# Northern Ireland Assembly Committees

Most of the detailed work of the Assembly is done by Committees. They are responsible for the Committee Stage of primary legislation (Bills) and investigate issues, through inquiries and reviews. They also have powers to introduce their own Bills. Statutory Committees contribute to the development of government policy and scrutinise the decisions and actions of Ministers and Departments, including spending.

**Types of Committees**

**Statutory** Committees - established at the beginning of every mandate to advise, assist and scrutinise Ministers and their Departments;

**Standing** Committees - permanent Committees that undertake specific roles, mostly concerned with the running of the Assembly, as set out in Assembly Standing Orders;

**Ad Hoc** Committees - set up for a limited time to deal with a particular issue; and

**Joint** Committees - set up from time to time - consider matters of concern to more than one Committee. Committees also have the option to meet concurrently (together).

Powers and responsibilities of Committees

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, states that Standing Orders shall make provision for …

   "establishing committees of members of the Assembly (statutory committees) to advise and assist each Northern Ireland Minister on the formulation of policy with respect to matters within his/her 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) and to set up a new Standing Committee to review functioning of the Assembly and Executive Committee - *Assembly and Executive Review Committee*.

3. **Assembly Standing Orders** (the procedures that regulate the way the Assembly carries out its business)

"The Assembly shall establish committees to

*(a) discharge the functions mentioned in Standing Order 48(1)(a) (statutory committees); and*

*(b) carry out any other functions deemed necessary. "*

(Standing Order 46)

**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 9 members on each Committee.

Standing Order 48(2) confers on the Statutory Committees the powers and responsibilities described 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 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 an official opposition until quite recently in the life of the Assembly, these Committees have been the main method by which the Assembly holds the Executive to account.

**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 7 Standing Committees:

- The Business Committee - arranges 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 Committee on Standards - deals with matters relating to the conduct of Members;
- The Public Accounts Committee – scrutinises the use of resources by Departments and government agencies;
- The Assembly and Executive Review Committee – 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; and
- The Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee – considers and reports to the Assembly on new EU laws, or amendments to existing laws, and how they apply to Northern Ireland.

*The NIAO authorises the issue of money to government Departments and does financial and value for money audits of Departments and Councils, reporting to the Assembly. It works closely with the Assembly's Public Accounts Committee which takes evidence from senior departmental 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 as set out in Standing Order 53. They meet for a temporary period to consider and report to the Assembly on specific issues. They might include a piece of legislation on a reserved or excepted matter, over which the UK Parliament has legislative authority; a Committee Bill because a committee cannot scrutinise its own Bill, or on any other issues determined by the Assembly. With the change in rules on Petitions of Concern, a matter on which a

petition has been submitted could be referred to an ad hoc committee to consider in the 2-week period between the submission of the Petition and the vote on the issue.

**Examples of Ad Hoc Committees**

In June 2026, the **Ad Hoc Committee on the School Uniform (Trousers) Bill** was set up to take the Committee Stage of the Bill, which was introduced to the Assembly in June 2026 by the Committee for Education. While education related bills are usually scrutinised by the Education Committee, it could not scrutinise its own Bill. The Ad Hoc Committee reported on the Bill in October 2026. See the Committee pages of the Assembly website for further information.

In February 2025, the Assembly Commission introduced T**he Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill** and an ad hoc committee was set up to take the Committee Stage of the Bill. The Commission is the corporate body of the Assembly. (The Bill sought to amend the 2011 Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) by changing the name of the body from Independent Financial Review Panel (the IFRP) to the Renumeration Board and removing powers to decide allowances payable to MLAs. That power now rests with the Commission. The Bill also removes the bar on former MLAs being members of the Board.)

**Principles of the Bill**
3. The Bill renames the IFRP as the Remuneration Board and removes its power and responsibility for determining the allowances payable to Members. The Bill inserts provision for temporary appointments to the Board and removes the bar on former Members being members of it. The Bill requires the Board to have regard to the salaries payable to members of certain other legislatures. The Bill also makes provision in relation to the timing of determinations, their publication in draft, and consultation on draft determinations and other matters.

The **Ad Hoc Committee on a Bill of Rights for Northern Ireland** was established in January 2020, following the New Decade, New Approach Deal, to consider the creation of a Bill of Rights specifically for Northern Ireland, as proposed in the Good Friday Agreement. The Committee reported - in February 2022, after 2 years of engagement with experts and the public - that although many Committee members supported the creation of a Bill of Rights in principle, there was no agreement to move forward with it at that time.

The **Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 Response**, set up in March 2020 was made up of all MLAs and chaired by the Speaker in the Assembly Chamber. This Committee enabled Ministers to make regular oral statements in the Chamber on COVID-19 matters and facilitated questioning by Members to scrutinise their actions.

Some Ad Hoc Committees may also be **Joint Committees** (Standing Order 64C). 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. The Health and Justice Committees formed a Joint Committee in 2015 to consider the very large Mental Capacity Bill.

Committees may also choose to meet *concurrently* (Standing Order 64B). When a specific issue or piece of legislation is of concern to two or more Assembly Committees, Concurrent Committees may meet together to deal with the matter, as if they were a single Committee. Committees meeting concurrently are comprised of Members from the 2 or more Committees concerned. They can deliberate and consider any evidence together, produce a single set of minutes, and prepare reports together.

Committees may also hold joint meetings. In May 2024, the Committee for the Economy and the Committee for Education met together to looks at careers education and skills provision.

**Role of Committees**

Committees assist the Assembly in its work:

- 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; and
- 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 (Bills) introduced to the Assembly by Ministers, individual MLAs or another Committee, or the Assembly Commission. Most Bills are Executive Bills, introduced by a Minister. In the 2017 to 2022 mandate - a shortened mandate from January 2020 to March 2022 - the Assembly passed 46 Bills. Thirty-six of these were Executive Bills and 10 were ‘Private Members’ Bills’, introduced by individual MLAs. This was a high volume of legislation for Committees to scrutinise (although some Bills were passed under the accelerated passage procedure, which skips the Committee Stage.) Many Committees had to meet more than once a week and for longer sessions.

The Committee for Justice scrutinised 5 Executive Bills during this period. Some of that legislation is very significant in that it creates new crimes, to prevent harm to people (stalking and taking personal photos of people without consent). It also sought to improve criminal justice outcomes for victims of crime. As a result of the Committee’s work, many amendments were made to the legislation. The Committee for Agriculture,

Environment and Rural Affairs had the challenging task of considering two separate Climate Bills – an Executive Bill and a Private Member's Bill (introduced by the then leader of the Green Party). This took up a lot of the Committee's time. The Committee for Health considered a total of 7 Bills, including both Executive and Member's Bills.

A Bill goes through several stages in the legislative process. Most Bills, after the Second Stage debate on the principles of the Bill – and if the Assembly agrees with its main objectives and votes to consider it further - are 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. At Consideration Stage in the Chamber, the Assembly debates, and votes on all proposed amendments. Under the Accelerated Passage procedure, a Bill skips the Committee Stage of the legislative process. (However, no Bill may pass through its required stages in less than 10 days.) The Assembly votes on whether to allow accelerated passage for a Bill and the vote must have cross-community support. Budget Bills are passed this way, because the Finance Minister has already consulted the Committee for Finance before introducing the Bill. The Chairperson of the Committee for Finance confirms to the Assembly that the Committee is satisfied that there has been proper consultation with it on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill. In the 2017 to 2022, a total 17 Bills got accelerated passage. In this mandate, the Speaker, Edwin Poots MLA, has told Members that he does not want to see accelerated passage viewed as a 'solution' for dealing with a busy legislative timetable.

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, and clause by clause. The Committee will receive briefings from the Department (or MLA if a Private Member's Bill) 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 or people with 'lived-experience', including children and young people. In October 2025, the Committee for Communities held an engagement event for young people with 'lived experience' of being deaf or having deaf parents. The aim was to help the Committee understand the impact of the Sign Language Bill on 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.

In March 2024, the Justice Committee was informed by the Department of Justice that the **Justice Bill** would not contain all its clauses at the time of introduction but that new clauses (in 4 areas) would be brought forward by the Minister, as amendments, at Consideration Stage (which follows Committee Stage). The Committee was concerned that it would not be able to properly scrutinise the Bill in its entirety and it wrote to the Department to express 'grave concerns' about this, while stressing that the Committee wished to work collaboratively with the Minister to ensure effective passage of the Bill.

On 5 November 2024, the Committee asked the Assembly to approve a request to extend the Committee Stage of the Justice Bill, to 26 March 2026, the longest extension ever sought by a Committee. The Chair explained that this was due to the complex nature of the mixed content Bill and the fact that that substantive provisions would be added by way of amendment at Consideration Stage. The Chair also referred to the High Court judgement on the Justice (Sexual Offences and Trafficking Victims) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022'. The High Court had ruled that part of this Act, which allowed anonymity for life and 25 years after death for those suspected but not charged with sexual offences, was outside the legislative competence of the Assembly and 'not law'.

For the Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill (to 18-year-old workers), the Committee for Communities was keen to add in a reporting clause which would place an obligation on the Department to review of the impacts of the legislation within 3 years of the Bill being implemented. This amendment was accepted by the Minister at the 11th hour, immediately before the motion was moved in Plenary.

The Committee for Education tabled 23 amendments to the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill including a cap on the number of items requiring a logo, a cap on cost, and 'rights of the child' elements, including the right of girls to wear trousers. It is the job of the Speaker to select amendments for Consideration Stage and the Speaker did not select 11 of the Committee's amendments including the right for girls to wear trousers and the specific cap on the number of branded items a school could require pupils to buy. The Speaker's decisions are final and cannot be challenged, and the Speaker does not have to explain decisions. The Committee decided it would introduce its own bill regarding the right to wear trousers. When the Bill was at Committee Stage, the Minister said that he would include adopt the recommendation. However, the Committee decided it would continue to seek passage of its Bill in order to provide protection of the right in primary legislation.

When the Death, Still-Births and Baby Loss Bill (DSBBL) was first outlined to the Finance Committee (before its introduction to the Assembly), it did not include provision for certificates for babies who are lost before 24 weeks, when the change to 'still-birth' begins. During this period of *pre-legislative* scrutiny, the Committee successfully lobbied the Department to include this provision in the final Bill. The Committee did not table any amendments at Consideration Stage, although individual members of the Committee did table amendments, some of which may be considered controversial.

**Legislative Consent Motions**

Committees also consider and inform the Assembly on Legislative Consent Motions (LCMs). A legislative consent motion requests the Assembly's permission for a piece of UK legislation to apply in Northern Ireland, even though the matter is devolved. Consent is given through a Legislative Consent Motion which is debated in the Assembly Chamber. The relevant Assembly Committee considers the Bill and reports to the Assembly. Recently, the Assembly has reformed the way it handles LCMs.

There was an issue for the Committee for Finance around a Legislative Consent Motion for the *Data (Use and Access) Bill*. The Department laid a Legislative Consent *Memorandum* with draft motion. Usually at this point, a process is triggered under Standing Order 42A which gives the Committee 15 working days to report on the provisions in the Bill which relate to devolved matters. However, this Bill had passed the point at Westminster where it could be amended, so the Assembly's consent or otherwise didn't count. The Committee wrote to the Speaker and the Department's motion was denied. The Minister subsequently brought a motion to note the Bill. The Committee was concerned by what it saw as the Department's lack of understanding of the LCM process and the timescales within it.

Following a review of the LCM process by the Procedures Committee, changes to Standing Orders were proposed, and approved by the Assembly. The rules now allow 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.

Examples of Legislative Consent Motions:

The Committee for Health considered the *Tobacco Products and Vaping Bill* which aimed to create a smoke-free generation and discourage young people from vaping. The Health Committee worked with the Youth Assembly to get the views of young people on the Bill. Their contribution was referenced in the Committee Report and in Members' speeches in the Chamber. Although, due to the Westminster election being called for July 2024, the Bill did not pass all the relevant stages in order to become legislation at that time, the Labour government re-introduced it and the Assembly passed a Legislative Consent Motion in February 2025.

The Committee for Justice agreed to support the Minister for Justice in seeking the Assembly's approval of a legislative consent motion to extend the provisions of the *Post Office (Horizon Systems) Offences Bill*, to Northern Ireland, which would result in the quashing of convictions and deletion of cautions in relation to the Post Office Horizon scandal. In 2025, the Justice Committee supported the Minister's LCMs on the Border, Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill, and the Crime and Policing Bill.

The Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs considered and decided to support the Legislative Consent Motion regarding the *Pet Abduction Bill* – to introduce new criminal offences in relation to the theft of cats and dogs.

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

The power of Committees to draft a Bill and introduce it in the Assembly is a way for Committees to directly achieve changes they want to see, perhaps as a result of an inquiry, or if they feel that an Executive Bill has not gone far enough. To date, use of this power has been rare.

In April 2015, the first Statutory Committee Bill was introduced. The Committee for the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (now the 'Committee for The Executive Office') 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 (an official who investigates complaints about public bodies).

In June 2026, the Committee for Education introduced the School Uniform (Trousers) Bill. The Committee had tried to persuade the Minister to amend his School Uniform (Affordability) Bill 2025, to add rights elements, including the right for girls to wear trousers. The Committee tabled its own amendments (a total of 23) but not all were selected by the Speaker, including the right to wear trousers. The Committee introduced its own Bill to achieve its aims. During the Committee Stage, the Minister said that he would adopt the Committee's recommendation after all and issue guidelines to school on the matter. However, the Committee did not withdraw its Bill which, if passed, will secure this right in primary legislation.

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 (now Committee for the Executive Office) did ask OFMDFM (now The Executive Office) to bring forward a Public Services Ombudsman Bill but it declined to do so.)

When considering the effectiveness of Committees in relation to power to propose a Bill, 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. A Committee will not always seek to amend a Bill. In the 2017-2022 mandate, the Health Committee did not recommend any amendments to the Organ Donation Bill.

**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. Inquiries are very time consuming and Committees may think twice about beginning an inquiry if they are considering or expecting to consider a lot of legislation.

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 may hold stakeholder events, to hear the views of a large number of groups. It 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 recent years, some Committees have undertaken 'mini', or 'micro' inquiries, sometimes called 'reviews'. The purpose of these is to allow a Committee to look at issues more quickly, rather than adopt the lengthy full inquiry approach, which could result in the Committee's Report being 'out of time'. Mini inquiries can be completed in weeks, rather than months. They allow Committees to look at current issues and policy initiatives coming from the Department, keeping them well-informed and in regular contact with stakeholders.

The Education Committee began a Mini Inquiry into Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) in February 2024 (when the institutions returned to operation following a hiatus). The Secretary of State had introduced legislation for Northern Ireland to make education on sexual and reproductive health and rights compulsory in Northern Ireland (within the Learning for Life and Work curriculum) and covering circumstances in which a pupil may be excused. Committee members expressed a range of views on this legislation and the Committee agreed to carry out a mini-inquiry. A very significant body

of evidence was heard, meaning that the inquiry lasted longer than expected. The Committee reported in July 2026 and report was debated by the Assembly in the Committee will soon conclude its report on the matter.

The Committee for Health spent 15 months on an Inquiry into Access to Palliative Care Services. The Committee asked for submissions via surveys, visited a number of hospice sites across Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland and held a 'Lived Experience Forum' to collect evidence from a number of individuals with experience of palliative care services as a patient or family member. It concluded its evidence and reported in July 2025. The Committee made 27 recommendations to improve services, including 100% funding for hospices (which do not currently receive any government funding).

Many interest groups and lobby groups recognise that Assembly Committees are an important part of the system and may be more accessible and open to persuasion than Ministers and officials.

**Meetings**

Most Committees meet weekly and meetings usually last for 2-3 hours. Most of the work of Committees is carried out in public session. This means members of the press and public can attend the public gallery of 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 resolve to meet in closed session (Standing Order 66(2). This means that it is not open to the public and not broadcast. There will be important reasons for doing so, such as finalising a report and not wishing their conclusions and recommendations to be released until the report is officially 'signed off' and published. Part of a meeting might also 'close' if a witness is giving evidence on a sensitive issue, or the Committee is receiving legal advice.

At the end of the last mandate, many Committees met more than once a week in order to deal with a heavy legislative workload. In this mandate, The Education Committee held extra meetings to consider and report on the School Uniforms Bill before the Summer Recess.

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. The Committee for Infrastructure held its first external meeting of the 2024-25 session at Belfast Grand Central Station Transport Hub.

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. The

Committee for Procedures visited the Scottish Parliament to find out how they are dealt with certain matters being considered by the Committee, including Members' Bills, questions, and electronic voting.

Committees also hold engagement events, in Parliament Buildings and externally. These provide an opportunity to engage with more people, in a less formal setting. The Committee for Committees did an 'engagement exercise' with the Arts Sector and held several events to hear views on the Sign Language Bill, including one with children and young people. The Committee for Education held an evening event in November 2025 to gather views for its inquiry into SEN provision in Northern Ireland.

**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 plays the lead role for the Assembly in Budget scrutiny. The Finance Committee 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. In this mandate, the Committee for Finance has achieved changes to the way the Department of Finance presents information to the Committee, to include narrative (words), in addition to tables of figures, which has resulted in the Committee getting a fuller picture of the Executive's budget situation throughout the financial year. The Finance Committee has shared the information with the other Statutory Committees to assist them in their budget scrutiny.

Committees have entered a new and more complicated era of Budget scrutiny, with plans to have multi-year budgets in future. The Executive had expected to be able to agree a three-year Budget from 2026 to 2029. It would have been the first multi-year Executive Budget for many years and the move was widely welcomed, as a way of providing more certainty of funding for Departments and everyone who receives public money. However, the allocations from the UK Government were not as generous as had been expected and, when the Finance Minister published a draft Budget for consultation at the start of 2026, it was rejected by his Executive colleagues. Without an agreed budget, Departments can continue to operate but are only able to spend 95% of last year's budget. Pressures are growing on Departments. The Committee for Finance has continued to scrutinise this situation and has written to the Finance Minister, the Secretary of State for NI, and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to offer suggestions and seek their views regarding how to resolve the crisis.

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

There is a danger that Committees could be flooded with work from 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. 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. The Committee for Communities held a single 'engagement exercise' with the Arts Sector and made recommendations to the Ministers based on the evidence gathered. Committees have appointed special advisers to assist them, and the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment (now the Committee for the Economy) was the first to appoint a Rapporteur to manage the collection of evidence for an inquiry and produce a report. At the Committee for Communities Arts Sector event, an artist was employed on the day to visually record the views being gathered.

When the Assembly is in operation, MLAs are extremely busy. They have to attend plenary sittings and deal with party business and constituency work (Friday is 'constituency day' and there are no meetings in Parliament Buildings.) Most MLAs are members of at least 2 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. This usually involves extra meetings. For MLAs, this also means more time spent debating legislation in the Assembly Chamber.*

**Strengthening Committee Scrutiny**

The issue of effectiveness of Committee scrutiny came to light as a result of the Renewable Heat Incentive Scheme Inquiry Report, which identified limitations in the Committee for Enterprise, Trade and Investment's ability to scrutiny the Department, due to limited resources and the dependence of the Committee on the Department for information and analysis.

The Inquiry's report recommended that the Assembly consider what steps are needed to strengthen its scrutiny role, particularly as conducted by Assembly Committees, in the

light of lessons from the RHI affair. The Inquiry recommended that they look at "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".

CLG reviewed 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. As a result of this review, in March 2022, the CLG's 'Strengthening Committee Scrutiny' Report made a total of 33 recommendations, including:

- more pre-legislative scrutiny (before a Bill is introduced)
- more post-legislative scrutiny to check that Acts are being implemented in full and in good time; more staff for Committees;
- training for MLAs in legislative scrutiny;
- more consultation with experts;
- more online consultation and video-conferencing, and taking evidence in alternative formats.

The Assembly is working towards the implementation of these recommendations. Some notable developments have included:

1. A new Standing Order, agreed by the Assembly on 17 September 2024, which sets a deadline for the introduction of Private Members' Bills. Standing Order 30 (2A) and (2B) states:
    a. "(2A) No Private Member's Bill shall be introduced in the Assembly after the final sitting day in June of any relevant year.
    b. (2B) In this Standing Order, a relevant year is the calendar year immediately preceding the calendar year in which, in accordance with section 31(1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, a poll for the election of an Assembly will take place."

Progress has been made on developing a new approach to scrutiny, including the improved provision of information to committees; enhanced timeframes for committee consideration; and the publication of information about proposals for statutory rules, and statutory rules being considered by committees and the Assembly. Additional staff have been recruited and deployed to support enhanced scrutiny across committees.

The Chairpersons' Liaison Group has been monitoring the implementation of work in relation to delegated legislation. A new Standing Order 43A, sets out the formal role of the Examiner of Statutory Rules in assisting Committees with the scrutiny of delegated legislation.

The process of dealing with Legislative Consent Motions was also reviewed by the Procedures Committee and it made recommendations to change Standing Orders to allow a Minister to provide early information about a possible LCM before deciding whether to seek Assembly approval and give committees more time to consider and

report on LCMs. The Committee's proposals were approved by the Assembly on 5 October 2026.

**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 often be consulted via special events, (eg, round table discussions), focus groups and/or an online survey. For example, the Committee for Communities engaged with members of the deaf community *in preparation* for the introduction of a Bill on sign language (introduced 10/2/25). The Education Committee used focus groups to hear the views of students on Anti-Bullying legislation (2015-16), School Inspections (2015), Shared and Integrated Education (2015), and the Impact of Lockdown on Children and Young People (2021-22). In recent years online focus group sessions and online surveys have made the process of engagement more flexible and accessible for young people. It is important for young people to get involved in the work of Committees.

Committee Engagement with the Youth Assembly (YA)

In 2024, the Health Committee consulted the YA on the issue of young people's use of tobacco and vapes, as the Committee considered a Legislative Consent Motion for the (UK) Tobacco and Vapes Bill. The Committee for Education consulted it on Relationship and Sex Education (RSE) in schools. Youth Assembly Members met with the Committee for Communities during the Committee stage of the Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill, which proposed lowering the age of pensions auto-enrolment from 22 to 18. While supportive of the Bill, Youth Assembly Members raised concerns about the lack of financial education, the effect on low-paid workers and families in poverty, and potential implications for small businesses. YA Members also gave their perspectives on careers and skills provision at a joint Committee for Economy and Committee for Education session in May 2024. They were also later invited to share their views directly with the Public Accounts Committee as part of its inquiry into 'Developing the Skills for Northern Ireland's Future'.

In 2025, Youth Assembly Members were commissioned by the Committee for Justice to examine the Justice Bill, focusing on bail, custody of children, and retention of biometric data. In March 2025, Youth Assembly Members met with the Minister of Justice, Naomi Long MLA, to discuss their concerns. They later gave formal evidence to the Justice Committee, emphasising the importance of children's rights in justice processes and highlighting the lived experiences of young people. In May 2025, Youth Assembly Members completed a targeted survey to feed into the Committee for Finance's Inquiry into the Northern Ireland Banking and Financial Services Landscape. Their contribution highlighted the importance of financial literacy and the accessibility of banking services

for young people. The YA was also invited to present their views to the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs on the Dilapidation Bill, which aims to give councils enhanced powers to deal with neglected, unsafe, or derelict buildings and land.

The YA also engaged with the Public Accounts Committee. In November 2024, Members attended the launch of the Public Accounts Committee's Report on Child Poverty in Northern Ireland, engaging in panel discussions and questioning MLAs about strategies to address child poverty. In 2025, they gave formal evidence on the Committee's Inquiry on Developing the Skills for Northern Ireland's Future, including on their experiences of careers education. They suggested that the Committee develop an online youth survey to gather a wider range of views and worked with the Committee to create and promote the survey, which was completed by over 500 young people. The Committee Report was launched in May 2025.

(See separate note about the Youth Assembly's engagement with Committees).

Increasing Public Engagement and Enhancing Communication

Anyone or any group can respond to a consultation and responses vary from short emails to long papers. All submissions will form part of the evidence used by the Committee to produce its report to the Assembly. The Assembly website's homepage keeps the public up to date on current inquiries and calls for evidence. The use of Citizen Space, an online consultation and public involvement solution has also enabled Committees to reach more people and make it easier for them to give their opinions. In 2021-22, the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs received 375 responses to their request for views on the challenges faced by women in agriculture. Some Committees have introduced 'summary reports' on their work as an "easy-to-read" snapshot of the committee's findings and recommendations, in addition to the full report. These appeared to be well-received according to the number of "click-throughs" on the Committee's social media accounts. The Committee for Finance is making more use of captioned videos of the Chair and deputy Chair talking about the Committee's work.

The Committee for Communities' advocacy of inclusive consultation methods, eg receiving evidence on the Sign Language Bill in the form of signed BSL/ISL videos via secure digital transfer is becoming a model of accessible engagement for other Committees. The Committee produced signed summary videos after each Committee meeting dealing with the Bill and held regional outreach events with the Deaf, Deaf-blind, and CODA communities. It used WhatsApp and video messaging and hosted 'world café' style session for children and young people, and their teachers and parents, to find out about their 'lived experience'. This is a phrase that is being heard more often in relation to consultation by Committees. As part of its evidence gathering on the Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Bill, the Committee for Communities is planning a meeting to hear about people's 'lived experience' of 'conversion practices'.

In this mandate, people may choose to conduct their business with a Committee through the Irish language or Ulster Scots. A simultaneous interpretation system is available to Committees (and also in the Assembly Chamber).

In the past number of years, the Northern Ireland Assembly Public Engagement programme has facilitated several Outreach Parliaments, including: a Women's Parliament; an Older People's Parliament; and a Disabled People's Parliament. Each of the Outreach Parliaments provide a platform for section 75 groups (women, age, and persons with a disability) to engage directly with decision-makers and raise issues of concern. The reports from these events are shared with Assembly Committees. In 2025, and 2026, the Assembly had a stand at the Balmoral Show and the Agriculture Committee held its weekly meeting there.

**The Advice and Assistance Role**

The role of a Statutory Committee, as set out in the Northern Ireland Act 1998 is to 'advise and assist' the Ministers. This advice and assistance role is often interpreted to be largely a scrutiny role, but Committees and Departments also work together. Co-operation at early policy development or draft legislation stage can make things much easier later on and help a Bill to be passed relatively quick by the Assembly. Departments often brief the Committee on a Bill before it is introduced to the Assembly. A good relationship, based on 'advice and assistance' does not mean less scrutiny and Committees will still scrutinise Bills thoroughly and keep a close watch on any secondary legislation relating to a Bill, and on progress in implementing the Act, as well as any Inquiry Report recommendations which the Minister has agreed to accept. However, sometimes, relationships between 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). 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 and the Chair of the Committee is not usually from the same party as the Minister.

Furthermore, Committees' legislation and inquiry reports are *evidence based*. Members try to leave their party hats at the door. 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. The Committee for Education did a mini-inquiry into **Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE)**, which proved a

sensitive issue. The report states that David Brooks MLA (DUP) and Julie Middleton MLA (DUP) advised the Committee that they did not endorse the report; although they supported recommendations relating to safeguarding, Violence Against Women and Girls, consent and anti-bullying. They were unhappy with recommendations in other areas, for example abortion and gender ideology, and the gradual removal of the right of parents/guardians to withdraw their children from RSE lessons. However, Mr Brooks and Mrs Middleton decided not to divide the Committee on individual decisions on recommendations, but to request a statement reflecting the position of their party within the report.

There have been strong party-political differences of opinion on other issues in the Education Committee, including the 2 Members' Bills considered by the Committee – the **Irish Medium Education (Workforce Plan) Bill** and the **Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill**. Relationships between the Committee and the Minister have been tense at times over these issues. The Minister and his party colleagues on the Committee opposed both bills. A Petition of Concern was submitted by the DUP, TUV and UUP to try to block the Irish Medium Education Bill.

The Committee for Communities has had to deal with different political perspectives on **language policy** in this mandate. However, it generally operates on a consensual and evidence-based basis, especially on social inclusion and equality issues. The Sign Language Bill scrutiny process has been notably cross-party and collaborative, reflecting shared support for Deaf rights and accessibility.

In the Finance Committee, when the Minister wanted to pressure the Committee into a short extension of the Deaths, Still Births and Baby Loss Bill Committee Stage, the Minister's party colleagues argued strongly for the Committee to avoid an extension, if possible. This was despite the general view that the 30 working days for Committee Stage set down in Standing Orders is considered to be unworkable.

Some meetings of the Committee for the Executive Office have been very party political. For example, the First Minister walked out of a meeting in November 2026, due to persistent questioning and accusations relating to the protest against an Orange Order March on the Garvaghy Road in Portadown.

**Checks and Balances**

Statutory Committees are an important part of the checks and balances built into our system of devolution to 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 4 political parties.

With official opposition in place, this also provides a further 'check' within the system. The Chair of Public Accounts Committee nominated by the Opposition and the Committee has been very active this mandate, in investigating matters including mental health, child poverty and access to GP services. While not a right of the Opposition, the Leader of the Opposition has been the chair of the Finance Committee in this mandate.

Despite the wide range of views across the political spectrum represented on Committees, working relationships are usually harmonious between members of the different political parties and party-political differences do not often 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. When the DUP members of the Education Committee could not sign up to supporting all of the recommendations in the Committee's report into its RSE inquiry.

Committees are keen to foster close working relationships with Ministers, officials, and others to benefit the public. They want to develop that 'advice and assistance' role. However, Committees do not want to compromise on their scrutiny role, in terms of legislation and policy, or the role they play in calling Ministers to account.

The Opposition and Committees

The Assembly's Statutory Committees have traditionally been the main method by which the Assembly carries out its role of scrutinising the Executive. In 2016, for the first time, arrangements were put in place to allow for the establishment of an official opposition – known as 'the Opposition'. Any party or parties with at least 8% of the seats in the Assembly may choose to enter the Opposition. If there is an official opposition:

- at least one seat on each Statutory Committee is allocated to a Member of the Opposition (as far as is practicable) and at least one Member of the Business Committee must be a Member of the Opposition;
- the Chairperson of the Public of the Public Accounts Committee is nominated by the Leader of the Opposition, and where there is a second party in the Opposition, the Deputy Leader of the Opposition will nominate the Deputy Chair; and
- at least one member of the Business Committee must be from the Opposition.

The current Chair of the Finance Committee is the Leader of the Opposition, Matthew O'Toole. However, this position is not one of the Opposition's rights.

**Virtual Meeting Arrangements for Committees and a Note on Proxy Voting**

During the Covid pandemic, the Committee on Procedures prepared 'temporary provisions' – changes to Standing Orders which would allow the continuation of Assembly

Business, whilst adhering to public health advice and keeping Members and staff as safe as possible. For Committees, this meant the introduction of remote participation in meetings, using the Starleaf virtual platform (either in fully virtual or hybrid Committee meetings); proxy voting in Committees; and decision making by Committees without meeting. Committees have continued to use videoconferencing software to enable hybrid meetings and remote attendance of Members and witnesses, as allowed for in Standing Orders.

**Conclusion**

Due to political difficulties, the 2017-2022 mandate was a shortened mandate, which ran from January 2020 to March 2022. The current mandate is also 'shortened'. This puts pressure on the institutions to deliver in a shorter period of time. As it takes time to develop Bills, this means that a lot of the legislation is dealt with towards the end of the mandate, putting considerable pressure on Committees. In the last mandate, Statutory Committees, in addition to being extremely busy considering a large amount of legislation, had to scrutinise government actions in relation to Covid-19 decisions. This was very challenging. Committees had to adapt their working arrangements to abide by Covid-19 restrictions and held extra meetings to ensure effective scrutiny.

The RHI Inquiry Report recommended strengthening resources for Committees to enable more effective scrutiny of the Executive and progress is ongoing in the implementation of the recommendations (for example, increase in the number of staff on Committee teams, changes to Standing Orders to allow more time for Committees to consider delegated legislation and Legislative Consent Motions).

The current legislative timetable is also very busy. The Speaker, Edwin Poots MLA, told Members that Executive legislation would take priority and not all Members' Bill proposals would be introduced (10 out of 23). The Speaker wants to ensure effective scrutiny of all Bills and has warned against the use of accelerated passage (no Committee Stage) as a means of getting more Bills through the system. While Wednesdays and Thursdays are still the main Committee days in the Assembly, Committee meetings are also taking place on Mondays and Tuesdays, to enable Committees to handle a heavy workload.

In both the last and current mandates, Committees also faced the challenge of reestablishing relationships with Departments, which did not have to answer to Committees when the Assembly was 'down'.

Up to date information on the current work of all Committees may be found on the Committee pages of the Assembly website.

You may also be interested in responding to consultations which are advertised on the Assembly website.

November 2026