

**Committee of the Centre
European Inquiry
Terms of Reference
SPECIALIST ADVISOR**

1. Background

The Committee of the Centre is a Standing Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Its role and remit is to examine and report on the following functions of the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, and in any other related matters determined by the Assembly:

- (a) Economic Policy Unit (other than the Programme for 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
- (l) Women's Issues

Public Bills and Statutory Rules arising from the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister are referred to the Committee.

The Committee replaced the Standing Committees on European Affairs and Equality, Human Rights and Community Relations.

The Committee has 17 Members, who are listed in Appendix One of this document.

The Committee has the powers to send for persons and papers and its procedures are as determined by the Committee.

2. Summary of Work Undertaken by the Committee

The Committee has been in operation since 2 December 1999 (with the exception of the period of suspension from February 2000 – June 2000). During that time it has taken the Electronic Communication Bill through the Committee stage of the legislative process and dealt with the Statutory Rules on "Equal Commissions (Time Limits) Order" & "Departments (Transfer of Functions) Order".

The Committee has also undertaken a three month Inquiry into a Children's Commissioner for Northern Ireland culminating in a Report which was placed before the Assembly for Debate and which has helped to shape the policy of the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister in this area.

The influencing of policy can also be seen in the Committees Scrutiny of and response to a number of consultations by the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister on policy areas i.e. PSI Working Group on Travellers, Budget Proposals, Programme for Government etc.

3. The European Affairs Aspect of the Work of the Committee

The role of the Committee involves that of scrutiny, and influencing policy of the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, which includes that of European Affairs.

EU Policy is a *non-transferred matter*, resting with the UK Government. The remit of the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister is

- to co-ordinate EU Policy for Northern Ireland by ensuring that its interests are taken into account when UK Government Policy is formulated;
- to provide central co-ordination of European information and issues across all 11 Northern Ireland Departments;
- to provide direct links between Northern Ireland and the EU to ensure that Departments work more effectively in Europe;
- and to ensure that EU Directives are implemented.ⁱ

The Department of Finance & Personnel currently undertakes the lead role in the policies associated with and management of European Funding.

Since its inception in 1999, the Committee of the Centre has been engaged in a wide and diverse range of issues. While some work has been carried out on European Affairsⁱⁱ, the volume of work undertaken by the Committee and the urgency of other remits has meant that this area has not been given the attention it merits. The Committee now wishes to turn some of its attention to this area. It has agreed that the focus of its work would be the following

An evaluation of the effectiveness of the current approach of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Devolved Government in the engagement of Northern Ireland with the institutions of the European Union.

4. The Key Issues to be Examined in the Inquiry

It is envisaged that the key issues to be examined by the Committee will be as follows. The Committee is open to suggestions from the Specialist Advisor on additional or alternative key issues.

- a) Mapping exercise of the various EU institutions and the Northern Ireland Government bodies who interact with them, including an understanding of what is gained from this information exchange. How such information is used within Northern Ireland? This can be defined as an analysis of the Strength and weaknesses of the current approach.

- b) The degree to which the Northern Ireland Devolved Government (including the Northern Ireland Assembly) has influences over policies of the EU and how this influence occurs.
- c) A review of the NI Strategy currently being developed by OFMDFM and an analysis of its likely impact i.e. what is the vision for NI, how different is it from what has gone before, how is it to be delivered, and what impact is it likely to have?
- d) Comparison of the approach and its mechanics with other regions with similarities to Northern Ireland.
- e) Recommendations for improvement or change in the current (or future as defined in OFMDFM Strategy) interaction of Northern Ireland with Europe.

5. Role of the Specialist Advisor

It is envisaged that the Specialist Advisor would be involved with the Committee on each issue as defined above by: -

- a) Assist the members to refine the Terms of Reference and the approach to their inquiry
- b) Provide expert advice & guidance in what is a complex and detailed area of Inquiry
- c) Ensure accuracy of information and provide an external and independent viewpoint
- d) Make recommendations on possible organisations and witnesses who can provide insight and information
- e) Assist Members to distil the information / evidence gathered into its essential points
- f) Facilitate members to draw their conclusions, make recommendations and structure their report
- g) Quality assure the draft report by considering the content & impact of the recommendations against the evidence presented

6. Likely methodology for gathering Evidence

The following are some of the methods that the Committee may decide to use in its inquiry. It is likely that the specialist advisor will be involved in advising and assisting the members in all of the following methods.

- European Seminar – this would be held in Northern Ireland and involve experts on European Affairs. It would be hosted by the Committee and invitations would be open to other Members, Committees and interested parties. The concept is to facilitate discussion on the role of the Northern Ireland Assembly in Europe, and to allow the Committee members an opportunity to hear of concerns or issues, which it may wish to explore in more detail in its inquiry. The Committee may wish to use this seminar as a means of encouraging wider discussion on its Inquiry and / or as a consultation exercise on its likely recommendations.
- Widespread Consultation and Gathering of Evidence – the Committee will wish to publish its Terms of Reference and invite written submissions from interested organisations. The Committee may also take oral evidence from a number of

relevant organisations and bodies such as Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister, MEP's etc.

- Analysis of other regions, Benchmarking and Best Practise – the Committee may wish to undertake an analysis of how matters are organised in other regions with a similar political structure to Northern Ireland. The aim of this exercise would be to allow for a comparative analysis with the Northern Ireland Model. Examples of best practise could be noted and included in the final report as recommendations.
- Visit to the Northern Ireland Executive Offices in Brussels – the Office in Brussels is central to the Strategy and Policies of the Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister. It will therefore be necessary for the Members to visit and experience its workings at first hand. The visit may also allow the Committee the opportunity to make relevant and important contacts in the European Institutions. It will also allow benchmarking with the Offices of the Devolved Institutions of Scotland & Wales.
- Production of a Report – this will detail the work undertaken by the Committee with its conclusions and recommendations. The report will go forward to the Assembly for debate before being passed onto Office of First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

7. Timescale

It is envisaged that the Committee would begin the inquiry in October 2001 for completion in February 2002. This gives a five months timescale, which is reasonable considering the workload of the Committee (and the Christmas recess) during this period. The following is a suggested timetable

September 2001	- Committee consider and agree Terms of Reference and appointment of Specialist Advisor
October 2001	- Appoint Specialist Advisor, advertise Terms of Reference and invite submissions, visit Brussels Office, taking of evidence
Nov/ Dec 2001	- Taking of evidence from witnesses
January 2002	- Hold Seminar, draft Report, agree conclusions & recommendations
February 2002	- Print Report, debate in Assembly, meet with OFMDFM re implementing recommendations

8. Experience of the Specialist Advisors

The Committee has requested that the Specialist Advisor have a working, practical and current knowledge of both the EU and the Devolved Institutions within Northern Ireland.

ⁱ Taken from Evidence given from Senior Officials, OFMDFM, to the Committee on 28.6.00

ⁱⁱ The Committee chair has attended two meetings with the Chairs from the other Devolved Institutions in the UK and the House of Lords & House of Commons on discuss areas of commonality in the approach to Europe. The Committee have also met with the Belgium Ambassador to the UK prior to the Belgium Presidency of the EU in July 2001

The Office of the First Minister
And Deputy First Minister

Machinery of Government Division

Block E, Castle Buildings, Stormont Estate, Belfast BT4 3SG
Tel: (028 90 5)20055 e-mail: linda.mccausland@ofmdfmi.gov.uk Fax: (028 90 5)22337

From: Linda McCausland
Date: 20 September 2001

To: Copy list below, for information

COMMITTEE OF THE CENTRE MEETING ON 19 SEPTEMBER

1. The Committee met to consider its forward work programme for the current Assembly session. The opening presentation on OFMDFM's main areas of work was given by Mr McCusker, Mr Haire and Mrs Bunting. A number of areas were highlighted for the Committee's attention notably the review of Community Relations policy and the development of the Strategy on EU policy.
2. It was evident from the discussions that the Committee has yet to clarify its respective roles in scrutinising the work of the Department and in the development of policy. The meeting was therefore not as productive as it could have been in terms of agreeing a work schedule for the coming session.
3. When senior officials left, the Committee discussed ways of managing its workload and prioritising subjects for consideration. It was agreed not to set up sub-committees to consider specific areas and to hold fewer evidence sessions. Priority would be given to primary and secondary legislation, with budgetary issues and other cyclical work being taken as necessary through the year.
4. The Committee had received a considerable number of issues from OFMDFM over the last two months and made initial decisions on the handling of these. The Clerks will clarify the outcome of the Committee's deliberations shortly but my understanding of what was agreed is as follows:

Children's Commissioner

- response agreed for issue to OFMDFM.

e-Government Corporate Strategic Framework

- Committee would not call officials; response to consultation would follow.

Executive's Response to the Disability Rights Task Force report

- researchers would prepare a paper for Committee to consider; no officials to be called

Victims strategy consultation

- researchers have prepared a paper; officials to attend 26/9/01

Community Relations review of policy

- Committee will give this priority

Civic Forum

- Committee will await outcome of review of Forum before considering

NI Beacon Scheme consultation

- Committee will note only, no detailed response expected

OFMDFM Equality Scheme (update following consultation)

- Committee will note

Equality Impact Assessment on Guide to Evacuation

- Committee unlikely to comment in detail; may request an update from CEPU on developments in area of emergency planning generally since the Unit last briefed the Committee.

5. Subject to wider political developments, the next meeting is scheduled for 26 September and will consider the Victims Strategy consultation. Officials have been invited to attend.

Linda McCausland

L McCausland
Assembly Section
Ext 20055