

Report: Llywydd led Committee Chair delegation visit to Iceland

25-27 March 2025



Senedd Delegation

Llywydd, Elin Jones MS

Llyr Gruffydd MS, Chair, CCEI Committee

Russell George MS, Chair, Health and Social Care Committee

Gwion Evans – Head of Llywydd's Private Office

Previous Senedd engagement



Former Presiding Officer, Dame Rosemary Butler, led a small delegation of “Assembly Women in Democracy Caucus” to Iceland in September 2014 for a programme focussed on Gender Equality.

The Senedd also hosted a two day visit in March 2016 by a delegation from the Althingi, led by then Speaker Mr Einar K. Gudfinnsson. The visit was focussed on Iceland’s interest in the Senedd Commission’s work in Education/Outreach and Members’ Professional Development.

A visit to the Senedd in May 2016 was arranged for the Director General of the Althingi to learn more of support for newly elected Members. This included the opportunity to shadow the induction programme for the recently elected Members as well as to meet with Commission Directors and the Standards Commissioner.

Meeting with the Speaker of Althingi, Ms. Þórunn Sveinbjarnardóttir.

Speaker Þórunn Sveinbjarnardóttir

Secretary General, Ms. Ragna Árnadóttir

Director General, Mr. Jörundur Kristjánsson

The Speaker gave an overview of Iceland’s history and the current political priorities. This included the continued development of their tourism industry and the associated infrastructure challenges.

Iceland’s membership of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA) and inclusion in the European Economic Area (EEA) were discussed. Their parliamentary activity can be heavily influenced by the need to align legislative and regulatory frameworks. The Welsh delegation discussed the way in which losing the European structures (financial and policy) post leaving the EU has dominated much of the Senedd’s activities as Wales sought to develop equivalent frameworks, such as the common agricultural framework.

EU membership has been a recurring topic in Icelandic politics, often influenced by concerns over EU fishing quotas and economic sovereignty. The Icelandic government plans to hold a referendum on EU membership negotiations by 2027.

The international context was currently volatile and Iceland's location in the North Atlantic means Iceland could increasingly become a strategically important actor in geo politics. An indication of this has been the increase of NATO activity in the country.



Photo: Llywydd with Speaker of Althingi, Ms. Pórunn Sveinbjarnardóttir.

Parliamentary practice: General

**The following notes set out matters of discussions with the Speaker and Althingi Committees regarding Parliamentary practice in Iceland:

- The last election saw 30 new MPs (63 Members in total). This was a consistent trend and was seen by the Speaker as being a positive thing as it generated new ideas. It was also the case that many of the new cohort were experienced individuals who brought valuable insights and perspectives – some from professional backgrounds and others as holders of office at municipal level – for instance the former mayor of Reykjavik and a former Director of Energy Affairs at Iceland's National Energy Authority.

- Whilst there were positives, it was also noted that such an influx of new Members could affect the equilibrium. One Member stated that he felt more continuity would be beneficial, stating that on his committee (Environment and Communications) only one of the 9 had previously been a Member of Parliament.
- Seating arrangements in the Althingi (pic): A ballot is held annually whereby Members are allocated random seats within the Chamber. This appeared to be universally acknowledged to be a positive thing. The exceptions would be Ministers who sit facing the Members of the legislature.
- The Speaker of Althingi has six Deputy Speakers. They form the Speaker's Committee that decides issues affecting Althingi. The Speaker also co-operates with the chairmen of the party groups in organising the agenda of the assembly. The Speaker retains the right to vote. The process of electing the Speaker and the Deputies reflects the composition and balance of power among the political parties.
- The Parliament meets Monday to Thursday with Committee meetings usually in the morning. Plenaries started midafternoon (usually a 15:00 start until approx. 20:00). In person only.
- Members' working hours tended to be from approximately 09:00 to 20:00
- The Parliament has 110 members of staff:
- Icelandic parliament members dedicate two weeks each year to working in their constituencies. During this time, they engage in various activities to connect with their constituents and address local issues. These activities typically include:
 - Holding meetings with local residents, businesses, and community groups to understand their concerns and gather feedback.
 - Visiting local institutions such as schools, hospitals, and social services to assess their needs and support.
 - Attending local events and functions to maintain a visible presence and show support for community initiatives.
 - Conducting site visits to infrastructure projects and other significant developments in the area.

- Collaborating with local authorities to address specific regional challenges and opportunities.
- The purpose of the exercise is to maintain local links and 'sense-check' the parliamentary activity against the reality of the needs of the population.
- Members have no dedicated support staff though the political groups do. Each political party represented in the Althingi appoints its own staff. These appointments are typically made by the party leadership and include roles such as political advisors, communication officers, and administrative support.
- There appears to be a culture of Members focusing almost exclusively on Parliamentary activity. Members tend not to have offices in constituencies nor staff who do case work.
- The Althingy has a system whereby if a Member is absent for more than 5 days, the Member is substituted by the next person on the electoral list. For example one Member was recently representing the Parliament at a NATO conference and the next person on the list was drafted in for that period.
- Reykjavik Members in particular would do very little direct engagement on individual constituency matters / cases. It may be that municipality level elected Members do more of this work. It was suggested that the situation was slightly different in the context of Members from further afield to Reykjavik..

In terms of engagement with the public, Icelandic Members stated that social media had been transformative in engaging with the public.

Committees

- Committees do not meet in public and the sessions are not broadcast (unlike their plenaries).
- Committees meet twice a week. Members usually sit on two committees.
- The Parliament elect the committees and the Committee then elects a Chair.

- Staff for parliamentary committees are appointed based on the needs of the committee and the expertise required. These appointments are often made in consultation with the committee chair and members.
- Committees undertake limited policy inquiries, though there are examples of this. Their focus is on legislation. The Welfare Committee, for instance, told us they can undertake such work for the Parliament and can also propose legislation but this was not common. They are usually scrutinising and discussing Bills.
- The Althingi adopts around 80 laws per year. Each committee is responsible for examining various legislative proposals, amendments, and related matters before they are debated and voted on by the full parliament.
- The exact number of pieces of legislation scrutinised by each committee can vary depending on the committee's focus and the legislative agenda for the year.
- The ability of committees to direct their own programmes is limited as it is dictated, to a large extent, to the Government programme and the legislation they propose.
- The Welfare Committee had 20 Bills to work on this year. Within a 4 year Parliamentary cycle, a committee could be considering 100 Bills.
- The importance of parliamentary staff was raised by the Llywydd and how critical such support was for Members.
- It would appear that in Iceland, they utilise a primary law making process for regulations and Committees (and therefore all Members) are involved in very specific policy discussions rather than scrutinising framework Bills and Bills that afford Ministers with regulation making powers as is more common in the Senedd. Some of the delegation suggested that this was a democratic approach enabling detailed scrutiny on the policy which directly impacted citizens.
- The Committee Members discussed the implications of the list system and how Member behaviour and practice may change in relation to responding to constituents.

One Member referred to the rigid timetable in the Parliament which provided limited flexibility in terms of ways of working (including working

from home). They were essentially required to attend the estate but they were also quick to acknowledge the privilege of being a Member.

Welfare Committee: Icelandic Parliament



Photo: Senedd Delegation with Members of the Althingi Welfare Committee.

- The Chair had been elected the morning of the meeting following the promotion of the previous Chair to be Children’s Minister. The new Chair was [Kolbrún Áslaugar Baldursdóttir](#) and Kristján Þórður Snæbjarnarson attended as Deputy Chair.
- The Welfare committee remit includes health and pension insurance, social services, housing, labour market affairs and health services.
- 20 Bills to consider before the summer recess.
- Some of the Bills would relate to ensuring alignment to EEA and the EU.

- Currently considering statutory grief leave. This was an example of the level of detail within the legislation considered by the Committee. This work related to the consideration of parental leave and support for parents with multiple children. The Welsh delegation suggested that such matters would be subject to Ministerial regulations in Wales and would therefore lack the same level of influence and scrutiny. It was suggested that such work would be a welcome addition in engaging the public on some of the more detailed issues which have a direct impact on the public.
- Russell George asked what could account for the high levels of physical activity but also rising levels of obesity in Iceland. One Member suggested that active travel was a particular weakness in the public policy make-up. This owed to poor public transport and over reliance on car use.
- To address the growing rates of overweight and obesity, the Icelandic government has implemented measures to encourage healthier eating habits. These include:
 - setting nutritional standards for school meals;
 - prohibiting food and beverage advertisements on TV and radio during peak child audience times;
 - adopting the Nordic keyhole nutrition label (also used in Denmark, Norway and Sweden) to highlight healthier choices within product categories, and in 2020, Iceland released its first clinical guidelines for managing obesity in adults.

However, despite these efforts and initiatives, limited progress has been observed thus far.

- Iceland provides universal health coverage through a mostly publicly funded health system, primarily funded through government revenue. Patients have to meet some of the costs of healthcare, like primary care visits and outpatient pharmaceuticals, but patient contributions are capped each month and there are exemptions, including all hospital care and treatment.
- The healthcare system in Iceland operates under an integrated purchaser-provider model, which means the government serves as both the payer and the owner of most healthcare organisations. Policy, administration and financing are centralised at the national level, but Iceland is divided into 7 districts for delivering healthcare services. Each

region has at least one main hospital and all hospitals are publicly owned.

- The Senedd's Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee also queried as to the effect of having a relatively small population on access to specialist health care. This depended on the kind of specialism but it would often be the case that the healthcare would be procured from overseas, very often in Denmark and Sweden (where Icelanders will access some cancer treatments). There are specific agreements between Nordic countries that allow for easier access to healthcare services across borders. These agreements help streamline the process for patients seeking specialized care.
- The Nordic countries, including Iceland, Denmark, and Sweden, have a long tradition of cooperation in healthcare. This includes shared research initiatives and clinical collaborations, which facilitate access to specialized treatments
- Health Insurance Coverage: Iceland's public health insurance system covers the cost of treatments abroad when necessary.
- The Welfare Committee would ordinarily complete its work on a Bill in 4 to 5 weeks. Their ability to shape their own work programme is limited due to the focus on legislation proposed by the Executive, however there are examples of time-sensitive policy inquiries. For instance, there was a short inquiry related to emergency health flights within Iceland linked to logistical issues. It was deemed an important piece of work which facilitated a public discussion and made stakeholders feel that their voices had been heard.
- Russell George MS asked about access to emergency health care – patients are often driven by ambulance or flown to access emergency medical services.

Environment and Communications Committee: Icelandic Parliament



Photo: Senedd delegation with Members of the Althingi Environment and Communication Committee.

- New Members – one was a former Director of Energy Affairs at Iceland's National Energy Authority and another was previously the mayor of Reykjavik.
- Llyr Gruffydd MS (Chair of CCEI Committee) asked whether they had statutory targets relating to climate change.
- The Government of Iceland has set a target to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2040. It describes its emissions profile as follows:

Iceland's emissions profile is in many ways unusual. Almost all heating and electricity generation is provided for by renewables – hydro and geothermal energy. Iceland has great potential for carbon uptake from the atmosphere by afforestation and revegetation, and to curb emissions from soils by reclaiming drained wetlands. The biggest sources of

emissions (outside land use) are industrial processes, road transport, agriculture, fisheries and waste management.

- Much use is made of geothermal energy, eg heating Reykjavík, steam for industrial energy, vegetable farming in greenhouses. Its greenhouse gas emissions per capita are higher than most European countries.
- The Government of Iceland published its first climate adaptation strategy in 2021. One Member said her concern was whether or not the plan in place would facilitate the targets being met.
- Given they rely on geothermal energy for households, the main issues for them include Electric Vehicles, shipping and flights.
- The alignment and coherence with the bigger picture when it comes to renewables and the link to the climate goals was an ongoing consideration. Members questioned whether Iceland are innovating to power Aluminium production or Data storage centres and stalling environmental progress by simply mitigating the damage done by others who may wish to benefit from offsetting their negative activity?
- They may be increasing production, albeit through greener methods, however what is the end goal and objective?
- The attraction that Iceland appears to be for international companies is noticeable but are their motivations ethical and environmentally progressive?
- Committee Members said it was a formidable agenda which requires time and expertise and some concern was raised of the committee's inability to pursue this given the number of Bills it has to consider. From March to June, they have 21 Bills.
- One Member said she would like to see a strategic map, digging into the detail and achieving a holistic perspective.
- A forensic policy approach is needed, with expert input. That is a challenge for both Government and the committee, and addressing this coherently and comprehensively within a 4 year electoral cycle is challenging.
- Food resilience and security is an important issue for both Iceland and Wales. Llyr Gruffydd MS said that Wales was importing too much. Iceland utilizes greenhouse farming to cultivate vegetables and fruits.

Greenhouses are heated using geothermal energy. Iceland's focus on sustainability and innovation in food production, combined with its extensive use of renewable energy has been positive, though continued investment and innovation is required.

- Asked whether wind generated energy was a priority in Iceland. It was noted that, although less prominent, wind energy is also part of Iceland's renewable energy mix, supporting the overall energy infrastructure. They are examining the Norwegian experience in this context.
- There is concern regarding moving too quickly without a clear framework from the start to ensure an appropriate approach. Planning of such initiatives need to be sensitive and anchored in local community needs.
- As with hydro energy, there is concern in some quarters that the pendulum is shifting too quickly towards wind turbines.
- On a positive note the Member stated that the big investments made 10 years ago in renewable energy sources was bearing fruit but that the investment is critical.



Photo: The Senedd delegation on a site visit to Hellisheiði Geothermal Plant and the Carbfix CO2 capturing facilities.

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Courtesy call on the President of Iceland, H.E. Ms. Halla Tómasdóttir, at the Official Residence Bessastaðir.



The delegation was shown the artwork within the official residence. The President is enthusiastic of promoting the work of young Icelandic female artists. The President and the Llywydd discussed the importance of profiling the issue of gender equality and understanding the historic contribution of women to social and political life. The President reflected on the women in leadership roles in Iceland at the moment. In addition to her role, this included the Prime Minister, the Speaker, the National Police Commissioner, the mayor of Reykjavik and the Bishop.

There was a wide ranging discussion about the current international context and Iceland's place in the world as well as Wales' relatively recent development of the Welsh Parliament.

The President explained her role as patron of the Wellbeing Economy Forum. The delegation discussed how wellbeing had featured in policy and legislative discussions in Wales. They referred to the passing of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 which puts in place seven well-being goals and the

delegation offered to facilitate contact between the President's office and representatives from Welsh Government to consider potential representation at the Wellbeing Economy Forum.

Conclusion

The delegation benefitted from having an insight into both the workings of the Icelandic Parliament and also the policy and legislative matters with which their parliamentarians are engaged.

The itinerary was exceptional and the Speaker, Committee Members and Parliamentary officials gave their time generously. Each meeting was engaging and the exchange of knowledge and experience between our parliaments was most interesting.

It is very much hoped that the parliamentary links made during this visit can be maintained and that there will be opportunities for representatives from Althingi to visit the Senedd in due course.