



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Assembly and Executive Review Committee

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Northern Ireland Act 1998: Review of Parts
III and IV

26 June 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Assembly and Executive Review Committee

Northern Ireland Act 1998: Review of Parts III and IV

26 June 2012

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Stephen Moutray (Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs
Mr Pat Doherty
Mr Paul Givan
Mr Simon Hamilton
Mr Conall McDevitt

The Chairperson: This session is in the context of reviewing the size of the Assembly and the number of Departments. I advise members that the purpose of the session is initially to consider items under part 1 of the Committee's review on the size of the Assembly and then to discuss part 2 on the number of Northern Ireland Departments. I propose to take each of these items in turn. I ask the Committee Clerk to speak to the memo in members' packs.

The Committee Clerk: The debate in the House on part 1 of the review is scheduled to commence at 5.05 pm today and has been allocated one and a half hours. The Chair will have 15 minutes to propose the motion, and the Deputy Chair will have 15 minutes to make a winding-up speech. All other Members who are called to speak will have five minutes. Of course, business could move in advance of that or lag behind. I remind members that issue 5 of the call for evidence paper asked for evidence on part 2. Issue 5 was the reduction in the number of Northern Ireland Departments and the associated reallocation of functions, which will ensure that the effectiveness of Executive functions is maintained. Members also have a paper on the very broad timeline for the review of the number of Departments. The intention is to report by the end of October. The timeline was agreed by the Committee in February.

Nineteen stakeholders have given a written response to the call for evidence paper. The intention is that, over the summer recess, the Committee secretariat will prepare a summary analysis of that evidence, which can be addressed immediately after the summer recess.

There are two papers on the initial discussions on what is done after October. One is a summary of the Assembly parties' priorities for the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) review. That was compiled in January 2012. To inform members on the business of considering the forward work programme, there is a copy of a letter from the Executive party leaders' group, which was considered by the Committee in April 2012.

The Chairperson: Do any members have questions?

Mr McDevitt: We are due to report in the autumn on our work on the number of Departments. Is it your thinking, Chair, that we will have the opportunity to have stakeholders in front of us again to discuss that issue specifically?

The Committee Clerk: Yes; that item is tabled for discussion a bit later in the meeting. Further written and oral evidence can be taken, but we have to be mindful of the fact that the intention was that the Committee will report in October. The Committee may wish to change its mind on that. We would have to be fairly swift if we were to meet that deadline.

Mr Beggs: It is always good to review the written evidence to see where there might be an area to take oral evidence. It is useful to have oral sessions, but we need to make best use of the time that is available.

The Chairperson: Members, in relation to part 1 of the review, I propose that we issue a media operational notice today simply to notify the press of the time of the motion for debate of the report later today and to advise where the report can be accessed on the Assembly AERC web page. That is purely for factual purposes and to aid members of the public. Are members agreed?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: In relation to part 2 of the review, I propose that we commission the Assembly's Research and Information Service to research current Department structures in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Where possible, this would show the different approaches taken to reform departmental structures and the key factors that were taken into account. Are members agreed?

Mr McDevitt: Chair, will the research on the UK include the devolved Administrations?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Mr Beggs: Will it include how those structures deal with minorities in them?

The Chairperson: OK. Members, I also propose that we agree that the Committee secretariat, over the summer recess, compile and analyse the evidence that has already been received on issue 5 of the Committee's call for evidence paper on the number of Northern Ireland Departments, together with the Assembly research papers, all to be considered at the first Committee meeting following recess. Are members agreed?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We have already covered members' comments on whether the Committee wishes to receive further written or oral evidence. Are members content with that?

Members indicated assent.