thing you have to learn on the job is how you balance these competing interests'

Assembly Members have no formal job description and so it is up to them as to what aspects of their role they choose to focus on. The new AMs initially placed championing their constituency in the Assembly as the highest of their work priorities, followed by scrutinising legislation, helping individual constituents, and holding the government to

account. One year on, the picture was similar, although holding government to account had become the number one priority, swapping places with championing the constituency in the Assembly. This might reflect the nature of the work at the Assembly or a greater awareness of the importance of holding the government to account as part of their role after one year in post.

The Assembly had recently acquired new legislative powers, if not much actual legislation, in this period, so it is not surprising to see that the scrutiny of legislation is high in the minds of AMs.

How would you rank the following aspects of your job as an AM in order of priority?		
	Survey 1 (July 2011)	Survey 2 (April 2012)
Championing constituency in the Assembly	1st	4th
Scrutinising legislation	2nd	2nd
Helping individual constituents	3rd	3rd
Holding the government to account	4th	1st
Local campaigning	5th	5th
Commenting on political or constituency issues in the media	6th	6th
Supporting the party	7th	7th
National campaigning	8th	8th

Great expectations

'I think people have both very low and high expectations of you at the same time. So on a basic level you're seen as part of that group of people called politicians who are useless and all the same as everyone else and therefore what the hell is the point of you? On the other hand people expect you to work miracles if it's their individual circumstances that have been impinged upon. There's still a lack of understanding out there of what the Assembly does, what the Welsh government does'

Assembly Members readily identify that they are subject to a range of competing expectations. From the public, who expect their AM to be omnipresent in their constituency or region, and to respond quickly and successfully to any request for assistance; to the requirements of party groups to represent their positions in the Assembly, campaign and fundraise on the ground; and from the media, who want strong communication, characters and controversy, while also expecting the highest standards of integrity and ethics.

'It's more like being a priest, in a different context. I think it's the same sort of expectations on you. You're there to do a job but you're also there to be a source of support for other people. You're there for people to turn to even though they don't believe in you!'

'The public expect you to respond to their issues, their problems; I see serving the people as my main role. Clearly there's a role within the Assembly in terms of, we're now a legislative body so it's holding the government to account, scrutiny. But I see it as keeping the people happy'

The time problem

'All sorts of decisions are taken out of your hands because you simply do not have the time to control it and you have to trust people who know what they're doing... I feel like I'm a chess piece sometimes. I'm being moved around to somebody else's strategy'

If there is one central issue for all new AMs, it is time. Balancing these competing priorities, expectations and demands on their attention is identified by many as a significant challenge.

This is especially true when the Assembly is sitting, as, unlike Westminster, attendance in the Chamber for plenary sessions and in committees is almost compulsory. This is due in part to the current political makeup of the Assembly; with Labour forming a minority government every vote counts, and the whipping of both government and opposition AMs is consequently strict, with limited flexibility. But it is also a function of the small size of the Assembly; with only 60 Members, any absence from a Chamber or committee session is much more noticeable.

'The whipping system is very heavy I think here and you have to find your ways to do things through this whipping system. But also, the Whips are very friendly and helpful'

The regimented Assembly timetable can make it difficult for AMs to engage with other aspects of their role that they wish to address, such as pressing constituency matters, and as a result this work and other meetings are often squeezed in during the early morning before business starts, during the one-hour pause in business for lunch, or at the very end of the day. These gaps in the Assembly timetable are also heavily targeted by lobbyists looking for meetings with AMs. Lobbyists also target emails to AMs during plenary sessions, when they know AMs will be in front of a computer and potentially more likely to read them personally, thus circumventing the staff filter on communications..

'The lobbying is much more intense than I realised it was'

The pressure on time extends to when AMs are in the constituency, with many working through the weekend to catch up with local meetings and paperwork. A number of AMs referred to the lack of reading time and thinking time available in their week.

'Enormous time pressures, long commute, put on weight, little personal time'

Time problems become even more apparent when asking AMs about their balance between work and personal time. Over the course of their first year new AMs' satisfaction with their work-life balance decreased considerably, reflecting their reported increase in working hours.

How satisfied are you with your work-life balance?		
	Survey 1 (July 2011)	Survey 2 (April 2012)
Very satisfied	0%	0%
Fairly satisfied	83%	33%
Not very satisfied	17%	50%
Not at all satisfied	0%	17%

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'[How do I manage work and family?] Well by doing one of those things really badly. To be perfectly frank it's very, very difficult'

In large part this dissatisfaction stems from the disruption that being an AM has on family life. AMs variously reported a 'considerable', 'immense' or 'huge' impact, particularly when it came to spending time with children. For those with young children, childcare costs are often a significant issue as a result.

'We have no family nearby, we're relying on favours from other people. We're spending an absolute fortune on childcare. An absolute fortune on informal childcare in the evenings as well as formal childcare during the day time because of course, this is not a nine to five job'

Some AMs said they were aware of the impact the job would have when they sought election, but for others the extent of the time commitment has caused more disruption than they had imagined.

With AMs experiencing so many competing demands, doing a job without a job description and one in which there is always more that could be done, it can be a real challenge for them (as with other elected politicians) to put down firm boundaries between work and personal time.

'Not that I'm deeply religious, but I do tend not to do something on a Sunday because I think you need at least one day a week that you can just put your feet up and forget about it'

Family life is not the only sacrifice that new AMs were aware they had to make as part of taking on the job, identifying that they might have to change their own behaviour.

'You give up the right to be yourself in a way, you know in as much as, you've got to be careful. You can't go out and have a few beers and just be one of the boys, rugby boys, as perhaps one has been in the past. You have to behave yourself, and I'm OK with that, I'm fine with that, but that is one thing you do give up'

'Politicians are only human; they may have foibles that someone discovers. If the press get hold of it you're ruined'

The workings of the Assembly

'There are a couple of really good things about the Assembly's structures and procedures. Things like family friendly hours, recess being aligned to the school holidays and things along those lines that make it possible for people with young families to be Assembly Members'

'Everybody's been very kind and helpful to me I have to say, and the research department here is very good'

There is much that the new AMs like about the Assembly. The friendly atmosphere, the accessibility of the institution and the culture of working are particularly singled out for praise, along with the service and support of officials.

Questions

Inevitably for a political institution, however, there are also complaints and frustrations with the way it operates. Opposition AMs are critical of the political culture of the ministerial question sessions, particularly First Minister's Questions, which they see as wasting time on political sparring and mimicking the culture of Prime Minister's Questions at Westminster.

'I have to say that I find the questions to Ministers, [particularly the] First Minister's, a bit of a staged show, a bit of a pantomime really, for public consumption'

'I do think we have an over emphasis on Ministerial questions. I think we're trying to ape the House of Commons which most people in Britain are turned off by now, and in ever increasing numbers. That will reflect badly on here'

Some AMs, particularly those from local government backgrounds, argue that a more discursive session modelled on local council sessions would be better. Others look to recent developments in Westminster, with an increasing use of urgent questions and topical questions as potential solutions.

Plenary debates

'I think plenary, to a large degree, are overrated, and we spend too much time in plenary'

Plenary debates also come in for criticism. Government AMs commonly see opposition debates as a waste of time, with repetitive subject matter and recycled speeches.

The weekly treadmill of opposition party debates. How many times in a month can you debate the future of the Welsh dairy industry I think without beginning to lose your reason? They are of poor quality; they are listened to by nobody and make almost no difference to anyone. So I think better use could be used of those hours

And AMs from all parties are concerned about the value of backbench debates, because of the constraint that the topic must be supported by Members from at least three parties. When the three opposition parties have agreed a topic this tends to result in a repeat of an opposition debate and when another combination of parties supports the subject matter it is usually completely non-contentious and risks being bland. In broad terms AMs would like these sessions to be more topical and less predictable, although few specific suggestions were advanced as to how this could be achieved.

'It's not dire, but there are things we could be doing here to sharpen it up, make it a bit more relevant a bit more topical. Use our time more wisely and hold the government to account better'

'I don't think anyone has stepped back and thought 'what are we getting out of the system?''

Committees

In contrast, committees are the area of Assembly that seem to give the greatest satisfaction, with AMs commonly saying they enjoy this work and some keen to give committees greater prominence.

'I adore the committees. The committee work is very good... I look forward to those meetings'

'I would move more to a committee structure, than plenary...Fewer grand-standings and more real discussion'

There are still areas where some improvement could be made. Some AMs complain that committee meetings can be slow and ponderous, have a tendency to seek evidence from the 'usual suspects' and that there is too much division along party lines, although this is likely to be a product of the political balance of the Assembly.

A number of new AMs indicated that they felt overwhelmed by the amount of reading material they need to absorb for each committee session. While none of them wanted to see the volume reduced, there was a desire for papers to be provided to them earlier to allow more time for preparation.

'You don't necessarily have the opportunity [to do much reading], unless you become a hermit'

Financial scrutiny

Another area of discontent raised by AMs was financial scrutiny, particularly those from a local government background who had experience of budget scrutiny in that context.

'The fact that we scrutinise a budget at local authority level, you're talking about a budget of [a few hundred million pounds], we scrutinise it probably from September through to January. In here, we scrutinised it for 10 days...I find it very, very strange'

That the Assembly model for scrutinising spending is necessarily different to local government may be part of the concern, but given that financial scrutiny was the most commonly identified topic on which new AMs felt they would benefit from further training, it suggests there is a willingness among new AMs to review the Assembly's approach to financial scrutiny.

'My most frustrating experience has been some of the budget scrutiny...A line that will always strike me was a line in the Budget that was scrutinised by the Children and Young People Committee which referred to "NHS core support services, £5bn", with no detail. When I asked a rather naïve question regarding when are we given the detail of what is included in that budget so that we can properly scrutinise expenditure, the civil service response was 'that is information that is held by the minister'. So I thought, well, what the hell's the point?'

Assembly Members and the Welsh government

'What I'd like for this place is for us to have regular meetings with the civil servants here. We're not allowed to meet them; we have to go through the Minister'

There is a similar issue, again for former local government AMs, with the relationship between Assembly Members and the Welsh Government. In local government elected members have a closer day-to-day working relationship with officers of the authority who perform the delegated executive functions on behalf of the council, and if they hold portfolio positions elected members are particularly likely to feel that they have the power of direction as well as scrutiny. The relationship between the executive and legislature at the national level is, however, very different and elected AMs do not have the power to direct officials within the executive and have only limited interaction with them. Some AMs are clearly dissatisfied with the way this operates. In part this dissatisfaction finds expression in relation to the practices of the Assembly, which are thought by some as too much like the Westminster model despite the avowed intention to avoid this. At the heart of the problem is the perceived lack of accountability of the government – ministers and officials – to the Assembly and themselves as its elected members.

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Some AMs are dissatisfied with the way this operates, suggesting that it is too much like the Westminster model which Wales had sought to avoid when establishing the Assembly.

'It is not as transparent as I thought it would be...The PR and the spin regarding this being a new way of government is absolute tosh, to be honest with you'

The size of the Assembly

A more common issue raised by new AMs on all sides is the size of the Assembly, with a number of AMs suggesting there are not enough of them to properly address all the responsibilities of the Assembly. This is partly a practical concern in relation to the committee system. There are just 60 AMs in total, and when serving ministers, the presiding officer and deputy are taken into account there are never more than 45 AMs available to sit on the Assembly's 12 committees,¹¹ each of which has between four and 10 Members. This results in most AMs sitting on two or three committees, which is a considerable commitment of both time and preparatory work.

'I think there just aren't enough of us to be honest, and that's not what I thought when I came here. I think that the amount of stuff the Assembly's trying

to deal with divided by the number of committees we're able to have because of how many of us there are isn't enough'

'We don't have enough people basically to populate our committees and there only being 60 of us, all of us are on at least two committees and when we've got legislation that means we don't have any time at all for doing inquiries, so there is a problem there'

There is also concern that the number of Members restricts the capacity of both government and opposition backbenchers to adequately scrutinise the Welsh government and that it, along with the finely balanced political situation, limits the development of an independent-minded backbench culture.

The size of the Assembly was examined by the Richard Commission on the Powers and Electoral Arrangements of the National Assembly in 2004, which recommended expanding the Assembly to 80 Members,¹² but despite greater powers for the Assembly following the Government of Wales Act 2006, no fundamental changes of this nature have taken place.

When questioned about the possibility of increasing their numbers, most AMs thought that this would be politically impossible to change – particularly during the current economic climate.

'I'd like to see 80 members of the Assembly not 60, and I would like to see smaller constituencies so again, people can relate to the Assembly Member whatever party that is'

One positive effect however, especially in comparison to other legislatures, is that the size of the Assembly virtually guarantees that if a Member wishes to speak in a debate they will have that opportunity, and with less of a restriction on time.

Media reporting of the Assembly

'I think they do a terrible job of reporting it. Very little is properly reported – the debates aren't reported at all'

'I think our media is a little strange here in Wales that we have an awful lot of personal scrutiny on individuals but not very much political scrutiny, so the policy stuff and the actual work of the Assembly is only covered if there's a controversy'

¹² Richard Commission (2004), *Report of the Richard Commission on the Powers and Electoral Arrangements of the National Assembly for Wales*, www.richardcommission.gov.uk/content/finalreport/report-e.pdf

The new AMs are generally critical of the media coverage of the Assembly and of their work, citing a focus on individuals, personalities and controversy and less attention on substance. On an individual level, some new AMs reported that it was difficult to get their points across with the media.

'I've been a little bit disappointed that as new Members perhaps we haven't been drawn in more to the media'

'Unless you particularly go to the press and make a point about something you said or some issue that you've got...it doesn't get reported'

Reflecting on the media approach to politics in general, AMs were keen to see a rebalancing of coverage away from current reporting practices that they felt are overly personalised and cynical.

'It covers politics as a very minor branch of the entertainment business really. We're talking more about the mass media, obviously there are outlets for more serious discussion of political ideas and philosophy and so forth, but they themselves, because they are very narrowly read, they tend to turn very internal themselves. It's very difficult to have that more wider debate around politics'

'We do need a wider debate about the worth of politicians and how what we do is perceived and reported...I've been surprised by the bitchiness of some media reporting – about people in all parties. I don't think it helps anyone. If we want to attract talented people to public service – instead of earning more in private life – then we can't pillory every politician as an untrustworthy money grabber as a default position. Politicians too need to take our share of responsibility for restoring public trust'

One positive note about coverage was reserved for the live feeds of Assembly business, although there was little evidence to suggest many AMs had watched these prior to their election.

What are the public missing out on?

If the media are not explaining the work of the Assembly and its Members sufficiently to the public, what is it that the new AMs would like the public to understand? The answer is primarily that there is real value to what the Assembly does and that AMs are keen to help their constituents as much as they are able to.

'I'd like them to know that we are productive, there is an end product to what

we do. I want them to know I do it because I want to do it, and I hope I'm providing a good service and it's not easy with the number of staff we have and the volume of work that comes our way'

'I suppose the main thing you'd want them to know is that it does actually make a difference. The people you vote for, or parties you vote for, or the ways you make your choices does affect legislation, does affect decisions of the government and is part of the way you live your life'

'I'd like for the public to have a better understanding of how they can engage with the political process because a lot of people feel very detached... it's a question really of just trying to make sure that the public can see us and can understand that we're there'

For officials, greater public understanding about the Assembly, its work and the difference between the Assembly and Welsh government are their main ambitions. Having begun life as a single corporate body, discharging both legislative and executive functions, this is a particular challenge for the Assembly. There is thus a potentially greater degree of confusion over the executive-legislative relationship than might otherwise be the case and it is a challenge that some new AMs, accustomed to life in local government, are still grappling with. There is also a desire to emphasise the role of the Assembly as a focal point for the people of Wales, the place where the public can come together to mark and celebrate moments of great importance in the life of the nation that unite people above and beyond politics, as occurred, for example, during the public celebrations of the Welsh rugby Grand Slam triumph on the steps of the Senedd in 2012.

One year on

Despite the long hours, the travel, the challenges and frustrations, the new AMs are still delighted to have been elected and be doing the job. They are particularly enthusiastic about their constituency work and take considerable satisfaction from the people they have been able to assist over the course of their first year in office.

'I enjoy casework, if we can resolve things for people that gives you a sense of personal satisfaction. With campaigns, if you manage to get people to come along with you and run a good campaign'

'I love meeting people... people with issues that I've tried to help'

Most are looking to progress within the Assembly, and many want to make politics a long-term career, although the proportion of new AMs saying that has fallen over the course of their first year in office.

	Survey 1 (July 2011)	Survey 2 (April 2012)
Do you aspire to become an office-holder in the Assembly?	60%	60%
Do you aspire to make politics a long-term career?	80%	50%

Looking to the future, AMs are keen to start utilising the Assembly's new legislative powers, helping their constituents, and making a positive contribution to the people of Wales. After the challenging weeks and months of learning their complex roles and adapting to their new environment, they are now seeking to make full use of the influence that they can bring to bear.

'My first year was about surviving and trying to make a name for myself and make sure that I was reasonably well set up. That's job done as far as I'm concerned now. I'm hoping that my team and I will sit down as we're running into Christmas and set ourselves some targets'

Conclusion

New Assembly Members come from a variety of backgrounds and have a wide range of skills and knowledge they bring to the role. But for all of their differences, the experiences of the first year in office are very similar, irrespective of party and whether they are a constituency or regional Member. They all face the same challenge of learning the ropes in a complex political institution and establishing an office and a presence both in the Assembly and in their constituency. They have to familiarise themselves not just with a new building, new staff and a new working environment but also with the complex procedural processes that govern any legislature. They all have to find their way around a job without a job description, balancing demanding expectations and competing priorities, and working hours well beyond most people's normal working week. Yet many of them are still left feeling as if there are never enough hours in the day to respond to all the demands placed upon their time and are afforded limited time and space to adapt and mould the role as the months pass. They have to 'become' an Assembly Member, learning to inhabit and own the role, in a 24/7 political and media culture in which the outside world expects them to be ready, fully formed and skilled from day one, which demands instant responses to complex problems with which they may have only limited prior experience, and which can be unforgiving in its treatment of mistakes.

36 Understandably, then, they have complaints and frustrations about the role, but above all they draw great satisfaction from it, particularly the opportunities it affords them to help others through their constituency work. But there is clearly less satisfaction with the Assembly aspects of their role as legislators. Here, however, reflecting the lack of time and space to step back, and think strategically about their role and work, Members have few concrete suggestions for reform but there is a sense among them that the Assembly is not as effective as it could be and not as distinct as it should be. The problems facing AMs are as much cultural as procedural. As the debate about the future of the Assembly and its powers continues, political space is therefore needed for an inclusive discussion transcending party lines, focusing on the challenges AMs share in common, if these issues are ever to be properly addressed.

Methodology

The findings of this paper are based on research carried out by the Hansard Society as part of a wider project looking at the experiences of newly elected legislators in Westminster, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Dublin. Further publications are forthcoming that will set the Welsh experience in comparison with these other legislatures.

This research involved surveys and interviews with the 2011 intake of Assembly Members, along with discussions with Assembly staff and background research. New Assembly Members were invited to complete two surveys, which were provided in both paper and electronic formats and the first of which was provided in English and Welsh. No responses were received to the Welsh language version of the survey, and so, given our limited resources, only an English copy of the second survey was distributed.

	Conducted	Number of AMs participating	Proportion of new AMs participating
Survey 1	July 2011	12	52%
Survey 2	April 2012	7	30%
Interviews	Nov 2011-Nov 2012	11	48%

In addition the project team conducted interviews and held a round-table discussion with Assembly officials.

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