

Committee on Procedures Inquiry into Private Members' Bills (PMBs)

Pam Cameron MLA Written Evidence

Thank you for the opportunity to share my experience of the Private Member's Bill process (PMB). As you are aware, I was delighted to introduce my PMB to amend the original Autism Act (Northern Ireland) (2011) into the Assembly in July 2021.

As the Chairperson of the All Party Group on Autism (APGA) I was approached by the APGA to develop a PMB to amend and strengthen the Autism Act, a previous PMB introduced by Dominic Bradley SDLP.

With no prior experience of the PMB process, I was initially concerned how complicated the process would be. However, I have found the process to have clear laid out stages thanks to the hard work, guidance and accessibility of the Bill's Office. I have only reached the Committee stage of this process, but have been incredibly grateful for the support and constructive words I have received so far.

I have highlighted the provided terms of reference I feel are relevant for me to comment:

- i. **Examine whether the system of support currently in place for PMBs is fair, appropriate and a good use of public resources.**

I have been very impressed with the current system in place for PMBs. I have found the process to be clear, and the support and guidance from the Bill's Office to be invaluable.

I have also found the option of access to RaISe and the ability to request further research on the topic valuable.

I have found the process requires a substantial amount of Member resource, along with that provided by the Bill's Office. Therefore, the extent to which it is a good use of public resources, would depend on how many Bills are successfully passed through the Assembly. For example, if my PMB were to make it to the last stage of the process and then fall, it could not be considered a good use of public resources.

iv) To consider whether committees, if they so choose, should be able to include the sponsor of a PMB as an ex-officio member of that committee during the appropriate stages of the passage of the PMB in order to allow the sponsor to ask questions of witnesses and thus provide necessary clarity to the committee.

I have found myself in the position wherein I am Deputy Chair of the Health Committee, and the sponsor of a PMB currently being scrutinised by the Health Committee.

Although I am not the first Member to be in this position, it did give me some concerns around inappropriate blurring of lines of between these roles. I have relied on the guidance of Committee Clerks to ensure I am acting appropriately in my role as a Committee Member, and not overstepping by acting as a Bill Sponsor when I am not presenting to the Committee in that capacity.

From my experience, I am not sure it would be helpful for a PMB Sponsor to be included as an ex-officio member to ask questions of witnesses.

The development of my PMB resulted from an identified need by many within the autism community. I believe the history and context around this issue is vital in understanding why a PMB had to be developed, and why the current legislation was not fit to meet that need.

The committee process has involved a call to evidence wherein any individual or organisation that wished to comment on the PMB as it was introduced could do so. This process has also involved the Health Committee identifying relevant Stakeholders, and Committee Members being able to propose stakeholders, to give evidence on the PMB. I as a Sponsor, have been invited to discuss the PMB and allowed to bring relevant individuals with me for support. I have also been invited to provide a response to the committee after the stakeholder session. If I were not a Health Committee Member, I would still have access to these evidence sessions. I believe this process, and the prior second stage debate Committee Members will likely have partaken in, provides the Sponsor ample opportunity to outline the necessary rationale and provide sufficient clarity to the committee.

I feel the role of an ex-officio member may not be necessary, and may confuse the roles of Committee Member and Sponsor. Moreover, as a PMB is a considerable commitment for a

Member, an ex-officio role could become a difficult commitment when balancing the PMB workload alongside other Committee roles and duties, and constituency duties.

Vii) 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

As previously mentioned, I have been very impressed with the resource and support provided by the Bill's Office. However, having witnessed the amount of Assembly resource which goes into the development of a PMB, there may be a need to consider mechanisms to safeguard this Assembly resource. If a PMB were to be developed, pass many stages and then fall due to a lack of Assembly support, I would consider this a waste of Assembly time and resources. However, I am also aware that my PMB went through many substantive changes from the original proposal, the post-public consultation proposal, to the final proposal which was introduced. Therefore, it would be difficult to measure a level of support for a proposal, given how it may change. Perhaps consideration could be given to whether there is a need for legislation to address the issue, rather than if a particular proposal would address the issue, given the need for flexibility especially in the early stages of developing a PMB.