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The Committee of the Centre
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**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

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Date: 17 September 2002

Ref: CM/20021016

Mr Greg McConnell
Chief Operating Officer
Review Public Administration
Room GD40
Stormont Castle
Belfast

Dear Greg

Review Public Administration – Evidence Session

I have been asked by the Committee of the Centre to invite you and your officials from the Review of Public Administration Team to give evidence to the Committee in relation to the Review on Wednesday, 16 October 2002 at a time and venue to be arranged.

The format will be a short (5 – 10 minute) briefing session followed by a question and answer session lasting up to 40 minutes. This will enable the members to raise any issues on the current position regarding the review.

Hansard will record the evidence session and a transcript of the evidence will be sent to you in due course.

For the information of the officials I enclose guidance notes for witnesses, terms of reference, and the Committee's membership.

If you have any queries regarding this meeting or special requirements for those attending, please contact me by telephone or by email. Perhaps you could confirm the names of those attending as soon as possible.

I appreciate your help and co-operation in organising this evidence session for the Committee of the Centre.

Yours sincerely

Stella

**Stella McArdle
Committee Clerk**

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THE NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

DEPARTMENTAL COMMITTEES

Notes for the Guidance of Witnesses Appearing before Committees

What is a Departmental Committee?

Departmental Committees have been established under Section 29 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Standing Order No. 43 of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Their purpose is to advise and assist Ministers in the formulation of policy. Committees have a scrutiny, policy development and consultation role with respect to the Department with which each is associated and also have a role in the initiation of legislation.

Committees have power to:

- consider and advise on Departmental budgets and Annual Plans in the context of the overall budget allocation;
- approve relevant secondary legislation and take the Government's view of relevant primary legislation.

Introduction

These guidance notes provide information and advice that will be of benefit primarily to witnesses appearing before Departmental Committees of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The guidance notes will however also be relevant and of interest to witnesses appearing before a number of Standing Committees of the Assembly including the Public Accounts Committee, the Special Committee on Conformity with Equality Requirements and the Audit Committee.

What is a Departmental Committee?

Departmental Committees have been established under Section 29 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Standing Order No. 45 of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Their purpose is to advise and assist Ministers in the formulation of policy. Committees have a scrutiny, policy development and consultation role with respect to the Department with which each is associated and also have a role in the initiation of legislation.

Committees have power to:

- consider and advise on Departmental budgets and Annual Plans in the context of the overall budget allocation;
- approve relevant secondary legislation and take the Committee stage of relevant primary legislation;

- call for persons and papers;
- initiate enquiries and make reports;
- consider and advise on matters brought to them by their Minister.

Committees, other than the Audit Committee, have 11 members including a Chairperson and a Deputy Chairperson. The Audit Committee has 5 members.

How does a Committee go about its work?

A Departmental Committee proceeds by way of enquiry into a matter or matters within its terms of reference, the subject of an enquiry being determined by the Committee itself. Having sought and received written evidence in the form of memoranda, reports, papers, etc., from interested parties, the Committee holds a meeting or series of meetings in public at which certain witnesses are invited to present evidence. Witnesses will often be selected from among those who have submitted written evidence. The selection of witnesses is a matter for the Committee itself. There is no right of appearance before the Committee.

Written Evidence

Witnesses are encouraged to provide evidence in a self-contained memorandum, with numbered paragraphs but without page numbers. This is useful should the memorandum be reproduced as part of a Committee's

final report. It is preferable for memoranda to be stapled rather than bound. Memoranda should include a one page summary of the main points and, if appropriate, a table of contents.

Where a date has been set for an evidence session, any written evidence should, where possible, be forwarded to the Committee Clerk at least one week in advance.

Are the press and public allowed into meetings?

Yes. There is a presumption that evidence sessions will be held in public. Departmental Committees may decide, in certain circumstances, to take evidence *in camera*.

Are meetings of Assembly Committees protected by the rules of privilege?

Yes, under Section 50 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, for the purposes of the law of defamation, absolute privilege applies to statements made to or in the Report of a Committee of the Assembly. This privilege covers all evidence given by a witness to a Committee whether in oral or in written form. It means that no action may lie in defamation against a witness in respect of such statements.

Where do Departmental Committees meet?

Many sittings of Departmental Committees are held in one of the Committee Rooms at Parliament Buildings, Stormont. When coming to Parliament Buildings, witnesses should park in the large car park to the right of the building (please see attached map) Access to Committee Rooms is via the main entrance to Parliament Buildings. Witnesses are obliged to pass through security on entering the reception area of Parliament Buildings and to obtain an Assembly pass, and are therefore advised to allow at least ten minutes for access to one of the Committee Rooms. A doorkeeper or a Departmental Committee staff member will escort witnesses from the reception area to the appropriate Committee Room. Where meetings take place away from Parliament Buildings, witnesses will be notified of alternative meeting arrangements.

How is a Committee Room arranged?

A Committee normally meets in private deliberative session before witnesses, public and press are invited into the Committee Room. The room will be so arranged that the members and Clerk to the Committee sit around one or more tables, with witnesses seated at a table facing them.

If desired, seats may be reserved for witnesses' colleagues to sit immediately behind them, from where notes or other advice may be passed. Other members of the public will sit behind the witnesses under the guidance of doorkeepers who will ensure that good order is kept throughout. Notes may be taken, but no form of tape recording may be

made, no photography is permitted and no refreshments may be consumed. Water is provided for witnesses. A Committee may make available to the press and public copies of any written evidence already submitted by the witnesses attending a Committee meeting. Committee staff and advisers sit behind or to one side of the Committee table.

Assembly Hansard staff attend meetings to record details of Committee proceedings.

How should witnesses prepare for the meeting?

To assist witnesses to prepare for their appearance before a Committee, a member of the Committee staff will normally be authorised by the Chairperson to provide some briefing to witnesses over the telephone. This briefing will indicate the order in which it is expected particular matters might be addressed in the course of the meeting, and, in cases where some research or gathering information or views might be necessary, may give a more precise indication of certain questions which are likely to be asked. Witnesses can expect to be given the briefing some time in the week prior to their appearance before a Committee.

Witnesses will not normally be briefed in writing.

Witnesses should also prepare themselves to answer questions not covered by the briefing and may wish to note that Committee members may choose to illustrate points of interest by reference to their constituencies.

What happens at a Committee meeting?

Witnesses will be informed of the date and time of evidence sessions in advance by the Committee Clerk. The Clerk should be given as much advance notice as possible of the names of the witnesses appearing before the Committee and their titles within their organisation. It is normal practice for the number of witnesses giving oral evidence from any one organisation to be restricted to a maximum of three people. Witnesses may wish to be accompanied by aides and the number of aides is normally restricted to three individuals. Their names should also be forwarded to the Committee Clerk in advance.

A Committee Chairperson will open a meeting by asking the lead witness to introduce his/her team to the Committee, and may provide an opportunity for a witness to make a brief opening statement before inviting colleagues to ask questions. Where more than one individual appears before a Committee, unless a question is directed to a particular witness, it may be answered by any witness present. Nameplates identify members of the Committee and witnesses. Witnesses should refer to the Chairperson as "Chairperson" and to other members of the Committee by name.

A witness invited to appear before a Committee must expect to answer detailed and probing questions on the subject of the inquiry and may also, for the purpose of placing facts or opinions on the record, be invited to respond to some very straightforward questions. In answering either type of question, succinct, clear and unequivocal responses should be given. Where a witness does not know the answer to a question, an indication to

that effect is preferable to an attempt to prevaricate. If necessary, a witness may offer to provide a note, which will answer a question, especially if the information requested is very detailed.

Members of Departmental Committees are informed laypeople. Some of them have particular qualifications or experience, but they will usually avoid using jargon or acronyms, and it is helpful if witnesses do the same.

What record is made of a meeting?

All public meetings of a Committee are recorded for the purpose of transcription and some are recorded for later broadcast on radio or television. If a meeting is to be televised, witnesses will, if possible, be notified in advance. A verbatim transcript of the evidence is prepared and will be forwarded to each witness following the meeting for an accuracy check. Amended transcripts should be returned without delay. Transcripts of evidence may be included in the published report of a Departmental Committee.

Can witnesses claim expenses for appearing before a Committee?

Yes. Witnesses may normally recover expenses necessarily incurred in attending a Committee meeting. A claim for expenses necessarily incurred should be forwarded to the Committee Clerk. A witness who is required to travel to a Committee meeting from outside Northern Ireland should contact the Committee Clerk before travelling to ensure that expenses necessarily incurred will be met.

Clarification of the advice contained in this paper may be sought from the Clerk to the Committee.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Mrs Eileen Bell

Mr Edwin Poole (Chairperson)

Mr Oliver Gibson (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Ian Shawcross

Mr David Evans

Mr Harry McIlroy

Mr Pat McIlroy

Mr David McIlroy

Mrs Anne Conway

Mr Thomas L. Lundy

Dr. William McIlroy

Mr Eugene McIlroy

Mr Roy George

Dr. Richard Harris

Mr Thomas Stephen Thomas

Mr David Kennedy

Mr Ken Robinson



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

COMMITTEE OF THE CENTRE

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Alliance

Mrs Eileen Bell

Democratic Unionist Party

Mr Edwin Poots (Chairperson)

Mr Oliver Gibson (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Jim Shannon

Progressive Unionist Party

Mr David Ervine

Sinn Féin

Mr Barry McElduff

Mr Pat McNamee

Dr Dara O'Hagan

Social Democratic and Labour Party

Mrs Annie Courtney

Ms Patricia Lewsley

Dr Alasdair McDonnell

Mr Eugene McMenamin

Ulster Unionist Party

Mr Roy Beggs Jnr

Dr Esmond Birnie

Mr Duncan Shipley Dalton

Mr Danny Kennedy

Mr Ken Robinson



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

TERMS OF REFERENCE

Committee of the Centre

- (1) There shall be a Standing Committee of the Assembly to be known as the Committee of the Centre, to examine and report on the following functions carried out in the Office of the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister and on any other related matters determined by the Assembly:
 - (a) Economic Policy Unit (other than the Programme of Government);
 - (b) Equality Unit;
 - (c) Civic Forum;
 - (d) European Affairs and International Matters;
 - (e) Community Relations;
 - (f) Public Appointments Policy;
 - (g) Freedom of Information;
 - (h) Victims;
 - (i) Nolan Standards;
 - (j) Public Service Office;
 - (k) Emergency Planning; and
 - (l) Women's Issues.
- (1) This Committee shall also have the functions conferred by virtue of Standing Orders 31 (2) and 41(2).
- (2) This Committee shall replace the Standing Committees on European Affairs and Equality, Human Rights and Community Relations. Standing Orders 'Standing Committee on European Affairs' and 'Committee on Equality, Human Rights and Community Relations' are, accordingly, revoked.
- (3) The Committee shall consist of 17 Members.
- (4) The Committee shall have the power to send for persons and papers.
- (5) The procedures of the Committee shall be such as the Committee shall determine.

Source: Official Report, 29 January 2001, Vol. 8, No. 9, Page 392.