2022 to 2027 Mandate – Committees

Committee on Procedures

The Committee on Procedures is a standing committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly, responsible for reviewing the Standing Orders and procedures of the Assembly. It undertakes inquiries and may propose changes to the way the Assembly operates, which will be debated and voted on in the Assembly Chamber. A Standing Order (SO) cannot be made, amended, or repealed without cross-community support. This ensures broad political agreement for procedural changes.

In the current mandate so far, the Committee has considered a number of issues:

Handling of Members' Bills

Following an inquiry into this issue by the previous committee (2017-2022 mandate) and agreement that there should be **a new rule setting a deadline for the Introduction of Members' Bills** to the Assembly, the current committee brought a motion to the Assembly to get approval to change Standing Orders accordingly. The Assembly agreed the deadline of the last sitting day in June in the penultimate year of a mandate (June 30 June 2026 was the deadline for this mandate). This **helps the Assembly to better plan plenary and committee time and ensure proper scrutiny of legislation during that very busy time before dissolution of the Assembly.**

Proxy Voting

Parental Leave – The Committee considered the issue of proxy voting for parental leave and brought a motion to the Assembly to introduce a new Standing Order – SO 27(a), to allow proxy voting in plenary meetings for those on parental leave (someone else could vote on their behalf). Parental leave includes maternity, paternity, adoption and parental bereavement leave.

Proxy Voting for Other Absences – The Committee then held an inquiry into extending the right to proxy voting for MLAs in the case of long-term illness, bereavement and absence on Assembly business. Agreement was reached that proxy voting should be extended to cover these three areas and, having consulted with the Speaker, the political parties and the independent Members in the Assembly, policy positions are being finalised. The Committee expects to present its findings, recommendations and proposed changes to Standing Order 27A to the Assembly in the near future.

Annual Debate on the Executive's Legislative Programme

Following the Committee's consideration of this and approval by the Assembly, a new Standing Order – SO 18 (c) now states that an annual debate should take place near the start of each Assembly session on the bills intended to be introduced during that session. (This fulfils a requirement in the 2016 Assembly and Executive Reform Act (Official Opposition). The previous Committee on Procedures (2017-22) noted that such provision had not yet been made and recommended that this be rectified.

Petitions of Concern

The Petition of Concern mechanism allows 30 MLAs to submit a petition to the Speaker requesting a matter to be decided by cross-community support - rather than a majority vote. Established under the Belfast/Good Friday Agreement, it is intended to ensure that significant decisions are supported by Nationalists and Unionists. There has been criticism of its past use and it was reformed in the NI (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern Act) 2022, known as MEPOC, passed by the UK Parliament as a result of the New Decade New Approach deal (NDNA).

Enactment of this required Standing Orders to be amended. The Committee sent an "issues paper" to party leaders underlining the need for decisions to be made on changes to Standing Orders arising from the legislation. However, the Committee did not receive responses in sufficient time to develop proposals for amendments to be made Standing Orders before dissolution in March 2022. The current Committee for Procedures has undertaken further work on this matter. It considered written and oral briefings from Assembly officials, legal advice, and the views of the Speaker and political parties.

The Committee brought a motion to the Assembly (9 November 2026) to get approval for its proposed changes to Standing Orders. On 9 November 2026, the Assembly approved the motion to amend the current SO 28 on the Petition of Concern. The new SO will say the following:

- There will be a 14-day waiting period before the vote on the matter.
- The Assembly may refer the matter to a committee for consideration during that waiting period
- The day after the waiting period is over, the petition must be confirmed by 30 signatures.
- A petition cannot be submitted in relation to the Second Stage debate on a Bill's general principles)
- A Petition cannot be used on a matter relating to the conduct of a Minister or another MLA

The Committee had also proposed 3 *new* SOs which were **not approved** by the Assembly.

SO 28A would have stated that a matter subject to a petition may be referred to an Assembly committee. Despite this SO not being approved in the Chamber, matters can still be referred to a committee, because the Westminster legislation allows for this and it must be followed. Legislation has primacy over Standing Orders.

The purpose of SO 36A and SO 40A was to prevent successive petitions being applied at the amending stages of a Bill (Consideration and Further Consideration), as this could create a string of 14 day 'cooling down periods', leading to a bill being "timed out" at the end of a mandate. The proposals were not in MEPOC or NDNA but were optional ideas that the committee proposed based on its evidence gathering.

(NB a valid Petition of Concern was submitted in relation to the Final Stage of the Irish Medium Education (Workforce Plan) Bill on 10 November 2026.)

Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee (DSC)

This relatively new standing committee had to be provided for in Standing Orders – like other standing committees, to set out its purpose and functions. A new Standing Order – SO 59 (a) was approved by the Assembly. The Committee has since undertaken a review of the Standing Order and has determined, in conjunction with the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee, that the provisions in the current Standing Order were sufficient to enable the DSC to effectively discharge its statutory functions and that no further changes were required.

Scrutiny of Delegated Powers in Bills by the Examiner of Statutory Rules

The (committee) Chairpersons' Liaison Group's Report 'Strengthening Committee Scrutiny', published in March 2022, proposed including in Standing Orders (Assembly rules) the role of the Examiner of Statutory Rules (ESR) in relation to the scrutiny of delegated powers in bills (allowing Departments to make further, 'secondary' legislation). The report also recommended that the advice given to committees by the ESR should be published, to improve the availability of information on a particular bill and increase the transparency of the Assembly legislative process.

The Committee commissioned legal advice and brought forward a new *Standing Order 43A Scrutiny Delegated Powers in Bills*. This formalises the current role of the ESR in the scrutiny of delegated powers in Bills and provides for the publication of the Examiner's reports. It also increases the information available and improves transparency for Departments, stakeholders and the public regarding the scrutiny of and conclusions reached by a Committee on the delegated powers in a Bill.

Delegated Legislation, eg a Statutory Rule (SR) is law made by Departments using powers given to them in primary legislation – a 'Parent Act'. (It is sometimes called secondary legislation.) A Department lays the SR before the Assembly for approval. The parent Act states how it should be approved, either by *affirmative resolution* (a vote in the Chamber), or *negative resolution* (the law will come into effect on a certain date, unless the Assembly objects to it by a 'Prayer of Annulment').

The **Examiner of Statutory Rules** ensures that all Statutory Rules (SRs) are thoroughly scrutinised by the Assembly.

Electronic Voting in Plenary

The Committee has undertaken some work in relation to the potential move to electronic voting in plenary meetings.

A research paper on *Considering Electronic Voting in Parliamentary Chambers* was considered in September 2024, followed by a briefing on the infrastructure currently available in the Assembly Chamber to support any introduction of electronic voting. During a study visit to the Scottish Parliament in December 2024 Committee Members received a briefing on its electronic voting system, including a digital voting app now being used. After consideration of the potential cost of the infrastructure required in the Chamber to facilitate electronic voting and the likelihood of achieving the cross-community support for the change the Committee decided that work to progress this issue further would not be taken forward as a priority in this mandate.

Review of Assembly Oral Questions

Initial work has also been undertaken to inform a potential Review of Assembly Oral Questions (AOQs). The Committee commissioned a research paper on issues relating to Oral Questions and requested views and suggestions from the political parties in the Assembly, and the independent MLA, on what should be covered by such a review.

Committee Members also discussed Question Time with the Presiding Officer and observed First Minister's questions and Portfolio Questions during a study visit to the Scottish Parliament.

The Committee was briefed by Assembly officials on *the Guidance for Members on Assembly Questions* and on issues raised by Members, Ministers and Departments. It commissioned additional research on the procedures and issues relating to oral questions in other legislatures. The Committee will consider the research and decide what further work it will undertake on this issue.

Assembly Written Questions

The Committee discussed whether to look into issues concerning Assembly Written Questions (AQWs), which are questions submitted by MLAs in writing, asking Departments for information. To help with this discussion, a research paper was prepared about the cost of answering AQWs and how written questions are handled in other legislatures. The research showed that the Northern Ireland Executive does not normally publish information about how much it costs to answer these questions. It also found that there is very little information available about the costs of answering written questions in other legislatures. The Committee noted these findings and will use the information when considering AQWs in the future.

Standing Order 42A: Legislative Consent Motions

In 2022, the Assembly agreed recommendations from the previous Committee on Procedures to improve how Legislative Consent Motions (LCMs) are handled. The aim was to give MLAs better opportunities to examine these motions and make the process more open and transparent. Some of the recommendations required changes to SO 42A.

A Legislative Consent Motion is brought to the Assembly by a Minister to request the Assembly's approval for Westminster law about a devolved matter to apply to Northern Ireland.

Since then, the Speaker, several Assembly committees and other stakeholders have raised concerns about how the current system works. (See the note on the Finance Committee which provides details on its concerns.) In February 2026, the Committee began looking at further proposed changes, including allowing a Minister to provide early information about a possible LCM before deciding whether to seek Assembly approval, and giving committees more time to consider and report on LCMs. The Committee finalised its proposals and they were approved by the Assembly on 5 October 2026.

Repeal of Standing Order 70

Standing Order 70 set out how matters of 'privilege' could be raised by MLAs and dealt with by the Speaker. The Committee on Standards and Privileges (CSP) considered whether it was still needed, particularly after changes to the Assembly Code of Conduct and in light of the Assembly's powers in this area. The SCP concluded that SO 70 was no longer appropriate because it suggested that the Assembly had powers it could not, in practice, use. The Committee on Procedures was asked to draft the necessary changes to Standing Orders and the Assembly approved these on 29 June 2026. One of the consequential updates to Standing Orders was that the name of the Committee on Standards and Privileges changed to the Committee on Standards.

Anomalies and Technical Issues with Standing Orders

Over time, a number of anomalies and inconsistencies have been identified in Standing Orders, including outdated references to legislation. The Committee decided to seek advice from Assembly officials and the Legal Services team. It will receive a briefing in December 2026 on the **first two areas being reviewed**, which relate to **Ministerial Appointments and the Opposition**. The Committee has also asked the Assembly Commission for its views on a possible change to Standing Order 79(2), which concerns **appointments to the Commission** and the timeframe for making those appointments after an election.

Assembly Commission - the corporate body of the Assembly, responsible for providing MLAs with the property, staff and services they need to carry out their roles. Membership is comprised of the Speaker (Chairperson) and representatives from the main political parties in the Assembly.

Assembly Sitting Days

The Committee discussed whether the current Assembly business week, particularly the days on which plenary meetings take place (Mondays and Tuesdays), should be reviewed. To help decide if this was something worth examining further, the Committee looked at work carried out during the 2017-22 mandate and information on previous discussions by the Business Committee about Plenary sitting days. The Committee then sought the views of the Speaker, the Executive, the Business Committee, Assembly political parties and the independent MLA on whether an inquiry into changing Plenary sitting days should be carried out. As most responses supported keeping the current arrangements, the Committee decided not to prioritise this issue during the current mandate. However, it agreed to record the matter in its Legacy Report so that the next Committee can consider it in the future.

Costing Requirements of Private Members' Bills (PMBs)*

The Committee looked at whether Private Members' Bills (PMBs) should include clear and fully costed estimates of their financial impact. It commissioned research comparing how PMBs are handled in the Assembly and other legislatures, including the House of Commons, the Scottish Parliament, the Senedd Cymru and the Oireachtas. The Committee noted that different legislatures take different approaches to costing PMBs. The issue has not been taken forward at this stage but will be included in the Committee's Legacy Report for consideration by the next Committee during the new mandate.

*While called PMBs in Standing Orders, these are now generally known as 'Members' Bills' in practice.

Assembly Bills – Provision in Standing Orders for Corrective / Tidying Amendments by the Executive

The Committee considered whether Standing Order 37, which covers the Further Consideration Stage of a Bill, should be changed to make it a formal requirement for Ministers to bring forward any necessary corrections or technical amendments at that stage. To help with its review, the Committee commissioned research on how other legislatures deal with corrective amendments to Bills. It also received written and oral evidence from the Bill Office on the Assembly's existing approach. After considering the evidence, the Committee decided that this issue would be better addressed as part of a wider review of the Assembly's legislative procedures during the next mandate, rather than making a standalone change now. The Committee will recommend this approach in its Legacy Report.

November 2026