



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**Assembly and Executive Review
Committee**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

**Northern Ireland Act 1998: Review of
Parts III and IV**

17 April 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Roy Beggs
Mr Gregory Campbell
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Pat Doherty
Mr Simon Hamilton
Mr Raymond McCartney

The Acting Chairperson: The purpose of this agenda item is threefold: first, for the Committee to consider the note on the meeting that the Deputy Chairperson and the Chairperson had with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister on 4 April 2012; secondly, for the Committee to consider the written submissions on the review that have been received to date; and, thirdly, to receive an Assembly research paper titled 'Scheduling Parliamentary time'. I propose that we take each in turn and ask the Clerk to speak to the memo in members' packs, starting with the papers for the meeting with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister. Are members content to do it in that fashion?

Members indicated assent.

The Acting Chairperson: John, will you recap the meeting with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister?

The Committee Clerk: I remind Committee members that the purpose of that meeting was to clarify what work is being done or is planned for 2012 on the reduction in the number of Departments post-2015 by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) or the efficiency review panel.

Members' packs contain a note of the meeting that the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson had with the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and an associated letter that was received from the Executive party leaders' group two days before that meeting on 2 April.

I will highlight two or three points that were emphasised by the First Minister and the deputy First Minister during that meeting. The note states:

"They stated that they are both very determined to expedite the matter of post-2015 structures of Government in 2012 in the context of the number of government departments and the size of the Assembly."

The First Minister and the deputy First Minister also said that they were taking that forward actively by meeting with Executive party leaders with the aim of reaching political agreement. They also referred to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee's (AERC) existing review, as well as previous reviews, when considering exploring options and presenting views to the Assembly and to that group. However, they emphasised in the end that it is a political matter for party leaders of the Executive to negotiate. They must agree a way forward for post-2015 structures and the review that the Committee is involved in.

I will leave the summary there.

The Acting Chairperson: Thank you, John.

Mr Beggs: Paragraph 4a of the Committee Clerk's note states:

"The First Minister also highlighted the on-going work to abolish the Department of Employment and Learning."

What work is ongoing? What has happened and what is the schedule for that work? I am just trying to get that information.

The Committee Clerk: No information was given on the detail of the schedule of work.

The Acting Chairperson: I was going to ask whether you are happy with that, Roy, but you look puzzled.

Mr Beggs: The note says that the ongoing work was highlighted, but what is that ongoing work? There is nothing to highlight.

The Committee Clerk: It was raised simply in that context —

Mr Beggs: That work is ongoing.

The Committee Clerk: Work is ongoing, but there is no time schedule.

Mr Campbell: It is a bit like our ongoing work, Chairman.

The Acting Chairperson: Work is always ongoing.

Mr Campbell: The only point I want to raise is not a query but an acknowledgement of paragraph 3a of the note. I have raised this point on several occasions since I joined the Committee. It states:

"However, full engagement by all Executive party leaders is desirable."

The next sentence is probably the most relevant, and we all need to try to bear it in mind as we labour intensively week on week:

"in the end, it is a political matter for the party leaders of the Executive to negotiate and agree the way forward."

We must bear that in mind as we toil and labour week in, week out and paper in, paper out.

The Acting Chairperson: Wise words. Anything else before we move on, members? No? Thank you.

I will pick up Gregory's point and the suggestion from the First Minister and the deputy First Minister that it might be more appropriate for the Committee to invite Executive party leaders to provide oral evidence on the review. I think that that is a useful suggestion. I think that we should park that idea until we receive all the written responses from the various parties. We have not yet got responses from all the parties that we would probably invite to give such evidence. However, we can perhaps take

that forward when we get all the responses. Therefore, are we content to revisit the option of bringing people to the Committee when we get those responses?

Members indicated assent.

The Acting Chairperson: We will move on to the written submissions on the Committee's review that have been received to date. Members will note that full copies of written submissions — there are 21 substantial responses and four nil responses — are included in our packs. The summary analysis of the written submissions is included in a useful table. I remind members that the fifth issue in our stakeholder 'Call for Evidence' paper on the number of Northern Ireland Departments is primarily the focus of the second part of the review, which the Committee has agreed to report on in late October of this year. If Members are content, I propose that we discuss in turn issues one to four, as set out in 'Call for Evidence', to summarise what has been said and for members to raise any issues that they want to raise. Are we happy to do that?

The Committee Clerk: Members should have received the twenty-sixth written submission, which is from the DUP, yesterday morning. Copies are available from the Committee secretariat. Indicate if you have not got that to hand.

The Acting Chairperson: I am sure that you all already have copy of it anyway.

Mr Doherty: I have spare copy. I have read it.

The Acting Chairperson: It is always useful to have it to hand.

The first issue is whether the statutory link between Westminster and Northern Ireland constituencies should be removed and the implications of removing or retaining that link. Members may wish to refer to the first column of the summary analysis of written submissions received to date. The majority of respondents — 14 out of 21 — have not offered views on whether the link between Westminster and Northern Ireland constituencies should be retained. Three respondents stated explicitly that the link should not be removed, and the remaining four respondents were either generally in favour or saw no reason why the link should be retained. Two respondents raised the option of new Assembly constituencies replicating review of public administration (RPA) or new council boundaries.

Members, do you have any views, comments or questions on the evidence that has come in so far? I should say, as we go through these, that our evidence from all the parties is incomplete. Unless there is a specific issue that anyone wishes to raise in each of the columns as we go through them, it may be better to wait until we get everything in before we have a more open discussion on the matter. This is just to note what has come in so far.

Mr Campbell: The leadership of the UUP has changed recently. Is there outstanding work there? Perhaps there is not any.

The Acting Chairperson: We will try not to point fingers, because all parties have fallen into that category in the past.

Mr Campbell: I understand that.

The Acting Chairperson: The Ulster Unionist Party, the Alliance Party and the SDLP have responses outstanding. There was some confusion.

Mr Beggs: I understand that an e-mail should have been sent this morning stating that our response should be in by the end of the week.

The Acting Chairperson: That is the important thing. Once we get all responses in, we can have a more open and frank discussion about the points that have been raised.

If members have no views on that, we will move on to the second issue. It relates to the implications of the forthcoming reduction in constituencies via the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011 and any further reduction in the number of MLAs. Again, members, look at the second column in the summary analysis. Seven of the 21 respondents stated explicitly that the number of MLAs should be reduced. They gave suggestions for appropriate numbers, ranging from 96 to 60 and a few points in between: 80, 72 and 64 were suggested. The vast majority of remaining respondents either offered no views on the matter or offered views on ways in which to mitigate the impact of a smaller Assembly. If members have no views to express at this stage, I will move on.

The third issue relates to the reduced number of MLAs required to ensure that the effectiveness of the Assembly in delivering its key functions is maintained, consistent with the safeguards on inclusivity. Eight of the 21 respondents gave suggestions on the specific numbers of MLAs required to maintain effectiveness, varying from 60 to 80 to 96. The vast majority of remaining respondents either provided no views on the specific number or only provided views on ways in which to ensure effectiveness with a smaller Assembly. If members have no issues with those responses, I will move on.

The fourth issue concerns views on proposals to mitigate the impact of reducing the number of MLAs on the effectiveness on the Assembly in delivering its key functions, including proposals to ensure a robust and effective Committee system. Many respondents have the view that a reform of the Committee system in the Assembly needs to be considered in conjunction with the reform of the Northern Ireland government structures. There also seems to be a fairly common view that, regardless of whether there is a reduction in the number of MLAs, the Committee structure and system needs to be reviewed. If members have no views on any of the comments in the summary analysis, I will move on.

The fifth issue is around the views on the reduction in the number of Northern Ireland Departments and the associated reallocation of functions that will ensure the effectiveness of the Executive functions is maintained, remembering that the Committee plans to revisit specifically the subject in detail for the second part of its review. Several respondents gave detailed suggestions as to how government could be restructured — with a broad reallocation of functions — and a number suggested having eight Northern Ireland Departments. Many respondents linked the reduction in the number of Northern Ireland Departments and the consequent reduction in the number of Statutory Committees when commenting on maintaining Assembly effectiveness. If members have no comments, I will continue.

If we are content, we can consider at week's meeting any further responses received and then start to agree a Committee position on the number of MLAs. Given that we have a few outstanding responses, which will be critical to the views of the Committee, are members happy to leave it until we get those responses in?

Members indicated assent.

The Acting Chairperson: On the outstanding written responses, I ask Committee members from the parties concerned to try their best to get them to the Committee secretariat as soon as possible. If parties are unable to provide a written response, their representatives should be able to give an oral presentation to the Committee. Are members happy with that?

Members indicated assent.