

# **The Northern Ireland Assembly Committees**

## **Giving Evidence Peter Hall**

# Committee functions

## **Northern Ireland Act 1998**

*“advise and assist each Northern Ireland minister in the formulation of policy with respect to matters within his/her responsibilities as a minister”*

## **Good Friday Agreement 1998**

- scrutiny, policy development and consultation role
- Initiation of legislation
- Consider and advise on departmental budgets
- Approve secondary legislation and take Committee stage of primary legislation
- Initiate enquiries and make reports
- Consider matters brought by its Minister

# Inquiries

- How significant is the power to hold inquiries?
- Opportunity to focus on an issue in depth
- Address topical issues
- Call for evidence
- Hear from stakeholders
- Conclusions informed by evidence
- Recommendations to Ministers to act on an issue
- Ministerial responses to Committee inquiries

# Inquiry Process

- Committee agrees an inquiry. Clerk will draw up terms of reference to be agreed by the Committee.
- Committee issues a call for evidence.
- On receiving the written submissions, the Clerk will summarise and present recommendations to the Committee on who to call for oral evidence. Members will also make suggestions as to potential witnesses.
- When agreed, the Clerk will issue formal invitations to witnesses. A wide range of views will be sought.
- All evidence sessions are held in public session.

# Inquiry Process

- Evidence is considered and analysed.
- Committee publishes report detailing its examination of the issue and conclusions and recommendations.
- Report sent to the relevant Minister(s) seeking comments on the Committee recommendations.
- Committee will table a motion for a debate on the Committee report to discuss the findings.

# Responding to call for evidence

- **Be strategic.** What you want to achieve? Simple opposition might not be the best strategy.
- **Stick to the point.** Your submission must be relevant.
- **Use reason and logic.** State your points clearly and back them up with explanation, reasons and evidence.
- **Use direct and simple language.**
- **Be concise and straightforward.**
- **Be correct and complete.** Double-check all your facts and evidence for accuracy.
- **Make it clear what you want to happen – or not happen.** Start with a summary of your general position and end with your recommendations. Be specific about the parts of a proposal you want changed.
- **Get it in on time!**

# Effective Presentations

## PREPARATION IN ADVANCE

- **Understand the environment.** Sit in the audience at a hearing or go to a Committee meeting.
- **Ask how the evidence session will run.** Committee officials will tell you what to expect and the deadlines you have to meet.
- **Be prepared for media interest.** Meetings are also recorded.
- **Be strategic.** Most Committees will only allow around 10 mins for your presentation, followed by questions from Members. Use it wisely.
- **Shared views.** Think about making a joint oral submission. Maximum 4 witnesses can sit at the table.
- **Be prepared for questions.** The Committee might want to question some of your arguments and even debate with you. Anticipate the questions they might ask or issues they might challenge you on.

# Effective Presentations

## AT THE MEETING

- **Arrive early.** Get a feel for the setup; watch how Committee Members listen and respond to the speakers before you.
- **Introduce yourself.** Who you are and why you are there.
- **Don't just read your submission or make a formal speech.**
- **Make your strongest points.** There's no need to cover every point in your written submission. Talk about what you think is your most convincing argument. If you want to mention all your points, spend more time on your strongest argument.
- **Be fresh and persuasive.** The Committee probably has to listen to lots of submissions at one sitting, many of them negative. You are at the hearing to make a point, to make impact to what you have written.



# Communicating with Committees

There are a number of ways in which community organisations, stakeholders and individuals can communicate with Committees:

- Speak to your local MLAs – they will have party colleagues on the Committee and can liaise with them on your behalf
- Write to the Committee on your specific issue. Again, **be strategic** in the issue you wish to bring to their attention
- Answer Calls for Evidence during Inquiries or Committee Stages of Bills.
- Express interest and/or attend stakeholder events
- Write to the Chair or the Committee Clerk