

# **The Northern Ireland Assembly - Committees**

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***Clerk to the Committee for Education***

1. The role of Assembly Committees
2. How do Committees deal with Bills and Committee inquiries?
3. How to be effective in providing written and/or oral evidence to a Committee
4. The work of the Committee for Education

# 1. Role of Committees

## **Northern Ireland Act 1998**

*“advise and assist each Northern Ireland minister in the formulation of policy with respect to matters within his/her responsibilities as a minister”*

## **Good Friday Agreement 1998**

- Scrutiny, policy development and consultation role
- Initiation of legislation
- Consider and advise on departmental budgets
- Approve secondary legislation and take Committee stage of primary legislation
- Initiate enquiries and make reports
- Consider matters brought by its Minister

# Scrutiny

## HOW?

- **Departmental briefings** – outcome of consultations, draft policy proposals, pre-legislative briefings etc
- **Stakeholder engagement** – call for evidence (legislation and inquiries), written briefings, oral evidence sessions; stakeholder events
- **Commission research**
- **Special advisors**
- **Report to Assembly**
- **Committee debate**

# Finances and governance

- Briefings on departmental budgets
  - Monitoring Rounds – bids and returns
  - Financial forecasting
  - Monitoring performance – outturns
  - Annual accounts
  - Programme for Government commitments
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- Questions?

# 2a. Legislation

- Primary legislation – Bills
  - Committee stage – scrutinises the Bill by taking evidence from stakeholders/department
  - Committees can make amendments to legislation or seek agreement of the Minister to make amendments
  - Committee makes report to Assembly
- Subordinate legislation – Statutory Rules
  - Provides detail of provisions outlined in primary legislation e.g. Education Bill is enabling Bill to establish ESA etc.
  - Committee considers policy merits and will establish a position

# Primary Legislation: Bills

- 6 stages to pass through the Assembly:
  - First stage: Bill is introduced to the Assembly
  - Second Stage: Assembly debates the principles of the Bill
  - Committee Stage: Relevant Committee scrutinises the Bill
  - Consideration Stage: Members debate any proposed amendments
  - Further Consideration: Amendments are tidied up
  - Final Stage: the amended Bill is debated and passed (or not)

**Committee Stage is very important as it provides the first opportunity to consider amendments to the Bill.**

# Bill: Committee Stage

- [*Pre-legislative briefing i.e. before Introduction*]
- Committee issues a call for evidence
- Following receipt of written submissions the Committee decides on who to invite to give oral evidence and formal invitations are issued.
- The Committee will endeavour to ensure that as wide a range of views as possible will present oral evidence.
- All evidence sessions are held in public session
- Evidence is considered and analysed



# Bill: Committee Stage

- Committee will come to position on clauses i.e. accept, amend, oppose
- Amendments – in first instance recommend to Minister who can agree or reject these
- Aim to get agreement from Minister **but** if rejected the Committee can bring its own amendment(s).
- Committee formally agrees position on Bill during clause-by-clause consideration
- Report published in advance of Consideration Stage to allow Members and the public to see how Committee came to its conclusions
- Amendments debated in Consideration Stage

## 2b. Inquiries

- How significant is the power to hold inquiries?
- Opportunity to focus on an issue in depth
- Address topical issues
- Call for evidence
- Hear from stakeholders
- Conclusions informed by evidence
- Recommendations to Ministers to act on an issue
- Ministerial responses to Committee inquiries

# Committee Inquiries

- Committee agrees an issue for inquiry and Clerk will draw up terms of reference to be agreed by the Committee
- Committee issues a call for evidence
- On receiving the written submissions, the Clerk will summarise and present recommendations to the Committee on who to call for oral evidence. Members may also make suggestions as to potential witnesses.
- When agreed, the Clerk will issue formal invitations to witnesses. A wide range of views will be sought.
- All evidence sessions are held in public session

# Committee Inquiries

- Evidence is considered and analysed
- Committee publishes report detailing its examination of the issue and conclusions and recommendations
- Report sent to the relevant Minister(s) seeking comments on the Committee recommendations
- Committee will table a motion for a debate on the Committee report to discuss the findings

Questions?

# 3. Communicating with Committees

- Look at Forward Work programme / End of Session reports on website and see if your issue fits in with forthcoming briefings.
- View Committee meetings
- Read Committee / departmental publications
- Write to the Committee on your specific **policy** issue. **Be strategic** in the issue you wish to bring to their attention.
- Answer Calls for Evidence during Inquiries or Committee Stages of Bills.
- Express interest and/or attend stakeholder events.
- Write to the Chair or the Committee Clerk.
- Speak to your local MLAs – they will have party colleagues on the Committee and can liaise with them on your behalf.

**Note that Committees don't deal with constituency issues.**

# Communicating effectively

- **Be strategic:** work out what you want to achieve and have a careful think about the best way of achieving your aim. Simple opposition might not be the best strategy.
- **Stick to the point:** your submission must be relevant – you must deal with the issue, policy or proposal.
- **Use reason and logic:** state your points clearly and back them up with explanation, reasons and evidence. You might be making a submission because you feel passionate but saying something strongly and often doesn't make it true.
- **Use direct and simple language:** A clever style and complex wording might sound good but your real point could be lost.

# Responding to call for evidence

- **Be concise and straightforward:** Your submission should be as brief as possible – people who read submission could be wading through hundreds of them. A good rule is write just one paragraph to explain each of your main points.
- **Be correct and complete:** Double-check all your facts and evidence for accuracy.
- **Make it clear what you support and what you don't:** Start with a summary of your general position and end with your recommendations. Be specific about the parts of a proposal you want changed.
- **Get it in on time!**

# Effective Presentations

## PREPARATION IN ADVANCE

- **Understand the environment:** Sit in the audience at a hearing or go a Committee meeting. This will help you understand procedures and protocols – you'll also learn something about the people who will be listening to you.
- **Ask how the evidence session will run:** Ask Committee officials to tell you how many people will speak, who will be on the Committee, who chairs it and where you come on the agenda. If you want to hand out copies of additional material, give them to officials electronically at least 7 days before the evidence session.
- **Be prepared for media interest:** Journalists often attend hearings, especially outside of Parliament Buildings. Meetings are also recorded.



# Effective Presentations

## PREPARATION IN ADVANCE

- **Be strategic:** Think carefully about how much you should say and how you'll say it. Most Committees will only allow around 10 mins for your presentation, followed by questions from Members.
- **Shared views:** Think about making a joint oral submission. If other people have made written submissions similar to your, a joint oral statement could have more impact. But remember, you will only have 10 mins in total. Maximum 4 witnesses can sit at the table.
- **Be prepared for questions:** The Committee might want to question some of your arguments and even debate with you. Think about questions they might ask or issues they might challenge you on.

# Effective Presentations

## AT THE MEETING

- **Arrive early:** Get a feel for setup, watch how Committee Members listen and respond to the speakers before you. Then you'll know if your points have been covered or if you should counter some of their arguments
- **Introduce yourself:** Make sure everyone knows who you are, why you are making a submission and what your view is on the proposal
- **Don't just read your submission or make a formal speech:** Members will have already your submission and this is the chance to say things a little differently. But there's no need to write and memorise a formal speech. **Get your key points across in your remarks and think through your arguments in order to be persuasive.**

Questions?

# 4. Committee for Education



Mervyn Storey  
DUP  
Chairperson  
North Antrim



Jo-Anne Dobson  
UUP  
Upper Bann



Danny Kinahan  
UUP  
Deputy Chairperson  
South Antrim



Chris Hazzard  
Sinn Féin  
South Down



Jonathan Craig  
DUP  
Lagan Valley



Trevor Lunn  
Alliance  
Lagan Valley

# Committee for Education



Maeve McLaughlin  
Sinn Féin  
Foyle



Seán Rogers  
SDLP  
South Down



Stephen Moutray  
DUP  
Upper Bann



Pat Sheehan  
Sinn Féin  
West Belfast



Robin Newton  
DUP  
East Belfast

# Committee for Education

- Inquiry – School Councils
- Inquiry – Education and Training Inspectorate
- Inquiry – Shared / Integrated Education
- Area Planning
- Common Funding Scheme
- STEM
- Health / Education interface

# Committee for Education

## **Previous Legislation**

- Education Bill

## **Upcoming Legislation**

- SEN & Inclusion
- General Teaching Council NI
- Early Years Bill

# And finally...the Committee Clerk

- Committee forward work programme
- Schedules all business including events, external meetings, study visits
- Approximately 3 month basis
- Procedural advice
- Background advice with Assembly Research; Legal Services etc.

Questions?

Thank you