**SDLP Response to the Committee on Procedures
Consultation on the Review of Public Petitions**

1. The SDLP welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation.

2. The SDLP are in favour of the use of Public Petitions in the Northern Ireland Assembly, and believe that they are an effective method of increasing public participation in government.

3. In the current mandate there have been 42 Public Petitions, with 13 of these being presented by SDLP members.
   - 2014-15 1 out of 3 were from an SDLP member
   - 2013-14 4 out of 11 were from an SDLP member
   - 2012-13 4 out of 14 were from an SDLP member
   - 2011-12 4 out of 14 were from an SDLP member

4. <u>Current System for Public Petitions in the Northern Ireland Assembly</u>
   4.1 The current system is based on Standing Order 22. Any member who offers to present a petition to the Assembly shall confine themselves to a statement of the parties from whom it comes, the number of signatures attached to it, and the material allegations contained in it.
   4.2 Each petition presented shall not contain matter which breaches the privileges of the Assembly. The petition must relate to matters which are within the legislative competency of the Assembly. The Clerk of the Business Committee will be notified of the intention to present the petition, and the committee shall consider whether and when it shall be taken to the assembly.

5. <u>Benefits of Public Petitions</u>
   5.1 The SDLP believes that public petitions give the general public a chance to influence what is happening in Government.
   5.2 Public Petitions help to inform policy development and to exercise scrutiny.
   5.3 Helps to raise awareness of an issue, another method which can be used to lobby the government for change.

6. <u>E-Petitions</u>
   6.1 The SDLP are in favour of a collaborative e-petitions system being introduced in the Northern Ireland Assembly.
   6.2 This gives the public the ability to influence what is debated in the assembly.

6.3 A set time/day should be given to debating e-petitions.

6.4 Public Petitions should be hosted on the Northern Ireland Assembly website.

6.5 It may be beneficial if they were announced in the same way as other plenary business, as then the members would have time to research and prepare.

6.6 E-petitions would mean that public petitions would be hosted neutrally, as opposed to being hosted by a particular party.

6.7 Suggestion of a committee that would decide on which petitions get debated. The joint sub-committee on Public Petitions in the Oireachtas would be an example of how the committee could work.

7. Other legislatures

   7.1 National Assembly for Wales

   7.1.1 The SDLP would be in favour of the system used by the Welsh Assembly would be beneficial to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Petitions can be submitted in writing or electronically.

   7.1.2 Admissibility criteria supplied could be the basis of the criteria for the Northern Ireland Assembly – i.e. 10 signatures, containing name and address and dealing with issues that the Assembly has power.

   7.2 Scottish Parliament

   7.2.1 The SDLP believes that the Scottish Parliament has an effective system for public petitions, and notes that they do not use a threshold for signatures.

   7.2.2 The SDLP further notes the role of the Public Petitions Committee and suggests that such a committee could be formed in the Northern Ireland Assembly, if the system changes.

   7.3 Oireachtas

   7.3.1 The SDLP notes the benefits of the system used in the Oireachtas, including inviting petitioners to appear before the committee to give further information on the petition. Another benefit of this system is that the committee has the power to invite government ministers to attend meetings and answer questions about the petition.

   7.4 Westminster

   7.4.1 Westminster has had e-petitions since August 2011. Petitions that gathered in excess of 100,000 signatures are eligible for debate in parliament.

   7.4.2 The SDLP notes the decision of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee in 2013, which said that numbers thresholds should not be used to determine whether a petition should be debated

   7.4.3 The current system, as of May 2014 is that the public can petition the House of Commons and press for action from Government.

8. Potential improvements to the Public Petitions System

   8.1 The SDLP believes that while the public petitions system in Northern Ireland is good, there could be improvements in the system.

8.2 More information could be provided on how the public can send in a public petition.

8.3 Public Petitions should be hosted on the Northern Ireland Assembly website.

8.4 Minister would respond orally, or directly to the group/person who submitted the public petition.

8.5 The SDLP believe that the Northern Ireland Assembly should address the idea of e-petitions, or petitions which have been submitted directly to the Assembly, rather than through political parties.

8.6 The SDLP believes that a more inclusive system for Public Petitions in Northern Ireland could use some of the methods that other legislatures use, including a template as used in the Scottish Parliament