

The Speaker



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Mrs Carál Ní Chuilín MLA
Chairperson, Committee on Procedures
Room 247
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BELFAST
BT4 3XX

3 February 2020

Dear *Carál*

SUPPORT AVAILABLE FOR PRIVATE MEMBERS' BILLS (PMBs)

I have today published guidance for Members on the support available for PMBs and I also announced the key changes at the start of today's plenary business.

The right to initiate legislation is enshrined in the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement, and I am keen to support Members in bringing forward PMBs to enact changes in the law which make a difference to the lives of their constituents. To this end, I authorise guidance to Members, and the Bill Office manages the support service in adherence to this guidance and where necessary in liaison with me.

In addition to publishing the guidance for 2020-22, to ensure that all Members who wish to bring forward PMBs can be supported, there will be an expansion of the staffing and financial resources provided for this purpose, including the establishment of a dedicated Non-Executive Bills Team. However, I am also mindful of the limited time available for the rest of this mandate.

In 2016, the Committee on Procedures began a review of Assembly's procedures relating to PMBs but was unable to complete it when the Assembly dissolved for the early election in 2017. I would be grateful if the Committee would consider returning to this issue to review the PMB system so that any further improvements could be in place after the 2022 election.

The Committee itself will of course decide the remit of any review but areas which might merit a careful and comparative examination include:

- Whether the system for support is fair, appropriate and a good use of public resources.
- Variations and limitations of the right to table PMBs in other legislatures
- Whether there are any issues arising from the nature of the special circumstances of the Assembly, which need to be taken into account.

I am also advised that it is usual for certain provisions about such a service to be made in Standing Orders. Therefore, the Committee could make an important contribution by deciding if provisions are required in our procedures such as:

- Whether there should be scheduled/dedicated plenary days for PMB business.
- Whether there should be mechanisms by which a proposal must pass a simple majority or other measure of support before being provided with resources to be developed further.
- Arrangements to allow Members to legislate as a group and for all their names to be attached to it.
- How Assembly plenary time can be maximised and prioritised towards the end of the mandate, when the level of PMBs and Executive legislation are likely to create significant pressures on Assembly business.

Finally, there is one other related matter which it would be helpful for the Committee to consider. There has been a steadily consistent use by Members of the ability to prepare and submit their own PMBs, independent of Bill Office support. In some instances, this is done with the support of lobbying interests. I am keen to minimise any inequity between those Members who rely on support from the Bill Office and those who have access to independent or external support.

There is also a public interest in ensuring transparency about how such support is being provided. While these bills are in order, I do not think it is unreasonable to consider whether some degree of process should apply to them to ensure that any potential issues or errors have been resolved before they have been submitted.

The growing interest from Members in bringing forward PMBs is to be welcomed, and I hope that the Committee on Procedures will share my desire to provide high quality and equitable support to Members in their roles as legislators.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Alex". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above a horizontal line that extends to the right.

ALEX MASKEY MLA