



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee on Procedures

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Review of Private Members' Bills: Dr
Caoimhe Archibald MLA

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We all know that this has been a very shortened mandate and that a lot of PMBs are coming through at the one time. That really is going to put pressure on our Committee not only in the scrutiny that we get to do on each of those Bills but with timetabling the work and having the oral evidence sessions that we want. We might not be able to do that to the extent that we would like for each of those Bills.

The Bills that are being brought forward are concerned with topical issues, such as Rachel Woods's Domestic Abuse (Safe Leave) Bill and Jemma Dolan's Bill to ban zero-hours contracts. Those are topics that will generate a lot of interest, and people will want to respond to them. We want to give them the fullest possible scrutiny, and we will do that to the best of our ability.

Those are my initial comments, Chair. I am happy to be led by you on any additional views that you may want.

The Chairperson (Ms Ní Chuilín): Thanks very much for that, Caoimhe. I will open things up to members, who may ask about your PMB as well. Does anyone want to ask any specific questions? Away you go, Tom.

Mr T Buchanan: There are many private Members' Bills coming through. You outlined quite a number of them. Surely it will not be possible to give them the scrutiny that they deserve. Therefore, is it wise to have so many private Members' Bills when the proper scrutiny will not be given to them? We know that if proper scrutiny is not given to a Bill, it can produce bad legislation, which is one of the things that we do not want. What are your thoughts on the idea that too many Bills are being squeezed into the short time frame that we have and that there will not be enough scrutiny of those Bills, with the offshoot of that being that we may produce legislation that is not really up to standard?

Dr Archibald: As I said, we all recognise that this is a shortened mandate and that there has been limited time available to bring forward Bills. We are, however, a legislative Assembly, so it is for us to bring forward legislation. We will give that legislation the fullest possible scrutiny. As a Committee Chair, I will play my role in that. We have the Citizen Space tool, which allows us to collect evidence via surveys. We will be challenged when it comes to timetabling oral sessions. I very much anticipate that we will be looking at holding two Committee sessions per week to give those Bills the detailed scrutiny that we need to. We want Members to have the opportunity to progress their legislation to the fullest possible extent. I will certainly facilitate that as much as I can in my role as the Chairperson of a Committee.

The Chairperson (Ms Ní Chuilín): Thank you, Caoimhe. From your experience, what areas do you feel could be improved for Members when they are taking through their PMBs?

Dr Archibald: I had a bit of a think about that, Carál, in advance of today. The process of what needs to be done to progress a Bill at each stage is quite complex. It has taken time to get my Bill to the point where it is about to be drafted. It has been through its consultation and all that. That took a number of months. As I said, a number of private Members' Bills are coming along at once, so there is obviously pressure on resources. In a normal mandate, that might be better spread out over the five years.

I am quite pragmatic about it in that I am keen to see my legislation progress, but if it is not finalised in this mandate, I am hopeful that it can be carried forward to the next mandate. I imagine that a lot of Members will be of that same view and that it is about getting their Bill progressed as far as possible and getting legislation on the books where we can and, where that is not possible, advancing it to the degree that we can and, hopefully, picking it up in the next mandate.

The Chairperson (Ms Ní Chuilín): Is anyone else seeking to ask a question?

Mrs Barton: Carál, could I come in?

The Chairperson (Ms Ní Chuilín): Yes. Ciara will be before you, Rosemary. Go ahead.

Ms Ferguson: I want to ask a question that follows on from the presentation that we had two weeks ago. How did you feel about the consultation process for your private Member's Bill? What support were you given, if any? Did it involve a personal cost for you?

Dr Archibald: There was no cost involved for me personally. We put the consultation out via SurveyMonkey. We also very proactively reached out to the stakeholders who are relevant to the

legislative area that my Bill is in. We talked to as many of those stakeholders as possible. We set up meetings to talk to those various groups and organisations on Zoom. I found that to be a very useful process. I certainly see the physical consultation document as one part of it, but talking to people about the Bill, what you want it to do and what you think that it will do and hearing their views was every bit as important, if not more so, in developing the Bill and in understanding how people saw how what you were doing fits into their work. If I were giving advice to anybody about their legislation, it would be that they should have that face-to-face engagement with people where possible, and that supports the consultation survey that they will bring forward.

The Chairperson (Ms Ní Chuilín): Sorry, Rosemary. Would you like to come in now?

Mrs Barton: You are OK. I was at a Women's Caucus meeting just before this one, and we were looking at ways of improving women's representation at Stormont. Caoimhe, this is a criticism not of you but a general criticism. A number of Bills are coming through, and you talked about having two Committee meetings per week etc. That does not bode well for people with young families and family life etc. It is fine to bring forward Bills, but some thought also has to be given to other issues.

Dr Archibald: Can I respond to that, Chair?

The Chairperson (Ms Ní Chuilín): Yes, certainly.

Dr Archibald: As MLAs, we all recognise the extent of our work and the difficulty in balancing everything: our Assembly role; our constituency role; and getting time to have some sort of work-life balance outside that. It is a constant juggling of responsibilities, and that is the case from anybody's perspective. Obviously, it is more difficult when you have caring responsibilities as well.

I see the scheduling of two Committee meetings a week as a necessity at this stage in the mandate because we are trying to progress as much legislation as we can, and the Committee will hopefully try to facilitate that. As Chairperson, I will be encouraging the other members to facilitate it, but, obviously, people are bound by the amount of time that they can spend on any one thing.

As I reflected, over a normal mandate, we should seek to spread PMBs out a bit more so that we are not in the position of having so many coming through right at the very end. Obviously, there is always a rush to complete legislation at the end of a mandate, and timetabling issues and late nights are, I guess, to be expected to an extent as we try to finalise things. It would be useful if we could, in some way, try to spread the PMB workload over a mandate.

Mrs Barton: Yes. Can I come back to Caoimhe?

The Chairperson (Ms Ní Chuilín): Of course.

Mrs Barton: I understand what you are saying, but I sit on the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs. We have already extended our workload into the afternoon on Thursdays, as you are possibly aware. On the Thursday afternoon, half the Committee members might attend, and, to me, that will not allow for proper scrutiny. You have the full Committee in the morning and only half the Committee for the second half of the day or maybe for the second Committee meeting later on in the week. There are problems there.

Dr Archibald: Yes. Rosemary, on that, what I described is our intention. Obviously, we will have to see how it works out in practice. It is very much dependent on the cooperation of MLAs, and, as I said, we all have an awful lot of demands on our time. Our intent is to facilitate as much legislation as we can, and, as I say, I will try my best to do that, but we are bound by what we and others can manage to fit in. I take on board your point. It is very useful to reflect on that, and I will certainly have a discussion with my Committee Clerk about it, because it is important that as many members as possible contribute to that scrutiny. We will take that on board.

The Chairperson (Ms Ní Chuilín): Thank you, Rosemary, Ciara and Tom. Are there any other questions for Caoimhe? No. Caoimhe, thank you very much for appearing at the Committee. I am sure that you feel that it has been fairly useful to get some feedback. I wish you well in your endeavours as a Committee Chair, as well as an individual bringing your private Member's Bill forward. If there are follow-up questions, we might write to you, if it is not too much hassle.

Dr Archibald: No problem.

The Chairperson (Ms Ní Chuilín): Good luck, and thank you again.