



## Northern Ireland Assembly Committees

The Northern Ireland Assembly carries out its work in plenary format on Mondays and Tuesdays in the Assembly Chamber. Here, MLAs debate and question Ministers. On Wednesdays and Thursdays breaks up into committees, which carry out specific functions on behalf of the Assembly. It is in committee rooms that the detailed work of the Assembly is done.\* Most of the detailed work of the Assembly is done in Committees. They take the Committee Stage of legislation (most legislation comes from Ministers – Executive Bills). Statutory Committees contribute to policy development, and scrutinise policies and actions of Minister/Departments, including spending.

*\*(The Business Committee meets at Tuesday lunchtime to agree the Order Paper for the following week's plenary sessions.)*

### Types

There are 4 types of committees:

**Statutory** Committees – permanent committees - advise, assist and scrutinise Ministers and their Departments;

**Standing** Committees - permanent committees - undertake specific roles set out in Assembly Standing Orders;

**Ad hoc** Committees - set up from time to time - deal with specific time bound issues; and

**Joint** Committees – set up from time to time - consider matters of concern to more than one committee.

### Powers and responsibilities

The committees get their powers from three sources:

#### 1. The Belfast Agreement

*“There will be a committee for each of the main executive functions of the Northern Ireland administration.... The committees will have a scrutiny, policy development and consultation role with respect to the Department with which each is associated... They will have the power to ... (Paras 8 & 9 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement)*

#### 2. The Northern Ireland Act (1998), which allowed for the implementation of the

Agreement, stated that provision would be made for ...

*“establishing committees of members of the Assembly to advise and assist each Northern Ireland Minister on the formulation of policy with respect to matters within his responsibilities as a Minister.... (and) conferring on the committees powers described in paragraph 9 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement.”* (Section 29 Northern Ireland Act (1998))

**NB:** The **Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement) Act 2006** amended the 1998 Act to establish a statutory committee for the Office of First Minister and deputy First Minister (now called The Executive Office) set up a new standing committee to review functioning of the Assembly and Executive Committee - *Assembly and Executive Review Committee*.

### 3. Assembly Standing Orders (rules)

*“The Assembly shall establish Committees to*

- (a) discharge duties in relation to Departments (Statutory Committees); and
- (b) carry out any other functions deemed necessary.

## Role/Functions

### Statutory Committees

Section 29(1)(a) of the Northern Ireland Act (1998) requires that Standing Orders ‘make provision for establishing committees of Members of the Assembly (statutory committees) to advise and assist each Northern Ireland Minister in the formulation of policy with respect to matters within his/her responsibilities as a minister’. There is therefore a statutory committee for each government department. Following the 2016 Assembly elections, the number of government departments was reduced from 12 to 9 and the number of Statutory Committees reduced accordingly.

There are currently 11 members on each committee.

Standing Order 48(2) confers on the statutory committees the powers and responsibilities describes in paragraph 9 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement. These are to:

- Consider and advise on departmental budgets and annual plans in the context of the overall budget allocation;
- Consider relevant secondary legislation and take the Committee Stage of relevant primary legislation;
- Call for persons and papers;
- Initiate inquiries and make reports; and
- Consider and advise on matters brought to the committee by its minister.

The roles given to these committees under the Belfast Agreement and the Northern Ireland Act are deliberately extensive. They have a legislative role; a scrutiny role; and they have advisory and consultative roles. At Westminster there are committees which deal with legislation only and other, 'Select Committees' which have an investigative or inquiry role. In the Northern Ireland system, Statutory Committees perform both these roles, plus the advisory role. Given the absence of a formal, Westminster-style opposition for most of the life of the Assembly, these committees have been the main method by which the Assembly holds the Executive to account. Formal opposition was introduced after the May 2016 Assembly election. However, it is difficult to assess effectiveness and the Assembly was short-lived, going into dissolution in January 2017.

### **Standing Committees**

The Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Assembly Standing Orders numbers 51, 52 and 54 to 59 established a number of permanent standing committees of the Assembly which have specific roles assigned to them.

There are currently six standing committees:

- The Business Committee - arranges the plenary business;
- The Audit Committee – agrees the annual spending plan of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO)\*and scrutinises its annual report and accounts;
- The Committee on Procedures - reviews Standing Orders and Assembly procedures;
- The Standards and Privileges Committee - deals with matters relating to privileges and the conduct of members;
- The Public Accounts Committee – scrutinises the use of resources by Departments and government agencies; and
- The Assembly and Executive Review Committee – this was established under the Northern Ireland (St Andrews Agreement Act) 2006 to examine a range of matters relating to the functioning of the Assembly and the Executive Committee.

\*The NIAO authorises the issue of money to government departments and does financial and value for money audits of departments and local councils, reporting to the Assembly. It works closely with the Assembly's Public Accounts Committee which takes evidence from senior officials on NIAO reports.

Like statutory committees, standing committees have the power to send for persons and papers.

### **Ad Hoc Committees**

From time to time, the Assembly establishes Ad Hoc Committees which meet for a temporary period to consider specific issues such as a piece of legislation on a reserved or excepted matter, over which the UK Parliament has legislative authority. These committees usually have about two months (with some exceptions) to carry out their work and report

to the Assembly.

While ad hoc committees have tended to deal with proposed reserved legislation, such as criminal justice legislation before these powers were devolved in April 2010, they can deal with any issue determined by the Assembly. In 2012, one was established to consider the controversial Welfare Reform Bill and whether or not aspects of the bill conformed to equality legislation in Northern Ireland (eventually dealt with at Westminster under the Fresh Start proposals). An Ad Hoc Committee was also set up to take the Committee Stage of the Public Services Ombudsman Bill (2016) which was brought forward by the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (it couldn't scrutinise its own bill).

Some Ad Hoc Committees are also **Joint Committees**. The establishment of a joint committee is one of the two ways in which matters of concern to two or more committees can be considered by the Assembly. Committees can also sit concurrently (together) to consider such matters. In 2013, the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development and the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety met concurrently to consider the problem of contamination of beef products by horse and pig DNA. The Health and Justice Committees formed a joint Committee in 2015 to consider the very large Mental Capacity Bill.

Committees assist the Assembly in its work as a Legislature:

- by taking the Committee stage of legislation and considering subordinate legislation;
- in calling Ministers to account, through their work on inquiries and scrutinising the work of Ministers and Departments;
- by the consideration of departmental annual budgets and plans;
- by ensuring that Order Papers are agreed (Business Committee), procedures are working well (Committee on Procedures) and the rules of the Assembly are adhered to (Standards and Privileges Committee).

## Role in Legislative process

Committees take the Committee Stage of primary legislation introduced to the Assembly by Ministers, individual MLAs or another Committee\*. Most legislation is Executive legislation i.e. introduced by a Minister. In the 2011 to 16 mandate, 60 primary bills passed by the Assembly were introduced by Ministers, 5 by individual MLAs (called 'Private Members' Bills') and 2 by a Statutory Committee – the Committee for OFMDFM\* – re the creation of a new post of Public Services Ombudsman.

\* now the Committee for the Executive Office, reflecting change to name of the department in the re-organisation of departments, effective after the May 2016 election.

A bill goes through several stages in the legislative process. For most bills, after the Second Stage debate on the principles of the bill - if the Assembly agrees with the main objectives of the bill and votes to consider it further - it is passed to the relevant committee for detailed scrutiny. This is called the Committee Stage. The committee gathers evidence on the bill *and reports its findings to the Assembly, with recommendations for any amendments it thinks should be made. The report informs the Consideration Stage where the Assembly debates and votes on all proposed changes to the bill, called 'amendments'.*

The Committee Stage of a bill involves commissioning research, inviting the public and interested groups to give their views on the bill, in the form of written and oral submissions, and examining the bill line by line, clause by clause. *The Committee will receive briefings by the Department (or other sponsor) on the policy objectives underpinning the bill (the 'why?') and may seek clarification from the Minister/Department on parts of the bill or any issues raised by witnesses.* Committees may also hold focus group sessions and special stakeholder events to engage 'hard-to-reach' groups including children and young people.

If the Committee believes, on the basis of its deliberations on evidence gathered, that amendments are required, it will usually, in the first instance, ask the Minister to make the necessary changes. If the Minister is unwilling to do so, the Committee itself will table the amendments at Consideration Stage, when the Assembly debates and votes on proposed amendments. Amendments are also often tabled by individual MLAs who may or may not be Members of the relevant committee.

### **How significant is the power to initiate legislation?**

A committee can draft a bill (primary legislation) and introduce it in the Assembly. This is a way for committees to directly achieve changes they want to see, perhaps as a result of an inquiry. To date, use of this power has been rare.

In November 2010, the Committee on Standards and Privileges (Standing Committee) and the Assembly Commission (corporate body of the Assembly) jointly introduced the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Bill. Passed in March 2011, it concerned the establishment of an independent panel to determine the salaries and allowances of MLAs. It also created the post of Assembly Commissioner for Standards whose role is to carry out independent, objective investigations into complaints against MLAs.

In April 2015, the first statutory committee bill was introduced. The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister introduced *The Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman Bill* to merge and reform the offices of the Assembly Ombudsman and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Complaints into a new office to be known as the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsperson.

When a statutory committee sees the need for new legislation in a particular area, it will usually, in the first instance, try to persuade the Minister to introduce a bill. The bill drafting process is time-consuming and expensive, and departments have the systems and skills in place to do this more easily. If the Minister does not agree to do this, then the committee may bring it forward. This power to initiate legislation is also a tool for statutory committees to hold Ministers to account. By introducing a bill, a committee is making the point that legislation is needed in a particular area and, in the absence of action by the Minister, the committee has to act independently. (Example: the Committee for OFMDFM did ask OFMDFM to bring forward a Public Services Ombudsman Bill but it declined to do so.)

Therefore, when considering the effectiveness of committees in relation to their legislative role, it is arguably more effective for a committee to persuade the Minister to introduce legislation, or to influence policy development at an early stage, before legislation is drafted.

## Inquiries and Reviews

Undertaking inquiries is a very important part of a committee's responsibilities. It allows a statutory committee to set its own agenda, rather than just react to what is coming from the department. The committee can choose any topic from within the department's areas of responsibility and the issue should 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.

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 on the issue, by post or email, and all submissions will be considered and included in the committee's report to the Assembly. The Committee will invite some groups or individuals to give oral evidence at a committee meeting, when the MLAs will have the chance to ask questions. Experts will also be consulted and the committee will make use of the Assembly's research service to provide further information and evidence.

Following the investigation into the issue, the committee will draw conclusions and produce the report, making recommendations regarding what needs to be done. The report is published and debated in the Assembly Chamber with the Minister usually present to make a response. The Assembly usually votes in support of the report and the Minister is then under pressure to act on the recommendations. The Minister is required to provide a written response to the report within 3 months. An active committee will keep bringing the issue back to the House, eg by tabling a motion for debate, in order to keep pressure on the Minister to act.

In the last mandate, some committees also undertook mini inquiries, called 'reviews', rather than lengthier 'full-blown' inquiries. This is an effective way of examining issues if the Committee has a busy legislative agenda.

Many interest groups and lobby groups recognise 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.

Most of the work of committees is carried out in public session. The vast majority of meetings are held in public. This means members of the press and public can attend committee meetings if they wish and most meetings are broadcast live on the internet. The Office of the Official Report (Hansard) takes Minutes of Evidence in some committee meetings, for those parts that involve the consideration of legislation or the taking of evidence as part of an inquiry. Committees have a closed session (not open to the public) if they are finalising a report and don't want their conclusions and recommendations released until they officially 'sign off' and publish the report. Part of a meeting might also 'close' if a witness is giving evidence on a sensitive issue. Committee reports are laid in the Business Office within 24 hours of being agreed and are usually published within 2 weeks.

Committees also make an effort to hold meetings outside Parliament Buildings, so that the public has the opportunity to attend meetings in their local area. As part of their evidence gathering role, committees sometimes go on fact finding visits to relevant locations in Northern Ireland and, occasionally, outside Northern Ireland, eg: visits to Wales and Iceland by the Assembly and Executive Review Committee when inquiring into the participation of women in politics in Northern Ireland and a visit to Cuba by the Health Committee to see their highly regarded health service in action.

## Budget Scrutiny

Committees also scrutinise the Executive's budget proposals. Each committee reports their views on the Executive's Draft Budget (to enable them to deliver the targets in the Programme for Government) to the Finance Committee which co-ordinates the Assembly's response to the draft budget. Negotiations will follow and the Assembly will debate and vote on the final draft in the Assembly Chamber. Once the Assembly has agreed the overall budget, committees will monitor individual departments' spending to ensure that spending is tied to the Department's Programme for Government commitments.

See reports on individual committees for examples of effective budget scrutiny.

*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.*

## How do Committees cope with such a wide range of responsibilities?

There is a danger that committees could be flooded with work from the Departments, which would not allow them to effectively carry out their scrutiny and policy influencing roles. To prevent this happening, committees draw up a forward work programme at the start of each session (September to July). Time is built in for the committee stage of expected legislation and the committee will decide what policy scrutiny work they want to do and whether that will involve a formal inquiry. Committees do not respond to everything a Department sends their way. They realise that, to be effective, they have to be selective and prioritise their time effectively. Committee forward work programmes are posted on the Assembly website and are updated regularly. As mentioned earlier, the introduction of reviews or mini inquiries, provides a faster way of considering issues. Committees have appointed special advisers to assist them and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment was the first to appoint a Rapporteur to manage the collection of evidence for an inquiry and produce a report.

Despite what some members of the public and the media might think, when the Assembly is in operation, MLAs are extremely busy. They have to attend plenary sittings and deal with party business and constituency work. Most are also members of 2 or 3 Assembly committees. The time that each member can devote to the work of a particular committee is therefore limited and it is the role of committee staff to ensure that the time allocated for meetings is used as constructively as possible. A committee meeting lasts on average around 2 – 3 hours each week and there will be lots of reading for MLAs to do beforehand.

*NB: Towards the end of a mandate, Committees usually experience a heavier workload due to an increase in the number of bills introduced to the Assembly by Executive Ministers as they seek to complete their legislative programmes before dissolution. For MLAs, this also means more time spent debating legislation in the Assembly Chamber. In the 2011-16 mandate 35 of the 67 bills passed by the Assembly were passed in the last year – 2015-16.*

## The representative role of Committees

When Committees consider legislation or undertake inquiries, they seek the views of the general public and interested stakeholders/interest groups. If the issue is especially relevant to a particular group, they will be consulted via special events, focus groups and/or an online survey. For example, the Education Committee used focus groups to hear the views of students on Anti-Bullying legislation (2015-16), School Inspections (2015) and Shared and Integrated Education (2015). It is important for young people to get involved in the work of committees. If you have an interest in or views on an inquiry issue, write in to the relevant committee and your submission will form part of the evidence used by the Committee to form their views on the issue. Your submission will be included in the final report. Anyone or any group can respond to a consultation and responses vary from short emails to long papers. The Assembly website's homepage keeps the public up to date on current inquiries and calls for evidence.



## The advice and assistance role

The committees also advise and assist the Ministers. Co-operation at early policy development or draft legislation stage can make things much easier later on. For example, the Department of employment and Learning consulted the Committee *before* introducing its Work and Families Bill to the Assembly. Members of the Committee commented in the Final Stage debate on the Bill that this helped the Bill be passed relatively quickly by the Assembly. Committee Chair, Robin Swann, said “I thank the departmental officials and the Minister for the close working relationship we maintained throughout the passage of the Bill”. However, he went on to emphasise that a good relationship does not mean less scrutiny and that the Committee would be keeping a close watch to ensure that the secondary legislation brought forward by the Department addressed concerns raised by the Committee which were not addressed in the Bill. However, relationships between some committees and their Department/Minister can be difficult.

## How does party loyalty affect the work of Committees?

Membership of committees reflects party strength in the Assembly, as does membership of the Executive (D’Hondt). While it may be argued that with the same parties in each, effective scrutiny is difficult and party loyalty can threaten effective scrutiny. However, it is important to remember that the majority of members on a committee are not from the Minister’s party. Furthermore, Committees’ legislation and inquiry reports are *evidence based*. Committees consult experts, stakeholders and the general public to formulate their conclusions and recommendations. Sometimes, but not often, parties will feel strongly about an issue and committee members from that party will not support the Committee’s stance when the issue is debated in the Chamber. While this can happen on a ‘bread and butter’ issue, it is more likely to happen in relation to a politically sensitive issue. Following the Social Development Committee’s report on an inquiry into BBC Spotlight allegations about the actions of the former SD Minister, Nelson McCausland, and the majority on the Committee concluded that he had acted inappropriately in relation to Housing Executive Maintenance contracts. However, DUP Committee members did not agree and a *Minority Report*, giving their views was included in the Committee’s report to the Assembly.

## Power Sharing

Statutory committees are an important part of the checks and balances built in to our system of devolution that ensure power sharing:

- the Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons of committees are appointed under the D’Hondt system;
- the Chair or Deputy Chair of a committee should not, if at all possible, be of the same political party as the Minister;

- the membership of each committee is representative of the make-up of the parties within the Assembly; and
- most committees comprise members from at least five of the political parties.

Despite the wide range of views across the political spectrum represented on committees, working relationships are usually harmonious between the different political parties and party-political differences seldom surface during committee meetings. Members of all political parties work constructively in committees to carry out their legislative and scrutiny roles. **Committees strive to reach consensus on issues (so no vote is required), based on the evidence gathered in their bill and Inquiry investigations. A committee that acts as one voice reinforces its cohesion and power.**

Committees are keen to foster close working relationships with Ministers, officials and others to benefit the public. However, they will not compromise on their scrutiny role or the role they play in calling Ministers to account. **NB:** Rick Wilford has described the relationship as a 'critical partnership'. See Education Service video:

[http://education.niassembly.gov.uk/post\\_16/academic-reflections-northern-ireland-assembly](http://education.niassembly.gov.uk/post_16/academic-reflections-northern-ireland-assembly)

## A note about the Public Accounts Committee (PAC)

The Public Accounts Committee (a Standing Committee of the Assembly) has an important scrutiny role. It holds senior government officials to account for the spending decisions that they have made and, through this process, ensures that there is a better delivery of services to the taxpayer. Unlike other Committees of the Assembly, it has the full-time support of the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) and his staff in the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

The main statutory function of the Committee is to consider accounts and the reports by the C&AG. Inquiries based on the C&AG's reports form the major part of the Committee's work. Its scrutiny of these reports is a key sanction against failure by Departments and public bodies to spend taxpayers' money properly and wisely. It can also play a major role in promoting good practice across the Executive and ensuring that, where mistakes are made, lessons are learned. The proceedings of PAC involve taking evidence on the C&AG's reports.

The work of the Committee is often reported in the news. It was PAC's investigation into the Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme (RHI) in the 2016-17 session which highlighted the serious problems with the scheme. The resulting fallout was a trigger for the resignation of Martin McGuinness on 9 January 2017 and the collapse of the Executive. The Committee published its report into the now defunct Northern Ireland Events Company (NIEC), which highlighted an 'appalling' level of mismanagement and impropriety which led to a financial deficit of approximately £1.6 million. It reported on various issues across many departments, including the use of agency staff and external consultants; major capital projects; fraud; whistle-blower complaints; and conflicts of interest. The Committee took a

strategic approach to its work, prioritising the inquiries it chose to conduct according to the significance of spending decisions, the impact and wide application of lessons learned in the public sector as a whole, the need to represent the work of all departments in the scrutiny material of the Committee, and the benefit its inquiries could accrue for the taxpayer.

## Strengthening Committee Scrutiny

The issue of effectiveness of committee scrutiny came to light as a result of the RHI Inquiry Report. Following recommendations in the report, the Chairpersons' Liaison Group (of Assembly Committees) considered how committee scrutiny could be strengthened.

**Report on Strengthening Committee Scrutiny by the Chairpersons' Liaison Group (CLG )** [Report on Strengthening Committee Scrutiny \(niassembly.gov.uk\)](https://niassembly.gov.uk/reports-and-publications/committees/committees-reports/2022-23/2022-23-report-on-strengthening-committee-scrutiny/)

The [Report of the Independent Public Inquiry into the Non-domestic Renewable Heat Incentive \(RHI\) Scheme](https://niassembly.gov.uk/reports-and-publications/committees/committees-reports/2022-23/2022-23-report-on-strengthening-committee-scrutiny/) identified "limitations inherent in [the Enterprise, Trade and Investment (ETI) Committee's] role" and found that "reasons for this included its own limited resources and its dependence on the Department for information and analysis to allow it to perform its challenge function robustly".

The Inquiry's report recommended that the Assembly consider what steps are needed to strengthen its scrutiny role and particularly as conducted by committees, in the light of lessons from the RHI. The Inquiry recommended that such a consideration might include "significantly increasing the resources available to statutory committees and, generally, identifying what steps are needed to improve the effective scrutiny of Departments and their initiatives, whether in Assembly Committees or in the Assembly Chamber itself".

The Chairpersons' Liaison Group (CLG), comprising the chairpersons of all permanent Assembly Committees, undertook a review of committee scrutiny to identify how the recommendations of the RHI report could be implemented, particularly in relation to the scrutiny of primary and subordinate legislation by statutory committees, to ensure the production of high quality legislation.

In March 2022, CLG made a total of 33 recommendations aimed at strengthening the scrutiny of primary and subordinate legislation as well as the need for pre-and post-legislative scrutiny. CLG said it was essential that its recommendations were acted upon to ensure that the Assembly delivers on its obligations as detailed in the RHI Inquiry Report.

Recommendations included:

- giving committees the power to amend **secondary legislation**
- **an increase in pre-legislative scrutiny.** This allows committees to influence bills before their introduction to the Assembly. It happens sometimes, but on an informal basis. Departments consult the public on the issue before drafting a bill. It is recommended that they consult again on when the bill is drafted. The relevant committee would also see the bill at this stage, before the final draft is written and introduced to the Assembly. There should be an **annual debate on the Executive's legislative timetable** (scrutiny by debate), with **departments presenting committees with their legislative timetable at the start of each**

### **Assembly year** (September).

- The progress of a bill is often delayed due to the failure of departments to provide information to committees in good time. **Ministers should make the provision of information to committees more of a priority** and the Minister should inform the committee in writing if there is a delay.
- **Committees should not have to deal with multiple bills simultaneously** and it is up to Ministers to ensure that this doesn't happen.
- Committees should **consult more independent experts** when scrutinising legislation.
- Dealing with the increase in the number of Private Members' Bills, which committees which have to scrutinise in addition to departmental legislation (Executive bills). Work has already been done to streamline the process for handling PMBs.
- Committees need to do more **post-legislative scrutiny**. Are laws (Acts) being implemented in a full and timely manner by departments? Departments should, at the very least, provide a report on implementation to the committee 18 months after the commencement date of an Act.
- **Committees need more staff** on the committee team, in research and in legal services to ensure proper scrutiny of legislation, departmental spending and new work arising from Brexit. MLAs should receive training in legislative scrutiny
- Committees should have the support of an Engagement Unit when consulting stakeholders/the public; do **more online public consultation and video-conferencing** (so people don't have to physically attend a meeting), and **take evidence in alternative formats**, from harder to reach groups.

### **Covid-19 Arrangements** (in addition to changes in relation to questions and consultation methods mentioned above)

When the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in March 2020, it became apparent that the Assembly would need to take steps be able to continue to function and that **temporary changes to Standing Orders** were needed to enable the continuation of Assembly Business, whilst adhering to Public Health Advice and keeping Members and staff as safe as possible.

The Procedures Committee prepared Temporary Provisions which enabled proxy voting in plenary sittings; the wholesale introduction of remote participation in committee proceedings (either in fully virtual or hybrid committee meetings); proxy voting in committees; and decision making by committees without meeting. On 31 March 2020 the Assembly agreed to put these in place and decided to extend them a number of times. They remained in place until July 2022.

In January 2021 the Committee, having received correspondence from amongst others both the Speaker and from the Executive, agreed that there was need to facilitate participation in plenary proceedings by alternative (remote) means. The Committee agreed that hybrid proceedings should be implemented not only to accommodate Ministers and Members who could not come to the

Chamber because they were self-isolating, but also to reduce the number of Members needing to travel to Parliament Buildings. The Committee brought forward a new temporary Standing Order (110A) to allow for the general principle of remote participation in plenary, subject to the discretion and guidance of the Speaker. This was agreed by the Assembly on 1st February 2021.