



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

Assembly and Executive Review Committee

**Stakeholder 'Call for Evidence' Paper on Review
Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly**

Section 1
Stakeholder Details

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Stakeholder Name	Telephone Number		
Alliance Party of Northern Ireland	(028) 90		
Stakeholder Address	Stakeholder Type (Include one or more X)		
88 University Street, Belfast. BT7 1HE	Registered Political Party	x	Local Government
	Academic		Government
	Legislature		Non-Government
	Other (Please Specify)/ Member of the Public		
Please provide some background information on your role as a stakeholder			
<p>The Alliance Party is Northern Ireland’s fifth largest political party, with two Ministerial portfolios in the Northern Ireland Executive, eight seats in the Northern Ireland Assembly, one in the House of Commons, and 43 local councillors.</p>			
Guidelines for Completion of Submissions			
<p>The Committee would ask that stakeholders submit <u>electronic</u> responses using this pro forma.</p> <p>Stakeholders should be aware that their written evidence will be discussed by the Committee in public session and included in the Committee’s published Report.</p> <p>Stakeholders should also be aware that if they decide to publish their submissions, the publication would not be covered by Assembly privilege in relation to the law of defamation.</p>			

Section 2

Introduction

Powers

- 2.1. The Assembly and Executive Review Committee is a Standing Committee established in accordance with Section 29A and 29B of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (“the 1998 Act”) and Standing Order 59 which, amongst other powers, provide for the Committee to:
- I. make a report to the Secretary of State, the Assembly and the Executive Committee, by no later than 1 May 2015, on the operation of Parts III and IV of the Northern Ireland Act 1998; and
 - II. consider such other matters relating to the functioning of the Assembly or the Executive as may be referred to it by the Assembly.

Assembly and Executive Review Committee’s Terms of Reference for and approach to this Review

- 2.2. The Committee agreed the **Terms of Reference** of this Review on **24 June 2014** as follows:
- i. **Analyse the key challenges / barriers facing women in relation to entry into politics in Northern Ireland and in particular this Assembly**
 - ii. **Examine potential existing initiatives which would assist women in relation to entry into politics in this Assembly**
 - iii. **Examine what are the merits of ‘positive actions’ that have been successful within the United Kingdom and Ireland and within other jurisdictions, and to consider their potential impact in the context of Northern Ireland and in particular this Assembly**
 - iv. **Provide recommendations / conclusions on i to iii above, including initiatives / mechanisms to enhance the role of women already active in the political arena in Northern Ireland and in particular this Assembly**

Phase 1 – Review Evidence Gathering

The Review will take evidence on **Women in Politics in the Northern Ireland Assembly** in relation to the (i) to (iv) above. This will include evidence from **Assembly Research and Information Services, expert / academic witnesses, a**

public 'Call for Evidence' and from visits to other legislatures.

Phase 2 – Consideration and Report

The Committee will consider all evidence received in relation to **Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly** and report and provide recommendations / conclusions to the Assembly on these matters by in **late autumn 2014**.

Matters Outside the Scope of the Review

- 2.3. The Committee has agreed that the following issue is outside of the scope of the Review:
- **Alternative electoral systems / models**

Section 3

BACKGROUND

This section provides some background information on some issues being considered by the Committee as part of this Review.

3.1. The following sections provide information relating to **Women in politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly** drawn from the Northern Ireland Assembly Research & Information Service Research paper NIAR 570-13.¹

3.2 Statistical Outline

The Northern Ireland Assembly currently has 22 female Members out of a total of 108 (22%), although 20 women were elected in 2011, the net increase being due to two more female than male co-option by a party and independent Member replacing Members since the election. 38 female and 180 male candidates stood in the 2011 Assembly elections (17.4%).

If placed in international perspective alongside national legislatures, the Northern Ireland Assembly would rank 70th in the world. Apart from the Italian regional legislatures, the Northern Ireland Assembly has significantly lower female representation than comparable Western European legislatures.

The following figures place the Assembly in the perspective of female political representation in Northern Ireland and in general.

- 23.5% of Local Councillors in 2011 were women (compared with 31% in England)
- With 5 of 26 Mayors /Chairs of Councils were women
- 4 of 18 MPs are women (compared with 22% in GB)
- 2 of 3 MEPs are women (compared with 30% in GB)
- 4 of 15 Ministers and Junior Ministers are women
- 4 Chairpersons and 2 Deputy Chairperson of Committees are women out of 18 Committees

The representation of women in politics in Northern Ireland has a direct association with candidate selection. An examination of the 2011 Assembly elections indicates that female candidates generally fared better than their male counterparts in terms of votes won, but the lower numbers elected were more reflective of lower numbers of candidates.

3.3 Policy

The Beijing Platform for Action of 1995, which consists of a range of commitments by governments to address structural disadvantages experienced by women internationally, includes specific measures to increase women's participation in power and decision-making.

¹ http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RaISe/Publications/2014/assembly_exec_review/potter0914.pdf

These include:

Strategic Objective G.1: Take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making.

Strategic Objective G.2: Increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership.

The Belfast Agreement 1998 includes a commitment to *'the right of women to full and equal political participation'*.

The vision for the Gender Equality Strategy for Northern Ireland states:

Men and women will be able to realise their full potential to contribute equally to the political, economic, social, (including caring roles) and cultural development of Northern Ireland and benefit equally from the results.

One of the Key Action Areas of the Strategy is *'representation in public life/decision-making'*, which is associated with the following strategic objectives:

- To achieve better collection and dissemination of data;
- To achieve gender balance on all government appointed committees, boards and other relevant official bodies;
- To actively promote an inclusive society; and
- To ensure the participation of women and men in all levels of peace building, civil society, economy and government

3.5 Legislative Frameworks

Elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly are provided for in the Northern Ireland Act 1998. There are no provisions for gender equality relating to elections in the Act.

The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 amends the Sex Discrimination (Northern Ireland) Order 1976 to exempt the selection of election candidates from the provision of the Order. This enables political parties to use positive discrimination for the promotion of women candidates over men. This provision has been extended to 2030.

Further information on barriers to women's participation within legislatures; examples of proposals, mechanisms to overcome barriers; quotas and support mechanisms to increase the political participation are set out in paper NIAR 570-13.

www.niassembly.gov.uk/Documents/RaSe/Publications/2014/assembly_exec_review/potter0914.pdf

Section 4

Questions to consider

(1) Question

What are the key challenges / barriers facing women in relation to entering politics in Northern Ireland, and in particular the Northern Ireland Assembly, and what evidence can you provide on this?

Alliance note that the proportion of female politicians elected to public bodies is roughly similar to the proportion of candidates. The issue is not therefore with the electorate, who appear to be as likely to elect female politicians as male ones. Therefore the issues lie with encouraging women to stand in the first instance.

Alliance believe numerous barriers exist to this; such as expectations of time a candidate need commit, especially if they are the primary care-giver to a child. Likewise, the tendency to value a history of party political activity over other types of experience for selection is a problem. Finally, we believe that the argumentative and grand-standing nature of much of NI politics is off-putting to many women.

(2) Question

Can you provide evidence on initiatives which demonstrates positive outcomes to encourage more women to pursue a career in politics which could be applied to the Northern Ireland Assembly?

Part of our experience of other countries where women are more adequately represented suggests that this is linked with greater representation for women in senior positions in a wider range of social and economic sectors.

Therefore, it is appropriate that we consider similar programmes to not just those countries political processes but also other sectors that have helped raise the profile of women.

For Alliance, this must be based around encouraging women to put themselves forward in the first instance as well as supporting them in a role once they are elected.

(3a) Question

What policies should political parties have in place to increase the number of women candidates in Northern Ireland elections?

See below.

(3b) Question

Political Parties are asked to specify what policies and initiatives they have in place to increase women in political life?

Alliance has made a proactive approach to encouraging women to stand. In the first instance, this has been informal, but has involved encouraging women in the party who would be appropriate to put their name forward for this election. As a result, we have seen a number of women elected to positions.

However, we are also aware that Alliance has a way to go in reaching gender parity. As a result we have established a women's section to ensure that there is available support to women who wish to stand and a mechanism for ensuring that women's voices are heard in our party committees.

(4) Question

What 'positive actions' would you recommend to increase women's representation in the Northern Ireland Assembly?

We believe that a form of mentoring scheme, within political parties, would be appropriate. However, this must include at a local government level as well, because there is a need to ensure women progress through the party at a local government level as well. As many MLAs are former councillors, failure to do so will mean less progress is made.

(5) Question

What recommendations would you put forward to enhance the role of women already active in the political arena in Northern Ireland (providing evidence for recommendations as applicable)?

Alliance is pleased to have had several high profile women in their Assembly group. This includes the first (and so far only) female Speaker. As a result, we have demonstrated that we are willing to promote women within the party.

It is important to note that the women who have enhanced their role from Alliance have done so through merit, but Alliance has tried to encourage women in doing so.

(6) Question

Do you consider there are specific initiatives / actions that the Northern Ireland Assembly as an institution should take to enhance the role of women in politics, including a gender sensitive environment – and if so please include your recommendations.

Following Assembly elections, the Assembly should consider an anonymous survey to all candidates to express their experiences of being a candidate. This could help identify if men or women have had different experiences.

Likewise, Alliance believes that the conduct and procedures in the Assembly could be off-putting to women and could be reviewed.

Section 5

Additional Information

Please provide any additional information which you believe will be of assistance to the Committee during the course of the Review.

Alliance are strong supporters of equal representation for women (and other groups which are currently underrepresented) in Northern Ireland Assembly. As a result, we welcome this inquiry. Across all parties, women politicians have made substantial contributions to the political system. We seek to improve their representation within our own ranks and hope that the inquiry will be able to assist us, and other parties, with this.