



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Environment

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Local Government Bill: Consideration of
Stakeholder Responses

21 November 2013

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for the Environment

Local Government Bill: Consideration of Stakeholder Responses

21 November 2013

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Anna Lo (Chairperson)
Ms Pam Brown (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr Ian McCrea
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr Peter Weir

The Chairperson: A list of all the organisations that have made submissions after the Committee's call for evidence under the Local Government Bill is at page 136 of members' packs. Copies of all the submissions received are in the packs at pages 138 to 342. That is your homework for the weekend, members, before the stakeholder event next Thursday. The initial oral evidence sessions have been scheduled for the meetings on the 5 and 12 December. Are members content that representatives of the Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA), the local government auditor, Community Places and NIPSA be invited to brief us?

Mr Boylan: I agree that there is plenty of homework. I got a chance to look at some of the submissions, and this is a good opportunity for us to tease out the issues. As we are doing only one stakeholder event, we should try to group people who have the same issues with the clauses. That is how we normally do it.

The Chairperson: That will mean more work for the staff this week rather than for us.

Mr Boylan: I take it that some questions have been formulated to be asked in addition to the ones that we will be asking so that we get a breakdown on where the main issues are. Community planning is a main issue, and, from what I have read, the code of conduct has also raised its head. It would be good to get a broad overview of the main issues raising their heads.

The Committee Clerk: That will be in the pack next week.

The Chairperson: What pack will that be in?

The Committee Clerk: The pack for the meeting on 28 November. The stakeholder event will be a formal meeting.

The Chairperson: Can we have that well in advance? Members usually get it on the Monday.

The Committee Clerk: Yes.

The Chairperson: OK. Then, you can have a look. We will go with separate discussions on different parts of the Bill.

The Committee Clerk: Yes.

Mr Boylan: That is a good enough format.

The Chairperson: With the Planning Bill and the Marine Bill, we asked one organisation to do a quick presentation. Are we going to do the same this time?

The Assistant Committee Clerk: I am not sure about the timing.

The Committee Clerk: We could, but it would be very short notice.

Mr Weir: A presentation is not particularly necessary. There are 200-odd pages of comments. The stakeholders will object to and agree with various things. The sheer wealth of the responses means that the issue at the event will be containing people. With the best will in the world, a briefing session would eat into time when the big problem will be the time constraint. When we do the clause-by-clause scrutiny, there will be briefings. At this stage, we have to try to get people to deal with the more thematic side of the Bill. There will be a temptation for people to delve into vast amounts of detail on particular clauses. There is a lot of genuine stuff, but I suspect that a whole stable of hobby horses will be ridden as well.

The Chairperson: How will we go about it then? We are talking about parts or themes.

The Committee Clerk: We could ask some of the major people. We were thinking of asking Community Places, which represents quite a number of organisations, to take the lead initially on community planning, and then the other stakeholders can come in. That was the idea. We will get a lead stakeholder on each theme and ask them to start the discussion but not in a formal or lengthy presentation.

The Chairperson: Yes, a couple of minutes for them to talk about it. That was the form that we used with the other two Bills. We will give them two or three minutes to start up the discussion, and other people can then come in. We will have microphones for people.

The Committee Clerk: Hansard will be recording it for us.

The Chairperson: They can state their name and the organisation that they come from and then make their statement. Are members happy with that?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: All the organisations that responded with written submissions have been invited to the stakeholder event on 28 November. Do members agree that the submissions that we received should be published on the website? There is no problem with that.

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Are you content to have the Bill folder on a SharePoint SkyDrive, which is the same as the meeting packs, rather than in hard copy?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Anyone who wants a hard copy should let the Committee staff know.

Mr Weir: The number of responses looks pretty comprehensive; nobody immediately leaps out as missing. Are there any organisations that you are surprised did not send a response? Any ones that I can think of seem to have responded.

The Committee Clerk: There are a number of umbrella groups. Community Places represents, I think, about 25 organisations, although some of those organisations have provided their own

submissions. Some people have sent in submissions to say that they agree with other submissions that they have contributed to, but, overall, I do not think that are any glaring omissions.

The Chairperson: I met the Woodland Trust yesterday, and it did not know that we were calling for submissions to the Local Government Bill. It has issues with tree cutting by local councils and wants to send a late submission. I just want to add that. I said that I would ask members if they agree.

Mr Weir: I appreciate that, and I am not sure that we will be glad to receive it. I met Patrick on other issues, but people have to be focused and understand that we are really looking for submissions on this legislation as opposed to them saying, "Here is an issue that we have with local government in general." People have to be aware that whatever is in legislation will not be a panacea on every issue out there in local government that they want sorted out.

The Chairperson: I think that it wants a bit more consistency between local councils. It said that some have tree protection officers who look at tree protection orders and all sorts of things. That would be in line with the planning function that will be given.

Mr Weir: It is very loosely connected with the legislation. I am not unsympathetic to the general point that you are making, but, in theory, if everything that everybody wants in local government is put into the Bill, we will be here for the next 10 years.

The Chairperson: Anyway, it said that it would send it in, and I said that I would see whether members will accept it as a late submission. We will see whether it does.

Assembly broadcasting has asked members to keep tablets away from the microphones and to turn off phones, if anybody has their phone on.

Are there any other organisations that members want to invite to next Thursday's event?

Mr Boylan: As long as we have covered a broad spectrum of the people who need to respond to the Bill, it is OK. We have noticed in other circumstances that, for example, the green lobby was an amalgamation of some groups coming to speak on its behalf. It is grand. I think that we have covered it fairly well.

The Assistant Committee Clerk: It seems to be under the Community Places banner.

Mr Boylan: That is grand if Community Places is representing that side of things and is content.

The Committee Clerk: You can include them in the evidence sessions subsequently if we need to.

The Chairperson: Which ones?

The Committee Clerk: Any other organisations.

The Chairperson: OK.