



Northern Ireland
Assembly

The Rules on All-Party Groups

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All-Party Groups

Introduction

- 1.1 The purpose of All-Party Groups is to provide a forum for MLAs from different parties to meet in order to consider and discuss shared interests in particular subjects. Membership of All-Party Groups is limited to MLAs but, at the discretion of each group, outside organisations and individuals are often welcome both to attend their meetings and to inform and support their work.
- 1.2 All-Party Groups are not, however, formal Assembly groups. They do not have any of the powers of an Assembly Committee (e.g. they cannot summon witnesses or Ministers to attend meetings or to provide documentation and they cannot use the Assembly logo), nor do they have any formal role in policy development. The views of an All-Party Group are not recognised by the Assembly in the way that business conducted through Committees or through plenary is recognised by the Assembly. Any views expressed by All-Party Groups are therefore simply the collective views of the members of the group. All-Party Groups should not attempt to replicate the functional areas covered by the statutory committees.
- 1.3 All-Party Groups can be established where members believe that to do so is in the public interest. All-Party Groups may not be established to further particular commercial interests. This does not mean, however, that All-Party Groups cannot be formed in relation to particular trades, industries or sectors. Ultimately, the approval of the formation of an All-Party Group is a matter for the Committee on Standards and Privileges who will pay particular attention to information provided about a group's purpose. If the Committee considers that a group is being formed not on grounds of public interest, but, say, to further particular commercial interests, it will not be approved.
- 1.4 It is important that All-Party Groups operate in accordance with good practice and that their activities are transparent. Accordingly, the Assembly will maintain a publicly accessible Register of All-Party Groups which will detail the groups that exist, their members, contact details and any financial or material benefits received.
- 1.5 While the operation of All-Party Groups is largely a matter for the groups themselves, All-Party Groups and their officers and members must observe the rules on the establishment, registration and operation of All-Party Groups as set out in this document. This is especially important in relation to any financial or material benefits that a group and/or its members may receive. Failure to adhere to the rules in this document could be considered as a breach of the Assembly's Code of Conduct.

Membership of All-Party Groups

- 2.1 Membership of All-Party Groups is open at any time to all MLAs. An All-Party Group must at all times include at least ten MLAs and all three designations at the Assembly must be represented in the membership.
- 2.2 While any MLA may attend and speak at any meeting of an All-Party Group (including the Annual General Meeting of a group), only the members of a group may vote at any meeting. It is therefore the members of an All-Party Group that elect its officers.
- 2.3 The officers have lead responsibility for managing the group and ensuring that the group complies with the rules. Groups typically have a Chairperson, Vice-Chairperson, Secretary and Treasurer. However, All-Party Groups may adapt these titles as they wish, and may have fewer or more officers than the four listed. The minimum number of officers allowed is two and one of these must be the Chairperson of the group who signs the Registration form which includes a declaration that the All-Party Group will comply with the rules. The Chairperson will also be the designated contact MLA for the group.
- 2.4 All-Party Groups can choose to be supported by outside individuals and organisations. At the discretion of each group, outside individuals and organisations may contribute to organising meetings. They may also attend and speak at meetings. They can advise and support All-Party Groups, including through the provision of permanent secretarial support. They can even provide financial support or other material benefits, provided this is properly registered. However, they cannot become members of an All-Party Group and therefore cannot vote at any meeting or on any issue. Nor can they offer any payment, reward or benefit of any kind in the expectation that the Group or any member of the group will advocate or initiate any cause or matter on their behalf. It is acceptable, however, to arrange and pay for visits for members of the group where the purpose of the visit is related to the subject matter of the group. In such circumstances, members would be required to register receipt of such a visit on the Register of Members' Interests. See paras 5.9 to 5.13 for further detail.

Establishment of All-Party Groups

- 3.1 Any MLA or group of MLAs who propose to establish an All-Party Group must adhere to the following steps:
- The Clerk of Standards should be contacted and provided with the name of an MLA to act as the contact point for a proposed group during the initial part of the application process. The Clerk will provide this MLA with the required registration form.
 - A meeting to propose the establishment of an All-Party Group must be organised and the meeting must be open to all Members to attend.
 - An All-Party Notice must be issued at least seven days before this meeting takes place, informing MLAs that it is proposed to form an All-Party Group on [TITLE] and inviting MLAs to attend a meeting to discuss the formation of a group and to elect its officers.
 - At the meeting the officers of the proposed All-Party Group must be elected. It is for each proposed group to determine its own preferred mechanism for electing officers. In addition to its elected officers, a group may also agree to have ex officio officers.
 - The purpose of the proposed group should also be agreed at the meeting.
 - Following this meeting the registration form should be completed and forwarded to the Clerk of Standards who will put it to the Committee on Standards and Privileges at its next meeting for consideration and approval. In most cases it is expected that recognition will be awarded with immediate effect, but the Committee may refuse recognition if it considers that a group does not comply with the rules or it may defer consideration in order to seek clarification from the group about its application. In any event the Chairperson will be informed of the Committee's decision.
- 3.2 The registration form that All-Party Groups must complete should therefore include details as per the following categories:
- The name of the proposed group;
 - The purpose of the proposed group;
 - The elected officers and any other officers (together with their party and designation details);
 - The members of the group (together with their party and designation details);
 - The Chairperson's contact details (as the group contact);
 - The relevant details in relation to any financial or other material benefits of £250 and over received or expected to be received in any calendar year from any single source (including the provision of any secretarial support);
 - Further contact information (if applicable – e.g. of organisations providing secretarial support);
 - A declaration that the rules will be complied with.
- 3.3 Advice on the registration requirements should be sought in the first instance from the Clerk of Standards but responsibility for compliance with the registration requirements rests with a group, and in particular with the Chairperson as the officer responsible for signing the declaration that the group will comply with the rules. The Clerk of Standards will enter into the register the details provided but will not be in a position to ensure that groups' details are compliant, or to alert groups to deficiencies in their entries.
- 3.4 A group should not meet, unless authorised to do so by the Clerk of Standards, between submitting its application to the Committee on Standards and Privileges and being accorded recognition as an All-Party Group.

The Register of All-Party Groups

- 4.1 The Assembly will maintain a Register of All-Party Groups. The purpose of the Register of All-Party Groups is to give public notification on a continuous basis of the different All-Party Groups that exist, the membership of these groups and other relevant details, particularly in relation to any financial support or other material benefits that an All-Party Group may have received.
- 4.2 The Clerk of Standards will enter the details registered by groups in the Register of All-Party Groups in the Assembly not later than 7 days after a group's application has been approved by the Committee on Standards and Privileges.
- 4.3 Any changes to the initial registration details must be notified in writing to the Clerk of Standards not later than 28 days after the change occurring. This requirement includes the notification of the receipt by the group of any benefit (see para 5.9 to 5.13) and details of any change of officer or of any MLA joining or leaving the group. This requirement is essential to ensure that the public are provided with accurate information in respect of All-Party Groups.
- 4.4 The Register is available for public inspection in loose-leaf form in the office of the Clerk of Standards at any time when the Assembly is open to the public. It is also available in the Assembly library and on the Assembly's website.

Operation of All-Party Groups

- 5.1 Generally speaking how All-Party Groups operate and conduct their meetings is a matter for each group. However, there are certain rules which must be adhered to and these are set out below.

Meetings

- 5.2 Any MLA may attend and speak at any meeting of an All-Party Group (including the Annual General Meeting) of a group – not just its registered members. In order to ensure that all MLAs are aware that a meeting of an All-Party Group is taking place details of the meeting should be published in advance via an all-party notice and on the day of the meeting on the Assembly Annunciator.
- 5.3 Where an outside organisation or individual is invited to attend a meeting of an All-Party Group they should be treated in the same way as any other visitor or guest of an MLA to the building and should be accompanied as necessary.
- 5.4 Meetings of All-Party Groups must be attended by at least two members of the group. If it is discovered, on meeting, that only one member can be present, it is still permissible, for example, for that member to meet with any guests who may have been invited to make a presentation. However, no decisions can be made on behalf of the All-Party Group. Informal meetings should only take place occasionally.
- 5.5 When planning an event to be held in Parliament Buildings (excluding ordinary meetings of groups), groups will be treated on the same basis as any other external group and any events policy adopted by the Assembly will be applied as if the group was an external body. This may mean that the group incurs charges for an event or that a proposed event may be refused by the Assembly.

Receipt of benefits

- 5.6 It is permissible for All-Party Groups to receive financial support or material benefits, provided the benefit is properly registered and its receipt in no way breaches the advocacy rule. The advocacy rule prohibits Members not only from advocating or initiating any matter on behalf of any other person in return for payment or benefit, but also from conferring benefit exclusively upon a body or individual outside the Assembly from which they have received, are receiving or expect to receive a financial or material benefit. A Member whose visit was funded by a non-governmental organisation (NGO) or other agency would not be inhibited in initiating proceedings relating to its work unless the Member sought to raise matters which relate specifically and directly to the affairs and interests of the NGO or agency itself, rather than the problems it was dealing with.
- 5.7 The Group must inform the Clerk of Standards in writing using the form entitled 'All-Party Groups Update Form – Financial or Other Benefits Received' within 28 days of receipt of donations or assistance of a value which exceeds £250. Any sort of financial support or material benefit over a value of £250 in a calendar year from a single source should be registered. This would include any donations, loans, credit, gifts, hospitality, overseas visits and goods or services given without charge or at a discount of more than 10% of the normal commercial value (e.g. the provision of secretarial or research support where the salary of those providing the service is met, in whole or in part, by an external organisation or individual). The form is available on request from the Clerk of Standards.
- 5.8 Where services are provided by a public relations agency, or indeed where any services are provided by one organisation on behalf of another, the ultimate client should be named.

5.9 Where an MLA gains personally from a benefit relating to the activity of a group, he or she should consider whether that benefit falls within the rules applicable to the registration of Members' Interests, and if so then this must be registered.

5.10 Adherence to the rules in relation to the receipt of benefits is of crucial importance. Further advice and guidance is available for members from the Clerk of Standards.

Annual General Meetings

5.11 All-Party Groups must have an Annual General Meeting at which there should be an election of the officers. Notice of the Annual General Meeting must be announced at least seven days in advance via an 'All-Party Notice' informing Members of the time, date and venue of the meeting and the intention to elect office bearers. The elections may take place at any time other than during recess. The Chairperson should then complete the form entitled 'All-Party Group – Annual Return Form' and return it to the Clerk of Standards. The form is available on request from the Clerk of Standards.

All-Party Groups in subsequent mandates

5.12 All-Party Groups may resume in a new mandate provided that the Group continues to satisfy the membership requirements and has met to elect its officers. Once this has taken place the Chairperson should submit a completed 'All-Party Group - New Mandate Update Form' to the Clerk of Standards. Should a completed form not be submitted within two months of the first meeting of the new mandate the All-Party Group will cease to exist.

Services provided to All-Party Groups and use of facilities

- 6.1 All-Party Groups may not draw on the resources of the Assembly staff to service meetings, except in fulfilment of the requirements of these rules or where expressly permitted by them, for example, in order to book meeting rooms. In relation to the Clerk of Standards, the services to be provided to MLAs are:
- Guidance on general issues relating to the rules of All-Party Groups.
 - Maintenance of the Register of All-Party Groups (in hard copy and on the website).
 - Updating individual All-Party Group information on the Assembly website and publishing links to external web pages, if requested by the Chairperson of the All-Party Group.
- 6.2 All-Party Groups may use, subject to availability, the meeting rooms of the Assembly. However, it should be noted that the Central Committee Office operate a priority system in relation to the allocation of Assembly meeting rooms and any booking made by an All-Party Group may have to be cancelled if it later emerges that a Committee requires a meeting room. In such cases Assembly staff will always endeavour to find an alternative meeting room for the All-Party Group but cannot necessarily guarantee that such an alternative will be found.
- 6.3 All-Party Groups are entitled to hospitality, subject to the ongoing availability of resources. Hospitality is defined as tea/coffee and biscuits and when meetings take place over lunchtime sandwiches can also be provided. Hospitality must be ordered via the Central Committee Office. Should an All-Party Group fail to notify the Central Committee Office of a cancelled meeting at least three hours in advance of the time set for the meeting, the group will be invoiced for the hospitality. Hospitality ordered directly with the catering service by an All-Party Group will be invoiced to the All-Party Group.
- 6.4 All-Party Groups must respect the limitations on the use of Assembly facilities:
- Members may make reasonable use of the Assembly's telephone, fax, photocopying, IT facilities and Assembly stationery in pursuit of All-Party Group business or where expressly permitted by these rules, e.g. use of the All-Party Notice bulletin. However, outside organisations and individuals associated with All-Party Groups are not entitled to use the Assembly's resources;
 - Groups may not make use of the Assembly logo (other than as may be provided for in the Assembly's terms and conditions on events); and
 - Groups may not make use of the Assembly's audio or broadcasting equipment and there is no provision for the televising or sound recording of their proceedings.
- 6.5 All-Party Groups are permitted to add links from the homepage of an All-Party Group on the Assembly's website to an external website on the All-Party Group. However, this is only permitted if the Chairperson of an All-Party Group completes and signs a 'Request to Link to an External Website' form. The form is available on request from the Clerk of Standards. The form sets out certain conditions and clarifies that:
- the Northern Ireland Assembly is not responsible for the content of external internet sites;
 - the Chairperson of the group has viewed the website to which the link is being provided and is content that the website is appropriate;
 - Complaints about the content of external sites (linked from the Assembly's site) will be directed in the first instance to the Chairperson of the group;
 - responsibility for checking links on the Northern Ireland Assembly website to ensure that they are working lies with the Chairperson of the group and that, in the event

of discovering a link which no longer works, the Chairperson will inform the Clerk of Standards; and

- the Northern Ireland Assembly reserves the right to refuse to establish links to an external site.

Compliance with the Rules on All-Party Groups

- 7.1 While all MLAs who are members of an All-Party Group have a responsibility to ensure that the group conducts itself properly, the Chairperson of the Group, as signatory of the registration form, will be held primarily responsible for ensuring that the group complies with the rules, including those on registration.
- 7.2 If the Chairperson of the group changes, the Clerk of Standards must be informed of this within 7 days and the new Chairperson of the group should, within that same timescale, sign the declaration on compliance with the rules.
- 7.3 Failure to comply with, or contravention of, the rules on All-Party Groups could lead to withdrawal of recognition of a group and could, for the members concerned, be considered as a breach of the Assembly's Code of Conduct. Members of All-Party Groups who have concerns about the interpretation of the rules should consult the Clerk of Standards.