

Committee on Procedures Inquiry into
Members' Statements

SDLP Response – October 2020

The SDLP welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Committee on Procedures' inquiry into Members' Statements and believes, in general, that creating a more flexible space for members to make statements in the Assembly chamber is a welcome proposal that would allow MLAs to more freely raise issues of concern to constituents.

While there is no longstanding tradition of individual members statements in the Westminster tradition, or indeed in any of the devolved legislatures, outside of those statements required to address particular standards issues, there are more well international approaches. In particular, the SDLP favours the approaches adopted in the Australian House of Representatives and the Canadian House of Commons which, to varying degrees, provide members with substantial latitude to raise issues in the chamber in a strictly time-limited way.

The SDLP notes that there are already mechanisms for MLAs to raise specific urgent issues through a Matter of the Day or an Urgent Oral Question. Any move to introduce a new mechanism, therefore, should seek to avoid replication of those methods available to members to raise issues of an urgent nature. We acknowledge, however, that these tools require adjudication against a set of criteria which, at times, constrain the ability of members to raise contemporary issues that have been brought to their attention.

The Committee Chair has sought views on a number of questions which we have detailed our response to below. Notwithstanding these responses, the SDLP would recommend further conversations with the Australian and Canadian Parliamentary authorities about the operation of members statements in these jurisdictions with a view to implementing a short, sharp, time-bound system of statements in the Assembly.

- How frequently Members should have the opportunity to make statements

The SDLP believes that members should have regular opportunities to raise issues of concern on the floor of the Assembly. These issues should not be limited to local matters but may include urgent issues at a local, regional or international level. Given the fast moving nature of such issues, the SDLP would support a time-limited opportunity for members to make statements during each Assembly sitting.

The timing for each contribution and the overall allocated time should be robustly enforced by the Chair.

- How long any period for statements should last

The SDLP believes that the time available for members to make a statement should be strictly limited to maximise the number of members able to make a contribution. The period for statements could mirror the period for oral questions and last for thirty minutes.

- At what point during a sitting Members' Statements should be scheduled, as well as whether it should be at a set time for each sitting or flexible

The SDLP believes that Members' statements would most logically follow Question Time and members would benefit from a fixed time. We have no objection to a more flexible approach, however.

- The process by which members are chosen to make a statement

The SDLP believes that maximum flexibility should be used to allow members to make a statement but understand that this may prove logistically difficult during busy sittings. It may be useful for members to submit their names in advance of a sitting to the Assembly Business Office.

- What time limit there should be on each individual statement

The time limits used in other legislatures are very restrictive but the SDLP agrees that a short, sharp limit is required to avoid long winded contributions. We favour a limit in the region of 2-3 minutes.

- Whether there should be any formal restrictions what Members might say in their statements

The SDLP believes that the terms of members statements should be framed to avoid overlap with urgent questions and Matters of the Day. Content may therefore be usefully limited to constituency issues or important global issues.