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## Sinn Féin Submission to the Committee on Procedures Consultation on the Review of Public Petitions Procedures

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1. Sinn Féin welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation.

### **2. Benefits of Public Petitions**

2.1 Sinn Féin are in favour of the use of public petitions in the Assembly.

2.2 Sinn Féin believe that public petitions are an effective way of engaging individuals more fully with the Assembly and political institutions.

2.3 In particular there are those who live in rural parts of the country who do not identify with the Assembly.

2.4 Sinn Féin acknowledge that the Fermanagh Trust made a submission to the consultation in support of the introduction of an E Petition system which would reach a greater amount of people and in a more effective way. Sinn Féin welcomes this submission.

2.5 It should be noted that broadband coverage in many rural areas is poor. Areas will need full broadband coverage to access the online service.

### **3. Current System for Public Petitions in the Assembly**

3.1 The current system is based on Standing Order 22.

3.2 Every member offering to present a petition to the Assembly, shall confine himself or herself to a statement of the parties from whom it comes, the number of signatures attached to it and the material allegations contained in it, and to reading the prayer of such petition.

3.3 Every petition presented under this order, not containing matter in breach of the privileges of the Assembly, shall be notified to the Clerk of the Business Committee,

and that committee shall consider whether and when it shall be taken in the Assembly.

3.4 A petition shall relate to matters that are within the legislative competence of the Assembly.

#### **4. E-Petitions**

4.1 Sinn Féin recommend the introduction of an E-petition system for the Assembly, following the good practice of the Oireachtas, the Scottish and Welsh Assemblies and Westminster.

4.2 Introducing a modern online mechanism would allow the public petition procedure to reach a greater amount of people. Also, an online mechanism would be a more effective way of engaging younger people with the political institutions.

#### **5. Petition Management**

5.1 Sinn Fein recommend that the Business committee should be responsible for considering public petitions.

5.2 There should be a few admissibility criteria. A petition must be in the proper form, must not include offensive language and shall relate to matters that are within the legislative competence of the Assembly.

5.3 Sinn Féin submit that there should be a reasonable signature threshold which should be low enough so as not to discourage the public from submitting petitions. A low threshold will also mean that issues are considered that may not have widespread support but are nevertheless of importance to those concerned. Sinn Féin recommend a threshold of at least 20 signatures in support of a petition.

5.4 Sinn Féin recommend that if the Business Committee conclude that the petition is admissible it should be referred to the chair of the relevant statutory committee and the relevant minister. The chair of the relevant statutory committee and the relevant minister could adopt a similar approach to the Oireachtas whose joint sub-Committee may invite the petitioner to appear before it to speak on the matter. It may also seek oral or written evidence from relevant organisations such as Government Departments, other appropriate bodies or stakeholders and can invite ministers to attend meetings and answer questions about the petition.

5.5 Sinn Féin recommend that reasons explaining why a petition is inadmissible should be sent to the relevant petitioners.

5.6 Sinn Fein further recommend that petitioners should be notified of any action taken on a petition within 14 days of the submission of the petition.