

Research and Library Services



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COMMITTEE SYSTEM AND STRUCTURES SURVEY

FINAL REPORT

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This paper presents the findings of a survey undertaken by Research and Library Service to assess the attitudes and opinions of Members and Committee Staff on the current Committee System and Structures found within the Northern Ireland Assembly.

This research aims to facilitate the Committee on Procedures with its inquiry into the Committee System and Structures and how they can be improved.

Research Papers are compiled for the benefit of Members of The Assembly and their personal staff. Authors are available to discuss the contents of these papers with Members and their staff but cannot advise members of the general public.

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

This paper details the findings of a survey carried out by Research and Library Service on the attitudes and opinions of Members and Committee Clerks on the current Committee System and Structures found within the Northern Ireland Assembly.

In total, a series of 39 interviews were conducted with Committee Chairpersons, Members sitting on three or more committees, Party Whips and Committee Clerks.

The following provides a summary of the headline results.

COMMITTEE SIZE

- 18 (46%) of respondents believed that the current committee membership of 11 was adequate. 19 (49%) believed it was excessive.
- Of those who felt that membership was excessive, the majority, (68%), felt that a committee would function equally as effectively with 9 members.
- The majority, 26 (67%), of respondents commented that the reduction in the number of committees would not be possible due to links with the number of Government Departments.

SIZE OF QUORUM

- 27 (69%) respondents considered it unhelpful to decrease the size of quorum. 4 (10%) would consider it useful.
- When asked what an appropriate size of quorum would be, 27 (69%) commented that it should be left at 5.
- 17 (44%) respondents voiced support for the continuation of discussion in the absence of a quorum. The same, 17 (44%), voted against discussion.

NUMBER AND TIMES OF COMMITTEE MEETINGS

- The majority of respondents, 16 (41%), commented that the number and times of committee meetings should remain flexible and should be dictated by business needs. 13 (33%) of respondents believed that a weekly meeting was excessive and 10 (25%) believed that weekly meetings should remain.
- 18 (46%) respondents considered that Committees should not meet on Plenary days whilst 13 (33%) believed that they should.
- 32 (82%) of respondents voiced support for the provision of additional committee rooms.

USE OF SUBSTITUTES IN COMMITTEES

- 17 (44%) of respondents felt that committees would benefit from the use of substitutes. 16 (41%) felt that they would not be of use and 6 (15%) were undecided.
- 18 (46%) respondents believed that one substitute for each party would be preferable with 12 (31%) voicing a preference for one substitute per member.
- The majority, 24 (62%), of respondents replied that they had no comment or were indifferent to the criteria to be used for making a substitution.

USE OF RAPORTEURS IN COMMITTEES

- There was general support for the use of rapporteurs in committees. 21 (54%) commented that they would be in favour but would have some reservations whilst 11 (28%) said they would be completely in favour. 5 (13%) commented that they would not be in favour.
- When asked if rapporteurs would make better use a Committees time, 17 (43.5%) commented that it possibly would; 10 (26%) were undecided; 7 (18%) were positive that it would; and 5 (13%) commented that it would not.

USE OF JOINT COMMITTEES

- The majority, 25 (64%), of respondents considered that it would be useful if committees sat together to discuss issues which overlapped each others remits. 10 (26%) commented that it would not be useful and 4 (10%) were undecided.
- 35 (90%) of respondents commented that there should be more sharing of information between committees that is of interest to both.
- 35 (90%) of respondents also commented that committees with overlapping inquiries should coordinate their efforts to ensure that they are not duplicating work but reporting to each other on aspects of work.

VOTING PROCEDURES

- In all cases, 39 (100%) respondents felt that a simple majority vote was adequate.

OTHER ISSUES

- A number of other issues were identified by interviewees. These included: the need to address the workload of committees; training and definition of roles; the influence of the Chairperson; community outreach; attendance levels and party politics.

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PART ONE: INTRODUCTION

This paper has been prepared for the Committee on Procedures by Research and Library Service. It details the findings of a survey carried out on the attitudes and opinions of Members and Committee Staff on the current Committee System and Structures found within the Northern Ireland Assembly.

THE INQUIRY

This research aims to facilitate the Committee on Procedures with its inquiry into Committee Systems and Structures and how they could be improved.

The inquiry was initiated in June 2007 and the Terms of Reference for this inquiry are to:

- examine the membership of committees with particular reference to the number of members sitting on committees and the number of members serving on multiple committees;
- assess the use of substitutes in committees;
- examine the arrangements for quorums in committees;
- consider the possibility of the use of rapporteurs in committees;
- give consideration to the days and times on which committees should meet, the frequency of meetings and facilities for meetings;
- consider the procedures for voting in committees;
- assess the possibility of introducing Standing Orders to allow for joint committees; and
- report to the Assembly making recommendations on the findings of the Committee on Procedures into committee systems and structures.

As part of the review the Committee on Procedures commissioned Research and Library Service to conduct a survey on the views of Committee Chairs, Members sitting on three or more committees, Party Whips and Committee Clerks on how committee systems and procedures could be improved.

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMITTEES

The Northern Ireland Assembly has 11 Statutory Committees, 6 Standing Committees and 2 ad hoc committees. Therefore in total, there are 187 standing and statutory committee places to be filled. Given the ineligibility of the Speaker, the Ministers of the Executive, 2 Junior Ministers and the decision of 3 MLAs to decline places, there are 91 MLAs available to fill these places.¹

Currently, there is 1 member sitting on four committees, 19 sitting on three committees, 52 Members sitting on two committees and 19 members sitting on only one committee.

¹ Professor Rick Wilford, Written Submission to Committee on Procedures, 2007.

PART TWO: SURVEY METHOD

The survey was conducted via short, approximately 15-20 minute, one to one interviews with Committee Chairpersons, Party Whips, Members sitting on three or more committees and Committee Clerks.

The target group for the survey therefore contained 66 potential positions for interview. This was made up of:

- 19 Committee Chairpersons;
- 5 Party Whips;
- 20 Members sitting on 3 or more committees;
- 19 Committee Clerks; and
- 3 Principal Clerks.

Given that some members and clerking staff fall into more than one of the above categories, the actual number of individuals targeted for interview was somewhat lower.

An interview schedule was devised by Research and Library Service and subsequently approved by the Committee. This survey covered the issues of:

- Committee size;
- Quorum;
- Number and times of meetings;
- Use of substitutes in Committees;
- Use of rapporteurs in Committees;
- Use of joint Committees; and
- Voting procedures.

The opportunity to voice any additional comments was also given to the interviewee.

In November 2007, Members and Clerking staff were forwarded correspondence informing them of the Inquiry and requesting a short interview. Enclosed with this letter was an outline of the interview questions and a copy of the recent report on Committee Structures which had been prepared for the Committee in October 2007.

Following this, Research and Library Service endeavoured to arrange appointments with all individuals. A further email was forwarded to those who had not yet secured appointments on the 3rd December 2007 and interviews were conducted until the 21st December 2007.

A total of 39 interviews were conducted. These were made up of:

- 9 Chairpersons;
- 2 Party Whips;
- 10 Members sitting on 3 or more committees;
- 16 Committee Clerks; and
- 2 Principal Clerks.

Where Members fell into more than one category, the more senior post was recorded. Where clerking staff occupied more than one position, their comments were recorded only once.

PART THREE: COMMITTEE SIZE – THE FINDINGS

CURRENT COMMITTEE SIZE

Interviewees were asked to consider whether the current size of 11 members on each committee was adequate.

As outlined in Table 1 below, 18 (46%) respondents believed that 11 was an adequate number to allow the committee to function effectively and 19 respondents (49%) believed that the current committee size was excessive and should be reduced. This opinion was felt most strongly in the Members Serving on 3 or more committees group.

Table 1: Committee Size

Question 1: There are currently 11 members on each Committee. Do you think that this is an appropriate number to allow Committees to function efficiently?

| | Chairpersons | Party Whips | Members serving on 3 or more committees | Clerks | Total |
|---------------------|--------------|-------------|---|-----------|-----------|
| Adequate | 5 | 1 | 3 | 9 | 18 |
| No, too many | 3 | 1 | 7 | 8 | 19 |
| Undecided | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Total | 9 | 2 | 10 | 18 | 39 |

Respondents who were satisfied with the current membership of Committees felt that 11 members provided a good distribution of people and views and ensured cross party representation. Respondents also believed that reducing the size may lead to difficulties in achieving quorum. Comments included:

“It is important that representation be maintained. If the size of membership is reduced...larger parties may be able to dominate whilst smaller parties may be given undue weight”. (Chair)

A marginal majority of respondents felt that 11 members on each committee was excessive. The primary reason cited for this was the impact on Member’s time. Comments included:

“Members sitting on three or more committees can find themselves overstretched.” (Member sitting on three or more committees)

“It all boils down to demands on member’s time. A figure of 11 means that some members are sitting on three or even 4 committees which isn’t realistic because of the workload. It also affects the ability of the Member to throw themselves into the work of the committee”. (Member sitting on three or more committees)

Many of the Clerking staff also felt that a committee could function effectively with fewer members, as long as proportionality and appropriate representation was maintained.

“Give parties a number of seats and let the party decide who they send. The party lines will be brought to the meeting so it doesn’t matter how many are on the committee”. (Clerk)

“The size of Committees is no longer practical due to the increase in the number of Committees...there are too many committees and too few members”. (Clerk)

APPROPRIATE COMMITTEE SIZE

Interviewees who considered the current size of 11 to be excessive were asked what they thought membership should be decreased to.

Of the 19 respondents, 13 (68%), felt that the committee could function as effectively with 9 members.

Single respondents, (2.5%), also considered that a membership of 7-8 and memberships based on committee by committee basis would be effective.

3 respondents (16%) noted that the actual reduced number did not matter as long as representation was maintained.

Table 2: Appropriate Size of Committee?

Question 2: If you believe that the number in committees should be decreased which of the following options would you support?

| | Chairpersons | Party Whips | Members Serving on 3 or more committees | Clerks | Total |
|---|--------------|-------------|---|----------|-----------|
| 10 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 9 | 2 | 0 | 4 | 7 | 13 |
| 7-8 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Committee by Committee basis | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| As long as representation maintained | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 3 |
| Undecided | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Total | 3 | 1 | 7 | 8 | 19 |

A number of comments relating to committee size are detailed below.

“Smaller committees would put pressure on members to turn up. At the minute the larger parties with more members on each committee can cover for each other”. (Clerk)

“The committee size would need to be of an odd number to ensure that voting is effective”. (Clerk)

“Can and does work at 9. Each member would also have more time to express their views”. (Clerk)

“Committees would have to be reduced across the board because of the terms of the D’Hondt principles and safeguards in the Good Friday Agreement”. (Member sitting on three or more committees)

“Reducing the number of members may also cut out repetition in questions and viewpoints”. (Member sitting on three or more committees)

NUMBER OF COMMITTEES

Table 3 below outlines the opinion on the current number of committees operating within the Northern Ireland Assembly. Interviewees were asked to consider whether the number of committees could be reduced and the remits of certain committees joined under one committee.

Of the 39 respondents, a majority of 26 (67%) believed that reducing the number of committees would not be possible; 9 (23%) believed that this may be possible; 2 (5%) considered that it would be possible; and 2 (5%) answered no comment.

Table 3: Do you believe that the number of committees could be decreased instead or as well as decreasing the membership?

| | Chairpersons | Party Whips | Members Serving on 3 or more committees | Clerks | Total |
|-------------------|--------------|-------------|---|-----------|-----------|
| Yes | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 |
| No | 7 | 1 | 6 | 12 | 26 |
| Possibly | 2 | 0 | 3 | 4 | 9 |
| No Comment | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Total | 9 | 2 | 10 | 18 | 39 |

Of those who answered that it would not be possible, the predominant reasons given were that the number of committees should be linked to the number of Government Departments and that fewer committees may increase workloads and reduce effectiveness of existing committees. Comments included:

“Whilst it may appear to make sense for certain topics or remits to be grouped together, this would result in less time for scrutiny”. (Clerk)

“Workloads of committees are heavy. Fewer committees may result in increased workloads thus reducing their effectiveness. If the number of committees was reduced, it would require committees to be more selective in their issues for scrutiny”. (Clerk)

“It would perhaps make better use of time if there were fewer committees dealing with more strategic issues. However, this would make it very difficult to deal with legislation.” (Clerk)

“Same number of issues even if the number of committees reduced. What would happen to clerks and secretariat”. (Clerk)

“The number of committees must be linked to the number of Departments. There are more Departments than needed because of the situation of conflict resolution. Therefore, the number of committees is justified even if demarcation of responsibilities within Government Departments is slightly contrived”. (Chair)

A number of comments were made suggesting the creation of further committees.

“Subordinate legislation would perhaps be better dealt with in a legislation committee rather than thinly spread in the statutory committees”. (Clerk)

“Possibly a further committee is required to address European matters”. (Clerk)

PART FOUR: SIZE OF QUORUM – THE FINDINGS

CURRENT SIZE OF QUORUM

Interviewees were asked to consider their opinion on the current quorum size of 5 members.

Table 4 below highlights that 27 (69%) considered it unuseful to decrease the quorum; 4 respondents (10%) felt that this would be useful; and 7 (18%) respondents commented that the size of quorum should be dependent upon the size of committee.

Table 4: Should the quorum be decreased?

Question 1: Do you think that it would be helpful if the size of a quorum is decreased?

| | Chairpersons | Party Whips | Members Serving on 3 or more committees | Clerks | Total |
|---|--------------|-------------|---|-----------|-----------|
| Yes | 1 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 4 |
| No | 5 | 1 | 6 | 15 | 27 |
| Undecided | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Dependent upon size of committee | 2 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 7 |
| Total | 9 | 2 | 10 | 18 | 39 |

The majority of interviewees felt that the current quorum of five members was adequate given a committee of 11 members. Comments included:

"I suppose that it may be possible to reduce the quorum but there haven't been any difficulties in achieving it so far. If quorum is reduced this may encourage members to leave meetings and affect attendance levels". (Chair)

"If quorum was reduced, any decision could potentially be made by 1 or 2 parties. A quorum of 5 is needed to ensure that a consensus is reached". (Chair)

"Quorum of five is necessary. The perception to witnesses if there is any less must be considered" (Clerk)

Of those who answered that it would be useful to decrease the quorum or commented that it was dependent upon committee size, comments included:

"It doesn't matter how many members are present as long as all parties are represented". (Member sitting on three or more committees)

"If committee size is reduced, quorum could be reduced." (Selection)

"Have never seen party members vote against the party line so as long as the parties are represented accordingly, quorum should not matter" (Clerk)

APPROPRIATE SIZE OF QUORUM

Table 5 below details how the interviewees responded when asked what an appropriate size for quorum should be.

A significant majority, 27 (69%) commented that 5 was adequate. 4 (10%) commented that it should not be below 4; 1 (2.5%) commented that it should be 3; and 7 (18%) respondents felt that the size of quorum should be dependent upon the size of the committee. Therefore, if the size of committees were to be reduced, so too should the quorum.

Table 5: What size should quorum be?

Question 2: What size do you think the quorum of a committee should be?

| | Chairpersons | Party Whips | Members Serving on 3 or more committees | Clerks | Total |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|-------------|---|-----------|-----------|
| Adequate as is | 6 | 1 | 6 | 14 | 27 |
| Not below 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| 3 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Dependent upon committee size | 2 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 7 |
| Total | 9 | 2 | 10 | 18 | 39 |

DISCUSSION IF INQUORATE

The interviewees were asked to consider whether an issue should continue to be discussed even if the committee becomes inquorate. They were advised that the Scottish Parliament allows for the continuation of discussion to the end of the item so long as no vote is taken and no further items are discussed. Table 6 overleaf details the responses.

The same number of respondents, 17 (44%), voiced support for and against the continuation of discussion if current quorum is not maintained.

In all of the survey groups, with the exception of the Members sitting on 3 or more committees, a majority against the continuation of discussion was highlighted. However, a significant majority of those sitting on three or more committees commented that it would be useful to allow discussion.

Table 6: Should a Committee continue to discuss an issue if inquorate?

Question 3: Do you think that the committee should continue to discuss an issue if inquorate?

| | Chairpersons | Party Whips | Members Serving on 3 or more committees | Clerks | Total |
|------------------|--------------|-------------|---|-----------|-----------|
| Yes, but no vote | 3 | 1 | 7 | 6 | 17 |
| No | 5 | 1 | 2 | 9 | 17 |
| No Comment | 1 | 0 | 1 | 3 | 5 |
| Total | 9 | 2 | 10 | 18 | 39 |

Of those respondents who felt that it would be useful for discussion to take place, the following comments and reasons were offered:

"Sometimes quorum is lost only temporarily and it would be useful if discussion could continue throughout this. Furthermore, in cases where outside bodies have been invited to give evidence, often putting large amount of work into presentations, it would be courteous and useful to be able to take information despite the uncommittment from Members". (Chair)

"It is important to consider an approach for this to happen especially when meetings are taking place outside Parliament Buildings or a Committee is on an external visit. What if the meeting is inquorate and is being held at Westminster? There should be some guidance and clear guidelines set on what should happen in these types of circumstances". (Clerk)

"This is often done on an informal basis...more formal procedures should be set in place." (Clerk)

"Definitely merit in examining this...there are many Members who travel long distances into Stormont for meetings. It would be a good use of time if some benefit or information could be taken from a meeting that is inquorate". (Member sitting on 3 ore more committees)

Of those who commented that it would not be useful for discussion to take place, reasons offered included:

"Continuing discussion inquorate would not be useful because it would be repeated at the next meeting". (Clerk)

"The quorum has to be maintained for any proper decisions to be made". (Chair)

"Continuing inquorate has potential risks in that members could take advantage and go inquorate too often". (Clerk)

"This is a sensitive issue and one which may not work in practice". (Chair)

PART FIVE: NUMBER AND TIMES OF COMMITTEE MEETINGS – THE FINDINGS

STATUTORY COMMITTEES

Interviewees were asked if they thought that statutory committees should continue to meet once a week. Table 7 below highlights the results.

The majority of respondents, 16 (41%), commented that the number and times of committee meetings should remain flexible to meet the business needs of the committee; 13 (33%) respondents commented that a weekly meeting was excessive and that fortnightly meeting would offer a better alternative; and 10 (25%) respondents commented that committee meetings should remain weekly.

Table 7: Should statutory committees continue to sit once a week

Question: Do you think that Committees should continue to sit once a week?

| | Chairpersons | Party Whips | Members Serving on 3 or more committees | Clerks | Total |
|---|--------------|-------------|---|-----------|-----------|
| Yes - Weekly | 3 | 0 | 3 | 4 | 10 |
| No, Excessive - Fortnightly | 2 | 1 | 3 | 7 | 13 |
| Should be flexible to meet business needs | 4 | 1 | 4 | 7 | 16 |
| Committee Should decide | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 9 | 2 | 10 | 18 | 39 |

The majority of respondents commented that committee times should remain flexible to meet business needs. The reasons offered as to why this should be the case included:

"I think at this stage there is a necessity to meet once a week, but I don't think this should be rigid. There shouldn't be a meeting for the sake of having a meeting". (Member sitting on three or more committees)

"Meeting times should be dictated by business needs. Committees should be creative and inventive to ensure that work undertaken on a weekly basis is effective, thus eliminating the emergence of cynicism". (Chair)

"There is a learning curve that the Departments have to go through relating to the information they provide which creates work". (Clerk)

"Possibly leave a week every so often to allow for planning. There is no time to strategise with the constant turnaround". (Clerk)

"Need to start with weekly meetings to set up work programmes. It may be possible to reduce meetings after this". (Clerk)

"It is enough for Committee meetings to take place once a week but there should also be the flexibility to have additional issues if an important issue should arise". (Chair)

Those who felt that it was necessary to meet once a week commented that:

“Having a weekly schedule means that forward work programmes can be reviewed in advance and updated when necessary. I have found this to be very effective”. (Chair)

“Parties need to be developing members who know their areas. Weekly meetings encourage this”. (Clerk)

“Committees often deal with heavy workloads. Weekly meetings are necessary to ensure that the workload is completed”. (Chair)

Those who considered that it should be fortnightly offered the following comments:

“Fortnightly meetings would encourage committees to be more strategic and effective in the issues that they address. It may encourage the consideration of items which can really make a difference”. (Chair)

“Committees should be less often but held for a longer time. Considerable time is spent administrating each committee and it would be more useful if clerks and research staff had more time to prepare briefings etc...” (Clerk)

“Weekly meetings mean that there is too short a time to turn round meaningful and detailed papers. Less frequent, better quality meetings would be the aspiration”. (Clerk)

“Committees need to be more strategic. Once a fortnight, with the ability to call an extra meeting in between if necessary would suffice. There is a need for more political maturity”. (Clerk)

“One all day meeting every two weeks would be more useful and the committees could sit on alternative weeks. A day session would concentrate the mind and enable Committee staff time to get out packs and enable time to arrange meetings if to be held outside the Parliament Buildings”. (Clerk)

“Fortnightly meetings is certainly something that should be considered. It may be more productive to meet fortnightly for a longer period of time”. (Clerk)

“The ability and experience of the chair would determine. Fortnightly would be preferable so long as chair could focus the meetings” (Chair)

SHOULD COMMITTEES SIT WHEN PLENARY IS SITTING?

Interviewees were asked to consider whether committees should meet on days on which the Plenary is sitting.

Table 8 overleaf highlights that 18 (46%) of respondents commented that committees should not meet on plenary days where possible; 13 (33%) respondents felt that they should; and 8 (20%) respondents were indecisive or indifferent on this matter.

Table 8: Should Committees meet when the plenary is sitting?

Question: Do you feel that Committees should be timetabled for times when the plenary is sitting?

| | Chairpersons | Party Whips | Members Serving on 3 or more committees | Clerks | Total |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|-------------|---|-----------|-----------|
| Yes | 3 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 13 |
| No, should be avoided where possible | 5 | 1 | 5 | 7 | 18 |
| Undecided | 1 | 0 | 1 | 6 | 8 |
| Total | 9 | 2 | 10 | 18 | 39 |

Those that felt that committee meetings should not be held on Plenary days voiced the following comments:

"This should be avoided where possible" (Clerk, Member of 3 Committees, Chair)

"Members are sometimes torn between debate and committee business. Not having committees on this day may allow staff additional time to get work done. There is also issues surrounding the availability of Hansard on Plenary days. Saying that, I have found Friday to be equally as problematic". (Chair)

"Committee meetings should not be held on Plenary days...it is hard enough at the minute to get people to attend debates in the chamber". (Chair)

Those suggesting that committees should continue to sit on Plenary days noted that:

"Evenings on plenary days may be useful for members. It is beneficial to be able to make good use of time at Stormont for Members who live a distance away". (Member sitting on three or more committees)

"It is useful that Members can make good use of time whilst in Parliament Buildings, freeing up time for other commitments such as constituency issues". (Member sitting on 3 or more committees)

"Members have decided to sit while in Plenary so it has not been an issue" (Clerk)

There was a reasonably high incidence of those who remained undecided. This was mainly due to clerking staff not wishing to voice an opinion. It was felt that this should be a matter for Members to consider.

ADDITIONAL COMMITTEE ROOMS

Interviewees were asked to consider whether they thought it would be useful to make more rooms available within Parliament Buildings for use by committees.

Table 9 overleaf outlines the results. There was significant support for the provision of additional committee rooms with 32 (82%) respondents voicing a

positive response. One (2.5%) respondent commented that no further rooms should be made available and 6 (15%) were undecided.

Table 9: Additional Committee Rooms

Question: Do you think that more rooms should be made available for committee meetings so that more committees can sit at the same time?

| | Chairpersons | Party Whips | Members Serving on 3 or more committees | Clerks | Total |
|-------------------|--------------|-------------|---|-----------|-----------|
| Yes | 8 | 2 | 8 | 14 | 32 |
| No | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| No Comment | 1 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 6 |
| Total | 9 | 2 | 10 | 18 | 39 |

Those who considered it useful to make available more committee rooms offered the following comments:

“Where items of public interest are being considered, finding a room large enough has been an issue”. (Chair)

“There is a need to make some of the rooms more committee friendly”. (Clerk)

“More rooms could only become available if there were less Members on each committee. The committees also have to compete with Policing Board for rooms”. (Clerk)

“It has been problematic securing suitable rooms for ad hoc and emergency meetings”. (Clerk)

It was noted however, that the development of the fourth Committee room should allow for greater flexibility in committee arrangements and should therefore negate the need for additional rooms.

“The development of the fourth Committee room should allow for flexibility in committee arrangements” (Clerk)

PART SIX: USE OF SUBSTITUTES IN COMMITTEES – THE FINDINGS

USE OF SUBSTITUTES

Interviewees were asked to consider the use of substitutes in committees. Table 10 below outlines the results.

Opinion on this matter was very much divided. 17 (44%) respondents felt that the use of substitutes would be of use to committees; 16 (41%) felt that they would not be of use; and 6 (15%) were undecided. The use of substitutes was favoured most by the Members sitting on 3 or more committees and the Party Whips.

Table 10: Use of substitutes

Question: Do you think that committees would benefit from another MLA being able to take the place of a committee member who cannot attend a meeting?

| | Chairpersons | Party Whips | Members Serving on 3 or more committees | Clerks | Total |
|------------------|--------------|-------------|---|--------|-------|
| Yes | 3 | 2 | 6 | 6 | 17 |
| No | 5 | 0 | 2 | 9 | 16 |
| Undecided | 1 | 0 | 2 | 3 | 6 |
| Total | 9 | 2 | 10 | 18 | 39 |

Comments in favour of the use of substitutes included:

"This would be a good idea in terms of securing quorum." (Member sitting on three or more committees)

"Larger parties don't need substitutes as they make sure a member is there. There would however, be room for small parties/independents to have substitutes to ensure that they have involvement." (Clerk)

Whilst in favour, many considered it important to exercise caution with a number of issues. These included:

"Whilst it might be useful in some cases ie when there is a danger of losing quorum, there is also danger of this being abused and loss of continuity and expertise." (Chair)

"Whilst it may be useful, it may breakdown the composition and effectiveness of committee membership." (Chair).

Those not in favour of the use of substitutes focussed on the loss of continuity and expertise as their reason why. Comments included:

"I am not comfortable with the use of substitutes. If they were used they would have to be given the vote, however, they may not have the background knowledge to required to make a meaningful contribution". (Chair)

"I am totally against use of substitutes in committees. Whilst it may help achieve a quorum, it can mean sending out more packs and the Committee Staff may not know who will be attending the meetings...Members need to be knowledgeable about the subject area." (Clerk)

The introduction of substitutes would disrupt learning within the Committee. Relevant issues could be missed by Members who were using substitutes". (Clerk)

"This would add pressure to committee staff to get additional packs out". (Clerk)

"This would present problems for committee staff in keeping records of who was substituting who". (Clerk)

Other comments for consideration include:

"The use of substitutes should be trialled and other parliaments looked at for comparative information." (Clerk)

"This is dependent upon the committee. Some require greater continuity and expertise." (Member on three or more committees)

NOMINATION OF SUBSTITUTES

Interviewees were asked to consider how substitutes should be arranged and whether it should be one for each member of the committee, one for each party or whether it should be left entirely flexible. Table 11 below outlines the results.

The majority of respondents commented that one substitute for each party would be preferable with 18 (46%) of the respondents nominating this arrangement. 12 (31%), of the respondents felt that a substitute should be arranged for each member.

Table 11: How should substitutes be arranged

Question: Do you think that substitutes should be arranged, one for each member of the committee or one for each party?

| | Chairpersons | Party Whips | Members Serving on 3 or more committees | Clerks | Total |
|----------------------------|--------------|-------------|---|-----------|-----------|
| One for each member | 3 | 0 | 3 | 6 | 12 |
| One for each party | 4 | 2 | 4 | 8 | 18 |
| Flexible | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 |
| Undecided | 2 | 0 | 2 | 4 | 8 |
| Total | 9 | 2 | 10 | 18 | 39 |

For those who considered it desirable to arrange substitutes by party, comments included:

"Would advocate the idea of substitutes as long as they were nominated by their party, they could bring fresh ideas and attitudes to the Committees. These Members should have the same voting rights as other Members". (Chair)

"Yes, I would consider the use of substitutes as it would give more flexibility. Members are often caught up in constituency business and this would allow Members leeway. A substitute per party would seem the most sensible idea". (Party Whip)

“Logistically, if all Members had a named individual as a substitute there would be considerably more administration for Committee staff. One substitute per party would reduce this”. (Clerk)

For those who considered that it would be desirable for a substitute to be arranged for each member, comments included:

“Specifically nominated substitutes should be named for each member to ensure continuity and focus”. (Chair)

“The use of substitutes needs to be carefully curtailed. It would not be appropriate for a substitute to simply turn up and vote. Substitutes need to be up to speed on the issues addressed in that particular committee.” (Member sitting on three or more committees)

“If there is a substitute then there needs to be a named individual with a watching brief”. (Clerk)

CRITERIA FOR MAKING SUBSTITUTIONS

The interviewees were asked to consider what the criteria should be used for making a substitution. They were informed of the current system operating within the Scottish Parliament which stipulated that to make a substitution *the member must be sick, or a family member sick; a replacement on death or leaving the party; an emergency; or an urgent constituency matter*. Table 12 overleaf highlights the results.

This area generated little interest and interviewees were generally reluctant to comment. Clerking staff in particular, considered that this was an area that should be discussed by Members.

Of the 39 interviewees, 24 (62%) answered that they had no comment or were indifferent on the criteria to be used for making a substitution. 4 (10%) of the respondents commented that a strict criteria should be set; 7 (18%) commented that the criteria set in other parliaments should be considered; and 4 (10%) commented that it needed to be flexible.

Table 12: Criteria for making substitutions

Question: What criteria would you set for making a substitution?

| | Chairpersons | Party Whips | Members Serving on 3 or more committees | Clerks | Total |
|----------------------------|--------------|-------------|---|-----------|-----------|
| No comment / Indifferent | 5 | 0 | 4 | 15 | 24 |
| Strict Criteria | 2 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 4 |
| Consider other parliaments | 2 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 7 |
| As long as its flexible | 0 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| Total | 9 | 2 | 10 | 18 | 39 |

Comments offered included:

“These should be serious criteria and not frivolous to ensure that the process of substitution is not abused”. (Chair)

“The members or parties should decide what criteria should be used”. (Clerk)

“In practice, it is of little effect what the criteria for substitutions is as there is no way to prove if a Member is adhering to the criteria or not”. (Chair)

PART SEVEN: USE OF RAPPORTEURS – THE FINDINGS

USE OF RAPPORTEURS

Interviewees were asked to consider the use of rapporteurs in committees.

In general, interviewees were positive about this use of rapporteurs however expressed a number of reservations.

The majority, 21 (54%), of respondents commented that the use of rapporteurs would be helpful, however, would have reservations about its success in reality; 11 (28%) considered that it may be useful; and 5 (13%) considered that they would not be useful.

Table 13: Use of Rapporteurs in Committees

Question: Do you think that the use of Reporters would be helpful in Committees?

| | Chairpersons | Party Whips | Members Serving on 3 or more committees | Clerks | Total |
|--|--------------|-------------|---|-----------|-----------|
| Yes | 3 | 0 | 2 | 6 | 11 |
| No | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 5 |
| Yes, Possibly with reservations | 5 | 2 | 5 | 9 | 21 |
| Undecided | 0 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| Total | 9 | 2 | 10 | 18 | 39 |

Those who considered it useful offered the following comments:

“This may be allow for issues to be worked up to a level that the committee can deal with fairly quickly. If a member has a particular interest in the subject area, this would be very effective.” (Clerk)

“The use of rapporteurs would be good for Committee Members, would give individual members a greater role, provide Members with greater self-esteem etc”. (Chair)

“I am aware of the use of rapporteurs in other Parliaments...their use should be looked at in the Northern Ireland Assembly as they may be a way of reducing the workload of Committees” (Chair)

Many who cited that it would be useful, held some reservations in practice.

Comments included:

“Use of rapporteurs would be advantageous to the work of the Committees, however, safeguards would have to be put in place to ensure the political affiliations of the member did not influence reporting”. (Clerk)

“Procedures in place might help but this may result in sectarian divides and information being given to the press before committee”. (Member sitting on 3 committees)

"It would be useful if representation was maintained and party lines did not dictate viewpoint". (Clerk)

"The use of rapporteurs may be useful, however, there may be problems in terms of securing volunteers for the group and there may be a matter of conflicting egos that may cause problems". (Clerk)

"This would be useful if the Member had access to the appropriate backup and resources needed to conduct the work". (Member of 3 or more committees)

"Whilst a committee rapporteur would be useful, it would be preferable if this were not a Member but a Committee official". (Party Whip)

A number of respondents also considered that the creation of a subgroup or task group would be equally as effective:

"A small task group could take forward and report back, however, there must be multipart representation". (Chair)

"Rapporteurs are good idea but there would be an issue of trust around who did it. It would be more accessible if it was a subgroup that undertook the work". (Clerk)

Those who were against the use of rapporteurs commented that:

"Dual mandate would stand very much in the way of using a reporter." (Clerk)

"Past experience has not been great. The downside is that greater stresses would be put on committee staff given the time constraints placed on Members". (Clerk)

"Varying quality of output may be produced and party lines may creep into the report". (Clerk)

"The rapporteurs role may degenerate into a partisan one". (Member sitting on 3 or more committees)

USE OF RAPPORTEURS AND COMMITTEES' TIME

The Interviewees were asked to consider if they thought that the use of rapporteurs would make for better use of Committee time. Table 14 overleaf highlights the results.

Given the results collated above relating to whether the use of rapporteurs would be helpful, support appeared diluted when asked if rapporteurs would make better use of committee time. The underlying sentiment for this appeared to be that whilst in theory it is a good idea, in practice it may not be as successful.

Of the 39 interviewees, 17 (43.5%) respondents commented that rapporteurs may possibly make better use of committee time; 10 (26%) were undecided; 7 (18%) considered that it definitely would and 5 (13%) commented that it would not.

Table 14: Rapporteurs and use of committees' time

Question: Do you think that Reporters would better use Committee time?

| | Chairpersons | Party Whips | Members Serving on 3 or more committees | Clerks | Total |
|--------------|--------------|-------------|---|-----------|-----------|
| Yes | 2 | 0 | 1 | 4 | 7 |
| No | 1 | 0 | 2 | 2 | 5 |
| Possibly | 3 | 2 | 6 | 6 | 17 |
| Undecided | 3 | 0 | 1 | 6 | 10 |
| Total | 9 | 2 | 10 | 18 | 39 |

“Whist a committee rapporteur would make better use of committee time in theory, what happens in practice could be a very different story.” (Chair)

“It would perhaps be useful to look at the success of such an approach in other committees with a view to trial it in the Northern Ireland Assembly.” (Clerk)

PART EIGHT: USE OF JOINT COMMITTEES – THE FINDINGS

JOINT COMMITTEES AND SITTING TOGETHER

The interviewees were asked to consider a series of questions relating to the use of joint committees.

Table 15 below highlights opinions relating to the possibility of committees sitting together to discuss issues which overlap each others remits. 25 (64%) of respondents commented that it would be useful to sit together; 10 (26%) commented that it would not be useful; and 4 (10%) were undecided.

Table 15: Joint Committees and sitting together

Question: Do you think that committees should sit together to discuss issues which overlap each others remits?

| | Chairpersons | Party Whips | Members Serving on 3 or more committees | Clerks | Total |
|------------------|--------------|-------------|---|-----------|-----------|
| Yes | 5 | 1 | 6 | 13 | 25 |
| No | 3 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 10 |
| Undecided | 1 | 0 | 1 | 2 | 4 |
| Total | 9 | 2 | 10 | 18 | 39 |

Of those who considered that it would be useful to site together offered the following comments.

“Would be good use of time however, procedural rules would need to be set down clearly. An agreed vision would need to be identified and good preparation would need to take place before the meeting”. (Clerk)

“This is an issue that is becoming increasingly important to some committees however clear procedures need to be in place to ensure governing the meeting, voting arrangements, quorum arrangements etc are formal and transparent.” (Clerk)

“This is a good idea in theory and it would not be necessary for the full committee to sit together. A number of members of each committee could be delegated to attend meetings with speaking rights”. (Member sitting on three or more committees)

“Need some sort of facility to bring together committees that have similar interests”. (Clerk)

A number of concerns were raised;

“Good idea in theory but problematic in practice. Regulations concerning who would take the lead etc would need to be transparent”. (Clerk)

“Logistics may prove difficult. Would there be a suitable room available?” (Clerk)

“Joint Committees could be used in certain circumstances. However, there are a number of dangers in introducing Joint Committees. For example, who is finally

responsible for the report? Who does the Joint Committee report back to? Does the Joint Committee have any decision making responsibilities?" (Clerk)

Of those who considered that it was not a good idea, the following comments were provided:

"Independence of each committee is important and is something that we need to hold onto. If the remit is overlapping, it is useful that each Committee look at the issue with their own point of view. I think that this adds to the debate rather than restricts it." (Member sitting on three or more committees)

"Not in favour of the establishment of Joint Committees...there might be problems in deciding which committee should take lead and party politics may come into play". (Chair)

"There would be no need for Joint Committees if the role of the Chairpersons' Liaison Group was strengthened". (Member sitting on 3 or more committees)

SHARING INFORMATION BETWEEN COMMITTEES

Interviewees were asked to consider if there should be more sharing of information between committees that is of interest to both. Table 16 highlights the results.

There significant support for this with 35 (90%) of respondents commenting positively. 4 (10%) were undecided.

Table 16: Sharing of Information between Committees

Question: Do you feel that there should be more sharing of information between committees that is of interest to both?

| | Chairpersons | Party Whips | Members Serving on 3 or more committees | Clerks | Total |
|------------------|--------------|-------------|---|-----------|-----------|
| Yes | 8 | 2 | 8 | 17 | 35 |
| No | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Undecided | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| Total | 9 | 2 | 10 | 18 | 39 |

A number of further comments were offered with regards to the sharing of information. These included:

"Yes, further sharing of information would be useful so long as issues surrounding confidentiality are respected". (Clerk)

"Good informal lines of communication are currently open". (Clerk)

"Sharing is happening at the minute but perhaps this could be done on a larger scale and provided for in Standing Orders". (Clerk)

"Silo mentalities not helped by standing orders. There needs to be further communication". (Clerk)

OVERLAPPING INQUIRIES

Interviewees were asked to consider whether committees with overlapping inquiries should coordinate their efforts to ensure the avoidance of duplication. Table 17 highlights the results.

As in the previous question, there was significant support for this. All respondents felt that there would be merit in pursuing this further, however, commented that formal procedures must be in operation. As in the previous question, 35 (90%) of answered positively and 4 (10%) were undecided.

Table 17: Overlapping Inquiries

Question: Do you feel that committees with overlapping inquiries should coordinate their efforts to ensure that they are not duplicating work but reporting to each other on aspects of work?

| | Chairpersons | Party Whips | Members Serving on 3 or more committees | Clerks | Total |
|------------------|--------------|-------------|---|-----------|-----------|
| Yes | 8 | 2 | 8 | 17 | 35 |
| No | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Undecided | 1 | 0 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| Total | 9 | 2 | 10 | 18 | 39 |

A number of comments were put forward including:

“A Sub Group made up of members of both of the committees may provide a better mechanism for bringing this forward”. (Chair)

“More formal structures need to be put in place if this were to happen”. (Clerk)

“Whilst I think this should be encouraged, I don’t believe that it should be legislated for or should be made mandatory. There should be a degree of flexibility allowing committees to decide the best route forward on a case by case basis.” (Member sitting on three or more committees)

PART NINE: VOTING PROCEDURES – THE FINDINGS

CURRENT VOTING PROCEDURES

Interviewees were asked to consider the current voting arrangements. In all cases it was felt that a simple majority vote was adequate and no problems to date had been encountered within the current procedure.

Table 18: Voting Procedures

Question: Do you feel that the current voting system within committees is adequate?

| | Chairpersons | Party Whips | Members Serving on 3 or more committees | Clerks | Total |
|------------------|--------------|-------------|---|-----------|-----------|
| Yes | 9 | 2 | 10 | 18 | 39 |
| No | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Undecided | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Total | 9 | 2 | 10 | 18 | 39 |

“The current system works reasonably well. The major benefit of it is that it is simple. If cross community voting were to be introduced, further resources would need to be given to Clerks to enable counting to take place.” (Clerk)

“The only issue arises when there is a vote on party sensitive issues and the vote comes down to what is essentially a unionist/nationalist viewpoint. However, I have experienced no problems relating to this in any of my committees.” (Member sitting on 3 or more committees)

PART TEN: OTHER ISSUES IDENTIFIED

Respondents were provided with the opportunity to comment on other issues which they would like to see addressed or to comment on an area which could be improved.

A number of recurring issues were identified.

WORKLOAD OF COMMITTEES

“Committees can sometimes aim to do too much. There is a need to take the ‘big picture’ into consideration and tackle issues that can make a real difference.” (Clerk)

“Inquiries should be shorter and more focused”. (Clerk)

“There is an issue surrounding the time taken at meetings. There should be more effort to stick to agendas and a further effort to focus meetings” (Member sitting on three or more committees)

TRAINING AND DEFINITION OF ROLES

“Members should be trained on how committees should work and how each Members should operate within a meeting. For example, if a Minister is present how should they be questioned appropriately. This may make the committee more efficient.” (Member sitting on three or more committees)

“Secretariat are being used as experts rather than as procedural”. (Clerk)

“There is a need to define roles. Some clerking staff are very proactive whilst others take less of a role and focus purely on procedures”. (Chair)

“A Clerk should be able to clerk any committee not be committee specific” (Clerk)

INFLUENCE OF CHAIRPERSON

“The Chairperson can have significant weight in deciding issues to be discussed, maybe too much.” (Member sitting on three or more committees)

“The quality of the Chairperson can make a big difference in terms of how effective the meeting is. Perhaps training should be given for Chairs to encourage more focussed, effective meetings”. (Member sitting on 3 committees)

“There is a need for the Chair of the committee and the Minister to develop a good working relationship and this is not always the case. In some cases there has been evidence of political divide affecting the relationship between Minister and Committee”. (Member sitting on 3 or more committees)

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

“Committees need to publicise more what they do. There is a lack of understanding in the public about the work the committee undertake and the good they do.” (Clerk)

“One area that I am concerned about is the lack of media coverage that the work of the committees receive. The media tend to focus on negative issues and rows between committee members. This is frustrating...a new information policy needs to be developed”. (Chair)

“There is an issue surrounding the quality of rooms for public engagement. It would be useful if you could get live feed from all committee rooms or webcam so that the public can witness the consensual nature of Committee meetings. (Member sitting on 3 or more committees)

“It would be useful to make it easier to meet outside Parliament buildings” (Clerk)

“A small budget should be clarified or provided to enable the Chair of the committee to host community or lobby groups”. (Chair)

ATTENDANCE

“Committee meeting should precede party appointments. Party whips should be able to appoint members on availability upon a final timetable being produced” (Chair)

PARTY POLITICS

“Problems of issues being debated down sectarian divides and party lines. There should be no place for this within Committees” (Member sitting on 3 or more committees)

OTHER

Review of current Assembly staffing structure may have implications on workings of committees. The impact of the loss of principal clerks could be detrimental given the loss of experience. A good senior clerk can drive an agenda, make use of contacts, knowledge of civil service mechanisms”. (Chairperson)

“At present committees are unable to make amendments to Bills. This seems overly rigid especially in cases where amendments are unanimously agreed between Committee, Minister and Department. Why should this have to go back to the Plenary? (Clerk)