

Representation Explained – Northern Ireland Assembly

KEY:

N: Narrator

N: Representative democracy allows the people to be heard, without requiring everyone to submit their opinion on every issue. Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) for Northern Ireland are elected by voters to represent their views and act on their behalf when making laws and decisions. MLAs carry out their representation role through their work in Parliament Buildings and their constituency. They communicate with their constituents by email, telephone, letter, and social media; and, by meeting with them.

At plenary meetings in the Assembly Chamber, Members will raise constituency concerns when making speeches during debates. They can also table motions for debate, including an adjournment debate, which deals with a specific issue in their constituency. When considering legislation, MLAs can propose an amendment to a Bill, which they believe improves the law and benefits their constituents. They can also introduce their own Private Member's Bill.

Asking Ministers questions on behalf of constituents is a very important representation tool. MLAs can ask oral questions in the Chamber during Question Time, or following a Ministerial Statement, and also written questions which receive more detailed written answers. Outside the Chamber, MLAs lobby Ministers and officials for meetings. In Committees, they take constituents' views into account when scrutinising legislation and undertaking Inquiries. As well as official Assembly business, MLAs from different parties will join informal all-party groups. These are forums for MLAs to meet with external groups who have a shared interest in a particular cause or subject.

Every MLA has an office in their constituency to enable them to provide a constituency service. They meet with constituents, listen to their views, and act on their behalf to resolve problems. MLAs will contact relevant bodies and can raise the profile of an issue in the media. Outside the office, MLAs attend meetings and events, and work with other locally elected representatives for the benefit of the constituency.

There are other things that influence MLAs. A Code of Conduct requires them to act in the interests of everyone in Northern Ireland, not just their constituents. Most MLAs also represent political parties. Party manifestos play an important part in elections. MLAs will act as spokespersons for their party and vote in the Chamber according to the party line. Personal judgement also guides MLAs.

MLAs work hard to represent their constituents. Ultimately, they are responsible to the electorate, who put them in the job and can remove them at the next election.