

Research and Library Services



Northern Ireland Assembly

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COMMITTEE SYSTEM AND STRUCTURES

PROGRESS REPORT

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The Committee on Procedures is conducting an inquiry into the Committee System and Structures found within the Northern Ireland Assembly. This report provides a progress report on the work completed to date by Research and Library Services on this matter.

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.

PROGRESS REPORT

1. INTRODUCTION

The Committee on Procedures initiated an inquiry into Committee Systems and Structures found in the Northern Ireland Assembly in June 2007.

Terms of Reference for this inquiry state the need 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 this inquiry, the Committee on Procedures commissioned Research and Library Service to conduct a survey into the views of Assembly Members and Clerking staff on the issues identified above. This report provides detail on the method used to conduct the survey and its progress to date.

2. SURVEY METHOD

The survey is currently being 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 contains 51 potential interviewees. This is made up of:

- 13 Committee Chairpersons;
- 5 Party Whips;
- 15 Members sitting on three or more committees;
- 18 Committee Clerks; and
- 3 Principal Clerks.

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 have endeavoured to arrange appointments with all individuals. On the 3rd December 2007, a further email was forwarded to those who had not yet secured appointments.

3. SURVEY PROGRESS

To date (5th December 2007), 28 (54%) of those on the target list have been interviewed. These interviews have been made up of:

- 2 Chairpersons (out of 13);
- 1 Party Whip (out of 5);
- 9 Members sitting on 3 or more committees (out of 15);
- 13 Committee Clerks (out of 18); and
- 1 Principal Clerk (out of 3).

Appointments have been secured for a further 5 interviews in the coming week.

4. ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

Unfortunately, the response from Members has been low. It has been understandably difficult to secure appointments with Members due to their busy schedules. This has resulted in under representation in particular target areas, most notably, the Chairpersons. A high incidence of unkept appointments has also been experienced.

It would be desirable to improve the response rates in these areas to improve the representativeness of the sample.

Research and Library Service continues to seek appointments and conduct interviews.