

17/12/14

Fermanagh Trust Submission to Northern Ireland Assembly's Committee on Procedures – 'Review of the Public Petitions Procedures'

The Fermanagh Trust welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the 'Review of the Public Petitions Procedures' by the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee on Procedures. The Committee's decision to review this matter is extremely welcome and we recognise this is a huge opportunity to address problems within our current mechanisms as well as the appetite for greater public engagement in Northern Ireland.

The Fermanagh Trust feels the current written petition process is not fit for purpose. It appears that limited, if any cognisance has been taken of written petitions to date. There is no feedback mechanism and no clarity of how exactly submissions are utilised within the legislative process. The negative result being a further widening of the gap between Government and communities.

While the terms of reference for this Review quite rightly incorporates potential options to enhance public petition procedures, more generally our recommendation is the introduction of an E-petition system for the Assembly, following the good practice of the UK Government, the Scottish and Welsh Assemblies and the Republic of Ireland Government.

As well as examining the mechanisms in place in other legislatures, which in many cases has worked extremely well and enhanced the legislative process, it is important to look at what impact, if any, legislative petition systems can have. Hough; 2012 found that the link between Parliament and citizen is enhanced as citizens can more easily navigate and engage with government and government agencies. His research has also shown how allowing those affected by a particular policy the opportunity to make their views known informs policy development and leads to more thorough executive scrutiny¹. In summary,

¹ Richard Hough, 'Do Legislative Petitions Systems Enhance the Relationship between parliament and Citizen?', Journal of Legislative Studies, September – December 2012, pp479-495

communities become more empowered and legislatures are able to have a more informed policy debate.

This is a straight forward solution to empower our communities and develop a much more modern, open and efficient way of governing. However, it is essential that such a system carefully involves a transparent and honest process which ensures that those submitting E-petitions are truly considered and valued within legislative decisions. This is key to any new process because it is one of the definitive problems with our current mechanisms.

If the Assembly does decide to introduce a E-petition system, we would recommend using a similar approach to the Oireachtas who publish a report on the outcome of each particular petition. Such a report could summarise the action taken by the Assembly in response to the petition and make recommendations for the relevant government departments to address any outstanding issues. These reports should be circulated to relevant signatories and be freely available online thereby upholding confidence in the process and practically demonstrating the impact of the petitioners' efforts.

Of course there will be numerous issues around the practical implementation of E-petitions; thresholds, registered signatories etc. However this is an opportunity to enhance the Assembly's public engagement, further allowing people to participate in political debate. It is an effective practice that we need to catch up on and rather than being seen as an alternative it must be considered as an addition to the current system outlined in Standing Orders.

In the context of increasing voter apathy twinned with a growing scepticism of the Assembly's effectiveness we believe there lies an opportunity in the increasing use of electronic/online methods of communicating to address the deficits of the negative tones around our politics. Introducing a new constructive online mechanism would allow the government's public petition procedure to reach a greater amount of people and in a more effective way. Enabling the public to influence political agendas and politicians to publicly demonstrate their responsiveness will surely be a welcome and positive development for the future of procedures in a more modern and progressive Northern Ireland Assembly.