

Policy Proposal Petition Mechanism for Northern Ireland



The Issue

One of the key features of any democracy is the ability of the people to have their voices heard by their government. The recent flags issue has brought this right to the fore of public debate.

A very simple way for the public to voice their opinion on an issue is through a petition. In Westminster an online petition system or epetition has been set up which allows anyone to start a petition on any issue (<http://epetitions.direct.gov.uk/>). If the number of signatories reaches 100,000 the petition is considered for a Parliamentary debate. There is a similar measure in the Houses of the Oireachtas. This could be a very effective way for anyone in society to become a catalyst for change. At the moment in Northern Ireland there is no official online system by which our people can create and present petitions to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Policy Proposal

The Northern Ireland Assembly should add an epetition function to their website, complimented by a legislative mechanism, through which the people of Northern Ireland can create and present petitions to the Assembly. If a specific petition has gained the support a certain number of signatures, it should spark a debate among the MLAs. The number of signatures required should be proportional to the population of Northern Ireland when compared to, for example, the UK as a whole and Westminster. For Northern Ireland that would be about 3,000 signatures, so a credible threshold might be 5,000 signatures.

This addition to the website would help to improve communication and increase confidence between our community and our Government. It could be a useful tool in the Cohesion Sharing and Integration strategy by giving a voice to marginalised voices and communities. It will increase citizen interaction and could help elected representatives to hear more clearly those issues which are important to the people they represent.

Why listen to us?

The Evangelical Alliance is the largest and oldest body representing the UK's two million evangelical Christians. For more than 165 years, we have been bringing Christians together and helping them listen to, and be heard by, the government, media and society. We have a credible record of influencing public policy for the benefit of all society. Locally, Peter Lynas is Director of the Evangelical Alliance Northern Ireland. He previously worked for a think tank advising UK Government on public policy and is a qualified barrister and Church leader. David Smyth is Public Policy officer for the Evangelical Alliance Northern Ireland and a qualified solicitor.

What needs to be done?

The Northern Ireland Assembly should add a petition function to their website. This policy has already been implemented effectively by Westminster which stands as a credible precedent.

Please contact us to discuss this further
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