2022-2027 Mandate - Committees

Committee for Infrastructure

Northern Ireland Assembly
Education Service

Role of the Committee

The Committee scrutinises the work of the Department for Infrastructure, which has responsibility for roads, public transport (through Translink), water (through NI Water), ports and planning (much of which is devolved to local councils).

Main issues

Three key issues for the Committee have been:

1. **Wastewater**: the supply of wastewater infrastructure requires significant additional resource, as capacity in some areas is such that new housing developments cannot proceed. While water charges or water rates have been employed in other jurisdictions, suggestions for this have been rejected in Northern Ireland. Instead, the Minister has sought to address this through a 'three-pronged strategy':

    a. the Water, Sustainable Drainage and Flood Management Bill
    b. introduction of a developer levy (tax) to help finance additional wastewater infrastructure; and
    c. appeal to the UK Treasury via the Executive to provide additional finance.

2. The **A5 Western Transport Corridor**: legal challenges to the construction of an upgraded road from Ballygawley to Strabane led to a suspension of work on this road and all major road projects which may be subject to similar challenges. The A5 has seen a number of fatal accidents in recent years and there has been a campaign for upgrade on that basis. The main challenge has been that a court determined that road construction has proceeded without the appropriate environmental requirements (Climate Change Act 2022). A successful appeal now means the A5 – and other roads – can go ahead. However, the project is well behind schedule, there have been significant additional costs and local landowners whose land has been acquired for the road, returned and now will again be acquired have been inconvenienced.

3. **Road maintenance**: the Committee has been concerned about the increasing prevalence of potholes on roads due to a year-on-year shortfall in the minimum resource for their upkeep. The new Road Maintenance Strategy aims to address this and the Committee will monitor implementation of the strategy.

Legislation

The Committee has been dealing with legislation as follows:

- Primary:
    - **The Water, Sustainable Drainage and Flood Management Bill**: The Committee proposed a number of amendments, particularly around the

nature of offences for non-compliance, which were taken forward by the Minister at Consideration Stage.

- **The Harbours Bill**: this aims to change the designation of Trust Ports to allow for more economic development. The Committee is supportive of the Bill.

- **The Tree Protection Bill**: a Member's Bill (Peter McReynolds) aims to conserve more trees and ancient woodlands. This touches on local council business, as it is essentially a planning issue. The Committee is supportive of the Bill but has concerns around resource implications and impacts on planning.

- **The Display of Flags and Emblems Bill**: The Infrastructure Committee is taking the Committee Stage of this Bill, due to the fact that many of these hang on lampposts. The Bill is sponsored by Paula Bradshaw MLA. It aims to address long-standing issues around the use of public property for displaying flags or emblems that may intimidate, exclude, or assert territorial control. There was a lack of consensus in the Committee about how long the Committee Stage should take, which suggests some opposition to the Bill. (Rules regarding the length of time a Committee has to scrutinise and report on a bill say 30 working days (6 weeks). However, Committees almost always request an extension. A request to extend must be approved by an Assembly vote.)

- **Delegated (secondary) legislation**: the Committee deals with by far the most delegated legislation of any committee, some examples being:

    - **Graduated Driver Licensing**: this came into force on 1 October 2026 and introduces **additional requirements for new learner drivers** to help reduce road casualties, particularly amongst young people. The Committee was concerned that the driver instruction sector would not be ready in time for commencement and sought assurances about this.

    - **Commencement of the Reservoirs Act 2015**: The provisions of the Act introduce **standards for the upkeep of reservoirs on public safety grounds** and offences for failure to comply. The Department is reluctant to commit to footing the bill for repairs, in case of a large number of applications for grants it cannot afford. Cost may well fall to managers/owners if the Department does not have the resources for a fully funded grant scheme.

Inquiries

The Committee has not undertaken any formal inquiries but has carried out **a review ('mini-inquiry') into the aspects of planning that are the responsibility of the Department**. This examined how the Planning Improvement Programme (PIP) is sowing the seeds of greater efficiency in the planning process. The Committee took up this issue because delays

in planning have long been a matter for growing concern for the economy, and the Committee wanted to contribute to measures for a faster, more efficient planning system.

Impact on policy/budget

The Committee has closely scrutinised departmental policy and held the Department to account on its spending.

Best achievements

- Ensuring the Department introduces amendments to the Water, Sustainable Drainage and Flood Management Bill
- Highlighting the lack of wastewater provision and its impact on housebuilding and economic development
- Convincing the Department of a need for a review of taxi services
- Managing high volumes of delegated legislation through a new scrutiny process
- Raising awareness of the consequences of the commencement of the Reservoirs Act 2015
- Ensuring the Department engages with stakeholders prior to the introduction of Graduated Driver Licensing

Biggest challenges

- Managing three Bills at the same time
- Recognising that the main impediment to the Department's work has been resource limitations – the work of the Department is fairly uncontroversial and mostly comes down to allocation of money to do things that need to be done, such as maintain roads and fund Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs) to deliver on water and wastewater provision, trains, buses, etc.
- Policy scrutiny of issues that stretch outside of the Department's remit, such as planning. (For example, Councils grant planning permission and it is the Department for Committees which is responsible for Councils.)

The **relations with the Minister** have been relatively good. On a couple of occasions, the Minister has announced major policy initiatives in the press before informing the Committee, but this issue has been addressed.

October 2026