



Northern Ireland
Assembly

**Assembly and Executive Review
Committee**

**OFFICIAL REPORT
(Hansard)**

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

14 February 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Stephen Moutray (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs
Mr Pat Doherty
Mr Paul Givan
Mr Raymond McCartney
Mrs Sandra Overend

The Chairperson: We move now to the review of Parts III and IV of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The purpose of this agenda item is for the Committee to consider and agree the final wording of the revised terms of reference for its review, the revised stakeholder call for evidence paper and a signposting advertisement for the review. I propose to take each of those areas in turn. I will ask the Committee Clerk to speak to the memo at tab 2 of today's pack, starting with the revised terms of reference at tab 3. Are members agreed? If so, I ask the Committee Clerk to speak to the revised terms of reference.

The Committee Clerk: At tab 3, we have the revised terms of reference based on the discussion and decisions taken at last week's Committee meeting on 7 February. The amendment made to the revised terms of reference reflects the Committee's decision to include the phrase "consistent with the safeguards on inclusivity" at bullet point (3). That was the only change.

Mr Beggs: We have lost our quorum, so we cannot take any decisions.

The Chairperson: Are members content that we talk through the next item and come back to the decisions? OK. Thank you.

We move to the revised stakeholder call for evidence paper at tab 4.

The Committee Clerk: There were a number of comments from members on that last week, and I will summarise the changes.

There are a number of changes in the background notes, which start on page 5. There was a request to be more specific about the current number of MLAs, the current number of constituencies and the implications arising from the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011. Those are reflected in paragraph 3.3, where the existing situation is set out — that is, of course, 18 Westminster constituencies and 108 Members. There is an additional line at the end of paragraph 3.5, which brings out the direct consequence of the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011 as regards reducing the number of MLAs from 108 to 96.

The other addition — a point raised by a number of members last week — is at paragraph 3.6. It reflects the possibility of a reduction in the number of Westminster constituencies here if there were changes in the number of people registered to vote. Indeed, paragraph 3.6 could probably usefully include the words "to vote" after "registered", if members were content.

The other changes to the background notes at paragraph 3.7 — *[Interruption.]*

Mr Beggs: Chairman, will we not have to go through this again when we have a quorum? We cannot take a decision until there is a quorum; that is my understanding of what a quorum is.

The Chairperson: We can discuss the paper. We run the risk that we may have to go back over it for somebody.

Mr Sheehan: I am sure that Stephen will be able to persuade his colleagues to agree to it if they come in.

The Chairperson: If they come in — that is the problem.

Mr Beggs: We will, at the very least, need to go through it again quickly.

The Chairperson: We will suspend the meeting for a few moments.

Committee suspended.

On resuming —

The Chairperson: Members, we are now quorate again. We will go back to the revised terms of reference. Members have them in their papers.

The Committee Clerk: The only change relates to a point that was raised at last week's meeting. The third bullet point in phase 1 contains the phrase "consistent with the safeguards on inclusivity". There are no other changes to the terms of reference.

The Chairperson: Are members content?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We move now to the revised stakeholder call for evidence paper.

The Committee Clerk: There have been a number of changes to that paper, and they reflect the points raised by Committee members at last week's meeting. As summarised in the note at tab 2, there is more specific reference to the current number of MLAs, the number of constituencies and the implications of the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies Act 2011. I am referring to the background notes. On page 5 of the call for evidence paper, there is more background information on decoupling. Paragraph 3.24 on page 8 contains more information on the position with the Department for Employment and Learning. That is a factual account of the statement that came from the First Minister and deputy First Minister about that Department. At the end of the paper, there is a list of research papers that the Committee has received on the subject of its review.

Other points were raised about the questions that will be put to stakeholders in the call for evidence paper. In section 4 on page 10, there is an additional question — the last question in that section — which relates to decoupling. It asks:

"how many constituencies and MLAs per constituency do you envisage in the 'decoupled' system, and why?"

As members requested, there is some clarification and rewording of the questions on page 11, particularly the middle question about a further reduction in the 16-constituency scenario, which could arise from a decrease in the number of MLAs in each constituency. There is an additional question there, and there is a slight rewording of the third question on page 11.

The only other rewording from last week's draft is on page 14. The second question asks stakeholders:

"In broad terms, what functions should be grouped in the reduced number of departments and what factors informed your decisions on grouping functions together in a department?"

Those are the only changes.

The Chairperson: Are members content with the revised stakeholder call for evidence paper?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: We move now to the signposting advertisement.

The Committee Clerk: This is for the Committee's information and approval. It is part of the process, and it is how things are done now, with regard to economies and budget. A small ad will go in the three main local papers, perhaps later this week. It will contain a link to the Committee's website. Stakeholders who are interested in the subject and wish to give their views to the Committee can go on to the Committee's web page, pick up the call for evidence paper and respond in due course.

Mr Doherty: It may be contained in the link, but is there a requirement to put the date for completion of submissions in the advertisement?

The Committee Clerk: Yes. The completion of the review?

Mr Doherty: No, the completion of the submissions. It may be in the link, but does it need to be in the ad?

The Committee Clerk: It says "deadline" at the bottom, and I will be putting in 28 March 2012. That was only a pro forma as such. That is the process.

The Chairperson: Are members content with the signposting advertisement?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: Are members content for Committee staff to make the appropriate arrangements to publish the advertisement in the three daily papers?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: In taking the review forward, I seek Committee agreement that Committee staff publish the terms of reference on the Committee's web page and issue the stakeholder call for evidence paper to the key stakeholders who were agreed at the meeting on 31 January. Although the deadline for written submissions on the call for evidence paper is 28 March, we hope that some key stakeholders may make their submissions before that date. I seek Committee agreement that, if any written submissions are received from key stakeholders before the Committee's next meeting, Committee staff, in consultation with myself and the Deputy Chairman, write to members to advise them of the submissions and the stakeholders who might be invited to provide oral evidence at the next meeting or the following meeting.

Are members agreed?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson: There is no other business. The next meeting will take place on 28 February at 11.00 am in this room. Thank you for your co-operation.