

Amending Standing Orders: Standing Order 12.19 (Open Debates)

January 2025

In accordance with Standing Order 11.7(iv), the Business Committee is responsible for making recommendations on the general practice and procedures of the Senedd, including any proposals for the re-making or revision of Standing Orders.

This report recommends a change to Standing Order 12.19 in order to allow a new format of debate, Open Debates, which would proceed on the basis of a topic instead of a motion.

The Senedd is invited to approve the proposal to revise the Standing Order as outlined at Annex A. The amended Standing Order, if approved, is at Annex B.



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1. Background

1. On 30 May 2024, Mark Drakeford MS, Adam Price MS, Jane Dodds MS and Paul Davies MS wrote to the Llywydd as Chair of the Business Committee to propose a trial of a new form of occasional debates on *“the key political choices which motivate Senedd members and which underpin the practical actions which different political parties propose”*. The Members also proposed a number of experiments in format. The letter can be seen at Annex C.

2. The Business Committee considered the letter at its meeting on 11 June 2024 and agreed to consider the proposal further. The Committee subsequently considered options for a new debate format on 16 July and 22 October and also consulted with party groups and the Members who had made the original proposal. On 10 December 2024, the Business Committee agreed to proceed with a trial of the new form of debate.

3. The Business Committee’s intention is to trial an open, deliberative form of debate, which will be known as ‘Open Debates’. The key features of the trial are set out below:

- Three debates to be scheduled on a termly basis during 2025, commencing in the spring term.
- The first debate to be scheduled for 120 minutes, with the Business Committee to review this following the debate.
- Debates to proceed on the basis of topics rather than motions, akin to Short Debates. There will be no amendments and no vote.
- Members will be invited to propose potential topics for debate, for selection by the Business Committee.
- The Member(s) who originally propose a topic selected for a debate will make the opening and closing contributions, with no further stipulations on order of speakers.
- Members of the Government will be able to contribute, though not in the form of a reply.
- Members will be facilitated to contribute more than once during a debate, and interventions will also be encouraged.

- The Business Committee will assess the trial following the final debate in the autumn term of 2025, to enable conclusions on the success or otherwise of the new format to be reached.

2. Change required to Standing Order 12.19

4. In order to enable a debate to proceed on the basis of a topic instead of a substantive motion in the manner proposed above, a change to Standing Order 12.19 is required. The proposed change to Standing Order 12.19 is outlined at Annex A.

5. The change would provide for an additional category of Plenary business which may proceed without a motion, and mirrors the existing provision for Short Debates. As such a provision would simply enable Open Debates to take place and neither the current Business Committee, nor any future one, would be required to schedule them, the Business Committee is not proposing that the addition to Standing Orders is made on a temporary basis. However, the continuation of the Standing Order will form part of the review following the conclusion of the trial.

3. Other matters to note

6. The Business Committee proposes that the ability for Members to be able to contribute on more than one occasion during an Open Debate, as suggested by the Members who made the initial proposal, will be enabled through inviting the Senedd to agree to suspend Standing Order 13.6 prior to each Open Debate. The other intended features of Open Debates outlined above will be set out in guidance to allow flexibility for the format to be adjusted as necessary during the trial.

7. The Business Committee considers that this approach is more proportionate for the purposes of the trial than the creation of a new Standing Order. The necessity of specific Standing Orders relating to this item of business will form part of the review that will follow the conclusion of the trial.

4. Decision

8. On 21 January 2025 the Business Committee formally agreed to propose this change to Standing Order 12.19. The Senedd is invited to approve the proposed new Standing Order 12.19 (vii) at Annex B.

9. The Senedd is also invited to note that detailed guidance will be issued by the Llywydd in accordance with Standing Order 6.17 – following consultation with the Business Committee – to cover selection of topics for debate, order of speakers, nature of contributions and interventions, contribution time limits and other matters relevant to the trial of Open Debates.

Annex A: Standing Order change and explanatory notes

STANDING ORDER 12 – Business in Plenary Meetings	
Motions	Retain heading
12.19. Business in plenary meetings must proceed on the basis of motions proposed, except for: (i) statements; (ii) introduction of new Members; (iii) obituary tributes to former Members and others; (iv) oral questions; (v) urgent debates under Standing Order 12.69; (vi) where a Member proposes a topic for a Short Debate under Standing Order 12.72; and, <u>(vii) where a Member proposes a topic for an Open Debate.</u>	Amend Standing Order In order to allow Open Debates to proceed on the basis of a topic rather than a motion.

Annex B: Standing Order 12.19 as amended

STANDING ORDER 12.19

Motions

- 12.19. Business in plenary meetings must proceed on the basis of motions proposed, except for:
- (i) statements;
 - (ii) introduction of new Members;
 - (iii) obituary tributes to former Members and others;
 - (iv) oral questions;
 - (v) urgent debates under Standing Order 12.69;
 - (vi) where a Member proposes a topic for a Short Debate under Standing Order 12.72; and,
 - (vii) where a Member proposes a topic for an Open Debate.

Annex C: Letter from Members

Annwyl Llywydd

We write with a proposition which we hope you will be willing to discuss at the next meeting of the Business Committee.

Wednesday afternoons at the Senedd follow a pattern which has been in place for many years. In the last term, a number of important but relatively modest changes were introduced, but essentially the bulk of time continues to be deployed in a way which would have been recognisable at any time in the last twenty years.

Not only has the form of Wednesday afternoons remained static, but the content has also settled into a familiar and predictable pattern. The Senedd debates important policy issues. Strangely, for a political forum, however, it almost never explicitly debates political perspectives or the underlying values and ideas which underpin the policy choices which are proposed or opposed.

We would like to suggest a modest new experiment, in which time would be set aside, once in each half term to discuss and debate the *key political choices* which motivate Senedd members and which underpin the practical actions which different political parties propose.

The working title of the debates we propose is 'The case for.....'.

The topics for debate would focus on key political ideas such as: 'The case for equality'. 'The case for taxation'; 'The case for immigration' and so on.

It may be that such a debate could be conducted on a 'take note' basis, without any final vote. Or a debate could culminate with a vote on the proposition that 'The case for has been made', with Members voting for or against that proposal.

We believe that this new content could be accompanied by some experiments in format. If the Business Committee agrees, the debate could be scheduled for longer than usual; Member contributions could be freed of the usual time constraints; Government participation could be encouraged, but not in the usual form of a 'reply' to the debate, but rather by way of broader contribution.

For such an experiment to be tested properly, we believe that a series of debates of the sort we propose in would be necessary. It is likely to take some time before the format settles down, and before those who report the Senedd to the outside world take notice of this new element its proceedings. If a debate of this sort, once in each half term could be agreed, that would provide for three occasions in the rest of this calendar year. That would seem to us to be the minimum length for an experiment which could be reviewed at that point.

We would, of course, be very happy to discuss any of the content of this letter.

Yours sincerely,

Mark Drakeford

On behalf of Mark Drakeford MS, Adam Price MS, Jane Dodds MS and Paul Davies MS