Northern Ireland Assembly

A guide to the Assembly and Parliament Buildings
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Under the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement Agreement, Northern Ireland has a devolved government. The UK Parliament has transferred, or devolved, legislative powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly, made up of 108 Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs). Executive Powers are devolved to Ministers on the Executive Committee (Cabinet).

Transferred or Devolved Matters include most of the issues that affect the everyday lives of the people of Northern Ireland, including health, education, agriculture, the environment and the local economy.

Westminster remains responsible for UK-wide and international issues in categories known as Excepted Matters and Reserved Matters.

How has history influenced the way the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive operate today?

It was on 2 December 1999, that the UK Parliament first devolved powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Devolution was not new to Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Parliament and Executive, which governed Northern Ireland between 1921 and 1972, were also devolved institutions. When they were suspended in 1972, Northern Ireland came under Direct Rule from the UK Parliament at Westminster.

The current Northern Ireland Assembly model of devolution is very different from the old model. The Northern Ireland Parliament was elected using a ‘First Past the Post’ electoral system and based on the Westminster model. The party that won a majority of the seats in the election formed the Government. This was always the Official Unionist Party.

The system of devolved government established by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement is a power-sharing, consociational model of democracy. The political scientist, Arend Lijphart, is most closely associated with this type of system, designed for societies where there has been, or is potential for, conflict. The Northern Ireland model is unique; it takes account of our political history and is a power-sharing arrangement between the two main political communities in Northern Ireland, unionist and nationalist.

The positions of First Minister and deputy First Minister are shared between the two communities. The two Ministers have equal powers and must agree all decisions.

The Executive Committee, made up of the First Minister, deputy First Minister and 11 other Ministers is a mandatory coalition. Membership is determined by a mathematical formula based on party strength in the Assembly, known as the D’Hondt System. This ensures that both communities share power. While parties may have the right to be in the Executive, based on their mandate from the electorate, the coalition is not compulsory; parties may choose not to join, or to leave, if they wish. Committee Chair and Deputy Chair positions are also allocated proportionally using D’Hondt.

Special voting arrangements, in both the Assembly and Executive ensure that one side of the community does not dominate the other. In effect this is mutual veto, preventing decisions being made if nationalists or unionists are unhappy.

Many events influenced the model of devolution we have today – view information, archive photos and video footage on our Evolution of Devolution timeline in Chapter 2.
The Stormont House Agreement

The Stormont House Agreement was reached on 23 December 2014, following 5 weeks of negotiations between the British and Irish governments and the 5 Northern Ireland Executive parties. The talks agenda included the controversial issue of welfare reform and how we could resolve disagreements over flags, parades and dealing with the past.

The talks were chaired by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Theresa Villiers, supported by Irish Foreign Minister, Charlie Flanagan and US Secretary of State John Kerry’s representative, Gary Hart.

The issue of extra money from London to help Northern Ireland ease the impact of welfare reform and other budget pressures was key to success of the talks. Prime Minister David Cameron and Taoiseach Enda Kenny joined the talks on 11 December, but David Cameron’s initial proposal for a financial support package was unacceptable to the Northern Ireland parties.

The Prime Minister left without agreement but, after further negotiations, a deal was reached.

How will the Agreement affect the Northern Ireland Assembly?

The agreement should ensure stability for the institutions for the rest of this mandate. Failure to agree on budget issues could have resulted in an early election. Now, the next election will be, as scheduled, in May 2016. As a result of the Agreement, the Assembly was able to elect a new Speaker, Mitchel McLaughlin, on 12 January 2015. It had previously failed to choose a successor for William Hay because the DUP would not support a Sinn Fein candidate due to Sinn Fein’s opposition to welfare reform.

A balanced budget for Northern Ireland will have to be agreed by end January 2015 in order to secure the extra £2 billion in spending power negotiated with London.

The controversial welfare reform legislation will be introduced, although the Assembly will have the flexibility to adapt in order to address local needs. The public sector will be reduced in size to save money and there will be an audit of how community divisions impact on delivery of public services, with a view to more shared services in the future.

On 19 January, the Minister for Finance and Personnel, Simon Hamilton, made a statement to the Assembly presenting the final version of the Budget, which he said was “a better budget than we might have dared to imagine six months ago.” Assembly Statutory Committees had fulfilled its responsibilities by scrutinising the draft budget and reporting to the Minister.

The power to set the corporation tax rate will be devolved to Northern Ireland in April 2017. The Northern Ireland Assembly will also assume responsibility for parades.

Significantly for the Assembly, there will be a reduction in the number of MLAs from 108 (6 per constituency) to 90 (5 per constituency), but not until the 2021 election. The number of government departments will be reduced from 12 to 9 following the 2016 election. Although the Assembly will then have fewer departments to scrutinise, the amount of work will remain the same in terms of scrutiny of legislation and actions of Ministers across all devolved areas.

Measures will be put in place by end March 2015 to allow for the establishment of an official opposition by any party entitled to ministerial positions but deciding not to take them up. The measures include financial and research assistance; and special rights in relation to tabling business, and speaking and asking questions in the Chamber.
This would have a significant impact on the way in which the Assembly operates. However, will these measures be enough to persuade parties with a right to be in the Executive to give up the power that comes with Ministerial office?

Changes will be made to the operation of the Petition of Concern mechanism, although the threshold (number of signatures required) remains at 30. There has been criticism that petitions have been used too often for partisan, rather than community concern reasons.

The new rules will mean that a petition can only be tabled in “specified circumstances, such as legislation or where one part of the community would be directly and adversely affected by what is proposed”. The initiator must also state a reason for tabling it which provides “evidence of the anticipated negative impact on the section of the community concerned”.

Specific to the Executive, the following changes will be implemented: Following an election, the draft Programme for Government must be agreed before d’Hondt is run. A number of measures to promote greater efficiency, and protect smaller parties within the Executive, will be introduced, eg:

• The agenda should be circulated one day in advance of Executive meeting;
• any 3 Ministers can request an Executive Meeting;
• any Minister can have a matter put on the Agenda under Any other Business; and
• any 3 Ministers can get item put on main agenda.

Other parts of the Stormont House Agreement refer to:
• Consideration of further areas for devolution and changes to government machinery
• A new civic engagement model – a panel to consider social, cultural and economic issues and to advise the Executive (to replace the 1998 Agreement’s Civic Forum); and
• Linguistic diversity – both the British and Irish governments endorse the need for respect for and recognition of the Irish language in line with European rules.

There was no consensus on the outstanding issue of a Bill of Rights but there was commitment to the principles of equality and respect.
Chapter 1
The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement
The Belfast Agreement is also known as the Good Friday Agreement, because it was reached on Good Friday, 10 April 1998.

It was an agreement between the British and Irish governments and most of the political parties in Northern Ireland, about how Northern Ireland should be governed in the future. The talks leading to the Agreement addressed issues which had given rise to the conflict of the previous 30 years. The aim was to set up a nationalist and unionist power-sharing government in Northern Ireland, and to make Northern Ireland a place where different cultures and identities would be valued and treated with respect.

On the constitutional question of whether Northern Ireland should remain in the UK or become part of a united Ireland, it was agreed that there would be no change to the current situation without the consent of the majority. This is called the ‘principle of consent’.

There would be an Irish dimension to the Agreement, recognising the Irish identity of the large, nationalist minority in Northern Ireland. The relationship between the UK and Ireland would be further developed.

The Agreement sought to build relationships within Northern Ireland, between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and between Britain and Ireland. It is divided into three strands:

- Strand One set up the power-sharing Assembly and Executive (and a Civic Forum, which is not currently in operation);
- Strand Two established an Irish dimension to the governing arrangements for Northern Ireland. The North-South institutions (the North-South Ministerial Council (NSMC) and the North-South Implementation Bodies) encourage co-operation that benefits both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. This is important for nationalists.
- Strand Three established ‘East-West’ institutions (the British-Irish Council and the British-Irish Intergovernmental Conference) to encourage co-operation and develop good relations between Britain and Ireland. These are forums where the two Governments discuss matters which are not devolved to Northern Ireland.

The Agreement also addressed a number of other issues. It committed parties to encourage decommissioning of paramilitary weapons and it set up the International Independent Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) to monitor progress in this area. The first suspension of the Assembly, in February 2000, after only 11 weeks in operation. The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) was reluctant to be in the Executive with Sinn Féin, unless the IRA began decommissioning.

The Agreement also referred to ‘demilitarisation’: as peace became more firmly established, and we moved towards a more ‘normal’ society, the military presence in Northern Ireland - in terms of troop numbers and security installations - would be scaled down.

A commission was established to consider reform of policing. This was a very controversial part of the Agreement, as was the early release of prisoners convicted of activities relating to the conflict.

Human rights and equality issues also featured significantly in the Agreement. An independent Human Rights Commission was created to advise government and other public bodies, and to hold them to account on human rights issues.

A single Equality Commission was established. The two main cultures and traditions would be promoted and treated equally, eg in relation to the Irish Language and Ulster Scots. The Agreement also referred to the need for an economic strategy and called on government institutions to promote the participation of women in public life.
Every household in Northern Ireland received a summary of the Agreement. In a referendum on 22 May 1998, over 71 percent of those who voted supported the Agreement. The Democratic Unionist Party (at that time, the second largest unionist party) was opposed to the Agreement. It had refused to participate in the talks process because of the inclusion of parties such as Sinn Féin, from the Republican movement and the Ulster Democratic Party and Progressive Unionist Party, representing loyalism. The DUP also objected to certain aspects of the Agreement, such as early release of prisoners and reform of the RUC.

The Republic of Ireland also held a referendum on the same day. The Irish Government had agreed in negotiations that, subject to the support of the people, Ireland would change Articles 2 and 3 of its constitution to reflect the principle of consent. Over 94 percent of the electorate voted yes, in support of the Agreement. As a result, the Irish Constitution now recognises the principle of consent - that Northern Ireland will remain in the UK for as long as the majority wishes.

The first elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly took place in June 1998.
The Agreement was an international agreement between the British and Irish Governments. Legislation had to be passed by the UK Parliament to allow its implementation.

The purpose of the Northern Ireland Act (1998) was ‘to make new provision for the government of Northern Ireland for the purpose of implementing the agreement reached at multi-party talks on Northern Ireland …’

This Act repealed the Government of Ireland Act of 1920, which partitioned Ireland. The new law now stated that:

‘Northern Ireland in its entirety remains part of the United Kingdom and shall not cease to be so without the consent of a majority of the people of Northern Ireland voting in a poll … But if the wish expressed by a majority in such a poll is that Northern Ireland should cease to be part of the United Kingdom and form part of a united Ireland, the Secretary of State shall lay before Parliament such proposals to give effect to that wish as may be agreed between Her Majesty’s Government in the United Kingdom and the Government of Ireland.’

The Act allowed Westminster to devolve powers to Northern Ireland. It set out the powers of the Assembly and Executive in relation to transferred, excepted and reserved matters. It also states that laws passed cannot contradict European law and Human Rights legislation. Section 75 requires all government bodies/agencies to promote equality of opportunity for all. The Act lists the stages in the legislative process and sets out how cross-community support for certain decisions would be determined. It also states the role and powers of Committees.

The Act outlines an election process for appointing the First Minister and the deputy First Minister, but the St Andrews Agreement changed this method of appointment - now the largest parties nominate for these positions.
Implementation of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement was not straightforward. Although the first election to the Assembly was held in June 1998, powers were not devolved from Westminster until 2 December 1999. Then, after only 11 weeks in operation, the Assembly was suspended. This was because the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) was reluctant to be in government with Sinn Féin until the IRA began decommissioning its weapons. It wanted assurance that the republican movement was committed to using only peaceful and democratic means to pursue its aim of a united Ireland.

The Assembly was restored in May 2000 but, on 14 October 2002, it was suspended again and Northern Ireland once more returned to Direct Rule from Westminster. This suspension lasted until 8 May 2007. The Assembly was restored following the St Andrews Agreement on 13 October 2006, which was the result of negotiations held at St Andrews, Scotland.

The UUP and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) had been the main negotiators of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement. At St Andrews, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin (SF) would have to do a deal to restore the Assembly, because they had become the largest parties in the second Assembly elections on 26 November 2003.

Negotiations concerned issues such as Sinn Féin’s support for the new policing arrangements. The DUP wanted Sinn Féin to endorse the PSNI and join the Policing Board. They also wanted to secure some changes to the way the Assembly operated before agreeing to enter government. For example, it argued for greater restrictions on the power of Ministers to act independently. Sinn Féin wanted to ensure that all parties would participate fully in the power-sharing Executive Committee and observe the joint nature of the Office of First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMdFM). In the previous Assembly, the DUP had not participated in the North-South or British-Irish institutions set up during the first period of the Assembly before suspension in October 2002.
So how did the Assembly change as a result of the St Andrews Agreement?

Individual Ministers are more accountable to the Executive and the Assembly because:

- there is a legally binding Ministerial Code;
- the First and deputy First Minister together can determine that an issue should be dealt with by the Executive as a whole, rather than by an individual Minister;
- the Executive should seek consensus on all decisions; however, where this is not possible and a vote is taken, three Ministers can ask for the vote to be taken on a cross-community basis; and
- if thirty MLAs are unhappy with a ministerial decision of public importance, they can refer it back to the Executive for review. This is known as an Assembly Referral for Executive Review.

The First Minister and the deputy First Minister are no longer elected. Instead the largest party nominates the First Minister, and the largest party in the other community nominates the deputy First Minister.

- A new Ministerial Pledge of Office refers to support for the ‘rule of law’. This includes policing and the courts, and commitment to both the joint nature of OFMdFM and participating in all the institutions.
- A committee established by the Agreement, the Assembly and Executive Review Committee reviews the way the Assembly and Executive function. The first issue it considered was the devolution of policing and justice powers to Northern Ireland. It has also considered the reduction in the number of MLAs and Departments, use of Petitions of Concern and the issue of ‘women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly’.
- Members cannot change their designation unless they change political party.

Regarding Strands Two (North–South) and Three (East–West) of the 1998 Agreement, it was agreed at St Andrews that:

- Arrangements should be in place to ensure adequate preparation for and attendance at North–South Ministerial Council (NSMC) and British–Irish Council (BIC) meetings.
- The Executive Committee would encourage the establishment of a North–South Parliamentary Body comprised of elected members of the Assembly and Dáil Eireann and an independent North–South Consultative Forum comprised of representatives from different sections of society, including business, the trade union movement, agriculture, and the community and voluntary sector.
- A permanent office would be established for BIC.

The North-South Inter-Parliamentary Association (NSIPA) held its first meeting in October 2012 and meets twice annually. It is made up of 25 MLAs and 25 members from the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Following the Agreement, the NSMC announced in July 2007 that it would establish a joint Review Group. This group would consider the efficiency and value for money of implementation bodies and the case for more bodies and areas of co-operation where mutual benefit would be derived.
Although the St Andrews Agreement led to some changes in the operation of the institutions set up under the 1998 Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, it also confirmed that:

‘Both governments remain fully committed to the fundamental principles of the (1998) Agreement:

- consent for constitutional change;
- commitment to exclusively peaceful and democratic means;
- stable, inclusive, partnership government;
- a balanced institutional accommodation of the key relationships within Northern Ireland between north and south and within these islands; and
- equality and human rights …’.

The St Andrews Agreement paved the way for the third election to the Assembly and its restoration on 8 May 2007, with the DUP and SF as the 2 largest parties in the Assembly and Executive. Although difficult issues have arisen since then, there has been no further suspension of the institutions.
The Hillsborough Agreement of February 2010 allowed Westminster to devolve Policing and Justice powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly in April 2010. This was hailed as the ‘final piece’ in the devolution ‘jigsaw’.

The Hillsborough Agreement also addressed ways to progress on difficult issues such as parades, improving Executive functioning and dealing with outstanding matters from the St Andrews Agreement.

The DUP and Sinn Féin agreed that the Justice Ministry would not, initially, be allocated under the d'Hondt system. Instead, Justice Minister, David Ford of the Alliance Party, was elected on a cross-community basis.

**Discussion**

- What challenges remain for devolved government in Northern Ireland?
- How do you see the political system continuing to evolve in the future?
The main consociational, or ‘power-sharing’ features of the Northern Ireland system are:

- cross-community power sharing at executive level, including the joint office of First Minister and deputy First Minister, and a multi-party executive, including unionist and nationalist ministers. The largest party after an election appoints the First Minister and the largest party on the other side of the community (nationalist or unionist) appoints the deputy First Minister. They have equal powers. One cannot be in position without the other.

- the joint office of the First and deputy First Minister which co-ordinate the multi-party executive, or coalition, made up of unionist and nationalist parties. The d'Hondt system determines the proportion of unionist and nationalist Ministers appointed to the Executive, based on the number of seats a party wins in the election.

- proportionality – a proportional representation (PR) electoral system called the Single Transferable Vote (STV) is used to elect Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs). The d'Hondt mechanism is used to allocate positions of power: ministers, and chairs and deputy chairs of committees.

- cultural equality for the two main traditions (for example, regarding the development of the Irish language and Ulster Scots).

- special voting arrangements that give veto rights to the minority. Certain Assembly decisions require cross-community support - not just majority support but the support of a certain percentage of nationalists and unionists. In order to determine cross community support, Members have to designate as ‘nationalist’ or ‘unionist’ when signing the Register as an MLA on the first day the Assembly meets after an election. MLAs who do not wish to label themselves as ‘nationalist’ or ‘unionist’ are considered to be ‘others’.

Decisions requiring cross-community support

- election of the Speaker and Deputy Speakers;
- changes to the rules of the Assembly, known as Standing Orders;
- budget allocations and other financial votes;
- determination of number of Ministers and their responsibilities;
- exclusion of ministers or members of political parties from holding office; and
- petitions of concern (30 MLAs can request that any decision be taken on a cross-community basis).
How has history influenced the way the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive operate today?

On 2 December 1999, the UK Parliament devolved powers to the Northern Ireland Assembly for the first time. Devolution was not new to Northern Ireland. The Northern Ireland Parliament and Executive, which governed Northern Ireland between 1921 and 1972, were also devolved institutions. When they were suspended in 1972, Northern Ireland came under Direct Rule from Westminster. The Northern Ireland Assembly model of devolution is very different from the older model. The Northern Ireland Parliament was elected using a ‘First Past the Post’ electoral system based on the Westminster system. The party that won a majority of the seats in the election formed the government. This was always the Unionist Party.

The system of devolved government established by the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement (1998) is a power-sharing, consociational model of democracy. The political scientist, Arend Lijphart, designed this model of democracy for societies where there has been, or is potential for, conflict. The Northern Ireland model is unique. It takes account of our political history. It is a power-sharing arrangement between the two main political communities in Northern Ireland, unionist and nationalist.

The positions of First Minister and deputy First Minister are shared between the two communities. The two have equal powers and must agree on all decisions.

The Executive Committee, made up of the First Minister, deputy First of Minister and 11 other Ministers, is a mandatory coalition, determined by a mathematical formula, based on party strength in the Assembly, known as the D’Hondt System. This ensures that both communities share these positions of power.

The Assembly has special voting procedures to prevent one community dominating the other. These ensure that certain Assembly decisions have cross-community support.
1905

Sinn Féin is organised as a political party.
Sinn Féin is organised as a political party by Arthur Griffith in an effort to provide focus for the various forms of Nationalism in Ireland.

The Irish Parliamentary Party, led by John Redmond, is the main Nationalist party, with party members holding seats in the British Parliament at Westminster. While Sinn Féin candidates also stand for election, Griffith promotes a policy of abstentionism, meaning that Irish elected representatives would refuse to take their seats at Westminster as a means of ignoring British rule.

This is also a time of revival for Irish culture with Gaelic sport, music, art, language and literature gaining in popularity. The Abbey Theatre, Dublin, had recently opened its doors to the public and was the first state-subsidized theatre in the English-speaking world.

The Ulster Unionist Council (UUC) is formed.
Booming industry in Ulster creates a powerful Protestant middle-class, who wish to protect their commercial interests by maintaining strong links with Britain. The Ulster Unionist Council is established to represent this new voice in Unionism.

The present-day Ulster Unionist Party at the Northern Ireland Assembly traces its formal foundations back to the establishment of Ulster Unionist Council.

1906

The Liberal Party wins a landslide victory at Westminster.
The dramatic collapse of the Conservative and Unionist Party vote gives the Liberal Party a strong majority at Westminster. Although they are sympathetic to Home Rule for Ireland, they do not consider it a priority.

Irish Parliamentary Party leader, John Redmond, finds his influence weakened as the Liberals do not need Irish Nationalist support.

1910

The Irish Parliamentary Party gains the balance of power at Westminster i.e. the Liberal government needs their support to remain in power.
The general election weakens the strong position of the Liberal government, leaving them dependent on the support of the Irish Parliamentary Party. John Redmond agrees to back Prime Minister Asquith in return for the introduction of a Home Rule Bill.

The Parliament Act of 1911 removes the absolute veto held by the House of Lords - their power to stop legislation already passed by the House of Commons. This effectively eliminates the last major obstacle to Home Rule. The House of Commons had passed the Second Home Rule Bill in 1893 but it had been vetoed or stopped by the House of Lords. Although the Lords still have power to delay a bill for two years, after that time it can pass into law without their consent.

On losing the protection of the House of Lords, Ulster Unionists make plans to arm in resistance to Home Rule.

Edward Carson becomes leader of the Ulster Unionist Council.
Edward Carson, a Dublin barrister, becomes leader of the Ulster Unionist Council in 1910. He leads unionists in the fight against Home Rule until 1921.
1911
Harland and Wolff shipyard places Belfast on the world stage of innovation and industry.
Harland and Wolff shipyard grows to become the largest in the United Kingdom, producing celebrated ocean liners such as the Teutonic and the Majestic for Atlantic crossings. By 1911, the shipyard boasts the largest dry dock in the world.

Other industries, including rope works and engineering, grow around the success of shipbuilding; while the traditional linen industry continues to prosper. In striking contrast, the rest of Ireland is mainly agricultural. Ulster Unionists fear that if Home Rule results in the formation of a government in Dublin, policies would concentrate on agriculture rather than industry and vital economic ties with Britain would be lost. Due to its economic importance, Belfast has significant influence in industrial Britain.

1912
The Belfast built Titanic sinks.
Titanic is constructed at the Harland & Wolff shipyard in Belfast for the White Star line, the organisation’s most valuable customer. Designed to compete with the rival Cunard Line’s Lusitania and Mauretania, Titanic is the largest passenger steamship in the world and uses some of the most advanced technologies of the day. Setting sail for New York with 2,227 people on board, Titanic strikes an iceberg and sinks, with the loss of 1,690 people. The fall of the celebrated ship remains one of the largest maritime disasters outside a period of war. Thomas Andrews, Harland & Wolff’s construction manager and head of their design department, is among those who perish.

The Third Home Rule Bill is introduced in the House of Commons. If passed, this would allow Ireland more control over its own affairs.
The Third Home Rule Bill would allow Ireland greater authority over internal affairs through a devolved parliament in Dublin. If the Bill was passed, then the Dublin Parliament would legislate on most national concerns, and have some financial control.

The Solemn League and Covenant is signed in Ulster. This pledge to fight Home Rule receives 471,414 signatures.
On 28 September, Edward Carson becomes the first signatory of Ulster’s Solemn League and Covenant at a rally at Belfast City Hall, with 471,414 signatures following from Ulster men and women. The Covenant pledges willingness to use “all means which may be found necessary to defeat the present conspiracy to set up a Home Rule Parliament in Ireland.” The following year, the first loyalist paramilitary group - the Ulster Volunteer Force - is formally established by the Ulster Unionist Council and receives 24000 rifles and several million rounds of ammunition from Germany at Larne in 1914.

The idea of excluding Ulster from Home Rule appears among the Liberals, but is initially rejected by the leader of the Irish Parliamentary Party John Redmond. Keen to stir up political tension for Britain, Germany also supplies arms to the pro-Home Rule Irish Volunteer Force at Howth, near Dublin. With two opposing forces now armed, the situation in Ireland lurches towards civil war.

1914
The Third Home Rule Crisis is avoided by the outbreak of the First World War.
The House of Commons passes the Home Rule Bill for a third time. With war in Europe looming, opposing Unionist and Nationalist organisations equipped with weapons makes Ireland dangerously unstable.

Prime Minister Asquith attempts to find a solution acceptable to all parties to settle the crisis and unite support behind the war effort. However, the outbreak of war means that Home Rule never actually takes effect.
Britain declares war on Germany on 4th August, entering the First World War. Carson and Redmond pledge full support for the war effort against Germany. With encouragement from both leaders, nationalists as well as unionists join the British army. However, the Irish Volunteers split over the matter, with a smaller group rejecting Redmond’s call to service.

For many militant nationalists, Home Rule did not go far enough because it did not grant total independence from Britain. The war brings an opportunity for them to take advantage of Britain’s vulnerability in the cause of Irish independence. Supplying the war effort increases the prosperity of those working in agriculture and industry. Improved circumstances among the general public produces a willingness to wait and see what would happen with Home Rule after the war.

1916

The Easter Rising takes place in Dublin.
The plan for the Easter Rising unites different groups of Nationalists in an attempt to end British Rule in Ireland, though the I.R.B. (Irish Republican Brotherhood) is central in planning the final stages of the rising. Rebels a number of key buildings in Dublin city centre. Headquarters are located in the General Post Office (GPO), where Patrick Pearse declares an Irish Republic.

After a week of fighting, an official surrender document is signed. At the time of the rising, public opinion is not with the rebels. After the leaders of the rebellion are executed, support for their cause increases.

1918

The Irish General Election sees Sinn Féin grow stronger, while the Unionist Party remains the most successful party in Ulster.
The results of the 1918 general election in Ireland reveal a dramatic change in post-war politics. Sinn Féin candidates overwhelmingly defeat the Irish Parliamentary Party, champions of Home Rule. In the aftermath of 1916, most nationalists support complete independence from Britain and Sinn Féin candidates refuse to take their seats at Westminster. The Unionist Party remains the most successful party in Ulster.

1919

The Irish Volunteer Force becomes known as the Irish Republican Army (IRA).
The IRA demonstrates willingness to use force by using small combat groups to attack members of the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) and their barracks. In response, the British government sends the Black and Tans and Auxiliaries from Britain to reinforce the RIC. They are recruited largely from unemployed soldiers and ex-army officers in Britain and their ruthlessness increases support for the IRA among the local population.

Sinn Féin proclaims the Assembly of Ireland, Dáil Éireann.
The Dáil begins to replace the British system of government, leading to the War of Independence. In keeping with the policy of ignoring Westminster, Sinn Féin invites Irish MPs from every party to a meeting at the Mansion House in Dublin, where they proclaim the Assembly of Ireland, Dáil Éireann. Unionists and Home Rule MPs refuse to attend. The Dáil begins to replace the British system of government, leading to a clash between the rival governments in the War of Independence.
1920

Local council elections take place in Northern Ireland.

In 1920, local elections result in 25 councils falling under Nationalist-Sinn Féin control. Many vote loyalty to Dáil Éireann, as opposed to the Northern Parliament. Local election boundaries are redrawn to guarantee Unionist control - a tactic known as gerrymandering. Proportional representation is abolished. This is a system of election that would have given nationalists greater representation in parliament.

Unionists and nationalist react differently to partition and elections to the new parliament take place.

Unionists and Nationalists react differently to the new political arrangements. Unionists are satisfied with the new system because of their strong majority in the new Northern Ireland. In the May 1921 elections unionists win 40 out of the 52 seats.

Nationalists are not happy with partition. They want to be part of the rest of Ireland and want to be governed by a parliament in Dublin. The Northern Ireland Parliament governs Northern Ireland until 1972.

The Government of Ireland Act creates Northern Ireland.

With sectarian violence in the North and the War of Independence in the South, the British government sets up a committee to find a solution. The committee recommends that Ireland be partitioned, with the six counties of Northern Ireland and the remaining 26 counties of Southern Ireland having separate parliaments in Belfast and Dublin. Ultimate sovereignty would be retained by Westminster and both areas would continue to send representatives there. A Council of Ireland is also proposed, with an aim of working towards establishing a single parliament for the whole of Ireland.

1920-22:

Protestants and Catholics clash in violent scenes.
The early years of Northern Ireland see violent clashes between Protestants and Catholics. Many Catholics are driven out of their jobs in the shipyards and other Protestant businesses, while the IRA receives reinforcements from the South for its violent campaign against partition. The new government responds by creating the Special Constabulary (B Specials) to reinforce the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC).

1921

The Northern Ireland Parliament is opened by King George V.

James Craig is appointed the first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland and the new parliament is opened at Belfast City Hall by King George V, with the Unionist Party forming the government.

Craig succeeds Carson as leader of the Ulster Unionist Party.

Edward Carson had always rejected Home Rule for any part of Ireland and is not in favour of partition and devolution (regional government) for Northern Ireland. As the parliament of Northern Ireland prepares to meet he hands over leadership of the Ulster Unionist Party to his natural successor, Sir James Craig.
1921

A truce between the IRA and the British Government results in the Anglo-Irish Treaty being signed.

A truce is declared between the IRA and the British government, with Eamon de Valera and British Prime Minister Lloyd George meeting in London for talks. Michael Collins and Arthur Griffith lead a further Irish delegation to peace talks in October – De Valera decides not to attend.

The Irish delegation sign a treaty which allows the parliament of Northern Ireland the right to opt out of the Free State and establishes a Boundary Commission to review the border between the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland.

1922

The pro-Treaty supporters clash with the anti-Treaty IRA in the Civil War.

After a long and bitter debate, the Dáil accepts the Treaty by a vote of 64 to 57. A new Free State government is formed and the British make preparations to withdraw from Ireland. DeValera and those opposed to the Treaty walk out of the Dáil.

With Sinn Féin and the IRA split over the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, pro-Treaty supporters, led by Collins and Griffith, create a new national army to defend the Free State. The anti-Treaty IRA seizes the Four Courts in Dublin and is driven out by the Free State Army. Bitter violence continues, and Michael Collins is killed on 22 August 1922.

1925

The Boundary Commission is set up to review the border between the Free State and Northern Ireland.

The Treaty included terms to set up a Boundary Commission to review the border between the Free State and Northern Ireland. A member was to be appointed from Northern Ireland and the Free State, as well as a neutral chairman. When the recommendations are leaked by the press, a crisis develops. Fearing violence, the governments decide to withhold the Boundary Commission’s report and keep the border as it exists.

While unionists are happy with the outcome, nationalists, North and South, are disappointed that some areas along the border will not be returned to the Free State.

Joseph Devlin is the first Nationalist to take his seat in the Northern Ireland Parliament.

The six Nationalist Party MPs elected to the Northern Ireland Parliament followed a policy of abstentionism, which meant they didn’t take their seats in Parliament.

Joseph Devlin MP for West Belfast in the Northern Ireland Parliament takes up his seat for the first time in 1925, acknowledging that “Permanent abstentionism means permanent disfranchisement,” or by not participating in government, they could not hope to influence the future of their electorate. He cautiously encourages participation in the Northern Ireland Parliament. By 1928, ten Nationalist MPs have taken up their seats.
1929

The Wall Street stock market crash in the US begins a 10-year economic slump for industrialised countries.

At the time of partition, the economy of Northern Ireland was at its peak. The post war boom period ends and main industries such as linen, shipbuilding and agriculture begin to face competition, accompanied by a fall in demand. A period of depression lasts throughout the 1920s, which sees a growth in unemployment. The Government is unable to attract new industries to Northern Ireland. The worldwide Great Depression during the 1930s means a further decrease in demand for Northern Ireland’s goods. In response to mass unemployment, Catholics and Protestants march together to Stormont in 1932. This is known as the ‘Hunger March’.

1932

A statue of Carson is unveiled at Parliament Buildings.

Edward Carson witnesses Lord Craigavon unveil a large bronze statue of him at the front of Parliament Buildings at Stormont. Sculpted by L.S. Merrifield, more than 40,000 people are present at the unveiling. The inscription at the base of the large plinth reads “By the loyalists of Ulster as an expression of their love and admiration for its subject.” This is the final time Carson visits Belfast. When he dies in 1935 he is given a state funeral and is buried in St. Anne’s Cathedral.

Parliament Buildings is opened by the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII)

Before the building at Stormont is complete, the Northern Ireland Parliament sits at Belfast City Hall and the Presbyterian Church in Ireland’s Assembly’s College. Design of Parliament Buildings and work on the site begins in 1922. Celebrations accompany the opening of the new building by the Prince of Wales in 1932.

1932-37

Eamon De Valera aims to remove British influence in Ireland by dismantling of the Anglo-Irish Treaty.

In March 1932, De Valera and the anti-Treaty Republicans of Fianna Fáil win the elections in the Irish Free State. Tension at the handover of power from pro-Treaty Cumann na nGaedheal (Fine Gael) is signified by Fianna Fáil deputies carrying guns into the Dáil. The change of government is also a cause for concern in Britain and Northern Ireland.

De Valera had opposed British influence in Ireland throughout the 1920’s and immediately sets about a policy of dismantling the Treaty of 1921. He informs Westminster that payment of land annuities (taxes) to Britain would cease, resulting in the outbreak of an economic war that lasts until 1938. The oath of allegiance to the King is removed and the powers of the Governor-General, the representative of the Crown in Ireland, agreed in the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, are at first reduced and the post eventually abolished in 1937.

Ireland and Britain aim to damage each other’s trade by imposing import taxes. This is known as the Economic War which lasts until 1938.

De Valera’s refusal to pay land annuities (taxes) results in Westminster placing a 20% duty on Irish imports, including livestock, meat and dairy produce. Fianna Fáil react by placing a 20% duty on British goods, such as iron and steel, sugar, cement and a five shillings a ton duty on coal.

The lengthy economic war between the formerly close trading partners impacts on both economies, benefiting Northern Ireland indirectly. The damage caused to certain industries in Britain and Ireland leads the governments to agree to lower their respective taxes on beef and coal in 1935.
With the prospect of war in Europe looming in 1938, the British and Irish governments agree to end their trade dispute by signing an Anglo-Irish Agreement. This sees the return of the Irish ports of Lough Swilly, Berehaven and Cobh, formerly retained by Britain under the Treaty. Britain hopes this goodwill gesture will encourage Irish support in the event of war.

1937

The new Constitution of Ireland is accepted after a referendum in the Free State.
The Constitution of Ireland - Bunreacht na hÉireann - changes the Free State’s name to Éire and makes Ireland a Republic in everything but name. The most controversial sections are Article 2 and Article 3, which maintain aspirations towards the unity of Ireland, though to many Northern nationalists they seem to do little more than reinforce a twenty-six-county state. The special place given to the Catholic Church in the Constitution reinforces Ulster Protestants’ fears that a United Ireland would not guarantee their religious liberty or freedom. The new Constitution is only narrowly accepted in a referendum held in the Free State.

1939

De Valera declares Irish Neutrality at the outbreak of the Second World War
De Valera adopts a policy of Irish neutrality in the Second World War. Britain had hoped the goodwill return of the Treaty ports would encourage Irish support. The British government makes several attempts to persuade De Valera to join the war, including proposals to end partition in 1940. Although De Valera rejects the offer, it outrages Ulster Unionists, who are not consulted and who had pledged their complete commitment to the war, with thousands of recruits joining the army.

Irish ships identify themselves as neutral by painting the tricolour and EIRE on their sides and decks. With the loss of the Treaty ports, Northern Ireland becomes more strategically important as a location for Britain’s marine and air defences.

1939-1945

Northern Ireland Contributes to the War Effort.
During the Second World War, Northern Ireland’s flagging industries temporarily revive – ship building, engineering and aircraft production soar and large quantities of guns, ammunition and tanks are produced.

Agriculture is also substantially boosted – even the grounds of Stormont are ploughed for food production for the war effort. New mechanisation techniques are evident as Sir Basil Brooke, Minister of Agriculture, watches tractors ploughing up land outside Parliament Buildings.

1939

The blackout comes into effect across Northern Ireland on 2 September 1939.
Even Stormont is camouflaged by painting the building black using paint mixed from a combination of tar and cow manure. It would take seven years to clean the building and the Portland stone never entirely regains its original white colour. Traces of damage and some remnants of the paint can still be found. Despite some precautions, the Northern Ireland government is criticised for its failure to make effective provisions to protect the people from German attack. There are not enough air raid shelters or anti-aircraft weapons, resulting in the air raids inflicting a high death toll and causing extensive damage to the city.

Evolution of Devolution
1941
Belfast is heavily bombed during the Blitz.

It was widely believed that Northern Ireland was too far away from German air bases to be in real danger of German attack. However, in April and May 1941 German planes showered Belfast residential areas with bombs, returning to drop further bombs on the harbours and shipyards - disabling war production and adding to the hundreds already killed.

German intelligence had revealed Belfast’s protection amounted to only seven anti-aircraft batteries. There were not enough air raid shelters and many fearful people begin to evacuate Belfast nightly, sleeping in the surrounding hills and countryside. Although Ireland’s neutrality had caused tensions with Northern Ireland - who viewed the move as an act of betrayal - cross-border help in the wake of the Blitz arrives from Éire’s fire brigades. The Blitz reveals the poor housing, health and living conditions in Belfast.

The Senate Chamber at Stormont is used as an operations room by the Royal Air Force (RAF) during the Second World War.

As the Senate Chamber becomes a strategic target for German bombers, Stormont is camouflaged by covering it with paint made from tar and cow manure. With the Free State’s neutrality, Northern Ireland becomes an important strategic location for air bases and American troops from 1942.

1945
The Anti-Partition League aims to bring an end to Stormont.

Another cause for Unionist concern is the formation of the Anti-Partition League by Northern Ireland nationalists in 1945. The aim of the League is to highlight grievances such as gerrymandering and bring an end to Stormont.

The League quickly gains support from inside Northern Ireland and beyond, including Irish communities in Britain and America, as well as Éire.


Although Ulster emerges from the Second World War with a strengthened relationship with Britain, Unionist security is short lived when the Labour Party (who do not support partition) wins victory over the Conservative Party (Unionist Party allies) in the British general election.

Relations between Belfast and London are tense, but Northern Ireland benefits from the period, including the introduction of a welfare state (to take care of citizens ‘from the cradle to the grave’), the nationalisation of industries and support for agriculture. The advances in housing, health, social services and education improve the welfare of the people of Northern Ireland and eventually raise living standards beyond those in Éire.

1947
The Education Act of 1947 changes the structure of the education system in Northern Ireland.

The Education Act has a long-term impact on Northern Ireland society by providing free secondary education for all pupils. Prior to the act, most people received only primary education, with grammar school education requiring the payment of fees, or winning a scholarship. The structure of the education system in Northern Ireland is shaped by the Act, which recognises three types of secondary school: secondary grammar, secondary technical and secondary intermediate.
The Republic of Ireland Act 1948 leads to the twenty-six counties officially becoming the Republic of Ireland in 1949.

A coalition government led by John A. Costello defeats De Valera in 1948. Britain and Northern Ireland are concerned when he announces the intention to leave the British Commonwealth and make Éire a Republic. Unionists fear this as a move towards a united Ireland, with Costello offering them “any reasonable constitutional guarantees” if they accept reunification. The twenty-six counties officially become the Republic of Ireland in 1949.

The Government of Ireland Act is passed at Westminster giving a guarantee that Northern Ireland would remain in the United Kingdom unless decided by Stormont. Unionists are delighted by the guarantee of their security within the United Kingdom.

Sir Basil Brooke, the Northern Ireland Prime Minister, seeks reassurance from Britain to guarantee that Northern Ireland’s position in the UK is secure. He calls a General Election to demonstrate support for the Union. The election is contested by the Anti-Partition League, with funding support from the Republic of Ireland to be collected at parishes on Sunday. The implication of southern and Church interference is fuel for Brooke’s manifesto. The poll becomes known as “the chapel gate election” and becomes the most violent since 1921. As expected, the election returns a Unionist majority.

The Anti-Partition League ceases to be active.

The results of the 1949 election seemed to strengthen the Northern Ireland’s relationship with Britain. Dwindling interest in partition in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland contributes to the decline of the Anti-Partition League.

The IRA border campaign begins.

Impatient with the Anti-Partition League’s results, the IRA begin a border campaign between 1956 and 1962. Their actions failed to win popular support among nationalists in Northern Ireland. As many leading activists are soon interned, jailed or killed, the campaign loses momentum and is abandoned in 1962 through lack of support. Six police officers were killed and 32 were wounded during the border campaign.

Chronicles of Narnia: Belfast born author C.S. Lewis completes The Chronicles of Narnia, a series of seven fantasy novels for children.

Belfast born author C.S. Lewis completes The Chronicles of Narnia, a series of seven fantasy novels for children. As a child he lived in the Strandtown area of East Belfast, where Little Lea was the Lewis family home from 1905 until 1930 and he briefly attended Campbell College. The inspiration of Irish mythology and themes of Christian unity are evident in the popular adventure tales, set in the fictional world of Narnia.
1963

Captain Terence O'Neill replaces Basil Brooke to become the fourth Prime Minister of Northern Ireland.

With concern in London about the £45,000,000 cost of subsidizing Northern Ireland, O'Neill is under pressure to modernise the economy. He focuses on economic development, reconciliation between the nationalist and unionist communities in Northern Ireland and improving relations with the Republic of Ireland. He is the first Prime Minister to include reconciliation in his programme.

1965

Taoiseach Sean Lemass visits Stormont.

Taoiseach (Irish Premier) Sean Lemass visits Stormont after being invited by Terence O'Neill for talks on cross-border trade links. It is the first official visit of an Irish Premier to Northern Ireland since partition, with high risk involved for both men because Lemass is formally recognizing Northern Ireland and O'Neill faces objections from many unionists. O'Neill makes a return visit to Dublin, where cooperation on tourism and the provision of electricity supplies is agreed. The meetings encourage nationalists to end their policy of abstention and become the official opposition at Stormont.

O'Neill's plans for a 'New Ulster.' Among his policies for economic development, he commences work on the new town of Craigavon and a new university is established at Coleraine.

With traditional linen and shipbuilding industries in bankruptcy and decline, O'Neill offers investment grants and tax allowances in an effort to attract new industries to Northern Ireland. Multinational firms such as Michelin and Goodyear set up in Northern Ireland.

John Hume emerges as a political figure in the University for Derry/Londonderry campaign.

Access to higher education under the welfare state had given rise to a new generation of educated Catholics. While O'Neill becomes the first Unionist Prime Minister to visit a Catholic school and meet with Catholic dignitaries such as Cardinal Conway, many nationalists feel that O'Neill's plans do not go far enough to address discrimination.

O'Neill's recommendation to locate the new University of Ulster in Coleraine, rather than predominantly nationalist Derry/Londonderry, faces opposition from both sides of the community. School teacher John Hume organises the University for Derry Campaign, resulting in a huge motorcade travelling to Stormont in a cross-community protest. Plans to locate the University in Coleraine go ahead.

1966

There is Unionist opposition to O'Neill and his policies.

Many of O'Neill's policies of reconciliation, particularly his meetings with Lemass, cause tensions within his cabinet and party. However, the most vocal Unionist opposition comes from outside Stormont from Reverend Ian Paisley and his followers.

Following the first meeting with Lemass, Paisley hands in a letter of protest at Stormont. Despite his critics, O'Neill's Unionist vote increases substantially in the election of the same year. Paisley is made Chairman of the Ulster Constitution Defence Committee (UCDC), which provides him with a political vehicle to lead the campaign against the policies of O'Neill.

1967

Taoiseach Jack Lynch visits Stormont and is greeted by Paisley's protest.

When Taoiseach Jack Lynch pays an official visit to Stormont in December, he is met by demonstrators and his car is snowballed by Paisley and his supporters.
The Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association is formed.
Inspired by the American civil rights movement, the Northern Ireland Civil Rights Association (NICRA) is established as a non-sectarian movement aiming to bring about changes in Northern Ireland through non-violent protest. The policies adopted by the organisation include ‘One Man, One Vote’, an end to gerrymandering and an end to discrimination in the allocation of government jobs and housing.

1968
As the political situation deteriorates, O’Neill introduces reforms.
As the situation deteriorates O’Neill is summoned to Westminster to meet with the British Prime Minister, Harold Wilson. The outcome of this meeting is a five-point reform programme which includes the appointment of an Ombudsman (to deal with complaints); a points system for allocating council houses and the abolition of extra votes for businesses.

The People’s Democracy group occupies the Great Hall at Stormont.
The People’s Democracy group, a nationalist group founded by students at Queen’s University, staged a number of demonstrations and occupied the Great Hall at Stormont on 24 October.

The first protests and civil rights marches take place.
Austin Currie, a Nationalist MP at Stormont, is among several people who begin a protest against discrimination in the allocation of housing by squatting in a house in Caledon, County Tyrone. The protestors are evicted by the police.

In August, the first Civil Rights march takes place from Coalisland to Dungannon. Several months later, the Government bans another March in Derry/Londonderry.

The march goes ahead, but ends in violence. The actions of the police are seen on television around the world and are met with criticism.

The People’s Democracy group occupies the Great Hall at Stormont.
The People’s Democracy group, a nationalist group founded by students at Queen’s University, staged a number of demonstrations and occupied the Great Hall at Stormont on 24 October.

1969
O’Neill loses support and eventually resigns.
O’Neill announces an official inquiry into recent disturbances, causing members of his cabinet to resign. Unionists demand the Prime Minister’s resignation. O’Neill calls for a general election and is challenged by Paisley in his own Bannside constituency. Although O’Neill wins, his position is weakened. Traditional nationalists also find themselves up against civil rights activists standing as Independents in the shape of John Hume, Ivan Cooper and Paddy O’Hanlon.

When O’Neill agrees to ‘One Man, One Vote’ for local elections, his cousin James Chichester-Clark resigns from government. He rapidly loses support and, as a bombing campaign breaks out, O’Neill resigns. Loyalists are happy to see him go.

There are violent clashes in the Battle of Bogside.
Sectarian clashes continue throughout the spring and summer marching season, putting the RUC under intense pressure. In Derry/Londonderry loyalists and residents clash after the Apprentice Boys parade through the city. The RUC intervene and the Battle of the Bogside develops. Television footage shows the police clashing with protestors. Violence spreads throughout the province, with RUC stations attacked. In Belfast many families are driven from their homes and police gunfire results in the first deaths of the ‘Troubles’.

Evolution of Devolution
British troops are sent to Northern Ireland. On 15 August, British Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, orders British troops to Northern Ireland. It is the first time since 1921 that the British Government intervenes directly in the affairs of Stormont. As the troops replace the police in Derry/Londonderry, many Catholic residents welcome them as protectors and the Battle of the Bogside comes to an end.

The Downing Street Declaration requires Stormont to make further reforms. After a meeting in London, the Government of Northern Ireland and the British Government announce that there should be equality and freedom from discrimination in Northern Ireland.

The Downing Street Declaration requires the Stormont government to introduce further reforms, including ‘One Man, One Vote’, an end to gerrymandering and the reorganisation of the RUC.

It is hoped that the introduction of these measures will bring about a return to normality in Northern Ireland. The civil rights leaders are pleased to see the implementation of their ideas and there are no plans for further political activity. The Declaration reassures unionists that Northern Ireland would not cease to be part of the United Kingdom without the consent of the people.

1970

British troops search nationalist areas. The British army become a target for the IRA campaign. The positive reception from the nationalist community quickly comes to an end as British Troops respond to attack with extensive searches for arms in Catholic areas. The Falls Road in Belfast is placed under a 34-hour curfew during a search. IRA recruitment is boosted as searches continue throughout the following years.

The IRA splits and the Provisional IRA is formed. The IRA faces criticism for its failure to protect the Catholic population during the sectarian violence of 1969. The ‘Provisional’ IRA emerges from a split from the older ‘Official’ IRA and embarks upon a campaign of violence.

The Loyalist Paramilitary campaign intensifies. Protestant paramilitary groups, such as the UVF, use violence to retaliate against the IRA campaign. In 1971, the loyalist bombing of McGurk’s bar in Belfast claims the lives of fifteen people.

Internment is introduced. The new Prime Minister, Brian Faulkner, orders the arrest and interrogation of 342 men, accused of being members of paramilitary groups. They are interned (held without trial). Despite UVF bombings and murders, no loyalist suspects are arrested and this angers nationalists. The measures boost IRA recruitment and activity.

1971

The Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) is formed. Ian Paisley is one of the founders of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). It represents more radical unionists, opposing power-sharing with nationalists and further cooperation with the Republic of Ireland.

1972

Stormont is suspended as the Trouble intensifies. As the Troubles intensify the British government loses faith in Stormont’s ability to deal with the growing crisis. In March, direct rule from Westminster is introduced and the Stormont parliament is suspended.

Intended as a temporary measure, the suspension brings to an end over fifty years of selfgovernment for Northern Ireland. Loyalists protest against the decision outside Parliament Buildings.
There is a temporary IRA ceasefire. Nine people are killed on Bloody Friday after the ceasefire collapses.
Nationalists welcome the fall of Stormont and Unionist control. As well as bringing an end to internment, the newly appointed Secretary of State, William Whitelaw, agrees to negotiations with the IRA. A temporary ceasefire is called but soon breaks down. The collapse of the ceasefire sees further outbreaks of violence and the bombings of Bloody Friday.

Special Category Status is granted by the Secretary of State.
After prisoner hunger strikes, the Secretary of State introduces Special Category Status for political prisoners. This means they are excused from prison work and allowed to wear their own clothes, as well as have extra visits and food parcels.

Thirteen people are killed on Bloody Sunday.
Despite a government ban, a large Civil Rights march takes place in Derry/Londonderry as a protest against internment. Rioting breaks out as the army barricade the approach to the Guildhall - the intended destination of the march. The Parachute Regiment open fire on the crowd, killing thirteen civilians. Bloody Sunday is followed by violent protests across Northern Ireland and the IRA launch a bombing campaign in England.

1974
The power-sharing executive is disrupted by protesters.
On 22 January Ian Paisley and his supporters occupy front bench seats in the Commons Chamber in Parliament Buildings, in an effort to disrupt business. They do this to protest against being excluded from the Sunningdale talks. The police remove them by force.

The Harland and Wolff cranes, Samson & Goliath, are constructed.
The twin shipbuilding gantry cranes are completed at the Harland & Wolff shipyard at Queen’s Island. They become a symbol of the ship building heritage of the city as they dominate the skyline. Goliath is completed in 1969 at 96 meters tall, while Samson is completed in 1974 at 106 meters high. Their construction shows the growth of one of Northern Ireland’s largest employers at the height of the troubles.

The Ulster Worker Strike brings industry to a standstill.
A group of Protestant workers known as the Ulster Workers’ Council (UWC) inform journalists at Stormont that a protest strike against the Sunningdale Agreement would begin. The strike lasts for just over two weeks, with widespread disruption to businesses, as supplies of electricity, petrol and other amenities are restricted. Road blocks are set up by the protestors and most industries close. As the situation continues to deteriorate, Faulkner resigns, followed by the other Unionist members of the power-sharing executive. As the Stormont Executive is brought to an end, responsibility for the government of Northern Ireland returns to Westminster.
The United Ulster Unionist Council is successful in the general election.
In the British general election, the unionist parties opposed to the Sunningdale Agreement unite under the banner of the United Ulster Unionist Council. They win 11 of Northern Ireland’s 12 Westminster seats, indicating that many people are unhappy with the Sunningdale Agreement.

1976
The Peace People is formed. Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams are given the Nobel Peace Prize.
Mairead Corrigan and Betty Williams become founders of The Peace People in response to witnessing the deaths of three children, killed by a gunman’s getaway car. They receive support from across the community and the female founders are given the Nobel Peace Prize.

Special Category Status is removed for political prisoners in Northern Ireland.
The British government abolishes Special Category Status for political prisoners in Northern Ireland. All prisoners were to be considered criminals, regardless of the nature of their offence. Prisoners are no longer entitled to privileges, which had included wearing their own clothes and exemption from prison work.

IRA prisoners in the H Blocks and the women's prison in Armagh protest against the removal of Special Category Status. They wear blankets instead of prison uniforms ('blanket protest') and refuse to wash or slop out ('dirty protest').

1979
A new Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher comes to power in Westminster.
Margaret Thatcher is elected as the first female Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and remains in the role until 1990.

In Northern Ireland, she becomes known for her reluctance to give in to the demands of IRA hunger strikers in the early 1980s. She is also remembered for the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985.

1980:
The First Hunger Strike begins.
In an effort to regain political status, Republican prisoners begin a hunger strike. Large protest marches and rallies demonstrate nationalist support. Believing they have gained some of their demands, the hunger strike is called off in December.

1981
The Second Hunger Strike begins.
As it emerges that demands have not been met, a second hunger strike begins, led by the IRA commander in the H Block compounds, Bobby Sands. He had previously been convicted of the possession of firearms and sentenced to serve 14 years in the Maze prison.

Catholic support grows with rising feeling against Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government. Most Protestants view the hunger strikers as IRA gunmen.

Bobby Sands is elected as MP for Fermanagh-South Tyrone.
Bobby Sands is elected as a Westminster MP in the Fermanagh-South Tyrone by-election. The election results draw international attention. Although this puts further pressure on the British government, Margaret Thatcher continues her refusal to make concessions. Sands and nine others die before the campaign is called off under pressure from relatives. Some of their demands are later met. The election of Sands and other hunger strikers launches Sinn Féin into Northern Ireland politics.
1981

The first integrated school in Northern Ireland opens. It is called Lagan College.
The ‘All Children Together’ movement (ACT) is formed by a committed group of parents in the early 70’s. They believe that Catholic and Protestant children should be educated together in the hope of healing a divided society. Lobbying Churches and government, ACT supports a small group of parents in founding Lagan College in 1981, the first integrated school in Northern Ireland.

1983

Gerry Adams is elected as MP for West Belfast.
Building on electoral politics successes during the hunger strikes, Sinn Féin emerges as a political force under new president, Gerry Adams. He is elected as MP for West Belfast ahead of former SDLP leader Gerry Fitt. In line with traditional Sinn Féin policy, Adams refuses to take his seat in the House of Commons.

1984

The New Ireland Forum Report is published. A second attempt to deliver devolved government is underway in the form of James Prior’s Rolling Devolution plan.
John Hume increasingly turns to the Irish Government for support after disappointing Westminster election results for the SDLP in 1983. Hume proposes a multi-party conference to discuss future peace and stability for Ireland. The conference is known as the New Ireland Forum. Although the British government and Unionist parties are invited, they refused to attend. Sinn Féin are excluded because of their refusal to renounce violence.

The Forum produces a report which criticises British policy in Northern Ireland. It offers three options for future resolution:

- A united Ireland
- A confederation of the two states of Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.
- Joint authority, giving British and Irish governments equal responsibility in the administration of Northern Ireland.

Unionist parties in Northern Ireland dismiss the suggestions. They are reassured by Margaret Thatcher’s negative response to the proposals outlined in the New Ireland Forum report. She dismisses each of the three proposals in turn by saying ‘That is out.’

A second attempt to restore a devolved government is underway at this time. James Prior’s Rolling Devolution plan is an elected assembly with no Irish dimension. It met for the first time in November 1982 but failed when the SDLP refused to take part and was dissolved on 23 June 1986.

The IRA kills five people in an attack on the Conservative Party Conference in Brighton.
On 12 October 1984 the IRA attempt to kill Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in a bomb attack on the Grand Hotel in Brighton. The Prime Minister is uninjured but five people lose their lives and several people are left permanently disabled.

1985

Talks between the British and Irish governments lead to the Anglo-Irish Agreement being signed.
The Anglo-Irish Agreement between the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and Taoiseach Garret FitzGerald is signed at Hillsborough Castle in an effort to end the Troubles in Northern Ireland. The Agreement gives the Irish Government an advisory role in Northern Ireland’s government. It states that Northern Ireland will remain part of the UK, unless a majority of its people agreed to join the Republic of Ireland.
Although the House of Commons at Westminster approves the Agreement by a large majority, it is opposed by all Ulster Unionist MPs. Margaret Thatcher is branded a traitor by unionists. Northern Ireland unionist parties unite in their opposition to the Agreement under James Molyneaux, leader of the Official Unionist Party, and Ian Paisley, leader of the Democratic Unionist Party.

Loyalist paramilitaries conduct a campaign against the Agreement. Nationalist opinion is divided, with the SDLP seeing the Anglo-Irish Agreement as an opportunity for progress. Sinn Féin considers the Dublin government’s recognition of Northern Ireland a strengthening of partition. Although most Irish politicians accept the Agreement, a number resign in protest against it, including Mary Robinson – who later becomes President of the Irish Republic.

**1986**

**DUP protests disrupt proceedings at Stormont**

A series of protests are held to mark the six month anniversary of the Anglo-Irish Agreement. Disruption is caused when fourteen DUP members seize control of the switchboard at Stormont.

Secretary of State, Tom King, calls for the Assembly to be shut down. Assembly members televise their last proceedings, making speeches against the Agreement. Loyalist protestors clash with police outside the building, while inside DUP members and several other Unionists refuse to leave the debating chamber. Ian Paisley is eventually removed from the chamber by the police.

**1987**

**An IRA bomb kills eleven people in Enniskillen on Remembrance Sunday.**

An IRA bomb explodes at the Enniskillen Remembrance Day ceremony, killing eleven people and injuring sixty-three others. There is worldwide condemnation and the bombing has a negative impact on Sinn Féin’s electoral support.

Earlier the same year, the IRA attacked Loughgall Police Station. The IRA unit was ambushed by the SAS. The SAS shot dead eight IRA members. One civilian was also killed.

**The unionist boycott of British ministers - because of their opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement - comes to an end.**

James Molyneaux, leader of the Official Unionist Party and Ian Paisley, leader of the Democratic Unionist Party, meet with Secretary of State Tom King for ‘talks about talks.’ The meeting brings to an end the Unionist leaders nineteen month boycott of contact with British government ministers. In the coming years, talks between political parties are difficult to conduct because of their differences over the Anglo-Irish Agreement.

**1988**

**John Hume meets Gerry Adams.**

SDLP leader John Hume meets secretly with Sinn Féin’s President Gerry Adams. This begins a series of discussions aimed at developing a peace process.

**Home Secretary, Douglas Hurd, announces a ban on the broadcast of direct statements by Sinn Féin and other organisations in Northern Ireland associated with paramilitaries.**

Although the ban impacts on other loyalist and republican organisations, Sinn Féin is the main target. Instead of hearing Gerry Adams speak, audiences hear an actor’s voice reading over footage of the Sinn Féin leader.
1991

The Brooke/Mayhew Talks on the future of Northern Ireland begin.

From April 1991, until November 1992, a series of talks on the future of Northern Ireland take place in an attempt to end the political stalemate. Those involved include the British and Irish Governments, as well as representatives from four of Northern Ireland’s main political parties - the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP), the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), and the Alliance Party of Northern Ireland (APNI).

The talks follow a three strand approach. The first strand deals with discussions between the Northern Ireland parties, aiming to achieve a devolved, power-sharing government; strand two tackles North-South relations and strand three addresses British-Irish relations.

1992

Gerry Adams loses his West Belfast seat to Joe Hendron of the SDLP in the British General Election. Nationalist support for SDLP continues to rise and the party increase their overall vote.

A general election is held in the United Kingdom on 9 April. The Conservative Party wins the election with a reduced majority of 21 seats in the House of Commons. In Northern Ireland Gerry Adams, then President of Sinn Féin, loses his seat in West Belfast to Joe Hendron of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP). Gerry Adams regains the seat in the 1997 general election.

Unionists agree to talks with the Irish Government for the first time.

Discussions are held in London between the British and Irish governments and Northern Ireland political parties. The DUP also attend the discussions, but three party members resign in protest at the development. Although the meeting creates hope for the future, no significant progress is made.

The Brooke/Mayhew talks collapse as unionists withdraw.

The Brooke/Mayhew talks on the future of Northern Ireland are brought to an end with unionist withdrawal from the process. Little real progress has been made. The talks are named after successive Secretaries of State for Northern Ireland, Peter Brooke and Patrick Mayhew.

1993

John Hume renews his controversial talks with Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams.

The result of the talks is the Hume-Adams Initiative. This document is presented to the British and Irish Governments. Hume defends his dialogue with Adams as by saying that it is the best chance of lasting peace. The document is said to influence the subsequent Downing Street Declaration.

Secret communication between the British government and IRA is leaked.

The Observer newspaper uncovers secret communication between the British Government and the IRA. The communication suggests that an IRA ceasefire could be possible.

The Downing Street Declaration is made on 15 December.

Both governments announce their intention to create an inclusive talks process. The talks would be open to parties who permanently rejected armed force as a means to achieving their aims. British and Irish governments reassure both traditions that their aim is to establish an atmosphere of trust upon which to build a lasting peace process.
1994

An IRA Ceasefire is declared on 31 August 1994.
An IRA statement announces a ‘complete cessation of military operations’ from midnight on 31 August, pledging commitment to the success of a democratic peace process.

The Broadcasting Ban against Sinn Féin is removed.
After the IRA ceasefire, British Prime Minister John Major lifts the broadcasting ban directed at Sinn Féin on the 17th of September. The voice of Gerry Adams receives legitimate broadcast for the first time since the imposition of the ban in 1988.

The Loyalist Ceasefire is declared 13 October 1994.
The Combined Loyalist Military Command (CLMC) issues a statement announcing a loyalist ceasefire. However, the ceasefire is dependent upon the continued cessation of violence by the IRA.

Both British and Irish governments welcome the ceasefire and the new generation of loyalist leaders, including David Ervine and Gary McMichael, begin talks with representatives from the Republic of Ireland.

1995

Fire devastates the Commons Chamber.
On the 2nd January 1995, a fire, caused by an electrical fault, destroys the Commons Chamber. The Chamber is carefully refitted using the same decoration and materials used in the original. The restoration provides an opportunity to create two additional viewing galleries.

British and Irish Governments publish Frameworks for the Future documents.
The British and Irish governments publish The Frameworks Documents: A Framework for Accountable Government in Northern Ireland, containing practical proposals for the workings of devolved government in Northern Ireland and A New Framework for Agreement, which focuses on North-South relations.

US President, Bill Clinton, Visits Belfast.
President Bill Clinton lends support to the peace process by becoming the first serving President to visit Northern Ireland. Receiving a warm welcome from crowds during his visit to Belfast in November 1995, he switches on the Christmas lights in the city centre. Clinton returns on two further occasions to bolster the peace process - in 1998 and 2000.

Mayhew demands decommissioning ahead of Sinn Féin entering talks.
Secretary of State Patrick Mayhew demands that some decommissioning of weapons takes place in advance of Sinn Féin entering talks. The decommissioning issue becomes a major stumbling block in the peace process.

The Twin-Track Approach: A breakthrough on arms decommissioning is announced.
The British and Irish Governments agree a twin-track approach to enable decommissioning and all party talks to run side by side. An international body chaired by former American senator, George Mitchell, will provide an independent report on decommissioning.

1996

The Mitchell Report on decommissioning of paramilitary weapons is published.
The Mitchell Report concludes that paramilitaries should not have to disarm before all-party talks and recommends decommissioning to run alongside talks. This does not happen but decommissioning eventually takes place after the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998.
The Docklands Bomb ends the IRA ceasefire on 9 February 1996.

The IRA ceasefire is ended by a bomb explosion near Canary Wharf Tower, London, killing two people and injuring many others. This is in response to the British Government agreeing to unionist demands for elections to the talks.

Elections to all-party negotiations are held on 30 May.

The Ulster Unionist Party has the largest party representation, with thirty seats at the talks table. Sinn Féin achieves its highest ever vote, giving them seventeen seats. The DUP win twenty-four seats, while the SDLP win twenty-one. The Women’s Coalition, UKUP, PUP, UDP and Labour Party are also represented.

Multi-party talks begin at Stormont.

British Prime Minister John Major and Irish Taoiseach John Bruton open multi-party talks at Stormont on 10 June. Sinn Féin continues to be excluded from the talks due to ongoing IRA violence.

1997

New Labour is victorious in British General Elections.

John Major’s Conservative government is replaced as Labour wins a landslide victory in the British General elections and Tony Blair becomes Prime Minister. Mo Mowlam is appointed as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

All-Party talks formally begin on 15 September.

Sinn Féin signs the Mitchell Principles and all-party talks begin under the chairmanship of former US Senator George Mitchell. The Mitchell Principles are six ground rules dictating that parties must adhere to ‘democratic and exclusively peaceful means of resolving political issues’.

Northern Ireland’s largest party, the Ulster Unionist Party, have concerns but enter the talks process. The second largest unionist party, the Democratic Unionist Party’, withdraw from the talks because of the lack of prior decommissioning.

The International Commission on Decommissioning is launched. This allows peace talks to progress and decommissioning to take place at the same time.

The Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD) is launched to monitor the decommissioning of firearms, ammunition and explosives. General John de Chastelain is the Chairman.

On 19 July, the IRA announces the restoration of the 1994 ceasefire.

After monitoring IRA activity to decide whether Sinn Féin would be admitted to the peace talks, Secretary of State Mo Mowlam announces that she believes the IRA ceasefire is genuine. Sinn Féin is invited to take part in the negotiations.

1998

A large loyalist rally is organised in Portadown.

The rally, held during March, is called to oppose the peace process and is attended by leading DUP members. Members of the Loyalist Volunteer Force (LVF) are also present.

Ongoing violence leads to temporary expulsion of Ulster Democratic Party (UDP) and Sinn Féin from talks.

On Monday 26 January the UDP is expelled from multi-party talks after the UFF is implicated in recent killings. Sinn Féin is also expelled from the process on 20 February because it is alleged that the IRA had been involved in two recent killings. The UDP rejoin the talks on 23 February and Sinn Féin re-enter talks one month later.
A crisis develops as the talks deadline approaches. As the deadline for the peace talks approach, George Mitchell tables proposals in an attempt to negotiate an agreement. Unionists reject the proposals, and the process collapses. Prime Minister Tony Blair flies to Belfast on 7 of April, followed next day by Taoiseach Bertie Ahern. As the deadline approaches, DUP protesters enter the grounds of Parliament Buildings. Although talks often teeter on the edge of breakdown, progress continues until, twenty hours after the official deadline, agreement is reached on Good Friday, 10 April 1998. The DUP are opposed to the Agreement.

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement is reached. After long negotiations, the British and Irish governments, together with most of the political parties in Northern Ireland, reach an agreement on a political settlement on 10 April 1998. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement includes provision for the establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly with legislative powers from Northern Ireland. The Assembly will appoint a power-sharing Executive Committee of Ministers from unionist and nationalist parties.

The Agreement states that there will be no change to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland (it remains in the UK) without the consent of the majority. The Irish dimension to the Agreement includes North/South cooperation on matters such as tourism, agriculture and health. The Irish government agrees to recommend amendment to the Constitution of Ireland. Plans to establish a British-Irish Council are also made. Under the agreement, there would be early release of prisoners convicted of paramilitary offences. The need for decommissioning of weapons and a reformed police service are also agreed. The issue of decommissioning becomes significant, as unionists are reluctant to participate in the new government until the IRA have decommissioned their weapons.

The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement gets the support of the people in a referendum. A copy of the Belfast Good Friday Agreement is posted to every household in Northern Ireland. A referendum on 22 May sees 71% voting in support of the Agreement.

A referendum in the Republic of Ireland is also held, with a 94% vote in favour of revising articles 2 and 3 of the Irish Constitution. These now recognise that Northern Ireland remains part of the United Kingdom as long as the majority of the people agree.

The first election to the new Northern Ireland Assembly takes place. Elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly are held on 25 June. The results see the Ulster Unionist Party gain most seats, with 28 members elected. The SDLP wins 24 seats and Sinn Féin wins 18 seats. The DUP are the second largest Unionist party with 20 seats. David Ervine and Billy Hutchinson are elected for the PUP, but UDP leader Gary McMichael is not. Five UKUP and three anti-agreement Unionists also win seats.

While the elections are viewed as a success for the nationalist parties, they reveal divisions within unionism.

The Independent Commission on policing for Northern Ireland is set up. The members of the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland are announced by Mo Mowlam. Headed by Conservative politician, Chris Patten, the aim is to reform the police service making it more representative of the whole community.
The Northern Ireland Assembly meets for the first time in Parliament Buildings.
On 14 September the Assembly meets in the former House of Commons in Parliament Buildings. This room becomes known as the Assembly Chamber.

Prisoner releases begin.
The first paramilitary prisoners to be given early release under the terms of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement are freed on 11 September.

1999
Powers are devolved to the Northern Ireland assembly.
Powers are devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly at midnight on 1 December 1999, bringing Direct Rule from Westminster to an end. The North-South and British-Irish bodies established as part of the Good Friday Agreement take effect.

At 3.00pm on 2 December 1999, the Northern Ireland Executive meets for the first time. Although the DUP refuse to attend, representatives from the Ulster Unionist Party, SDLP and Sinn Féin are present. The UUP leader David Trimble pledges to resign in three months if there is no progress on decommissioning.

A decommissioning crisis delays the devolution of power to the Assembly.
After the election unionists are reluctant to form a power-sharing Executive with Sinn Féin unless the IRA begins decommissioning their weapons. Sinn Féin argues that they cannot force the IRA to decommission.

Talks to find a solution continue between the British and Irish governments and the Northern Ireland parties.

Senator George Mitchell, former Chairman of the multi-party talks, is asked to help break the deadlock. After talks between the pro-agreement parties, the IRA agrees to nominate a representative to enter talks with General John de Chastelain’s decommissioning body. The Council of the Ulster Unionist Party holds a meeting in the Waterfront Hall and decides to enter devolved government with Sinn Féin.

The Patten Report on policing is published on 9 September.
The Report makes 175 recommendations for changes to policing in Northern Ireland. Included are a change of name, community-led policing boards and 50-50 recruiting of Protestants and Catholics. While objections are met from Unionists and members of the RUC, nationalists are more positive about the proposals.
Northern Ireland’s challenges did not end when it achieved a new form of Devolution. The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement paved the way for Westminster to devolve powers to Northern Ireland under the Northern Ireland Act 1998. Although Direct Rule ended on 2 December 1999, when powers were first transferred, devolution was initially short-lived and the Assembly faced substantial periods of suspension and return to Direct Rule over the next number of years. Parties engaged in negotiations to agree on decommissioning and other obstacles to the survival of the new institutions.

The second elections to the Assembly were held in November 2003 during a suspension which had begun in October 2002. The election was significant because the anti-Agreement Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) became the largest unionist party and Sinn Féin (SF) the largest nationalist party in the Assembly. The major parties at the time of the 1998 Agreement - the Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) and the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP) moved into third and fourth positions respectively. As a result, any deal to return devolution would have to be agreed by the DUP and Sinn Féin.

Political developments and the St Andrews Agreement of October 2006 led to the third election in March 2007 and the Assembly’s restoration in May 2007. Devolution of powers was completed when Westminster devolved Policing and Justice powers to the Assembly in 2010 following the Hillsborough Agreement of the same year. Despite some difficult issues still requiring resolution, there have been no suspensions since May 2007 and Northern Ireland has a fully operational legislative Assembly and power-sharing coalition government, currently comprised of Ministers from the five main parties. This is known as the Executive Committee.
2nd December 1999

Devolution

Power is passed from Westminster to Belfast for the first time. Devolution gives the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive Committee full legislative and executive authority over Transferred Matters, including Agriculture, Economic Development, Education, the Environment, Health and Social Services.

May 2000

Arms Inspection Announcement

Negotiations lead to a proposed sequence of events to restore power-sharing after the Assembly was suspended on 12 February 2000, over the issue of decommissioning. The IRA announces that it will open up some arms dumps to inspection and agrees to put arms beyond use if there is movement on policing reform and demilitarisation.

14th October 2002

Suspension of the Assembly

The police raid on Sinn Féin’s Stormont offices leads to a breakdown in trust between the political parties. The IRA is accused of spying on the Northern Ireland Office; Sinn Féin claims that the raid is a political stunt. As a consequence, John Reid, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, suspends the Assembly.

23rd November 2003

Second Assembly Election

The second elections run whilst the Assembly remains suspended. The Democratic Unionist Party gains ten seats to become the largest party. Sinn Féin gains six seats at the expense of the Social Democratic and Labour Party and the Alliance Party holds on to its six seats.
26th October 2006
St Andrews Agreement

After talks involving the British and Irish Governments and the political parties of Northern Ireland the St. Andrews Agreement is reached. This sets out a timetable for the restoration of the Assembly.

7th March 2007
Third Assembly Election

The Democratic Unionist Party remains the largest party in the Assembly, making significant gains from the Ulster Unionist Party. Sinn Féin gain further seats at the expense of the Social Democratic and Labour Party and remains the largest nationalist party. The Alliance Party gains one seat while the Progressive Unionist Party and independent health campaigner, Dr Kieran Deeny, retain their single seats. The Green Party wins its first Assembly seat.

8th May 2007
Restoration of Assembly

Northern Ireland has a new power-sharing government. Democratic Unionist Party leader, Ian Paisley, and Sinn Féin’s Martin McGuinness, become First and deputy First Ministers as almost five years of Direct Rule ends. The return of devolved government follows an historic meeting, in March, between Ian Paisley and Sinn Féin President, Gerry Adams, when they agreed to share power.

February 2010
Hillsborough Agreement

After ten days of intense negotiations, the Democratic Unionist Party says it has agreed a deal with Sinn Féin over the devolution of policing and justice powers from Westminster to Northern Ireland. The Agreement also addresses parades, Executive functions and outstanding issues from the St. Andrews Agreement.
We elect Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) to the Northern Ireland Assembly.

There are 108 MLAs, six from each of 18 constituencies. As elected representatives, MLAs have the right and responsibility, or mandate, to represent the views of those in their constituencies as they carry out their work of making laws and holding Ministers on the Executive Committee to account.

The Northern Ireland Miscellaneous Provisions Act, passed by the UK Parliament in March 2014, allows the Assembly to legislate to reduce the number of MLAs by one per constituency, to 90.

Most MLAs are members of political parties, so they also represent their party and vote according to the party line, unless granted a ‘free vote’ on a ‘conscience’ issue.

The allocation of positions in the Executive Committee is based on how parties perform in the election.

The more seats a party wins, the more Ministers it will have around the Executive table and the greater its power to shape decisions on policy and legislation.

There have been four elections to the Northern Ireland Assembly. In the last election on 5 May 2011, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) and Sinn Féin (SF) emerged as the two largest parties in the Assembly (as they have done since the 2003 election). Out of the Assembly’s 108 seats, the DUP won 38 and Sinn Féin won 29. The Ulster Unionist Party (UUP) won 16 seats, the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), 14, and the Alliance Party, 8 seats. The Green Party, Traditional Unionist Voice (TUV) and an independent candidate won one seat each.

According to the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and the Northern Ireland Act 1998, elections to the Assembly were to be held every four years, following the first one in June 1998. However, political difficulties, including suspension of the Assembly, delayed the second election until November 2003.

Election Results: 5th May 2011

The last election took place on 5th May 2011, when 218 candidates contested 108 seats in 18 constituencies.

Election results by constituency (2007 and 2011)
You can use this resource to analyse the performance of the political parties in the last two Assembly elections. (http://education.niassembly.gov.uk/post_16/your_mlas_your_constituency)

The timing of the third election was dependent on progress to deal with perceived problems, such as the decommissioning of IRA weapons. The third election took place in March 2007 following the St Andrews Agreement of October 2006 and the fourth election, in May 2011.
As a result of the passing of the Miscellaneous Provisions Act by the UK Parliament in March 2014, the next election will be held in 2016, rather than 2015, and every 5 years after that. This brings Northern Ireland into line with the other devolved institutions and means that regional elections will not clash with the General Elections of MPs to the House of Commons.

Click on the links below to find out more on political parties:

- www.mydup.com
- www.uup.org
- www.sinnfein.ie
- www.sdlp.ie
- www.allianceparty.org
- www.tuv.org.uk
- www.ni21.com
- www.greenpartyni.org
- www.ukipni.com
- www.ni21.com

*David McNarry MLA joined UKIP after leaving Ulster Unionist Party in 2012.

**Basil McCrea MLA and John McCallister MLA left the UUP in 2013 and formed NI21. John McCallister later resigned and is now independent.
To elect our 108 MLAs, 6 from each of the 18 constituencies, we use a system of Proportional Representation (PR), known as Single Transferable Vote (STV).

STV is also used to elect Councillors to Northern Ireland Local Government (Councils), MEPs to the European Parliament and in all elections in the Republic of Ireland.

The term ‘proportional representation’ (PR) describes electoral systems in which candidates win seats in a legislature more or less in proportion to the votes cast. The form of PR used in Northern Ireland Assembly elections is Single Transferable Vote. It is also used to elect Councillors in Local Government elections and Members of the European Parliament (MEPs).

In an STV election, constituencies elect a set number of candidates: in Northern Ireland Assembly elections, the number is six. A party can put forward as many candidates as it likes per constituency. Voters have as many preferences as there are candidates. They mark the candidates 1, 2, 3, etc, in order of preference, with 1 for their first choice of candidate, 2 for their second and so on. Voters do not have to state a preference for all candidates – they can choose as many or as few as they like. STV awards seats in proportion to the number of votes cast, with voters’ lower ranking preferences taken into account.

Supporters of this type of system argue that it reflects voters’ preferences more accurately than First Past the Post (FPTP) which is used to elect MPs to Westminster. In the Northern Ireland Assembly elections, over 80 percent of all valid votes determines the six successful candidates for each constituency. This means results are more representative of the views of the electorate than would be the case under ‘First Past the Post’.

Furthermore, STV gives smaller parties a better chance in elections, as they may benefit from transfers from larger parties. It gives smaller parties a better chance of success.

The Alliance Party has benefitted from STV since its introduction under Direct Rule in the 1970s. In earlier elections to the Assembly, the Ulster Democratic Party and the Progressive Unionist Party gained seats in the Assembly, ensuring that a broad range of views were represented at this early stage of the Assembly’s development.

Another important feature for Northern Ireland is the multimember constituency. With more than one candidate elected to represent a constituency, voters usually have a choice of representative to engage with. One practical ‘downside’ to STV is that it is quite complicated to administer. In the 2011 Assembly elections, counting took some time!

The election took place on Thursday 5th May and counting began the following day, after verification of ballot papers. According to Electoral Commission figures, the first result to be declared was for the Newry and Armagh constituency, at 1.30 am on Saturday 7th May. The count had taken 9 hours. The last result declared was North Down on Saturday evening at 9.30 pm.

PR systems differ from the First Past the Post (FPTP) system used for electing Members of Parliament (MPs) to Westminster. Under FPTP, each constituency elects only one MP. The names of one candidate for each political party, plus independents, are on the ballot paper. Voters choose one candidate only and the candidate with the most votes wins the seat. Only a simple majority is required, so candidates can be elected with less than 50 per cent of the votes. With this system, Constituents have only one elected representative which not all will identify with. However, the MP is responsible for representing all constituents and lines of accountability are clearer.
Proportional Representation - STV

We have used STV in Northern Ireland for local and European elections since the introduction of Direct Rule, following the suspension of the Northern Ireland Parliament, in 1972. FPTP had helped produce single party government by one party for the life of the Northern Ireland Parliament from 1929 (when STV was abolished in favour of FPTP) until 1972. STV was re-introduced to provide better representation for those who supported other parties.

In 2014, the Northern Ireland Miscellaneous Provisions Act gave the Assembly the power to reduce the number of Assembly seats from 6 per constituency (108) to 5 per constituency (90). Should this happen, it will be interesting to see how smaller parties or independents will be affected, as they often benefit from transfers to win the 6th seat.

Proportional electoral systems tend to produce coalition governments. Most coalitions are formed when parties agree to work together.

However, Northern Ireland has a unique form of coalition government, known as a consociational model, which is designed to guarantee power-sharing between representatives from different sections of the community.

The d’Hondt system is used to determine membership of the Government or Executive. D’Hondt is a mathematical formula which allocates positions of power proportionally, based on the number of seats a party has in the Assembly. This is called a ‘mandatory coalition’.

A PR election system, such as STV, ensures that different sections of the community have their views represented in the devolved institutions. For a democracy to be healthy, it is important that as many people as possible feel represented and included.

To watch a short and simple explanation of STV click on the link below:
http://education.niassembly.gov.uk/post_16/how_do_we_elect_mlas/video
Chapter 4
The Work of the Assembly
As the legislature in Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Assembly has three main roles:

- to make legislation;
- to scrutinise the work of the Executive - policies, legislative proposals and actions; and
- to represent the views and interests of the people of Northern Ireland.

The Assembly is a devolved legislature. The power to legislate on certain issues was handed over from Westminster as a result of the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and the Northern Ireland Act (1998) which implemented the Agreement. These issues are called Transferred or Devolved Matters. Later, the Hillsborough Agreement led to the transfer of Policing and Justice issues in April 2010.

The Assembly can make primary legislation and secondary (subordinate) legislation. In general terms, primary legislation provides the principles and framework of the law and secondary legislation contains the detail. A proposal for primary legislation is known as a Bill. When passed, the Bill becomes an Act.

The power to make secondary legislation on set out in a piece of primary legislation. Secondary legislation adds the detailed rules and procedures. These are known as Statutory Rules (SRs) in Northern Ireland. For example the Act may impose a fine for breaking a rule and the SR will set the amount of the fine. MLAs can amend secondary legislation quickly and more easily than primary legislation, for example, to increase the level of a fine.
Transferred, Excepted and Reserved Matters

Transferred Matters
The areas that the Assembly has power to legislate on are called Devolved or Transferred Matters. Under devolution, locally elected politicians, rather than Westminster MPs, make laws about most of the everyday issues that affect us in Northern Ireland. Compared to Direct Rule, devolution allows more detailed and effective scrutiny of legislative proposals, through more extensive debate, committee scrutiny and opportunities to amend Bills.

- Health and Social Services
- Education
- Employment and Skills
- Agricultural
- Social Security
- Pensions and Child Support
- Housing
- Economic Development
- Local Government
- Environmental Issues, including Planning
- Transport
- Cultural and Sport
- The NI Civil Service
- Equal Opportunities
- Justice and Policing

Excepted Matters
The UK Parliament still legislates for Northern Ireland on UK-wide or international matters. These are called Excepted Matters. They are:

- Royal Succession
- The Constitution
- Internal Relations
- Defence and Armed Forces
- Nationality, Immigration and Asylum
- National Security

- Nuclear Energy
- UK-Wide Taxation
- Currency
- Conferring of Honours
- Internal Treaties

Reserved Matters
The UK Parliament is also responsible for Reserved Matters, including postal services and import and export controls. Reserved Matters may be transferred to the Assembly. Policing and justice issues were in the ‘reserved’ category until the Hillsborough Agreement of February 2010 led to the transfer of these powers to the Assembly in April 2010. Other reserved matters are:

- Firearms and Explosives
- Financial Services and Pensions
- Regulation
- Broadcasting
- Import and Export Controls
- Navigation and Civil Aviation
- Internal Trade and Financial
- Markets
- Telecommunications and Postage
- Foreshore and Seabed
- Disqualification from Assembly
- Membership
- Consumer Safety
- Intellectual Property
The Assembly can legislate on reserved and excepted issues, if permission is granted by the Secretary of State.

The Assembly cannot legislate on issues that are outside its powers, or ‘legislative competence’.

Bills must not:
- refer to excepted or reserved matters - unless the Assembly asks for special permission from the Secretary of State, eg, there has been a request to change the level of corporation tax in Northern Ireland;
- contradict European law, or the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR); or
- discriminate against any person because of their religious belief or political opinion.

The Office of Legislative Counsel drafts Bills. This is a team of specially trained solicitors and barristers.

A new Bill is presented to the Speaker who confirms that it meets the above conditions before it can be introduced to the Assembly. The Speaker will send it to the Human Rights Commission and Equality Commission for approval.

Click on the links to find out more.

www.nihrc.org www.equalityni.org
Bills are introduced to the Assembly by:

- Ministers (Executive Bills);
- MLAs, as individuals (Private Members’ Bills); and
- Committees (Committee Bills).

There is also provision for a private company or individual to introduce a Private Bill, but this is unlikely to happen.

After an election, the Ministers on the Executive Committee agree a draft Programme for Government (PfG) for the new mandate, to be approved by the Assembly. The Executive reaches agreement on the draft programme after negotiations between parties. The parties want to fulfil promises they made in their election manifestos. Ministers may need to create new legislation, or make changes to existing laws, to fulfil some of the aims of the PfG. Some of this legislation will be introduced to keep Northern Ireland in line with the rest of the UK, in areas such as welfare reform and implementation of European directives.

Ministers and their departmental officials may also develop new ideas, or ‘policies’ about how to improve the delivery of public services and may propose new laws to implement these ideas.

Ministers consult the public about their views on a new policy before deciding to introduce a Bill. They will also talk to their corresponding statutory committee.

Individual MLAs can introduce Private Members’ Bills (PMBs). An MLA may feel strongly about a particular issue or be lobbied by an organisation, or an individual, to introduce a law. There have been 4 Private Member’s Bills (PMBs) passed by the Assembly since 2007:

- Caravans Act (2011) (John McCallister MLA)
- Autism Act (2011) (Dominic Bradley MLA)
- Carrier Bags Act (2011) (Daithi McKay)
- Civil Service (Special Advisers) Act (2013) (Jim Allister MLA)

PMBs currently going through the legislative process, both introduced in June 2013, are the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Bill (Lord Morrow MLA), to prevent and combat human trafficking and slavery, and support victims, and the Road Traffic (Speed Limits) Bill (Pat Ramsey MLA), to reduce speed limits in residential areas to 20 miles per hour.

Other MLAs are working on the development of Bills which they hope to introduce to introduce to the Assembly in this mandate, including an:

- Organ Donation Bill (Joanne Dobson MLA) to introduce a system whereby people opt out of organ donation, rather than opt in;
- an Assembly Reform (Opposition) Bill (John McCallister MLA), to provide for an ‘official’ opposition in the Assembly;
- a Townlands Bill (Phil Flanagan MLA) to number individual properties within townlands;
- a Rates Bill to exempt amateur sports clubs from having to pay rates;
- an Agriculture Bill to redesignate the horse as an agricultural animal.
- and a Scrap Metal Dealers Bill (Roy Beggs MLA) to regulate the scrap metal industry.

Organisations or individuals can also lobby committees to take action on issues.

Committees undertake inquiries that may reveal the need for new legislation. In the first instance, the Committee may call on the Minister to introduce the legislation, as Departments have significant resources in this area. If the Minister is reluctant to bring forward the Bill, the Committee may decide to do so. If so, the Bill will be introduced in the Committee Chair’s name.
So far, only one law passed by the Assembly was introduced by a committee, in partnership with the Assembly Commission (the corporate body of the Assembly). The Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act was passed in 2011. It established an independent body to set salaries and pensions of MLAs and created the post of an independent Commissioner for Standards to investigate complaints against MLAs. Drafting is currently under way for the first ever Statutory Committee Bill, the Public Services Ombudsman Bill. This will create a new office that will be the single point for complaints about public services.
Stages of the legislative process

A Bill has to pass through a number of stages before it becomes law.

First Stage
This is when the Speaker introduces the Bill to the Assembly. The Speaker will have confirmed that the Assembly has the power to legislate on this issue - that it is within the legislative competence of the Assembly. The Clerk of the Assembly reads out the Bill’s title in the Assembly Chamber and the Speaker orders the Bill to be printed. There is no debate or vote.

Second Stage
The Assembly debates the general principles of the Bill and votes on whether it wants to consider the legislative proposal further.

The rules of the Assembly allow Committees 30 working days to consider the Bill. However, committees can ask the Assembly to approve an extension. If a Bill gets to this stage, it usually means that it will become law, although the Act may end up looking very different to its the original Bill.

Consideration Stage
MLAs debate the Committee’s report, including proposed amendments, in the Assembly Chamber. The Minister may have already agreed to adopt the Committee’s amendments. If not, the Committee can propose its own amendments. Individual MLAs can also suggest amendments at this stage. Proposed amendments are debated and voted on.

Further Consideration Stage
This stage provides a further opportunity to amend the Bill. New proposals for amendments are debated and voted on in the Chamber.

Final Stage
A final debate on the Bill takes place. Amendments cannot be made at this stage. Members vote on whether to pass the Bill.

Royal Assent
After going through all its stages in the Assembly, a Bill must receive Royal Assent before it can become an Act of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Secretary of State, who represents Northern Ireland in the UK Government, asks the Queen to approve the Bill. This is a formal process where the Queen agrees to the Bill becoming law. After the Bill receives Royal Assent, the Speaker announces this at the next plenary sitting of the Assembly. The Bill is now an Act of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The enacted law may come into effect immediately, or after a period of time.

www.niassembly.gov.uk/Assembly-Business/Legislation
Bills usually take months to get through the Assembly. There are a few which which have been years in the making. The Education Bill (a proposal to create one employing and management body, for all schools in Northern Ireland - the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) completed its Committee Stage in April 2014. It was first introduced to the Assembly in October 2012. At time of writing the Bill has not been scheduled for the next stage in the process, the Consideration Stage.

However, under the Accelerated Passage procedure, a Bill can pass through all stages of the legislative process in ten days. This process skips the detailed scrutiny involved in the Committee Stage. Cross-community support is required for the Assembly to allow a Bill to go through the Accelerated Passage procedure. Budget Bills are usually passed in this way. Another example is the Road Races Bill which passed its Final Stage. The Assembly supported the Minister’s request to expedite this Bill, so it could be implemented in time for road races such as the North West 200.

Statistics

The 2007 – 2011 Mandate

Between May 2007 and March 2011, Ministers introduced 79 Bills to the Assembly and 69 of these Bills became laws.

Eleven MLAs introduced their own Private Member's Bill (PMB). Three were passed by the Assembly and became Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly. They were the Autism Bill, the Caravans Bill and the Single Use Carrier Bags Bill.

The 2011 to 2016 Mandate

Between May 2011 and June 2014, Ministers introduced 33 Bills to the Assembly and 24 were passed. Four PMBs were introduced, with one passed by end June 2014 - Jim Allister’s Civil Service (Special Adviser’s) Bill.

Go to www.niassembly.gov.uk to view the progress of each Bill through the various stages of the legislative process. Follow the progress of a Bill. Did it pass all stages and become an Act? How long did it take to get through the legislative process? How many amendments were made to it along the way?

The Planning Bill (2011) was the largest piece of legislation. It had most amendments made to it – 145! The Assembly passed the Debt Relief Bill (2010) with just one amendment.

Click here to find out about legislation in the current mandate: http://education.niassembly.gov.uk/post_16/the_work_of_the_assembly/making_legislation/bill_act
Scrubtity of the Executive Committee

After an election, the Northern Ireland Assembly appoints the Executive Committee, also known as the Northern Ireland Government. Ministers, including the First Minister and deputy First Minister, lead Government Departments responsible for delivering important public services. The Northern Ireland Executive is a multi-party coalition government.

As the elected government body, it is the role of the Assembly to hold the Executive to account on behalf of the people of Northern Ireland.

The Executive Committee produces a draft Programme for Government (PfG) and associated Budget, which both have to be approved by the Assembly, after scrutiny by Committees.

Most Bills are brought to the Assembly by Executive Ministers and the Assembly has to pass these before they can become laws. Ministers do have power to make operational decisions that do not require Assembly approval. However, the Assembly will scrutinise these actions through debates, questions and the work of committees, especially Statutory Committees.

In the current mandate, there are 5 parties in the Executive and no large party outside acting as a formal opposition. The vast majority of MLAs (at time of writing, 101 out of 107, excluding the Speaker) are members of the governing parties. This raises some questions in relation to scrutiny. Will MLAs criticise Ministers from their own party? Will Statutory Committees be effective in their scrutiny role, given that most committee members belong to the parties on the Executive?

In fact, Executive parties do not always agree with each other and one Minister or party may be openly critical of another. Executive powers are devolved to individual Ministers and Departments - there is no ‘collective responsibility’ or ‘unanimity’ or confidentiality’ rule, as in the Westminster system.

Although the Executive ‘agreed’ a draft budget before the last election in 2011, the SDLP subsequently voted against it in the Assembly Chamber. It also voted against the latest draft budget for 2015-16 and the Ulster Unionist Party and the Alliance Party abstained.

Individual MLAs, with constituency problems to be resolved, will press the relevant Minister for action and hold them to account, even if that Minister is from his/her own party.

Some MLAs are calling for the system to be changed to allow a more formal opposition. John McCallister MLA is working towards the introduction of a Private Member’s Bill to forward this aim.
Committees

Plenary meetings in the Assembly Chamber have a high public profile. However, most of work of the Northern Ireland Assembly takes place in Committee Rooms.

Committees are groups of 11 MLAs, from different political parties, appointed to specialise in a particular area of government or to carry out specific functions.

Membership reflects party strength in the Assembly and Chair and Deputy Chair positions are allocated using the d'Hondt system. All Members are entitled to a position on a committee.

The Assembly has four types of committee:

Statutory Committees advise, assist and scrutinise Ministers and their Departments. (See later section)

Standing Committees undertake specific roles, mostly concerned with running the Assembly.

Joint or Concurrent Committees. Under the rules of the Assembly, a matter of concern to 2 or more committees can be dealt with by the relevant committees sitting together, or concurrently or by the establishment of an adhoc joint committee. consider matters of interest to more than one committee. The Health and Agriculture Committees met concurrently to consider the issue of beef contamination by horse DNA; the Health and Justice Committees met to investigate the abuse of children and young people in the care system; and the Enterprise, Trade and Investment Committee worked with the Justice Committee to consider progress on plans to establish a Community Safety College (for training police and fire officers) at Desertcreat.

Ad Hoc Committees are set up for a limited time to deal with a particular issue. In the 2012-13 session, an adhoc committee considered and reported on whether the provisions of the controversial Welfare Reform Bill conformed to equality and human rights legislation.

Committees usually hold meetings in Parliament Buildings on Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays, but some are held in external venues, and Committees also go on research visits. Meetings are usually held weekly and last for about two to three hours. They are mostly open to the public. Despite the range of views represented by the different political parties in a committee, working relationships are usually harmonious. Party political differences seldom emerge during committee meetings. Members work constructively to carry out their legislative, scrutiny and representational roles. Agreement between members reinforces the cohesion and power of a committee.

The powers of committees come from:

• the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998;
• Legislation passed by the UK Parliament, the Northern Ireland Act (1998) in particular, that allowed the Agreement to be implemented; and
• Standing Orders – the rules governing how the Assembly works.

Committees assist the Assembly in its work as a legislature, by examining Bills at Committee Stage. This involves commissioning research; taking evidence from subject experts, interested parties and the general public;
and reporting to the Assembly on the Bill. If the Committee concludes that amendments should be made, it will ask the Minister to change the Bill accordingly. If the Minister does not agree, the Committee will table its own amendments to be debated and voted on by the Assembly.

To find out more about the work of a Committee click on the link below:
http://education.niassembly.gov.uk/post_16/the_work_of_the_assembly/scrutinise/committees

The power to initiate legislation

Committees have the power to initiate legislation. This means that a committee could, if it wished, draft a bill and introduce it in the Assembly. This power allows committees to be pro-active and directly achieve the changes they want, perhaps as a result of an inquiry into a particular issue. The power has not been used often.

A Committee Bill to formalise the powers of an Assembly Ombudsman (to deal with complaints against MLAs) was introduced in the first mandate of the Assembly, but it fell due to suspension of the Assembly in October 2002. This issue was revisited in June 2010, when the Assembly agreed to adopt recommendations from a report by the Committee on Standards and Privileges to enforce the Assembly’s Code of Conduct and appoint an Assembly Commissioner for Standards. The Committee introduced the Bill, in partnership with the Assembly Commission and the Assembly passed it in March 2011. This legislation ensures independent, objective investigations into complaints against Members.

The OFMdFM Committee has been drafting a Bill to merge the functions of the NI Ombudsman (investigates allegations of maladministration by Departments and other public bodies) and NI Commissioner for Complaints (investigates complaints against public servants). The 2 roles are currently carried out by the same person and the Bill will recognise this and simplify the situation by creating the single post of Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman. This will be the first Statutory Committee Bill and it is hoped it will be ready for introduction to the Assembly in Autumn 2014.

If a Committee, through its scrutiny and inquiry work, discovers an issue which it believes needs to be resolved by a new law or change to an existing law, it may, in the first instance, try to persuade the Minister to take this forward. Ministers have the resources of a large government department to call on, including experts in drafting legislation. If the Minister is not willing to introduce the Bill, then the Committee will consider doing so.

OFMdFM declined to bring forward an Ombudsman Bill, so the Committee is doing so. Highlighting the need for legislative change is an important means of holding Ministers to account. The Office for the Commissioner for Children and Young People was established in 2002 by a Bill which started life as a Private Member’s Bill (PMB), but was adopted by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMdFM). More recently, the OFMdFM Committee has asked the Department to consider taking on another PMB still at the drafting stage, the Duty to Co-operate on Children’s Services Bill, initiated by Steven Agnew MLA. If passed into law, this would require all Departments to co-operate when working on issues affecting children and young people.
Statutory Committees are the main way in which the Assembly holds the Executive to account. These committees scrutinise the work of Ministers and Departments, including how they spend their budgets and their proposals for laws. They can call Ministers and officials to attend meetings and answer questions from the Committee. They hold inquiries into issues that they want Ministers to take action on.

Statutory Committees also advise and assist Ministers to develop policy and plans for their Departments.

There are 12 Statutory Committees. One for each of the 11 Ministers and their Government Departments and one for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMdFM). The Committee for the OFMdFM co-ordinates the work of the Executive. It is sometimes called the ‘Twelfth Department’.

The roles and responsibilities given to Statutory Committees under the Agreement and Northern Ireland Act (1998) are deliberately extensive. This is because of the lack of formal party opposition in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Currently, all of the main parties are in the Executive, or Northern Ireland Government. There is no substantial party outside the Executive, or formal opposition, to hold the governing parties to account. Statutory Committees have a central role to play in the scrutiny function of the Assembly. They have the power to:

- consider and advise Ministers on new policy for their Department’s budget and plans;
- consider matters brought to their attention by Ministers;
- consider secondary legislation and take the Committee Stage of Primary Legislation;
- introduce legislation;
- hold inquiries into issues of their choosing; and
- call for persons to give evidence or supply documents (refusal could lead to a fine or imprisonment for up to three months).

The House of Commons has Bill Committees which only consider legislation and Select Committees which investigate the work of Departments. In the Assembly, Statutory Committees carry out both these roles.

As far as the advice and assistance role is concerned, the Statutory Committees are keen to foster close working relationships with Ministers, officials and others to benefit the public in terms of producing the best policies and legislation. The relationship should be a partnership. However, committees will not compromise on the role they play in terms of scrutiny and holding Ministers to account. The power to send for persons and papers is crucial to this role.

A Minister must consult the Committee about changes in policy or development of new policies. This gives committees an opportunity to shape policy at an early stage. Committees themselves can suggest a new policy or a change in policy for consideration by the Minister.

There are 12 statutory Committees:
Agriculture and Rural Development | Culture, Arts and Leisure | Education | Employment and Learning | Enterprise, Trade and Investment | Environment | Finance and Personnel | Health, Social Services and Public Safety | Justice | Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister | Regional Development | Social Development
Statutory Committees

Legislative Role

During the Committee Stage of the legislative process, committees scrutinise a Bill, or piece of secondary legislation (Statutory Rule/Regulation) line by line and clause by clause.

Each statutory committee deals with legislation initiated by its corresponding Minister, for example, the Committee for the Environment will scrutinise legislation introduced to the Assembly by the Minister for the Environment. Committees also take the committee stage of Private Members’ Bills (PMBs).

Committees consult interested groups and the public – asking for their views on the proposed legislation, and they call witnesses to give oral evidence at committee meetings. The Assembly’s research service will produce a paper on the Bill as introduced and any other information requested by the committee.

Following its investigation into a Bill, a committee produces a report on the Bill, which will be debated in the Assembly at the next stage of the legislative process, the Consideration Stage. This is when changes or ‘amendments’ can be made. If the committee has concluded that ‘amendments’ are required to improve the legislation, it will first seek to persuade the Minister to adopt any amendments and amend the Bill accordingly. If the Minister is unwilling to do so, the committee will propose amendments at Consideration Stage and the Assembly as a whole will debate vote on whether to approve each amendment.

Between May 2007 and March 2011, committees scrutinised and reported to the Assembly on 52 Primary Bills. In the current mandate, up to July 2014, 27 Bills have gone to committees for this Consideration Stage of the legislative process. Reports on Bills can be found on the Committee pages of the Assembly’s website.

Inquiry Role

Undertaking inquiries is another very important part of a statutory committee’s responsibilities. It’s part of the process by which a committee sets its own agenda, rather than simply reacting to policy initiatives from the department. The committee can choose any topic from within the department’s areas of responsibility. The issue under investigation will generally affect people across Northern Ireland, rather than in just one or a few constituencies. In the course of its work, the committee may have noticed an issue or problem that requires attention. Interest groups, or even individuals, might lobby a committee to inquire into a particular issue or an incident might occur that demands investigation, eg the contamination of beef by horse DNA. In early 2013, a concurrent committee was established, to allow the committees for health and agriculture to work together on an inquiry into the issue.

There have been inquiries into a wide range of issues, including suicide and self harm, school councils, the school inspectorate, creative industries, levels of participation in sport and careers education. Standing Committees can also undertake inquiries.

Once the topic is agreed, the committee puts out a call for evidence, in the press and on the Assembly website. It will also write directly to relevant organisations and interest/pressure groups. Anyone can submit their views, by post or email, and all submissions will form part of the evidence considered and be included in the committee’s report to the Assembly.

The committee will invite some groups or individuals to give oral evidence at a formal committee meeting, when MLAs will have the chance to ask questions. Frequently, committees organise less formal evidence-taking events with the help of the Assembly Community Connect service, which allows marginalised or harder to reach groups to participate. Experts will also be consulted and
the committee will make use of the Assembly’s research service to provide further information and evidence.

Following this investigation into the evidence, the committee will draw conclusions and produce a report, making recommendations regarding actions to address the relevant issues. When committees consider contentious issues they can reach a decision by taking a consensus approach or by voting. It can be difficult for a minister to oppose recommendations which enjoy consensual support in a committee. The report will be published and is usually debated in the Assembly Chamber with the minister present to make a response. The Department is required to provide a formal written response within 3 months. Committees regularly follow up on departmental progress in implementing recommendations. When a committee is dissatisfied with progress, it can summon officials to explain or keep bringing the issue back to the house, eg, via a committee motion for debate, to keep pressure on the minister to act.

Go to the Committee pages of the Assembly’s website to find out more about current and past inquiries.

**How do statutory committees cope with this wide range of responsibilities?**

There is a danger that committees could be flooded with work from departments, which would not allow them to properly carry out their scrutiny and policy development roles. To prevent this happening, they undertake strategic planning and draw up forward work programmes at the start of each session (every September), to include time for scrutiny of legislation which is expected and any inquiries they want to undertake. They are selective about the issues they deal with, in order to set their own agenda and achieve the outcomes they want to see. Forward work programmes are posted on the Assembly website.

Despite what some members of the public and the media might think, MLAs are extremely busy. They attend plenary sittings in the Chamber, deal with party work and constituency work, and most are members of 2 or 3 committees. Committees usually meet weekly for 2-3 hours and a lot of preparation work is required. A team of staff assist committee members to ensure that time allocated for meetings is used as constructively as possible.

**Power Sharing**

Assembly Committees are an important part of the checks and balances built in to our system of devolution. Assembly Committees implement power-sharing for the different communities by ensuring that each committee has:

- a Chairperson and a Deputy Chairperson that are appointed under the d’Hondt system;
- a Chairperson, or a Deputy Chairperson, from a different political party to that of the Minister (statutory committees);
- membership that reflects the composition of the parties in the Assembly; and
- members from at least five of the political parties.

Find out about the work of individual Statutory Committees at www.niassembly.gov.uk/io/Statutory.htm and when considering the Assembly’s Executive scrutiny role, it is also worth looking at the work of the Public Accounts Committee. Although a Standing Committee, it has the important role of examining the spending of government departments and agencies.

Committees often use innovative ways to engage with stakeholders. In addition to holding meetings at external locations, they attend events such as the Balmoral Show and hold multi-group events to give a wide range of organisations the opportunity to meet with members from a particular committee.
In 2011, the Regional Development Committee worked with a youth organisation to consult young people about public transport. One of the ways in which the young people expressed their views was through a drama performance. Committees have engaged in video conferences with schools. The Education Committee held workshops for young people when carrying out their Inquiry into School Councils and will directly consult young people as part of their current inquiry into Area Planning for Schools.

Compared with direct rule, what has the existence of statutory committees meant for Ministers, departmental officials and Chief Executives of non-governmental agencies/ public bodies?

- Closer and more detailed scrutiny of policies
- Closer and more detailed scrutiny of subordinate and primary legislation
- Intensive questioning about budgets and annual plans
- Many interest groups and lobby groups are now aware that Assembly committees are an important part of the system and are, in many instances, more accessible and open to persuasion than Ministers and officials.
- Scrutiny is much more open and transparent than in the past. Most committee meetings are held in public session, which means the press and public can attend. Most meetings are broadcast live on the internet and on BBC Democracy Live, where you can also access an archive of past meetings. The Office of the Official Report (Hansard) takes minutes of evidence in meetings considering legislation or taking evidence as part of an inquiry. Committees have closed sessions if they are finalising a report and don’t want their recommendations released until they ‘sign off’ and publish the report. They might also have a closed session, if a witness requests it due to the sensitive nature of the evidence involved.

Academic reflections on how the Assembly is working by Professor Rick Wilford from Queen’s University Belfast, and Professor Cathy Gormley- Heenan from Ulster University. Please note their views are not the views of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

http://education.niassembly.gov.uk/post_16/academic-reflections-northernireland-assembly
Standing Committees support the work of the Assembly. They are permanent committees set up under the rules of the Assembly called Standing Orders. There are currently six Standing Committees, each with a specific role:

The Audit Committee scrutinises the spending plans and accounts of the NI Audit Office. The Audit Office carries out financial and value for money audits of Northern Ireland Departments and public bodies.

The Committee on Procedures reviews the Standing Orders (rules) and procedures of the Assembly. It has completed 2 major inquiries the current mandate, The first resulted in the creation of the post of Principal Deputy Speaker and the election of the first PDS in the Assembly, Mitchel McLaughlin MLA, from Sinn Féin. it also inquired into the issue of Topical Questions, resulting in their introduction in September 2013. It has recently concluded a review of the Current Organisation of the Business Week of the Assembly and is currently considering the Extent to which Standing Orders should permit the participation of the Attorney General in Assembly Proceedings and looking again at topical questions.

The Standards and Privileges Committee deals with matters relating to privileges and conduct of Members. In the last mandate, the Committee and the Assembly Commission the corporate body of the Assembly, jointly introduced the Assembly Ombudsman Bill, which was passed by the Assembly in March 2011. This created the post of Assembly Commissioner for Standards whose role it is to carry out independent and objective investigations into complaints against Members. It also established an independent body to determine the salaries and allowances for MLAs. Before this, MLAs themselves had this responsibility.

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) has an important role in scrutinising public sector spending. It holds senior government officials to account for financial decisions and promotes good practice which will ensure that taxpayers’ money is being spent properly and wisely. During this mandate, its work has included an investigation into financial irregularities in the Fire Service; scrutiny of the Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure’s spending on and management of major capital leisure projects, such as the rebuilding of the Lyric Theatre, Belfast and examination of the Police Service of Northern Ireland’s use of agency staff. The nature of the Committee’s work means that it is high profile and often in the news.

The Assembly and Executive Review Committee reviews matters relating to the functioning of the Assembly and the Executive. Its work is often politically sensitive and of great interest to students of AS Politics. It was established under the Northern Ireland Act (1998), rather than Standing Orders, to review and report on the general operation of the Assembly and Executive as set up under the Agreement. It reported on this at the end of 2012. It also considered the issue of Devolution of Policing and Justice in the 2009-10 session. More recently, it has reviewed the Number of Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, D'Hondt, Community Designation and Provisions for Opposition and Petitions of Concern. It is currently considering the issue of Women in Politics and the Northern Ireland Assembly.

More examples of committee impact and effectiveness can be found in this document and on the Assembly website at www.niassembly.gov.uk/io/5.htm.
Ad Hoc Committees

Ad Hoc Committees are temporary committees the Assembly sets up to consider specific issues such as legislation on Reserved or Excepted matters. One was established in 2013 to consider the controversial Welfare Reform Bill and whether or not aspects conformed with equality requirements in Northern Ireland. These committees usually have about two months to carry out their work and report to the Assembly.

Joint Committees

The Assembly can consider matters that concern more than one committee in one of two ways. It can:

• establish a joint committee with members from more than one committee; or
• allow two full committees to sit concurrently.

In 2013, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development, and the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety, met together to jointly consider the problem of contamination of beef products with horse and pig DNA.

Find out about current joint committees or concurrent committee meetings at www.niassembly.gov.uk.
To fulfil its function of scrutinising the Executive, it is important for the Northern Ireland Assembly to question Ministers about their areas of responsibility. This ensures that Ministers explain their work, policy decisions and the actions of their Departments.

Questions to Ministers also help MLAs fulfil their representative role, by raising issues that concern constituents. Questions seek information or press the Minister for action on a particular issue.

There are five types of question:

- Questions for Oral Answer;
- Questions for Urgent Oral Answer (to Ministers in the Chamber);
- Topical Questions
- Written Questions; and
- Priority Written Questions.

To find out what questions have been put to Ministers, or search for questions on a particular topic, go to the website and click on AIMS - Assembly Information Management System.

http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/default.aspx
Questions for Oral Answer

Ministers must reply to Questions for Oral Answer during a plenary meeting of the Assembly in the Assembly Chamber. This is known as Question Time. It is a very public way for Ministers to explain what they and their Department are doing.

Question Time currently takes place in the Assembly Chamber between 2.00pm and 3.30pm on Mondays and Tuesdays.

A rota is agreed in advance to determine which Ministers are due to answer questions on a particular day. Each Minister has 30 minutes to answer standard Oral Questions. Four Departments answer questions each week. Ministers are on the rota once every 4 weeks. The First Minister or deputy First Minister answer questions once a fortnight. They can also ask a Junior Minister to answer the question if it concerns the Junior Ministers’ area of responsibility.

Members who wish to ask an Oral Question must submit their names in advance. Fifteen names will be selected in a random ballot and the successful MLAs will have to submit their actual questions. There will be a random shuffle of the 15 questions to determine the order in which they will be asked.

The Minister will have just under 2 weeks to prepare answers to these questions and any possible supplementary questions – follow-up questions that the Minister will not know in advance, which Members use to scrutinise a Minister in more detail on an issue.

Ministers must answer as clearly and fully as possible and they usually have up to 2 minutes to answer each question. It is unlikely that more than 10 questions will be answered on the day. Those not answered will receive written replies.

When the 30 minutes is up, there will then be 15 minutes of Topical Questions.

The Speaker may also allow an MLA to ask an Urgent Oral Question about a pressing issue that has arisen.
Most questions asked by MLAs are written questions. These can be longer than oral questions and usually require more detailed answers from Ministers.

MLAs can table up to five written questions per day. Departments will have up to 10 working days to answer written questions.

**Priority Written Questions**

A Member may table one Priority Written Question per day. The Minister must answer this question between two and five working days later. These questions should not request large amounts of historical or statistical information.
Topical Question Time was introduced in September 2013. This is an extra 15 minutes of Questions for Ministers on current or ‘topical’ issues, in addition to the traditional 30 minute Question Time.

Ministers will be informed 3 working days in advance of the names of Members selected to ask topical questions. However, there is no requirement on the Member to inform the Minister of the content of the question.

A topical question can be about a constituency or regional matter. Ministers will require very up-to-date briefings on all issues within their area of responsibility to be able to answer any question which arises. No supplementary questions will be allowed during Topical Question Time.
The Role of the Speaker at Question Time

The Speaker controls the pace of Question Time. After each question, if he/she allows MLAs to ask a lot of supplementary questions, there will be less time to cover different topics and the Minister will be under close scrutiny on just a few subjects. If the Speaker allows too few supplementary questions, they will be able to deal with more topics in the time allowed, but in less detail. The Speaker has to try to find the right balance.

When selecting who can ask supplementary questions, the Speaker will try to ensure a cross-community balance during the 30 minutes the Minister is subject to questioning. He will also consider relevance to Members’ constituencies.

The Speaker will also appeal to Members to keep their supplementary questions short. The Speaker may check a Member for being too lengthy or for making statements and engaging in debate across the Chamber.

The Speaker controls the pace of Question Time and selects Members who can ask supplementary questions.
Debates take place during plenary meetings in the Assembly Chamber on Mondays and Tuesdays.

MLAs debate motions that call on Ministers, or the Executive as a whole, to take a certain course of action on an issue. Other motions seek an Assembly view or decision, on legislative proposals, issues that concern all the people of Northern Ireland and constituency issues. In fact, the Assembly can debate any issue of its choosing, including international issues. However, it can only legislate on Transferred/Devolved Matters. Motions for debate are tabled in the Business Office by MLAs. Committees can also propose issues for debate.

When speaking in debates, MLAs will always try to represent their constituents’ views, using examples from their constituency as evidence to support points they are making either in favour of or against the motion. Ministers are usually present for debates on issues in their area of responsibility, so the MLA tries to make the Minister aware of his/her constituents’ concerns and to put pressure on the Minister to act.

MLAs who belong to a political party represent that party and have to speak and vote in line with party policy. Sometimes, party policy may conflict with the views of some constituents.
MLAs debate Bills at several stages during the law-making process. At the Second Stage they debate the general principles of the Bill. Is it a good idea? Is it a law that the Assembly thinks it should pass?

The third stage of the process is the Committee Stage. At this stage, the relevant Committee carries out an investigation into the Bill and produces a report for debate in the Assembly. The report may suggest amendments. The Assembly debates the Committee’s report on the Bill, and any suggested amendment, and votes on whether to approve proposed changes to the Bill. This is known as the Consideration Stage of the law-making process.

Ministers and individual MLAs can also suggest amendments at this stage and at a Further Consideration Stage. After the Final Stage debate the Assembly votes on whether to pass the Bill.

There is no time limit imposed on debates on legislation.
Individual MLAs can table a motion for debate on any subject of their choice.

MLAs will use Private Members’ Motions to raise matters that concern their constituents. Motions are tabled in the Business Office and are put on a ‘No Day Named List’, (no date for debate has been agreed).

The Business Committee decides what will be on the Order Paper, or agenda, for plenary meetings. D’Hondt is used to select Private Members’ Motions for debate, with parties taking it in turn to choose motions. This means that larger parties have greater influence over what is debated than smaller parties do.

An hour and a half is usually the length of time allocated to these motions. The Assembly votes on these issues and the relevant Minister will be present. The Minister is not obliged to accept the Assembly’s view on an issue.
Adjournment Debates

This type of debate usually takes place on a Tuesday, as the last item of business in the plenary meeting, just before the meeting is adjourned.

An MLA can request an adjournment debate about a topical issue that concerns their constituency, for example the proposed closure of a school or the future of hospital services.

The Minister responsible for the issue is present and responds to issues raised at the end of the debate. No vote is taken, so the Assembly does not resolve to do anything about the issue. The Minister is not obliged to act. However, the adjournment debate is an effective way for an MLA to fulfil their representative role by raising constituents’ concerns in a very public way.
In the Assembly Chamber, votes are usually carried by a majority.

When a motion is read, those in favour say ‘Aye’ and those against (contrary) say ‘No’. If it is unclear whether the Ayes or Noes ‘have it’, or if the apparent result is challenged, the Speaker rings the Division Bell throughout the building. MLAs who are not already in the Chamber have three minutes to get there. The Speaker calls for another ‘voice vote’. If the result remains unclear, a Division takes place. Members enter either the Aye or the No Division Lobbies to register their vote and the result is announced in the Chamber.

Some decisions require cross-community support.

This special voting arrangement is intended to ensure that one side of the community cannot dominate the other. Decisions which require cross-community support, include the election of the Speaker and Deputy Speakers, approval of the Budget and changes to the Standing Orders of the Assembly. Any decision can be subject to cross-community support if 30 MLAs request this by signing a Petition of Concern.

While possible to get cross-community support on a voice vote, for example, when William Hay MLA was unanimously elected as Speaker, a count usually takes place in two stages. The first stage is a normal count. The second counts the number of nationalists and unionists who support the motion.

There are two ways to get cross-community support:

The Parallel Consent method requires 50 percent of all those voting and 50 percent nationalist and unionist support.

The Weighted Majority method requires 60 percent of all those voting and 40 percent support from both nationalists and unionists.

The Assembly decisions that require cross-community support are:

- election of the Speaker and Deputy Speakers;
- changes to the rules of the Assembly, called Standing Orders;
- ratification of the Budget;
- decisions about how many Ministers there should be and what areas of government they should be responsible for;
- exclusion of a Minister, or members of a political party, from holding office; and
- petitions of concern, allowing 30 MLAs to submit a request to the Speaker for a particular vote to be taken on a cross-community basis.
MLAs represent the people who live in the area that they were elected to represent – their constituency.

When carrying out their legislative and scrutiny roles, MLAs consider the views of their constituents. They press for government action on issues of concern in their constituency.

Most MLAs also represent a political party. They are obliged to follow the party line on many issues, even if it is not popular with their own constituents. The party’s Chief Whip ensures that MLAs know what the party line is. Political parties present their policies to the electorate before an election in a manifesto, so that voters know where they stand on issues.

All MLAs have at least one office in their constituency for meeting their constituents and keeping in touch with local opinion. They also attend numerous local events.

However, constituency work is not just about listening to constituents’ views. It also involves providing an advice and problem-solving service for constituents. This is often called a ‘constituency surgery’. There is no business in Parliament Buildings on Friday, to allow MLAs to spend one full day in their constituency.

Other constituency activities include:

• attending meetings and events where they can discuss issues with groups of constituents;
• meeting and working with fellow MLAs and local councillors to discuss issues of mutual concern, for example, threatened closure of a hospital or library;
• attending special events, for example, the opening of a new community centre;
• replying to letters and emails; and
• working with the constituency branch of their party, seeking the views and help of party members.

It is important for elected representatives to be very visible in their constituency and to provide a good service. After all, they want constituents to vote for them at the next election.

It is important for elected representatives to be very visible in their constituency and to provide a good service. After all, they want constituents to vote for them at the next election.
MLAs represent us in plenary meetings in the Chamber by:
• speaking and voting on issues;
• putting forward (tabling) motions for debate, including an adjournment debate about a constituency matter;
• suggesting amendments to Bills;
• questioning Ministers, including the First Minister and deputy First Minister;
• introducing a Private Member’s Bill; and
• presenting petitions on behalf of groups;

MLAs also represent us in Committees, by engaging with the public and interest groups to hear their views on proposed legislation and issues under inquiry by Committees. Individuals and groups can suggest topics for Committee Inquiries. Committee members also question Ministers and departmental officials about their policies and decisions, and how they are spending tax payers’ money.

MLAs form and join All Party Groups (APGs) where they meet with outside organisations and individuals to discuss shared interest in a particular cause or subject. MLAs represent us in Committees by:
• examining Bills in detail;
• proposing amendments to improve Bills;
• conducting inquiries into issues (an individual constituency or constituency group may persuade a committee to hold an inquiry into an issue – this could even result in the committee introducing a new law);
• discussing and writing committee reports (legislative and inquiry reports);
• monitoring and asking Questions about the decisions and actions of Ministers and Departments, include how they are spending their budget; and
• inviting outside groups with specific knowledge and expertise to present evidence and keep Members fully informed about issues.

What is an APG?
Joining All Party Groups (APGs) is another way in which MLAs represent us in the Assembly. These are groups that MLAs join voluntarily because they are looking at issues that are relevant to their constituents. The groups also include members from outside the Assembly, from relevant interest groups. All Party Groups are not official Assembly groups, like Committees. They do not have a formal role in policy development.

Check out what APGs exist:
http://www.niassembly.gov.uk
Abraham Lincoln described democracy as ‘government of the people, by the people for the people’. Indeed, the term comes from the Greek words ‘demos’, meaning ‘people’ and ‘kratia’, meaning ‘rule by’.

In a modern, representative democracy, we elect representatives to govern on our behalf. In the direct democracy of ancient Athens, citizens (men only!) assembled to make decisions themselves. In our system today, a referendum is a form of direct democracy, when the government asks the people to vote yes or no to a question on a specific issue.

However, as well as choosing who will make decisions on our behalf and voting in a rare UK referendum, a healthy democracy requires the people to influence government decision-making on an ongoing basis.

What are the different ways in which people can get involved and how do we encourage them to do so?

Voting is vital and, for many people who vote, this will be their only form of participation. However, for democracy to flourish, it is not enough. We must continue to make our views heard between elections, when government institutions are making decisions about how to spend taxpayers’ money and making laws that affect our lives.

Education is important. People need to understand how government works to enable them to influence policy and law making at the right time, in the most effective way. In Northern Ireland, all young people are required to study Citizenship to gain an understanding of how their democratic institutions work.

This was not always the case and, in the past, many people left schools with little or no knowledge of the political system. The Northern Ireland Assembly is committed to educating the public about how the Assembly works and encouraging them to participate in the decision making process. Many other organisations working with children and young people also promote participation in politics.

Members of the public, including young people (no age restriction!) and interest groups can contact their MLAs, Assembly Committees, Ministers or government Departments to raise issues of concern express views on existing policies and legislation and lobby for change. Groups, such as Non Government Organisations (NGOs) and individuals can respond to committee consultations on bills being considered by the Assembly and submit views/evidence relating to subjects being investigated by committees as they carry out inquiries. They can lobby a committee to hold an inquiry into a particular issue.

People can approach their MLAs to ask written or oral questions to Ministers on their behalf. MLAs can table motions for debate on particular issues, to highlight the issue and bring it to a Minister’s attention. MLAs are easily contactable, through their offices in Parliament Buildings and their constituency offices. Contact details are available on the Assembly’s website. Many MLAs have their own websites, Facebook pages and Twitter accounts!

MLAs are elected to represent us and they can’t do that properly if we don’t get involved!
The Speaker is the Presiding Officer of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Speaker’s most visible role is to chair plenary meetings in the Assembly Chamber. Outside the Chamber, he chairs the Business Committee which decides what will be discussed in the Chamber; and the Assembly Commission, which ensures that the Assembly has the accommodation, staff and services required to carry out its legislative, scrutiny and representative roles.

Regarding the legislative process, the Speaker checks that any Bill introduced to the Assembly has legislative competence, i.e., concerns a devolved matter. If part of a Bill refers to a reserved or excepted matter, consent will be sought from the Secretary of State.

The Speaker also performs an important ambassadorial role. After an Assembly election, the first task for MLAs is to elect a Speaker. This is a politically neutral role and the decision requires cross-community support from both nationalists and unionists. Mr. William Hay MLA was Speaker from May 2007 to October 2014. The Assembly has still to elect his successor.
As chair of plenary sessions, the Speaker:

- calls Members to speak in debates;
- controls the pace of Question Time;
- ensures that the right procedures are followed;
- maintains order in the Chamber; and
- has the final say on disputes regarding the rules of the Assembly, called Standing Orders.

MLAs must have confidence in the Speaker’s impartiality. Therefore, the Speaker does not take part in or vote on any debates in the Chamber, and does not become involved in party politics. When representing the Assembly, the Speaker will talk only on operational matters and not on political issues, as to do so would have a negative impact on his authority in the Chamber and beyond.

In his role in the Chamber, the Speaker represents the interests of the Assembly and will try to ensure that MLAs have the opportunity to effectively scrutinise Executive Ministers, within the rules governing plenary sessions.

Click the link below to view a video on voting in a plenary meeting of the Assembly:
http://education.niassembly.gov.uk/post_16/the_work_of_the_assembly/role/chamber
Chairing the Business Committee

The Speaker and the Chief Whips of the main political parties form the Business Committee.

The Business Committee meets on Tuesdays at lunchtime. It agrees the following week’s agenda for plenary meetings in the Assembly Chamber and provisionally agrees the business for the week after that. The Order Paper lists the order of business for each plenary meeting.

A representative from OFMdFM also attends the meeting to inform the Committee about Executive business which needs to be scheduled.

The Business Committee will also agree timings for each motion/debate. These are for guidance, rather than set in stone, as there is no time restriction on debates on legislation. The Committee will also approve the running order of Private Members’ Motions (parties select one of their MLAs’ motions in d’Hondt order), as well as the motions picked. Debates on these motions are timed and are usually allocated up to a maximum of 1.5 hours.

The Speaker decides what proposed amendments to motions will be debated and voted on.
Chairing the Assembly Commission

The Assembly Commission is responsible for providing the Assembly with the property, staff and services it needs to carry out its work. The Assembly needs:

- a suitable building to meet in;
- sufficient office accommodation;
- staff to support MLAs; and
- services, including recording and printing.

The Commission consists of the Speaker, who is the Chair, and MLAs from each of the main parties represented in the Assembly.
Representing the Assembly

The Speaker is an ambassador for the Assembly, representing the institution as a whole. This role includes:

- receiving VIP visitors to Parliament Buildings, such as Heads of State, Ambassadors and senior political figures;
- attending events outside Parliament Buildings to promote the work of the Northern Ireland Assembly; and
- hosting events in the building to encourage people to visit, to meet with their elected representatives and to get involved in the work of the Assembly.

To find out more on the Work of the Assembly visit:

http://education.niassembly.gov.uk/post_16/the_work_of_the_assembly
Chapter 5
The Assembly & Executive
The Assembly and the Executive Committee are two separate branches of government. This is not always clear in the way politics is reported, as the term Stormont is often used without clarifying the different roles of the two institutions.

What is the difference between the Assembly and the Executive?

The Assembly is the legislature, made up of MLAs who have been elected by the people of Northern Ireland to represent their views and make laws on their behalf. The Assembly considers and scrutinises the legislative proposals brought before it. A Bill cannot become a law unless the Assembly votes to pass it. The Assembly meets in the Assembly Chamber of Parliament Buildings, in the grounds of the Stormont Estate in Belfast.

The Government, or ‘Cabinet’ in Northern Ireland is known as the Executive Committee – or ‘Executive’. This is made up of Ministers in charge of Government Departments. The Ministers are MLAs nominated by parties, under the D’Hondt System. The Executive Committee meets in Stormont Castle, also on the Stormont Estate. Its work is co-ordinated by the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.

Click on the link below to find out more about how the Assembly and Executive work together: [http://education.niassembly.gov.uk/post_16/the_assembly_and_executive/video](http://education.niassembly.gov.uk/post_16/the_assembly_and_executive/video)

Ministers are responsible for making and implementing day to day operational decisions of government within their own areas of responsibility. Executive powers are devolved from Westminster to individual Ministers/Departments. The Executive Committee as a whole:

- draws up the draft Budget and the Programme for Government (PfG), which has to be approved by the Assembly. In managing their Departments, developing policies and draft legislation, Ministers seek to meet targets set by the PfG to improve public services and quality of life for all the people in Northern Ireland.
- discusses issues which are controversial or cross-cutting, ie, involve more than one department;
- approves the introduction of Executive legislation to the Assembly.

As the elected body, the Assembly holds the Executive to account, scrutinising Ministers’ decisions and actions, including spending, and their proposals for new policies and laws.

Note about the Budget

The budget for Northern Ireland is agreed is agreed in line with the UK Spending review periods, which generally coincide with the term of a mandate; the last budget was for 2011-15. As the current mandate has been extended by one year to May 2016, the Assembly and Executive have to agree a budget for the year 2015-16.

The Budget Process

Following negotiations with other Ministers, the Minister for Finance and Personnel brings a paper to the Executive for agreement. In the case of the 2015-16 budget, although the paper was agreed by the Executive Committee as a whole, not all Executive parties supported it. The SDLP voted against it because of the suggested cuts to the Department for the Environment and the Alliance and Ulster Unionist Parties abstained.
The Finance Minister made a statement on the draft to the Assembly on 3 November 2014 and MLAs got the opportunity to ask questions.

“The tightening UK public spending environment that began in 2010 continues apace, and the pressures placed on services by the public do not abate. However, the resources available to fund those pressures have reduced dramatically. Between 2014-15 and 2015-16 alone, the Executive’s resource DEL decreased by 1.6% in real terms. Compared with 2010-11, when the Assembly last agreed a Budget, the Executive’s spending power has been reduced by around £1.5 billion. Looking ahead, Office for Budget Responsibility projections show that we can expect our resource DEL to fall by a further 13% in real terms by 2019. So, in this year and beyond, we will have a wide range of increasing demands placed on our public services while we have fewer and fewer resources with which to meet that growing demand. It is a situation that demands tough, sometimes even undesirable, choices be made”.

The Minister for Finance and Personnel,
Ministerial Statement on Draft Budget 2015-16, 3 Nov 2014

Following this, the Draft Budget is scrutinised by the statutory committees. The Committee for Finance and Personnel coordinates a response to the draft budget on behalf of all the committees and its report is sent to the Executive for consideration. Negotiations will follow and the Assembly will debate and vote on the final draft in the Assembly Chamber.

The draft budget for 2015-16 includes cuts of 10-12% to the budgets of 5 departments – Environment; Employment and Learning; Culture, Arts and Leisure; and Finance and Personnel. Only 2 departments see an increase in funding: Health, Social Services and Public Safety; and Enterprise, Trade and Investment.

How much money is there and where does it come from?
It costs approximately £20 billion per year to run Northern Ireland. Money comes from taxes raised in Northern Ireland, a grant from Westminster, EU funding, regional rates and borrowing. Money is spent on welfare, including pensions and some is ‘ring fenced’ by the UK treasury, meaning it has to be spent in a certain way. The Northern Ireland Executive has control over just under £10 billion, and the Assembly and Executive have to agree how much will be allocated to each government department. The Draft Budget 2015-16 document announced that Northern Ireland’s 2015-16 budget settlement from Westminster has resulted in a real terms reduction of 1.6 per cent in money available to spend.

The draft for 2015-16 gives the Department for Health 47% of available funds, over £4.5 billion. The department with the second largest allocation is Education (almost £2 billion), followed by Justice (just over £1 billion), Employment and Learning (just over £674 million), and Social Development (£590m). Of course, draft figures may change as a result of the Assembly’s scrutiny.
Chapter 6
Inside Parliament Buildings
Parliament Buildings is the home of the Northern Ireland Assembly, but was originally built for the Northern Ireland Parliament. The Parliament first met in 1921 and moved to Parliament Buildings when it was completed in 1932.

The old Parliament was bi-cameral: it used two chambers to pass laws, the House of Commons and the Senate Chamber. The Parliament was suspended in 1972 at a time of serious political unrest and trouble.

Today, the Northern Ireland Assembly is ‘uni-cameral’: a single ‘house’ makes the legislation. The original House of Commons, which held 52 Members of Parliament (MPs) has become the Assembly Chamber for 108 MLAs.

The original Westminster style ‘adversarial’ seating format has been replaced by a U-shaped layout inspired by European, coalition-style parliaments. This is where the Assembly holds plenary meetings on Mondays and Tuesdays.

Explore the model of Parliament Buildings to find out how it fits together:
http://education.niassembly.gov.uk/post_16/inside_parliament_buildings/activity
Chandelier

The main central chandelier is cast metal, decorated with gold and it weighs 1/3 of a ton. It was originally a gift from Kaiser Wilhelm of Germany to King Edward VII and hung in Windsor Castle.

However, at the beginning of WWI, it was placed in storage because England was at war with Germany. You can see evidence of its history in the design - the Imperial German eagle.

The chandelier was a present from King George V, to mark the opening of Parliament Buildings. Then, after a fire in Windsor Castle in 1992, those in charge of its refurbishment asked for it to be returned! However, after some persuasion, it remains in Parliament Buildings.

Public Gallery Entrance

The entrance to the Public Gallery is on the first floor. Quiet observation only and no mobiles or cameras please!

Statue

At the top of the Grand Staircase stands a bronze statue of Sir James Craig, who later became Lord Craigavon. He was the first Prime Minister of Northern Ireland, from 1921 until he died in 1940. He is buried beside Parliament Buildings.
Great Hall

Assembly Chamber Entrance

This is the main entrance to the Assembly Chamber. On sitting days, access through this door is restricted.

Senate Chamber Entrance

This is the main route to the Senate Chamber. Visitors go this way on the tour or to attend special events.

When committees are sitting in the Senate, witnesses who have been called to give evidence wait in this area. Public can watch from viewing boxes in the Chamber.

Plasma Screen

This monitor shows live footage of the plenary or committee meetings, so that people in the Great Hall can keep up to date with what’s happening.

Welcome and Meeting Area

Visitors wait here in the Great Hall to meet with MLAs, Party staff or Assembly staff or they pass through on their way to the public galleries of the Assembly Chamber or committee rooms. Tours of the building begin here: they are free and available to everyone. A coffee and gift shop provides refreshments and souvenirs.
Press Conferences

Press conferences are often held in the Great Hall. MLAs and Ministers give interviews to journalists.

Events and Ceremonies

The Great Hall is often used to host events and ceremonies. For example, George Best’s funeral service was held in the Great Hall.
William Conor Portrait

This painting was done by William Conor and shows the first meeting of the Northern Ireland Parliament in 1921. Parliament Buildings was not built at this stage, so the first meeting was in Belfast’s City Hall.

Cameras

Cameras record Committee Meetings in the Senate Chamber and broadcast them live on the Assembly’s website, so that the public can observe the work of the Assembly without visiting Parliament Buildings. Meetings, both live and previously recorded, can also be viewed on the BBC’s Democracy Live website here.

Hansard Reporter

When committees are considering legislation or taking evidence from witnesses in an inquiry, the Office of the Official Report, also known as Hansard, will record and publish a record of proceedings. Reporters sit here to make notes.

The Assembly Portrait

This is a portrait of the members of the first Northern Ireland Assembly, elected after the Agreement of 1998. It was painted by a Belfast artist, Noel Murphy, and was unveiled on 10 February 2003.
Committee chairpersons and deputy chairpersons are appointed using a mathematical formula - known as d’Hondt. This ensures that the larger political parties have more positions of power in the Assembly because they received more votes in the Assembly election. The role of the Chairperson is to chair meetings and speak on behalf of the Committee. The Deputy Chair will carry out these duties when the Chair is not available.

The Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson of a Statutory Committee, which checks the work of a Minister and their Government Department, does not normally belong to the same political party as the Minister of that Department.

Committee Clerk

The Clerk to the Committee sits beside the Chair at meetings. The Clerk organises the meetings and provides the members with the information they need for the meeting. The Clerk also advises the Chair on procedures.

Committee Members

Most committees have 11 members from different political parties represented in the Assembly - including a chairperson and a deputy chairperson. Most MLAs are members of more than one committee. Committee work involves examining Bills (proposals for new laws) in detail, questioning Ministers and holding inquiries into issues that concern the people of Northern Ireland.

Witnesses

When committees are examining proposals for new laws, or holding an inquiry into a particular issue, they can call on any member of the public who may be able to give useful information to attend their meetings. For example, if a committee is discussing how to reduce the occurrence of heart attacks, they may ask for a heart surgeon to give evidence.

A person may have to pay a fine, or even go to prison, if they fail to attend a committee’s proceedings, or if they do not produce documents when asked. However, it is very unlikely that this would ever happen!
It is important that the work of the Assembly is open and transparent, so committee meetings are mainly held in public session. Visitors sit in this area. No advance booking is required and seats are allocated on a first come, first served basis. The public cannot participate in the meeting, unless invited to give evidence to the Committee.
The public gallery in the Assembly Chamber is open to the public. Anyone can visit and see what happens in the Chamber for themselves. No booking is required. Seats are allocated on a ‘first come, first served’ basis. Visitors are not allowed to participate in debates: the gallery is for quiet observation only!

Small TV monitors in the Public Gallery inform visitors of the topic being debated or the question being asked to a Minister. They also provide a ‘close-up’ view of the Member who is speaking, which is useful, as not all Members are visible from the Public Gallery.

Hansard Reporters sit in this gallery. They make notes to help them produce the Official Report, which is a written account of Assembly debates and decisions. The Report is published by 8.30 am the morning after the sitting. You can read the Official Report on the main website.

The press gallery is open to journalists who report on the work of the Assembly. In a democracy, government institutions must be open and transparent. Laptops or mobile phones are not allowed into the gallery, so reporters work mostly from offices in Parliament Buildings.

As well as telling the time, these clocks are also used as stopwatches. Some debates are timed and Members may have only have 5 minutes to speak. There is no time limit on debates about legislation.
Television Cameras

All meetings in the Assembly Chamber are recorded by video camera and broadcast live on the Assembly’s website. There are 6 cameras in total. Filming the Assembly meetings means that the work that takes place there is completely open and transparent to the public. The media can order clips of action in the Chamber to show on the news or play on the radio. Desktop microphones are switched on by the Assembly Broadcasting team and a camera will then automatically turn to focus on the Member speaking.

Table Clerks

Table Clerks sit on either side of the Speaker, providing advice and assistance. The Clerk on the Speaker’s right hand side – the ‘Right Hand Clerk’ - keeps a record of which MLAs are in the Chamber and organises the counting of votes, called ‘divisions.’ The ‘Left Hand Clerk’ keeps the list of those who want to speak in debates or ask questions to the Ministers, operates the clock for timing speeches and rings the Division Bell.

If Members raise a query about proceedings, suggesting that a rule has been broken, this is known as a ‘Point of Order.’ The Right Hand Clerk will listen closely to these queries and advise the Speaker if required.

Speaker

The Speaker chairs debates in the Assembly Chamber and makes sure that the MLAs keep to the rules of the ‘House’. The person holding this position is an MLA, who has been elected to be Speaker by the other Members. Three Deputy Speakers are also elected to take the Chair when the Speaker is not available.

During debates, the Speaker keeps order and calls MLAs to speak. The Speaker must remain neutral at all times. In debates, all speeches are addressed to the Speaker. He/she chooses which MLA’s turn it is to speak and no MLA may stand when the Speaker is standing.
Officials' Boxes

These boxes, on either side of the Speaker’s Chair, are for officials from Government Departments, who sit here when their Minister is in the Chamber. Assembly officials, eg, Committee Clerks can also sit here.

Division Lobby Doors

Doors at the side of the Chamber lead to division lobbies on the left and right of the Chamber; they are used when a vote is being counted.

MLAs vote on issues being debated in the Chamber and to pass legislation. In the first instance, they vote by saying ‘Aye’ or ‘No’. If the result is unclear, the Speaker asks for a count of votes using the division lobbies.

The MLAs voting ‘Aye’ pass through the lobby to the right hand of the Speaker and those voting ‘No’ pass through the lobby to the left. The MLAs are counted as they return to the Chamber. If the numbers of Ayes and Noes are equal, the motion falls (i.e does not pass).

Most votes are decided by a majority of those voting (50% +). However, some votes have to be passed with cross-community support i.e. support from a certain percentage of unionists and nationalists.

Chief Whip

The Chief Whip of the largest political party sits here. All parties have Whips who manage party members, ensuring that they attend the Chamber and vote in line with party policies.

Chief Whips sit on the Assembly’s Business Committee, which decides the agenda for plenary meetings.
MLAs

Members of the Assembly are called MLAs, which stands for ‘Members of the Legislative Assembly. There are 108 MLAs elected to the Assembly, most are members of political parties and sit with their party group in the Chamber.

A political party is a group of people who share the same ideas about the way the country should be governed. There are currently 7 parties in the Assembly: Democratic Unionist Party, Sinn Féin, Ulster Unionist Party, Social Democratic and Labour Party, Alliance Party, Green Party, and the Traditional Unionist Voice.

Party Seating

MLAs sit with their party group. Ministers and Committee Chairs address the Chamber from the front row, known as the ‘front bench. When the Chamber is full, Ministers and other senior party figures sit on the front bench, Committee Chairs and Deputy Chairs on the ‘middle bench’ and other MLAs on the ‘backbench’.

Translators

Translators sit in soundproof booths behind the main Public Gallery directly opposite the Speaker on the first floor. Although Members speak mostly in English in the Chamber, Irish and Ulster Scots are also spoken. Speeches made in languages other than English have to be translated as the person speaks, for the benefit of the Speaker. The Member speaking translates for other Members. Both the Irish/Ulster Scots and the English translation will appear in the Official Report.
Chapter 7
Levels of Government
The people of Northern Ireland elect representatives to four levels of government: the European Parliament (MEPs), the UK Parliament (MPs), the Northern Ireland Assembly (MLAs) and Local Councils (Councillors). So, who decides what?

The Northern Ireland Assembly was established under the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Devolution meant that legislative powers were transferred to the Assembly, which has 108 Members. The areas in which the devolved Assembly and 12 Executive Departments have responsibility for are known as Transferred or Devolved Matters. They include healthcare, education, public transport, roads, agriculture, housing, policing and justice, and economic development.

The UK Parliament retains legislative power over Excepted and Reserved Matters. These are UK wide matters such as taxation, international relations and defence. There are 18 Northern Ireland MPs in the House of Commons.

As the United Kingdom is also a member state of the European Union, European laws, known as ‘Directives’ apply to Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland has 3 MEPs.

At a local level, Councils make decisions about planning and service provision in relation to leisure and waste disposal.

Do you know which level of government decides on the different issues affecting your community? Think about the implications of devolution and test out what you know. [http://www.education.niassembly.gov.uk/post_16/levels_of_government](http://www.education.niassembly.gov.uk/post_16/levels_of_government)