

Extract From Business Office Guidance

PUBLIC PETITIONS

Introduction

The presentation of a public petition during plenary proceedings is a formal mechanism used by Members to give profile to a particular matter on which he/she has received a collection of signatures for support - Standing Order 22 refers. A public petition, which should not contain matter in breach of the privileges of the Assembly, must relate to a matter that is within the legislative competence of the Assembly.

Processing a Public Petition

The Business Committee considers public petitions and determines when they can be presented to the Assembly.

Further guidance on processing a public petition is attached at Appendix H.

In Plenary

In plenary the Member presenting a petition will have limited time. He/she should name its source, the number of signatories and the reason for the petition. This should take no more than a couple of minutes. The Member then walks to the Speaker's Table and hands the petition to the Speaker.

There is no opportunity for the Member or the relevant Minister to speak about a petition after presentation. After it has been presented the Speaker will announce:

'I will forward the petition to the Minister and send a copy to the Chairperson of the Committee.'

It is good practice for the relevant Minister to be present in the Chamber when a petition is being presented. The Clerk should therefore advise OFMDFM when a petition is scheduled on the Order Paper.

Once the public petition has been presented in plenary the Speaker's Office takes responsibility for ensuring that it is forwarded to the relevant Minister and Committee Chair and that all responses are received.

Ministerial Response

The Minister will determine the response to the petition. There are a number of options available:

- (i) a letter to the Speaker who will forward this to the Member/Committee Chair and place the letter in the Assembly Library;
- (ii) a Ministerial Statement, notice of which should be provided to the Speaker in the usual way;
- (iii) an announcement, e.g. through an answer to a Supplementary Question or in the course of a Ministerial response during another debate.

In any case the Speaker must be notified how the Minister has opted to respond. In the case of (ii) and (iii) above, the Speaker will arrange that the Member who presented the petition will be in their place in the Assembly when the Minister responds.

The Speaker's Office will copy all correspondence to the Business Office.

GUIDANCE ON HANDLING PUBLIC PETITIONS

Procedure in the Assembly

Standing Order 22 governs the presentation of public petitions to the Assembly. The Member wishing to present the petition must notify the clerk to the Business Committee, which will decide on the petition's scheduling in the Assembly. The petition's title should be notified to the clerk for the purposes of the Order Paper, and the petition itself should state clearly the matter to which it relates and the action it is calling for.

In the Chamber, the Standing Order limits the presenter to naming the source of the petition, the number of signatories, what the petition is about, and a rehearsal of the narrative of the petition. This should take no more than 5 minutes. The presenter should then come to the Table, where the Speaker will take receipt of the petition and advise that he will pass it to the relevant Minister and, where relevant, to the Chairperson of the appropriate Committee. There is no opportunity for the Minister or other Members to speak to the petition. However, it is good practice for the Minister to be in the Assembly, if possible, when the petition is being presented.

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