

Participating in Public Hearings

Both houses of Parliament, the National Assembly and the National Council, have committees which sometimes consider proposed laws or issues of public interest. These committees often travel around the country to hold public hearings. Making input at these public hearings is a good way to make your voice heard. The general guidelines for public hearings apply to other kinds of public meetings as well, such as meetings held by regional councils, local authority councils or other government bodies.

The role of Parliamentary committees in law-making

Not all proposed laws (“bills”) are referred to committees. Bills are considered by committees when they will have a major impact on society or particular sectors of society, or if the bill is controversial. A bill can also be referred to a committee if the members of the National Assembly or the National Council want more information about public opinion before making a decision on the bill.

When a bill is passed to a committee, the committee can invite experts, interested groups, or members of the general public to make oral or written statements about the bill. People with a particular interest in the proposed law are often referred to as “stakeholders”.

Committees may also hold public hearings to discuss bills. Public hearings may be held in Windhoek, or they may be held in different locations around the country. Anyone can attend a public hearing. Public hearings are normally announced in advance, and a hearing schedule will often be published in a newspaper or announced on the radio. But remember that public hearings are not always advertised, and the announcements are easy to miss. If you know that a bill has been referred to a committee but you have not seen an announcement about public hearings, call Parliament and speak to Committees Services at the National Assembly or to Specialised Services at the National Council.

Some hearings last for several hours. They may be held over a period of several days. Statements at the hearings are usually recorded, so committee members can review them later. Attending hearings on a bill will give you an opportunity to express your views on the bill before it is voted on in Parliament. Your input will be more effective if you are well informed about the proposed bill, the changes you want made and the reasons you think that changes are necessary.

How to prepare for a public hearing

- 1. Follow your bill.** If you are interested in a particular bill, follow its progress. You can attend sittings of the National Assembly or the National Council, which are open to the public. You can check for information on the Parliament website. You can contact the Table Office at the National Assembly or Specialised Services at the National Council to find out what is happening to the bill. You can also contact the Ministry which is most closely concerned with the bill.
- 2. Find out if the bill has been referred to a committee.** If the bill has been referred to a committee, find out if the committee will be holding hearings or accepting written submissions. You can call the clerk of the committee and watch the newspapers.
- 3. Do your research.** Get a copy of the draft bill. Bills are only referred to committees after they are tabled, so you can get a copy of the bill from the Messenger of the National Assembly or the Specialised Services of the National Council or the Parliament Library at this stage. If you disagree with an aspect of the bill, be prepared to explain why you disagree and what you think the bill should say.
- 4. Plan your comments.** If you are going to make an oral presentation you should write out your comments in advance, or at least make a summary of the key points you want to mention. This will help you make your input as clear as possible, and make sure you do not forget anything important. Your summary should include –
 - your name, your place of residence, and the name of your organisation (if you are representing one)
 - whether you support or oppose the bill in general
 - the key changes that you are suggesting.

- 5. Consider joining forces.** If several organisations have similar views, they could join forces and choose one or two persons to speak on behalf of all of them. This can be an effective way to add emphasis to particular points. If a single suggestion is proposed by 10 or 15 different interested groups, then the committee is likely to give it serious consideration.
- 6. Make copies of your input.** If possible, you should make copies of your comments or summary for the committee and for representatives of the media who attend the hearing. If you are not able to make copies, give your input to the chairperson of the committee.
- 7. Prepare for questions.** The committee may want to ask you questions after your presentation. If you rely on facts or statistics in your presentation, such as “40% of the children in my community have suffered child abuse”, be prepared to tell the committee the source of your information.
- 8. Practice in advance.** If you are nervous, practice your presentation in front of family or friends. Your organisation could organise a role play so that you can practice answering questions.

If you are not able to attend a public hearing in person, you can still send written input to the committee clerk. Make sure that your written comments reach the clerk by the day before the hearing begins.

BEHAVIOUR AT A PUBLIC MEETING

- If you are attending a public hearing as part of a large group, tell the committee clerk in advance. Large groups who attend a public hearing should designate one or two persons to speak for the whole group. This saves time, and also makes the group’s position clearer.
- Tell the committee clerk in advance if you have any special needs, such as wheelchair accessibility or a sign language interpreter.
- Treat the hearing as a formal occasion.
- Dress neatly.
- Listen respectfully when others are presenting their views.
- Be polite when it is your turn to speak.
- Speak clearly.
- Introduce yourself and state your place of residence and your organisation (if you are representing a group).
- Indicate right away whether you support or oppose the bill, and whether you are offering suggestions for changes to the bill. Then present your comments as you have prepared them.
- Stick to any time limits set by the committee for your presentation. Make your important points first before you run out of time. Even if there is no time limit, a brief presentation is usually more effective. Avoid wasting time on irrelevant issues.
- When you have finished, remain in place to see if any committee members have questions about your presentation.



Follow-up action

After receiving input, the committee will study the bill and the recommendations made by stakeholders. The committee will then prepare a report about the input it received. This report might include suggestions for changes to the bill. This committee report will be tabled in Parliament. It is a public document.

To find out what the committee recommended, you should try to get a copy of the official committee report as soon as possible. You can request it from the clerk of the committee, or from the Parliament Library. You can then check the report to see if your recommendations have been reported accurately, and if the committee recommended the changes you want. Even if you have not suggested any changes to a bill, you should still check the committee report. The committee may have proposed changes which you might want to oppose.

If you are not happy with the committee’s recommendations, then you can lobby Members of Parliament directly – by requesting meetings with individual MPs, by making press statements, by giving interviews to the media or writing letters to the editor, or by distributing a response to the committee’s report directly to MPs.

If the bill is still before the National Assembly, you may want to prepare for additional lobbying in the National Council. Even if the National Assembly referred the bill to a committee that held public hearings, there may be another round of committee hearings while the bill is being considered by the National Council. ■

WILL THE COMMITTEE LISTEN?

The members of the National Assembly and National Council are accountable to the public. This means that they have a duty to consider the views of the public. This does not mean that every suggestion put forward will be included in the final bill. Members of the public will often have different views on the best approach, so it is usually not possible to please everyone. Parliament is also required to pass laws that are consistent with the Namibian Constitution. Your input may not change the bill, but input from the public is usually given careful consideration.