



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Research and Information Service Briefing Paper

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## Rules and Arrangements governing All-Party Groups in the Northern Ireland Assembly and other UK Parliaments/Assemblies

### **Introduction**

In response to a request for research from the Committee on Standards & Privileges, this paper provides an up-to-date overview and cross-comparison of the rules and arrangements that currently underpin the operation of All-Party Groups/Cross-Party Groups in the Northern Ireland Assembly, Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales, and the UK Parliament. The paper does so by outlining the known rules and arrangements relating to a number of key features of the regulatory regimes currently operating in each of the four legislatures. The paper concludes by identifying a number of points of difference for consideration and, for ease of comparison, a comparative table is provided as an Annex.

## The Northern Ireland Assembly

### *Make-up and operation of Groups*

All-Party Groups (APG) active in the Northern Ireland Assembly (NIA) provide an opportunity for Assembly Members (MLAs) from all parties to meet informally for the purpose of discussing shared interests in particular subjects<sup>1</sup>. Thirty<sup>2</sup> APGs are presently active in the NIA, each of whom being distinct from committees and occupying no formal standing within the legislative process. It is necessary that the MLAs establishing a particular group believe it to be in the “public interest”<sup>3</sup>, and for them not to be motivated by commercial purposes. In the past, such groups were formerly recognised by the NIA as falling into one of two separate categories: ‘All-Party Groups’, comprised of both Assembly Members and outside individuals and organisations, or ‘All-Party Assembly Groups’, whose membership consisted solely of MLAs. This distinction has since been discontinued in the view of it being “unnecessary”<sup>4</sup>, with the Committee for Standards and Privileges providing in its 2010 report that all groups should fall into the single category of ‘All-Party Groups’ and that membership ought to be restricted to MLAs.

In addition to restricting membership to Assembly Members, the current rules prescribe that each APG must maintain a membership of at least 10 MLAs, with each of the three designations recognised by the NIA being represented within the membership. The involvement of outside individuals is meanwhile confined to the making of financial and practical contributions. Among the 10 members must be two officers who are first elected at the groups initial meeting prior to it receiving approval, and afterward on a yearly basis at the group’s Annual General Meeting (AGM). Groups are responsible for publicising their AGM on the ‘All-Party Notices’ at least one week in advance, and must ensure that an Annual Return form is subsequently submitted. All group meetings must be attended by at least two members.

### *Administration and transparency of groups*

APGs are required to record certain details on the register. Such details consist of: (1) The name of the group; (2) the purpose of the group; (3) the officers of the group; (4) the members of the group; (5) the contact details of the group’s Chairperson; (6) Any financial and material assistance received or expected to be received in the year from a

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<sup>1</sup> 1.1, [http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/publications/all-party-groups/apg\\_rules.pdf](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/publications/all-party-groups/apg_rules.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/your-mlas/all-party-groups/>

<sup>3</sup> 1.3, [http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/publications/all-party-groups/apg\\_rules.pdf](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/publications/all-party-groups/apg_rules.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> 11, Committee on Standards and Privileges, Report on the Review of the Rules for All-Party Groups, 2010.

single source outside the Assembly that can be valued at £250 and over (written notification of such benefits must also be given to the Clerk of Standards within 28 days); (6) Further contact information where applicable (e.g. of organisations providing secretarial support); (7) a declaration assenting to the rules governing the operation of APGs. APGs must ensure these details are kept up to date, and have 28 days to provide the Clerk of Standards with notification of changes. It should also be noted that groups disclose details of their upcoming meetings, current officers and members (including contact details of members), and the benefits received by the group on the section allocated to them on the NIA website<sup>5</sup>.

Approval of prospective APGS is granted by the Committee on Standards and Privileges, which may decline approval should the group have failed to comply with the rules, or defer it if desiring clarification from the group on a particular matter. Whilst the Committee also retains (as affirmed in its 2010 report) the responsibility of monitoring the rules governing APGs, the current rules recognise that the Committee Clerk is not in a “position”<sup>6</sup> to ensure compliance, with his or her function not exceeding that of entering group details onto the register. Responsibility for ensuring compliance with the rules therefore rests firmly the group, with the group’s Chairperson bearing particular responsibility.

### *Support and entitlements*

APGS are not permitted to avail of the Assembly’s research or legal services for group business purposes. Nor are they allocated any funding by the Assembly or authorised to use the Assembly’s logo. The NIA does, however, permit groups to hold meetings, inclusive of basic hospitality, within Parliament Buildings, subject to room availability and the demands of formal proceedings. Group members are also entitled to the reasonable use of on-site facilities including telephone, photocopying, fax, and IT facilities where such is pursuant of group business, although such usage does not extend to outside individuals and organisations who happen to be involved with the group. All of these services can be now accessed by groups through the Assembly’s Central Committee Office<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/your-mlas/all-party-groups/>

<sup>6</sup> 3.3, [http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/publications/all-party-groups/apg\\_rules.pdf](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/publications/all-party-groups/apg_rules.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> 6.2, [http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/publications/all-party-groups/apg\\_rules.pdf](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/publications/all-party-groups/apg_rules.pdf)

## The Scottish Parliament

### *Make-up and operation of groups*

In the Scottish Parliament, a single category of group, known as ‘Cross-Party Groups’, exists. These groups provide an outlet for MSPs to “engage with external stakeholders” on issues and subjects relevant to their “parliamentary duties”<sup>8</sup>. Come the end of the Scottish Parliament’s fourth session, eighty-six<sup>9</sup> Cross-Party Groups were registered, each of whom being headed by an elected Convenor, and being required, under Section 6:4.1<sup>10</sup> of the Code, to have a minimum of five members. Whilst the Code stipulates that groups have one member from each of the parties represented in the Parliamentary Bureau, the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee has agreed an adjustment to this rule for the current fifth session, requiring instead that groups “at least one MSP member from the majority of the parties or groups represented on the Parliamentary Bureau”<sup>11</sup>. In addition instances do exist where groups are permitted to exist with fewer than 5 MSP members. For this to happen, the group must be granted a ‘specific waiver’<sup>12</sup> by the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee following the making of an application, or else for the Committee to issue a ‘general’ waiver applying to all Cross-Party Groups. In contrast to the Northern Ireland Assembly arrangements, outside individuals and organisations (two separate categories) are admitted as members at the discretion of the group and enjoy full voting rights. Whilst no precise limit on the number of non-MSP members exists, it is necessary for the overall membership of the group to “be clearly Parliamentary in character”<sup>13</sup>.

As with the arrangements in the NIA, it is mandatory for groups to hold one AGM a year, in which the group’s officers are elected and an Annual Return form is to be subsequently submitted. In addition to holding an AGM, groups must hold at least one other meeting in the same year, and are responsible for ensuring that notification of the date, time, and room number of all meetings are provided least 10 calendar days in advance. Moreover, all formal meetings must be attended by at least two MSPs who are registered members of the group. Should a meeting not feature such minimum attendance, it will not qualify as counting towards the group’s minimum number of

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<sup>8</sup> 6.1.1 <http://www.parliament.scot/msps/42779.aspx>

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.parliament.scot/msps/S4-CPGs.aspx>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.parliament.scot/msps/42779.aspx>

<sup>11</sup> [http://www.parliament.scot/CrossPartyGroups/Session5CrossPartyGroup/Admin/CPG\\_Best\\_Practice\\_Guidance.pdf](http://www.parliament.scot/CrossPartyGroups/Session5CrossPartyGroup/Admin/CPG_Best_Practice_Guidance.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Under s. 6 “Guidance on Cross-Party Groups

<http://www.parliament.scot/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/57292.aspx>

<sup>13</sup> 6.4.2. <http://www.parliament.scot/msps/42779.aspx>

required yearly meetings, and no formal group decisions can be made. Minutes must be produced for every formal meeting.

### *Administration and transparency*

The Scottish Parliament's website affords each group its own section in which its details are recorded. These details mirror the information which the group is required to state on its registration form prior to being granted approval as a new Cross-Party Group. The details which must be supplied are that of the group's name and purpose; the MSP and non-MSP members belonging to the group; the officers of the group (Convenor, Deputy Convenor, Secretary, Treasurer); the elected officers of the group; financial and other benefits which are from a single source from outside of the Scottish Parliament and amount to £500 within the space of the year; details of subscriptions charged, where applicable; the contact details of the group's Convenor; and a statement of compliance with the Code of Conduct governing Cross-Party Groups. In the event of changes occurring to the content of registration details supplied by a Cross-Party Group, the group must ensure written notification of such is provided to the Standard Clerks within 30 calendar days. This is necessary for the appropriate changes to be applied to the group's page on the Parliament's website. Updates to a group's MSP membership meanwhile can be performed by the group's Convenor, or alternatively a member of staff of the Convenor who has been formally authorised.

The responsibility of approving new Cross-Party Groups rests with the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. Should an MSP wish to set-up a new Cross-Party Group, he must first determine whether there exists "sufficient interest among other MSPs"<sup>14</sup>, and if satisfied of such should go on to arrange an initial meeting in which the Groups purpose, MSP members, and officers are confirmed. Having done such, it is then a requirement that the Group's completed registration form be submitted to the Standards clerk, who will present it to the Committee for approval.

In addition to approving new groups, the committee is also responsible for overseeing the regulation of groups in regards to compliance with the Code of Conduct, an example<sup>15</sup> of this being the regular assessment of Annual Return forms of groups to ensure rule compliance. Furthermore, Cross-Party Groups receive support from the Standards clerks. As outlined in the "Cross Party Groups Best Practice Guidance"<sup>16</sup>,

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<sup>14</sup> [http://www.parliament.scot/CrossPartyGroups/Session5CrossPartyGroup/Admin/CPG\\_Best\\_Practice\\_Guidance.pdf](http://www.parliament.scot/CrossPartyGroups/Session5CrossPartyGroup/Admin/CPG_Best_Practice_Guidance.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> 6.5.3 <http://www.parliament.scot/msps/42779.aspx>

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.parliament.scot/CrossPartyGroups/CPG\\_Best\\_Practice\\_Guidance.pdf](http://www.parliament.scot/CrossPartyGroups/CPG_Best_Practice_Guidance.pdf)

Standards clerks provide groups with guidance on adherence to the Code of Conduct and maintenance of details found on group webpages, as well as serving the function of reminding groups of their compliance obligations when acting contrary to such. Additionally, the Scottish Parliament's website<sup>17</sup> supplies Cross-Party Groups with guidance on the formulation of an Annual Return.

### *Support and entitlements*

The arrangements in the Scottish Parliament also entitle groups to make use of on-site meeting rooms, though groups must be willing to give way to formal parliamentary proceedings. Rather than being done through the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee, rooms can be booked, by both MSP group members and their staff, through the Facilities Management Helpdesk.<sup>18</sup> As is permitted in other legislatures, MSP members of groups are also entitled to make reasonable use or "the Parliament's telephone, fax, photocopying, IT facilities and Parliamentary stationary"<sup>19</sup>, in so far as such use is grounded in group business or else expressly authorised by the rules. The same entitlement does not apply however with respect to on-site postage facilities or broadcasting equipment, and groups are not permitted to utilise resources of the Parliamentary staff in order to facilitate meetings. Neither do the arrangements make provision for Cross-Party Groups to access the on-site research or legal services available to MSPs. Whilst no allocated budget funding is made available to support group activities, MSP members of Cross-Party Groups can receive reimbursement for "travel and overnight costs"<sup>20</sup> connected to group activities, an entitlement which is not visible in any of the other jurisdictions.

## **The National Assembly for Wales**

### *Make-up and operation of groups*

As with the arrangements in the Scottish Parliament, groups active in the National Assembly for Wales (NAfW) fall into the single category of 'Cross-Party Groups', and serve essentially the same function as groups in each of the other legislatures<sup>21</sup>. Thirty-four<sup>22</sup> Cross-Party Groups currently exist in the NAfW, with it being necessary for each of these to have been established in respect of any subject area relevant to the

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<sup>17</sup> [http://www.parliament.scot/CrossPartyGroups/Guidance\\_on\\_the\\_completion\\_of\\_annual\\_return\\_form.pdf](http://www.parliament.scot/CrossPartyGroups/Guidance_on_the_completion_of_annual_return_form.pdf)

<sup>18</sup> Confirmed by correspondence received from Scottish Parliament on 03/10/2016

<sup>19</sup> 6.4.11, <http://www.parliament.scot/msps/42779.aspx>

<sup>20</sup> Confirmed in correspondence from Head of Allowances, Scottish Parliament on 14 October 2016

<sup>21</sup> See 4, <http://www.assembly.wales/en/memhome/code-conduct-mem/Pages/rules-op-crossparty.aspx>

<sup>22</sup> <http://senedd.assembly.wales/mgListOutsideBodies.aspx?bcr=1>

Assembly, and to be comprised of at three Assembly Members from different political parties represented in the Assembly. Whilst outside individuals can be included as members at the discretion of the group, such persons are barred from voting; the rules here contrasting somewhat with those in place in the Scottish Parliament. Among the members of each group must be a Chairperson and a Secretary, each of whom are to be elected at the group's AGM. An Annual Report and Financial Statement is to be released within six weeks of the AGM. In addition to holding an AGM each year, groups must hold at least one other meeting and ensure that minutes are kept. It is generally the responsibility of the group's Chair to inform the appropriate Assembly Commission officials of meeting times and venues in order for these to be published on the Assembly website. The approach here can thus be viewed as more comparable to the arrangements in the Scottish Parliament than those in place in either the NIA or the UK Parliament.

#### *Administration and transparency*

Details of Cross-Party Groups are to be found on the register of groups on the Assembly's website. These details include that of the group's name; purpose; members; officers; minutes from past meetings; and all Annual and Financial Statements which it has produced. Should a group's details at any point require updating, the groups Chair is required to provide notification of such changes within four weeks. This must take the form of an amended registration form, the content of which is then published on the appropriate Cross-Party Group's section of the Assembly's website.

In the event of a Cross-Party Groups receiving financial and other practical support from outside individuals and organisations, the group is obligated to register/declare such where it exceeds £269.26 (0.5% of an Assembly Members salary). It is also a requirement in regards to financial transparency that the Annual Report of each group lists the totality of benefits received by both the group and its individual members from outside sources, including any secretariat support provided to the group. In the event of an individual Cross-Party Group member receiving a financial or other benefit from an outside source, the onus is on the member to ensure record of such is made in the Assembly's Register of Interests.

#### *Support and entitlements*

As is the case in other legislatures, Cross-Party Groups active in NAFW are permitted to make use of on-site meeting rooms. Such bookings, along with any accompanying

hospitality, must be organised by an Assembly Member who is also a member of the group, and it appears that groups may not avail of any of the Assembly Commission staffing services, with the exception of Welsh to English translation. Groups can though make reasonable usage of the Assembly's telephone, fax, photocopying, IT facilities and Assembly stationary where such forms of group business are expressly required by the rules. Whilst the NAFW does not afford groups any allocated funding from its budget, instances do exist, by virtue of the Assembly Access Fund<sup>23</sup>, in which groups can access limited financial assistance. The guidance states that 'The Access Fund has been established to ensure that Assembly Members have the necessary support to engage with constituents with diverse needs, and provide additional support to disabled Members and disabled support staff'. The fund cannot, however, be used for the provision of text translation into the Assembly's official languages or Welsh to English interpretation for Member-sponsored events which are organised by external bodies. Furthermore, the guidance states that 'If the Chair of a Cross Party Group considers that the CPG needs support to allow it to engage with constituents with diverse needs, for example to interpret a language that is not an official language of the Assembly, and this support cannot be provided from within the group's own membership, then they may wish to submit a business case to Members' Business Support for access to the Fund'. Regarding submission of such a business case, Chairs are reminded, however, that they should bear in mind that activities of Cross-Party Groups do not constitute formal Assembly proceedings

## The UK Parliament

### *Make-up and operation of groups*

In the Westminster Parliament, groups consisting of Members from both Houses who meet to discuss shared interests are known as 'All-Party Parliamentary Groups' (APPG)<sup>24</sup>. It is only those groups that meet the requirements of registration that qualify as APPGs, whilst a separate category of groups, termed 'unregistered cross-party groups', exists concerning those that fall short of such requirements. Only those groups which fall into the former category are authorised to use the term "All-Party" or "Parliamentary" in their name, and for the purposes of this paper the focus shall be restricted to them.

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<sup>23</sup> 10.27, <http://www.assembly.wales/en/memhome/code-conduct-mem/Pages/rules-op-crossparty.aspx>

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/pcfs/all-party-groups/guide-to-the-rules-on-appgs.pdf>



The UK Parliament features a markedly higher number of established groups than any of the other jurisdictions, with there being in excess of four-hundred APPGs on the most recently published register<sup>25</sup>. The rules governing these groups prescribe that at least one meeting be held each year in addition to the AGM, with minutes being kept at all meetings, and an income and expenditure statement being published by groups subsequent to their AGM. As required in the NIA, groups in the Westminster Parliament must publicise their AGM, along with all other<sup>26</sup> ‘formal’ meetings, at least one week in advance via ‘All-Party Notices’.

Out of the four legislatures, the UK Parliament can be seen as prescribing the most stringent rules in regards to meeting attendance and group membership. It is necessary that meetings be attended by at least five parliamentary members and that groups be made up of 20 parliamentarians, 10 of whom coming from the party or parties in government and the remaining 10 from the other parties (with at least six being from the party or parties in opposition). Similar to the rules in the NAfW, non-parliamentarians may be admitted as “external members” without voting rights.

#### *Administration and transparency of groups*

The procedure for approving new APPGs appears somewhat distinct from that which is in place in the NIA and the Scottish Parliament, with the procedure not involving a committee. For a prospective APPG to be granted approval by the Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, it is only necessary for it to supply the information required by the registration form. There also appears to be no express requirement that MPs seeking to establish an APPG believe its purpose to be in the public interest (as in the NIA), nor do the rules stipulate that groups must serve a purpose that relates to a subject area relevant to the Parliament (as in NAfW). Details of individual APPGs are recorded and maintained on a register known as “the Register of All-Party Parliamentary Groups”. With the exception of the requirements concerning the declaration of benefits received from outside sources (APPGs only have to include on the register those benefits that exceed £1,500), the scope of the details recorded on the register by APPGs can be seen as the most far-reaching of all the four jurisdictions. It is indeed notable here that certain details recorded on the Register of APPGs are not found on the register for APGs in the NIA, which can be outlined as that of the date of

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm/cmllparty/161012/contents.htm>

<sup>26</sup> Confirmed by correspondence received from the Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, House of Commons on 07/10/2016

the group's inaugural election of officers; the name and details of a public enquiry point; the name and details of any external organisation providing the group's secretariat; the group's web address where applicable; the start date of the group's reporting year; and whether the group has published an income and expenditure statement in respect of the previous reporting year. Such extensive requirements can be argued to add a greater level of transparency and accountability to the operation of groups functioning in the Westminster Parliament in comparison to those in the NIA and other jurisdictions. Furthermore, the rules in the UK Parliament also appear to mandate a particularly extensive disclosure of group information (both financial and otherwise) on the websites of individual APPGs. In addition to a full list of its members and dates of forthcoming meetings (as found on the webpages of APGs in the NIA), APPGs are also obligated to ensure online publication of dates of all past meetings; minutes of all previous formal meetings; reports and publications issued; previous income and expenditure statements; and whether groups submit accounts to an external body<sup>27</sup>. In addition, groups must include a disclaimer on their publications and webpages confirming that these are not to be understood as official publications of the Westminster Parliament.

### *Support and entitlements*

The UK Parliament affords practical assistance to recognised APPGs. As with each of the other jurisdictions, APPGs are authorised to make reasonable use<sup>28</sup> of the on-site photocopying, fax, IT, and telephone facilities, and are generally able to book on-site meeting and dining rooms for group business purposes. Similar to the support provided by the Standards Clerks to Cross-Party Groups in the Scottish Parliament, the Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards affords support<sup>29</sup> to APPGs in the form of seminars and advice on the rules found in the Guide to the Rules on APPGs, although no provision appears to have been made for the maintenance of webpages. In contrast somewhat to the rules in the other three legislatures, APPGs are permitted to make use of a modified version of the UK Parliament's crown portcullis emblem (the "bespoke APPG portcullis emblem"<sup>30</sup>) on their publications

## **Points of difference for consideration**

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<sup>27</sup> s. 21, <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/pcfs/all-party-groups/guide-to-the-rules-on-appgs.pdf>

<sup>28</sup> Confirmed by correspondence received from the Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, House of Commons on 07/10/2016

<sup>29</sup> Confirmed by correspondence received from the Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, House of Commons on 07/10/2016

<sup>30</sup> 26., <http://www.parliament.uk/documents/pcfs/all-party-groups/guide-to-the-rules-on-appgs.pdf>

- The current rules in place in the NIA do not expressly prescribe that APGs meet at least twice a year. This differs from the rules governing such groups in each of the other legislatures, which all impose the express requirement of groups meeting a minimum of twice a year. It is also the case that APPGs active in the UK Parliament are required to have four elected officers. This is double the required minimum for groups in the NIA, the Scottish Parliament, and the NAfW. This though may simply reflect the difference in size between the UK Parliament and other legislatures.
- APGs in the NIA must consist of no fewer than 10 MLAs. Neither the Scottish Parliament nor the National Assembly of Wales (NAfW) impose such a high threshold, with the minimum for group membership in each legislature being five and three respectively. The Committee may thus wish to consider whether replicating the minimum number of group members required in either the Scottish Parliament or NAfW could help to make the establishment of a new APG a more straightforward task to MLAs in the NIA.
- Whilst APGs in the NIA are not permitted to admit outside individuals or organisations as formal members, the Scottish Parliament takes a different approach, in permitting Cross-Party Groups to include non-MSP members who enjoy full voting rights. In its 2010 report, the Standards and Privileges Committee expressed its opposition to the NIA replicating such a practice. It was concerned that it would result in APGs not acting in conformity with the views of the majority of MLAs, as well as outsiders using APGs as a means of obtaining personal benefits<sup>31</sup>. The Committee may, however, wish to consider the extent to which such perceived drawbacks can be counter-balanced by the increased level of public engagement which could result from adopting the Scottish approach in this area.
- In contrast to the arrangements in the Westminster Parliament (and to an extent those now in place in both the NAfW and the Scottish Parliament), APGs are not required to ensure online publication of the dates of past meetings; the minutes of past meetings; the publications produced by the group; or previous income and expenditure statements. Furthermore, the rules in the NIA don't stipulate that minutes be kept at group meetings<sup>32</sup>, which would run contrary to rules in each of the other three jurisdictions (para 5 of the rules providing that how groups "operate and conduct their meetings is a matter for each group"). Requiring that minutes be kept and then publicised could

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<sup>31</sup> 14, Committee on Standards and Privileges, Report on the Review of the Rules for All-Party Groups, 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Confirmed by correspondence from the Committee on Standards and Privileges received on 06/10/2016

enhance APG transparency, in ensuring that the operational activities of groups are visible and accessible to both the legislature and the public. The same can be said with respect to the publication of income and expenditure statements.

- The arrangements in the Scottish Parliament appear to afford groups a greater level of assistance with respect to rule compliance and the maintenance of webpages. This is indicated by Cross-Party Groups being able to rely on the Standards clerks to remind them of their responsibilities under the Code of Conduct should they fall foul of compliance, and to provide maintenance of their webpages. It is also the case that APPGs in the UK Parliament receive support from The Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards affords support to APPGs in the form of seminars and advice on the rules. No such assistance is indicated by the current rules in the NIA. In fact, para 3.3 of the rules states that “the Clerk is not in a position to ensure that groups’ details are compliant”.
- APGs in the NIA are not afforded any financial assistance. This can be contrasted to a degree with the arrangements in the NAFW, where financial assistance is afforded by the Assembly Access Fund to those groups that seek to engage constituents with exceptional needs. It can also be contrasted somewhat with the arrangements in the Scottish Parliament, where MSP group members are entitled to reimbursement for travel or accommodation costs that flow from group activities. The Committee may wish to consider whether replicating such practices could have the effect of enabling MLAs to involve themselves more extensively with APGs, with financial constraints not serving as such an obstacle.
- As highlighted, the UK Parliament appears to take something of a different approach to approving new groups than the NIA, primarily in light of the absence of committee involvement. Whether this has given rise to a more straightforward process for establishing groups, and hence helping to explain the vastly greater number of groups in the UK Parliament, could be worth considering.

## **Annex A: Comparative Information Regarding Cross – Party Groups**

	<b>NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY</b>	<b>SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT</b>	<b>NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FOR WALES</b>	<b>HOUSE OF COMMONS, WESTMINSTER</b>
<b>Purpose and establishment of All – Party Groups</b>	<p>These groups provide a forum by which Members of the Assembly and outside organisations and individuals can meet to discuss shared interests in a particular subject. They play no formal part in the legislative process, and those wishing to establish a new group must believe it to be in the “public interest”. Groups cannot be set-up for commercial purposes</p> <p>The distinction between ‘All-Party Groups’ and ‘All-Party Assembly Groups’ is no longer in existence, with the Committee for Standards and Privileges conducting producing a report in 2010 in which it was deemed that all groups should fall into the single category of ‘All-Party Groups’.</p>	<p>Cross – Party Groups provide an opportunity for Members of all parties, outside organisations and members of the public to meet and discuss a shared interest in a particular cause or subject. For an individual MSP to establish a group, there must be “sufficient interest” among other MSP”.</p>	<p>Cross-Party Groups may be set up by Members in respect of any subject area relevant to the Assembly. They serve to provide a forum for Assembly members to meet for the purpose of discussing a particular area of shared interest.</p>	<p>‘All-Party Parliamentary Groups’ (APPGs) consist of Members from both Houses who meet to discuss shared interests. Only those groups that meet the requirements of registration that qualify as APPGs, whilst a separate category of groups, termed ‘unregistered cross-party groups’, exists concerning those that fall short of such requirements.</p>
<b>Membership</b>	<p>All Party Groups must consist entirely of MLAs, and must include at least ten members, with all three designations at the Assembly represented. Groups can allow outside individuals and organisations to make practical and financial contributions.</p>	<p>It is a requirement for group’s membership to include at least 5 Members, of which one must be from each of the parties or groups represented in the Parliamentary Bureau. Instances do exist however where groups are permitted to exist with less than 5 MSP</p>	<p>A Cross-Party Group must contain at least 3 Assembly Members from different political groups represented in the Assembly. Outside individuals can be included as members at the discretion of the group, though, unlike in the Scottish</p>	<p>The group must have 20 qualifying members on its Register entry, 10 from the Government party, plus a total of 10 Opposition/Other Members (of which 6 must be from the main Opposition party. Non-parliamentarians may be admitted as “external</p>

	<p>Membership must be available to Members from all parties. Groups must have at least two officers, first elected at the groups initially, and from then on at the groups AGM.</p>	<p>members. For this to happen the group must be granted a waiver by the SPPA committee. Outside individuals and organisations (two separate categories) can be admitted as members at the discretion of the group and enjoy full voting rights. There exists no precise limit on the number of non-MSP members, though the overall membership “must be clearly Parliamentary in character”.</p>	<p>Parliament, are barred from voting. Among the groups members must be a Chairperson and Secretary (the latter need not necessarily be an Assembly Member, though in such a case must receive approval from the Chair before acting), who serve as the groups two elected officers.</p>	<p>members”, albeit without voting rights.</p> <p>It is required that groups have at least four officers, with at least one being from a government party and one from an opposition party, as at least two being from the House of Commons.</p>
<p><b>Who approves such groups?</b></p>	<p>The Committee on Standards and Privileges approves groups, and may refuse approval should it deem the group in breach of the rules, or may defer approval if desiring clarification from the group on a particular matter.</p>	<p>Applications for recognition as a Cross – Party Group must be submitted to the Standards clerks, who will pass it on to the next suitable meeting of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. Groups must re-constitute within 90 days of a new mandate.</p>		<p>The Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards informs that prospective groups will receive approval so long as they supply the information required by the registration form.</p>
<p><b>How are details recorded/published?</b></p>	<p>Details of each group are recorded on a register as well as on the webpages of individual groups</p>	<p>The Scottish Parliament website affords each group its own section in which the details recorded on the groups Registration Form are published.</p>	<p>Details can be found on the register of Cross-Party Groups on the Assembly’s website.</p>	<p>Details of groups are recorded on the “Register of All-Party Parliamentary Groups” as well as on the websites of individual groups.</p>

<p><b>What details are recorded on the Register and/or group webpages?</b></p>	<p>On the Register:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The name of the group;</li> <li>- The purpose of the group;</li> <li>- The officers of the group;</li> <li>- The members of the group;</li> <li>- The Chairperson’s contact details;</li> <li>- Any financial and material assistance received or expected to be received from a single source outside the Assembly that can be valued at £250 and over;</li> <li>- Further contact information where applicable (e.g. of organisations providing secretarial support);</li> <li>- A declaration assenting to the rules governing operation of All-Party Groups.</li> </ul> <p>On the webpages of groups:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Upcoming meetings;</li> <li>- Current officers and members (including contact details of members);</li> <li>- Benefits received by the group.</li> </ul>	<p>On the Scottish Parliament website:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Name of the group;</li> <li>- Purpose of the group;</li> <li>- MSP members;</li> <li>- Non-MSP members;</li> <li>- Group officers (Convenor, Deputy Convenor, Secretary, Treasurer);</li> <li>- Elected officers;</li> <li>- All members;</li> <li>- Financial and other benefits which are from a single source from outside of the Scottish Parliament and amounting to £500 within the space of the year;</li> <li>- Details of subscriptions, where charged;</li> <li>- Convenor contact details;</li> <li>- Statement of Compliance.</li> </ul>	<p>On the register of the Assembly website:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The group’s name;</li> <li>- The group’s purpose;</li> <li>- The names of the groups officers;</li> <li>- The names of the group’s members;</li> <li>-Minutes of previous meetings;</li> <li>- Annual and Financial Statements.</li> </ul>	<p>On the Register:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The title of the group;</li> <li>- Purpose;</li> <li>- Category;</li> <li>- Officers of the group, along with their party affiliation;</li> <li>- Date of group’s inaugural election of officers;</li> <li>- Contact details of Chair;</li> <li>- Name and details of a public enquiry point;</li> <li>- Name and details of any external organisation providing the group’s secretariat;</li> <li>- The group’s web address (if applicable)</li> <li>- The start date of the group’s reporting year;</li> <li>- Whether the group has published an income and expenditure statement in respect of the previous reporting year;</li> <li>- Whether the group submits accounts to an external body;</li> <li>- Any financial and material assistance received from outside parliament where the total value from particular source exceeds £1,500 in the calendar year.</li> </ul> <p>On the websites of APPGs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Group members;</li> <li>- Dates of forthcoming meetings</li> <li>- Minutes of all previous formal meetings;</li> <li>- Reports and publications issued;</li> <li>- Previous income and</li> </ul>

				<p>expenditure statements;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Whether the group submits to an external body.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Which area of the secretariat takes the lead role in conducting administration.</b></p>	<p>The Clerk on behalf of the Commissioner for Standards maintains the register, whilst the Committee on Standards and Privileges remains responsible for its regulation.</p>	<p>The Standards and Public Appointments Committee.</p>		<p>The Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards.</p>
<p><b>Rules governing meetings</b></p>	<p>Groups must hold at least one AGM per year, in which officers are to be elected and an Annual Return form is subsequently submitted. The meeting must be publicised at least one week in advance via 'All-Party Notices'. All meetings must be attended by at least two members, however the rules provide that it is generally a matter for each group to decide how it conducts its meetings.</p>	<p>Groups must hold at least one AGM per year. An Annual Return form is to be subsequently submitted. The meeting must be publicised at least one week in advance via the Parliaments website. Groups must hold at least one other meeting during the year, and all meetings must be attended by at least two MSPs that are registered members of the Group. Groups have discretion to permit non-MSPs who are not members to attend meetings. Minutes must be produced for every formal meeting.</p>	<p>Groups must hold at least one AGM per year, in which officers are to be elected, and an Annual Report and Financial Statement is to be submitted within six weeks. Groups must hold at least one additional meeting. Minutes must be produced for every formal meeting.</p> <p>The groups Chair must take ownership for room bookings.</p>	<p>Groups must hold at least one AGM per year, in which officers are to be elected, and an income and expenditure statement is subsequently published. The meeting must be publicised at least one week in advance via 'All-Party Notices'. The minimum attendance, as with all group meetings, is five members, all of whom must be Parliamentarians, and at least one of whom an MP. Groups must hold at least one other meeting in the same reporting year. Minutes must be produced for every formal meeting.</p>
<p><b>How is the approval of such groups and their meetings publicised?</b></p>	<p>The Committee on Standards and Privileges updates the list of All-Party Groups.</p> <p>Groups must publicise their AGM on the 'All-Party Notices' at least one week in advance. Other meetings must also be made known via an All-Party notice, as</p>	<p>The Clerks of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee approve and publish subsequent meetings on the individual web pages of the Cross-Party Groups. Notification of the meetings date, time and room number must be</p>	<p>It is generally the responsibility of the groups Chair to inform the appropriate Assembly Commission officials of meeting times and venues in order for these to be published on the Assembly website.</p>	<p>The Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards will publish a list of the All-Party Groups. All group meetings must be publicised on the All-Party Notices with full details at least one week in advance.</p>



	well as on the day of the meeting via the Assembly Annuciator.	given at least 10 calendar days in advance.		
<b>Updating the group's details</b>	Any change in registration details should be put in writing to the Clerk of Standards within 28 days of the change occurring.	Updates to MSP group membership can be performed by the group's Convenor, or alternatively a member of staff of the Convenor who has been formally authorised. Any changes to the initial registration details must be notified in writing to the Standards Clerks no later than 30 calendar days after the change occurring. Subsequent to such notification, the appropriate changes will be applied to the groups page on the Parliament website.	It is the responsibility of the groups Chair to inform of any changes to group details, and such notification should be provided within four weeks in the form of an amended registration form. It will then be then published on the appropriate Cross-Party Group's section of the Assembly's website.	Groups are responsible for ensuring their register entry is kept up to date, submitting details of any changes to the Assistant Registrar within 28 days.
<b>How the rules governing such groups are managed/monitored</b>	The Committee on Standards and Privileges remains responsible for managing the rules. Clerks of the Committee however are "not in a position" to ensure groups remain complaint.	The Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee is responsible for managing the rules, as well as determining any changes to the rules. In the previous session Clerks for the Committee produce a report twice a year informing of group activity over the past six months, and this practice is expected to resume a year into the current session.  The Committee also provides groups with guidance on issues regarding adherence to the rules and their responsibilities under the Code of Conduct.		The Officer of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards oversees the general administration of rules, whilst the Committee on Standards is responsible for determining changes to the rules.
<b>What details are recorded on the Approved List?</b>	Not applicable	Not applicable	Not applicable	No longer applicable

<p><b>Degree of entitlement and support available to these groups</b></p>	<p>Groups are entitled to book rooms and hospitality for via the Central Committee Office, which prioritises the booking requests of Committees. The administration of such bookings is shared by the Committee of Standards and Privileges and the Members Support office share the administration of room bookings. Groups may make reasonable usage of certain facilities, such as meeting rooms (albeit subject to availability), telephone, photocopying, IT equipment, and stationary. They are not, however, entitled to support from the Assembly’s budget, and are responsible for financing themselves. Nor can groups use the Research services of the Assembly.</p> <p>Groups are not entitled to make use of the Assembly logo.</p>	<p>The Standards and Public Appointments Committee provides the following support:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Guidance on issues that concern the regulation of groups under the Code of Conduct;</li> <li>- Maintains and updates the webpages of cross-Party Groups; and,</li> <li>- Reminds groups of their responsibilities under the Code of Conduct should they not be compliant.</li> </ul> <p>The Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee does not book rooms or hospitality for Cross-Party Groups. This is done through the Facilities Management Helpdesk. Only Members, their staff and SPCB staff may book meeting rooms.</p> <p>MSP members are entitled to use to a reasonable degree “the Parliament’s telephone, fax, photocopying, IT facilities and Parliamentary stationary” with the exception of where such are designated for public use.</p> <p>Groups are not entitled to make use of the Scottish Parliaments logo.</p>	<p>Cross-Party Groups have access to the Assembly’s accommodation facilities, but any booking for Cross-Party Group meetings must be made by an Assembly Member who is a member of the Group. The Assembly Member would also be responsible for booking hospitality. The cost of any hospitality would also have to be met by the Group – it would not be met through Assembly funds. In addition, groups can make reasonable usage of the Assembly’s telephone, fax, photocopying, IT facilities and Assembly stationary in pursuit of Cross-Party business or the fulfil the requirements of these rules. However, with the exception of Welsh to English interpretation at meetings held on Assembly premises, groups cannot access any of the Assembly Commission staffing services at meetings.</p> <p>The Chair of a Cross-Party Group is permitted to seek assistance from the Assembly Access Fund in the event of the group members lacking the necessary funds for engagement with “constituents with diverse needs”. The Fund serves to financially assist those groups seeking to engage such constituents as part of their operation yet lack requisite funds. A business case must be submitted to Members’ Business Support for this to happen.</p>	<p>APPGs are authorised to make reasonable use of the on-site photocopying, fax, IT, and telephone facilities, and are generally able to book on-site meeting and dining rooms for group business purposes. It is the responsibility of All-Party Groups to book rooms for meetings and hospitality.</p> <p>The Office of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards affords support to APPGs in the form of seminars and advice on the rules found in the Guide to the Rules on APPGs, although no provision appears to have been made for the maintenance of webpages.</p> <p>Registered groups are entitled to make use of the portcullis logo (not the Crown &amp; Portcullis) on their publications.</p>
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			Cross-Party groups cannot use the Assembly logo on any of their publications.	
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