



**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

Contents

Section 1: Stakeholder Details and Guidelines for Completion of Submissions

Page 3

Section 2: Introduction

Pages 4-5

- Powers
- Assembly and Executive Review Committee's Terms of Reference for and approach to this Review.
- Matters Outside the Scope of the Review

Section 3: Background

- **Women in Politics in the Northern Ireland Assembly**

Pages 6-7

Section 4: Questions to consider

Pages 8-11

Section 5: Additional Information

Page 12

Section 6: Contact Details

Page 13

Stakeholder Name	Telephone Number		
Green Party	028 9052 1467		
Stakeholder Address	Stakeholder Type (Include one or more X)		
Room 258, Parliament Buildings, Ballymiscaw, Stormont, Belfast BT4 3XX	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 Green Party in Northern Ireland supports and economy for people and planet, and a politics for the common good. We are committed to social justice, sustainability, grassroots democracy and non violence. Gender equality is crucial to our vision and we have just adopted a new Women's Equality Strategy, which is attached to this submission for information. It includes a Women's Forum, a system of targets and quotas, a mentoring system, training, and support for carers (both female and male).</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

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

governments to address structural disadvantages experienced by women internationally, includes specific measures to increase women's participation in power and decision-making.

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/RaISe/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?

In Northern Ireland, it is unusual for anyone to be involved in party politics and more so for women. If women do get involved, they face sexism both within and outside their parties and this may erode already fragile self-confidence. Women in Northern Ireland are still expected to provide the majority of caring and domestic tasks such as childcare and caring for elderly relatives, which takes time and may also have affected their career paths and therefore their financial status and skills base. If women are elected to public office, they may find the adversarial nature of political debate to be challenging and to include sexist comments and assumptions. The difficulty of long hours and travelling between the constituency and Assembly/ Westminster/ Brussels can be difficult in relation to family life. At worst, sexual harassment and sexual violence can occur, but women may find they are judged on their appearance in a way that is difficult to cope with.

Statistics on women's involvement in the Assembly and other elected bodies has been provided by Assembly Research and Information Service papers. It is notable that the proportion of women in the Assembly is lower than that in the other devolved bodies or at Westminster.

(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?

No, but we understand the Committee has been in touch with local organisations such as DemocraShe and the Centre for Advancement of Women in Politics (QUB) as part of the consultation process.

(3a) Question

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

See 3(b)

(3b) Question

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

An abridged version of the Green Party's new policy is attached as a separate document.

The political rationale for the Strategy is that ***increasing women's involvement is ultimately about challenging ingrained power structures, networks and relationships which privilege men.***

This Women's Involvement Strategy aims to increase the involvement of women in the Green Party in Northern Ireland. It sets out a series of policies and related actions in order to:

- Ensure the party presents itself as 'woman friendly' in recruitment literature and other publicity
- Actively welcome new women members and create an environment in which women are encouraged to participate in both administrative and electoral roles at local, regional, national and international levels
- Provide suitable training and support to allow women to become active at the level that suits them
- Adopt a mixture of targets and quotas to support structural change
- Take decisive action on sex discrimination and violence against women, wherever it occurs

This document is only about women, but *the same approach could be applied to other underrepresented groups and we resolve to do so in future.* We recognise the phenomenon of intersectionality, through which some women will experience multiple forms of discrimination through their class, ethnicity, sexuality, disability or other elements of their identity or lifestyle.

(4) Question

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

The ultimate responsibility for increasing women's involvement lies with the political parties, who need to train and encourage women to stand in winnable seats and to encourage them once elected. However, there is the possibility that the Assembly could adopt a quota system as has the Dail in the Irish Republic, where 30 per cent of each party's representatives must be women after the next election or a fine will be paid. The figure will rise to 40 per cent over time.

It is difficult to decide whether such a measure would gain public support in Northern Ireland's socially conservative society, however on balance it would encourage parties to take action and should probably be adopted. The Green Party has participated in consultation on the Review Committee's work so far, and we think all parties genuinely want to improve the position of women in politics, so an overall quota might be helpful.

Other useful initiatives would include:

- an in house crèche (for staff and members of both sexes – many staff go on to have political careers)
- firm politics and action on sexual harassment and on sexist comments in debate
- resources for training and mentoring
- Consideration of Assembly sittings only in normal working hours, although this may not always be practical

(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)?

All those listed in response to question 4 plus specific training on public speaking and media

(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.

See answer to question 4.

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.

The Green Party's new Women's Involvement Strategy is attached.

Section 6

Contact Details

All responses should be sent by email please to:

The Senior Assembly Committee Clerk **Tel:** 028 90521787 or
Assembly and Executive Review Committee **028 90521928**
Room 276
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Belfast
BT4 3XX

To arrive no later than Tuesday 25 November please

Email: committee.assembly&executivereview@niassembly.gov.uk

Thank you for your submission