Northern Ireland Assembly

Education Service

Glossary of Terms



Terms are defined as they apply to the Northern Ireland Assembly

A

Accelerated Passage

Under this procedure, a **Bill** skips the **Committee Stage** of the Assembly's **legislative process**. Accelerated passage allows the Assembly to pass a Bill in a shorter time than usual, although no Bill can pass through its required stages in fewer than 10 days. The Assembly votes on whether to allow accelerated passage and the decision must have **cross-community** support. **Budget** Bills may be passed this way, provided that the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance confirms to the Assembly that there has been consultation with the Committee on the public expenditure proposals contained in the Bill.

Act

A law. When a Bill is passed by the **Northern Ireland Assembly** and given Royal Assent, it becomes an Act of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Ad Hoc Committees

Temporary **Committees** set up from time to time to look at specific issues.

Adjournment Debate

An adjournment **debate** is a particular type of debate. Adjournment debates are generally used by the Assembly to allow an MLA to highlight a particular issue within their **constituency**, and they may receive a ministerial response in the **Assembly Chamber**. They are usually scheduled, time permitting, as the last item of **plenary** business on a Tuesday (before the meeting 'adjourns'). A topic is debated, not a motion, and the topic is listed on the **Order Paper** and **Indicative Timings**. The debate lasts for up to one hour. There is no vote at the end of an adjournment debate and the **Minister** is not obliged to act on the issue. However, an adjournment debate is a useful tool for **MLAs** to demonstrate that they are representing constituents well by highlighting and pressing for action on a local issue.

All-Party Groups (APGs)

All-Party Groups provide an opportunity for **MLAs** from different parties to engage with outside organisations and individuals, to discuss shared interests in a particular cause or subject. APGs usually meet in **Parliament Buildings**. While they have no official status within the Assembly, they enable the sharing of information on issues of public interest. A list of APGs is available on the Assembly's website.

Amendment

A change to the wording of a **motion** for **debate** or a piece of **legislation** (**Bill**). The Speaker selects amendments for debate and publishes these on a list, known as the 'Marshalled List'. Ministers, MLAs and Committees can submit amendments to motions and Bills. Amendments are debated and voted on in the **Assembly Chamber**. Amendments to motions are voted on during the debate on a motion; and amendments to Bills are voted on during the relevant stage (Consideration Stage or Further Consideration Stage) of the **legislative process**.

Applicability Motion

Under the new arrangements in the **Windsor Framework**, the UK Government will not agree (apart from in exceptional circumstances), for new European Union (EU) acts to be added to the Windsor Framework, and therefore to apply in Northern Ireland, unless the Assembly passes an 'applicability motion' with **cross-community support**.

Assembly Chamber

Where the **Assembly** meets to conduct its business in **plenary** session. Located in **Parliament Buildings**.

Assembly Commission

The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission is the corporate body of the Assembly. It is responsible for ensuring that the Assembly is provided with the property, staff and services it requires to carry out its work.

Assembly and Executive Review Committee

This was established under the **Northern Ireland Act 1998** to review matters relating to the functioning of the Assembly and the **Executive**. It has considered issues such as the **devolution** of policing and justice; size of the Assembly; number of **Government Departments**; **D'Hondt**; **designation**; provision for **opposition**; and use of the **Petition of Concern** procedure.

Attorney General (AG)

Chief legal adviser to the **Executive** for **devolved matters**, and its most senior representative in the courts. The AG confirms that **legislation** passed by the Assembly is competent. See **Legislative Competence**.

Audit Committee

This **Standing Committee** scrutinises the Northern Ireland Audit Office's spending plans and accounts. The Audit Office supports the Assembly in holding the **Executive** to account for public spending, working closely with the **Public Accounts Committee**. The Audit Committee also considers the spending plans of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) and the **Assembly Commission**.

B

Belfast/Good Friday Agreement

The 'Belfast Agreement' or 'Good Friday Agreement' is a peace agreement reached on 10 April 1998 by the British and Irish Governments, and most **political parties** in Northern Ireland. After the Agreement was endorsed by a majority of the electorate in Northern Ireland, the **Northern Ireland Act (1998)** implemented the Agreement, establishing the **Northern Ireland Assembly** and **Executive**, together with 'North-South' and 'East-West' institutions. The Agreement enshrined the Principle of Consent (no change to the constitutional status of Northern Ireland without the consent of the majority). It also established a new Human Rights Commission, a single Equality Commission and a Commission for (the reform of) Policing. Early Prisoner release was also part of the Agreement. See **North/South Ministerial Council** and **British-Irish Council**. See also **St Andrews Agreement**; **Stormont House Agreement** and **Stormont House Fresh Start Agreement**, and **New Decade, New Approach**.

Bill

The name given to a proposed new **law** as it passes through the various stages of consideration by the **Assembly**. If it is passed by the Assembly and receives Royal Assent, it becomes an **Act** of the **Northern Ireland Assembly**. The majority of Bills are introduced by **Ministers** (**Executive Bills**), but Bills can also be introduced by an individual **MLA** (Member's Bill), a member of a **Committee** on behalf of the Committee (Committee Bill) and a member of the **Assembly Commission** on behalf of the Commission (**Non-Executive Bill**s). A Bill is divided up into sections, known as **clauses**. Clauses can be amended or added to a Bill. The Assembly will scrutinise, **debate** and vote on whether each clause should be part of the Bill. See **Legislative Process**.

Bill Office

The Assembly's Bill Office supports **MLAs**, the **Speaker**, Assembly **Committees** and **Departments** in navigating the process of making laws in the Assembly. See **Legislative Process**.

British-Irish Council

Established by the 1998 **Belfast/Good Friday Agreement**, this is a forum for sharing information, and discussing and developing policies for co-operation in matters of mutual interest between the UK and Ireland. Members of the Council represent the British and Irish Governments, the devolved governments of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and the governments of Jersey, Guernsey and the Isle of Man.

Budget

Financial statement that includes an estimate of **Government** income and planned expenditure. In Northern Ireland, this is the responsibility of the **Minister** of Finance. The Budget must be approved by the Assembly.

Business Committee

This **Standing Committee** decides what business will be considered by the Assembly in **plenary** meetings. This agenda for plenary meetings is called the **Order Paper**. The Business Committee is made up of the **Speaker**, **Chief Whips** of the main parties, and a representative of the smaller parties and **independent** MLAs. It usually meets at lunchtime on Tuesdays.

Business Office

Facilitates the running of **plenary** meetings, which includes giving procedural advice to the **Speaker**. The Business Office also provides administrative support to the Business Committee which sets the agenda for plenary business in the **Assembly Chamber**. **Questions** for Ministers, **motions**, and **amendment**s for debate are tabled in the Business Office; as are all papers laid before the Assembly, including **delegated legislation (Statutory Rules)** and **Legislative Consent Memorandums**.

C

Chief Whip

Someone appointed by a political party to ensure that their elected **representatives** attend **plenary** sessions and vote according to party instructions. Chief Whips sit on the **Business Committee**, chaired by the **Speaker**, which sets the agenda for plenary meetings.

Civil Service

Administrative staff (civil servants) who work in the 9 **Government Departments** and implement the policies of the **Executive**. Assembly administrative staff are known as **Assembly Commission** Staff.

Clause

Bills are split up into separate sections, called clauses. This allows the Bill to be debated, and agreed or rejected, in parts, so that the Bill can be passed, even if some of the clauses are rejected.

Clerks

People who work for the Assembly, supporting **plenary** meetings and **Committees**, and providing guidance to MLAs on the rules governing the operation of the Assembly.

Code of Conduct

Set of rules followed by MLAs. MLAs must not use their position as an MLA to benefit any individual or group in return for payment or gifts, and they must declare any interests held outside the Assembly. See **Register of Members' Interests** and **Commissioner for Standards**.

Commissioner for Standards

The Commissioner is an independent person, appointed by the Northern Ireland Assembly to carry out thorough, fair and transparent investigations into complaints about the behaviour of **MLAs** and **Ministers** in relation to their respective codes of conduct. See **Code of Conduct** and **Ministerial Code of Conduct**.

Committee

Group of MLAs appointed to carry out specific functions. The main types of Committee in the Northern Ireland Assembly are **Statutory Committees, Standing Committees, Joint Committees** and **Ad Hoc Committees**.

Committee Chairperson

Committee Chairpersons are appointed using the **D'Hondt** system. The Chairs **of Statutory Committees –** which scrutinise the work of **Ministers** and their **Departments** – should not, where possible, be from the same party as the Minister. Committee Chairs get paid an allowance for taking on the extra responsibility that goes with the role.

Consociationalism

A power-sharing model of **democracy** designed for countries or regions where there has been conflict or is the potential for conflict. The Northern Ireland model established by the **Belfast/Good Friday Agreement** was designed to ensure power-sharing between unionists and nationalists. The **Executive** is a multi-party, mandatory coalition (not a voluntary coalition), with membership determined by party performance in **elections**. The joint office of **First Minister** and **deputy First Minister** is shared between the largest parties in the 2 main communities. Ministers of 7 of the 9 **Government Departments** are appointed using the D'Hondt mathematical formula, based on the number of seats won by parties in the election. Parties may opt out of the Executive and, since 2016, may form or join an official opposition. Chairs and Deputy Chairs of Assembly **Committees** are also appointed using D'Hondt. The use of D'Hondt reflects the consociational model's principle of proportionality. Certain Assembly decisions require **cross-community support** (from nationalists and unionists), including the election of the Speaker, approval of the **Budget**, changes to **Standing Orders** (rules of the Assembly) and votes on **Petitions of Concern**. Under the **Hillsborough Agreement** (2010), the appointment of the Minister of Justice also requires cross-community support. Following the **St Andrews Agreement** (2006), certain Executive Committee decisions may also be subject to cross-community support. Recently, the cultural equality feature of consociationalism has been demonstrated in the Assembly by the provision of simultaneous translation into English if Members speak in Irish or Ulster Scots. See **Designation**.

Constituency

A geographical area (electoral district) of Northern Ireland that elects 5 **MLAs** to the **Northern Ireland Assembly** and one MP (Member of **Parliament)** to Westminster. There are 18 constituencies in Northern Ireland. The people who live in a constituency are called constituents.

Cross-community Support

Certain decisions made by the **Northern Ireland Assembly** cannot be carried by a majority (over 50%) of those voting. These decisions include the election of the **Speaker**, changes to **Standing Orders**, and approval of the **Budget**. Special **voting** procedures are in place to ensure that such decisions have the support of both designated unionists and designated nationalists. They can be agreed by 'parallel consent' (the support of over 50% of all those voting, including over 50% of both designated nationalists and designated unionists) or 'weighted majority' (the support of 60% of those voting, including 40% of designated 'Unionists' and 40% of designated 'Nationalists'). A cross-community vote can also be triggered by a **Petition of Concern**. The requirement for cross-community support is, in effect, a veto. Nationalists or unionists can prevent a decision being made which they do not support. See **Designation** and **Consociationalism.**

D

Debate

Formal discussion in the **Assembly Chamber**, usually followed by a vote.

Delegated Legislation

Also known as subordinate, or secondary, legislation. Delegated legislation sets out detailed rules and regulations, brought forward to the Assembly by **Ministers**, under powers granted in a "parent" **Act** (the **primary legislation**, which outlines the framework of the law). In the Westminster **Parliament**, these are commonly known as **Statutory Instruments** and, in Northern Ireland, as **Statutory Rules**. Delegated legislation allows for changes in the law to be made quickly without the more elaborate procedures involved in passing **primary legislation,** for example, to increase annual fee charges, or temporarily close a road for maintenance. **Departments** lay Statutory Rules before the Assembly (in the **Business Office**). They become law in a number of ways:

Negative resolution – the SR is made by the Department, laid before the Assembly and can come into effect on the stated date without formal approval by the Assembly, but can be annulled by the Assembly within a **statutory** period (whichever is the longer of 30 calendar days or 10 sitting days) of it being laid. This is known as a Prayer of Annulment.

Affirmative Resolution – the SR is made by the Department, can be laid before the Assembly by the Department but requires approval by a vote in the Assembly Chamber before it can come into effect. The motion for debate is proposed by the relevant Minister.

Draft Affirmative Resolution – the SR is laid in draft before the Assembly but cannot be made by the Department unless and until the draft has been affirmed by a vote in the Assembly.

Confirmatory Resolution – the SR is made by the Department, laid before the Assembly and comes into effect on the stated date, but ceases to have effect after a specified period (stated in the parent Act) unless approved by an Assembly vote within that time.

Democracy

Refers to 'government by the people'. In today's democratic societies, it is usually through elected representatives. The **Government** is accountable to the people and the people have the right to criticise it, and to protest peacefully. There is freedom of speech and of the press. See **Representation**.

Democratic Consent Mechanism

This is a vote by the **Northern Ireland Assembly** on whether European Union (EU) single market regulations should continue to apply in Northern Ireland (articles 5-10 of the **Windsor Framework**).

Department/Departments

See **Government Department/s**

Deputy First Minister

See **First Minister and Deputy First Minister**.

Designation

After elections to the **Assembly**, **MLAs** sign the Roll of Membership and enter a designation of identity – 'Nationalist', 'Unionist' or 'Other'. This is to allow for cross-community voting on decisions that require the support of both unionists and nationalists. See **Cross Community Support**.

Devolved Matters

See **Transferred Matters**.

Devolution

The transfer of certain powers from a central government to a regional **government**, allowing decisions to be made closer to the point at which they will have impact. In the UK, power has been devolved by the UK **Parliament** at Westminster to the **Northern Ireland Assembly**, the Senedd (Welsh Parliament) and the Scottish Parliament. Power was first devolved to the Northern Ireland Assembly at midnight, 1 December 1999. The Assembly legislates on devolved matters, known as '**transferred matters'** and appoints an **Executive Committee** of Ministers to lead Northern Ireland's 9 **Government Departments**. Between 1921 and 1972, powers were devolved to the Northern Ireland Parliament.

Direct Rule

The governance of Northern Ireland directly from Westminster through a **Secretary of State** assisted by a small team of Ministers. Direct Rule began in March 1972 and, despite attempts to re-establish **devolution**, continued until December 1999 when powers were devolved to the **Northern Ireland Assembly** following the **Belfast/Good Friday Agreement** of 1998. Direct Rule was re-instated when the Assembly was suspended between February and May 2000, and between October 2002 and May 2007.

D'Hondt System

A system used to appoint **Ministers**, and **Committee** Chairpersons and Deputy Chairpersons. Based on the number of seats held by parties on the first day the Assembly meets after the election, it ensures proportional allocation of these positions of power in the **Assembly**.

Dissolution

The official term for the adjournment (end) of the **Assembly** before **elections** to a new Assembly.

Division

A recorded vote in the **Assembly Chamber**. When there is no clear result from a 'voice vote', or the decision given by the **Speaker** is challenged, the Speaker may order the Assembly to divide, "Ayes" to the right and "Noes" to the left. This allows votes to be counted in the division lobbies beside the Chamber. See **Voting**.

E

Election/s

Elections to the **Northern Ireland Assembly** should be held every 5 years. Each of Northern Ireland's 18 constituencies elect 5 **MLAs** each, making a total of 90. The **Single Transferable Vote** electoral system is used for Assembly elections.

Examiner of Statutory Rules (ESR)

An officer of the Assembly with responsibility for examining **delegated (secondary) legislation**, or '**Statutory Rules**', and advising the Assembly accordingly.

Excepted Matters

Matters that have not been transferred to the **Assembly** and will remain the responsibility of the UK **Parliament**. They are usually matters of UK-wide importance, eg, international relations, defence and taxation. See **Reserved Matters** and **Transferred Matters**.

Executive Bill

A Bill introduced by a **Minister**.

Executive/ Executive Committee

The Executive Committee, or 'Executive' is the regional '**Government**' of Northern Ireland which is appointed from the Assembly. It introduces **legislation** (Bills) to the Assembly and oversees the implementation of **Acts**. It prioritises Government proposals and plans, producing a **Programme for Government** and **Budget**, which must be approved by the **Assembly**. The Executive Committee consists of the **First Minister and deputy First Minister** assisted by 2 Junior Ministers in their **Department**, The Executive Office (TEO), and 8 other Departmental **Ministers.**

F

First Minister and deputy First Minister

The First Minister and deputy First Minister together chair meetings of the **Executive Committee** and share responsibility for the functions of **The Executive Office (TEO)**. They have equal powers. The largest party from the largest designation in the Assembly ('unionist', 'nationalist' or 'other') nominates the First Minister, and the largest party from the second largest designation nominates the deputy First Minister. However, if the largest party from the largest designation is not the largest party in the Assembly, then the position of First Minister goes to the largest party in the Assembly. See **Designation**.

G

Government

In the Northern Ireland system, the term 'Government' refers to those elected representatives in charge of running Northern Ireland, ie, the **Executive Committee**, or **Executive**, comprising the Ministers in charge of the 9 **Government Departments.** The Assembly and Executive are both devolved government institutions, but the Executive is 'the Government'. On a UK level, 'Government' refers to the Prime Minister and Cabinet, based at 10 Downing Street. See **Devolution**.

Government Department/s

There are 9 Northern Ireland Government Departments, responsible for providing **public services**, developing **policy** and **legislation** to improve services, and implementing legislation passed by the Assembly. Each Department will have targets to meet under the **Programme for Government (PfG)** and an allocated budget. Departments are headed by **Ministers**.

H

Hillsborough Agreement

Reached in February 2010, this agreement led to the **devolution** of policing and justice powers to the Assembly in April 2010. Under this agreement, the **Minister** of Justice is elected by the Assembly, a decision which requires **cross-community support**.

I

Indicative Timings

A document produced for each **plenary** meeting which gives an indication of the timings for the items of business on the **Order Paper**. Includes items that have been added after the Order Paper has been published, such as **ministerial statements**.

Independent

An MLA who does not belong to, or represent, a political party is called 'Independent'. A candidate may stand as an Independent in an **election**, or a sitting MLA may leave their **political party** and become Independent.

Inquiry

An investigation by a **Committee** into a particular issue. The Committee produces an evidence-based report with recommendations, which is debated in the **Assembly Chamber**. The relevant **Minister** must respond to the report, but is not obliged to act on its recommendations. Mini inquiries, known as reviews, are less time-consuming and allow Committees to look into a greater number of issues.

J

Joint Committees

These are set up to deal with a matter of concern to two or more Committees. Committees can also sit concurrently (together) to consider such issues.

L

Legislation

Law or set of laws.

Legislative Assembly/ Legislature

Group of elected representatives with the power to pass laws.

Legislative Competence

Refers to whether the **Assembly** has the power to pass a piece of **legislation**. Before a **Bill** is introduced to the Assembly, the **Speaker** must confirm that it is within the Assembly's legislative competence, ie, that it concerns a matter which is **devolved** (transferred) to the Assembly by the UK Parliament, and complies with human rights and equality legislation. Following the Final Stage of the **legislative process**, a Bill will be checked by the **Attorney General (AG)** to ensure that any **amendments** made have not impacted on its legislative competence. The AG may refer a Bill to the UK Supreme Court. The Assembly can legislate on **reserved matters** and even **excepted matters** with permission from the **Secretary of State**.

Legislative Consent Memorandum

This is a document to inform the Assembly about a **Bill** that is before the UK **Parliament** which contains provisions which affect Northern Ireland and on which the Assembly would normally legislate (**devolved matter/s**). It is laid before the Assembly by the Northern Ireland **Executive** Minister/s responsible for the devolved matter/s concerned. The Memorandum will include an explanation of why the provisions in the Bill should be made and why they should be made in the UK Bill rather than by an **Act** of the Assembly. The Assembly will debate and vote on a **Legislative Consent Motion** in the **Assembly Chamber**.

Legislative Consent Motion

A **motion** which, if passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly, or the Scottish Parliament or Senedd (Welsh Parliament), allows the **UK Parliament** to pass **legislation** on an issue over which the **devolved** regional body normally has authority.

Legislative Process

The process which a **Bill** has to go through before it can become law. A proposal for **legislation** is presented to the Assembly in the form of a Bill, which must successfully pass through several stages of scrutiny before becoming law – an **Act** of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Following pre-introduction scrutiny by the **Speaker** to confirm the **legislative competence** of the Bill, the main stages are set out below:

First Stage – the Bill's title is read out in the **Assembly Chamber**;

Second Stage – the Assembly debates the Bill's general principles in the Chamber. If it supports the Bill, it goes through to the next stage;

Committee Stage – the relevant Committee scrutinises the Bill – line by line and **clause** by clause, takes evidence on the Bill (from experts, stakeholders and the general public), and produces a report, which may propose changes, known as **amendment**s;

Consideration Stage – in the Chamber, the Assembly considers the Bill clause by clause. Selected amendments, as grouped, are debated. Amendments may be proposed by a Minister, Committee or individual MLAs. The individual clauses, schedules (details of how provisions will work) and amendments are voted on;

Further Consideration Stage – a further and final opportunity to amend the Bill;

Final Stage – the last debate and vote on the Bill, followed by a final check by the **Attorney General** for legislative competence (as a result of amendments). In the rare event that there is a problem, there will be a Reconsideration Stage;

Royal Assent – formal approval by the Monarch. Once the Speaker has announced in the Chamber that Royal Assent has been granted, the Bill becomes an Act.

Lobbying

The attempt by an individual or group to influence **government** to make decisions that will be in their interest.

M

Mandate

The authority an elected politician or **party** has to **represent** people, passing laws and governing on their behalf. The word is also used to refer to the period of time between **elections**, eg, the 2022 to 2027 **mandate**.

Mandatory Coalition

Most coalition governments (with Ministers from more than one political party) are formed by voluntary agreement between parties. In the Northern Ireland system, membership of that coalition is determined by the **D'Hondt** mathematical formula, which is based on the number of seats parties win in the **Assembly** election. Therefore, the number of Ministers a party has in the **Executive** depends on its **mandate** from the electorate. The word 'mandatory' also means 'compulsory'. We do have to have a coalition government, but parties may opt out of the Executive, and may form or join the **Opposition**. (D'Hondt is used to appoint Ministers for 7 of the 9 **Government Departments**. The **First Minister and deputy First Minister** are nominated by the Assembly and the Minister of Justice is elected by the Assembly.)

Matter of the Day

An **MLA** may ask the **Speaker**'s permission to make a statement to the **Assembly** about a matter which has occurred and come to public attention since the Assembly last sat. It must be a matter of exceptional public interest which directly affects the people of Northern Ireland.

Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA)

One of 90 people elected to the **legislature** for Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland Assembly. Within the Assembly, MLAs are also known as Members.

Member's Bill

A Bill introduced by an **MLA**. In most cases, a Member must first lodge an initial proposal with the **Bill Office**, which will arrange for research and legal advice on the policy proposal. The Member is then required to undertake a number of steps, including a consultation on their proposal. If the process is followed to the satisfaction of the Speaker, access to a panel of drafters may be offered. If a Member arranges for their Bill to be drafted without the support of the Bill Office, they are not required to lodge an initial proposal but must still conduct a consultation. Following the introduction of a Member's Bill to the Assembly, the scrutiny process is the same as for an **Executive Bill**.

Members' Statements

A 30-minute period at the start of a **plenary** meeting when MLAs may speak for up to 3 minutes on topical issues of public interest (local, national or international). This is an opportunity for Members to highlight matters of interest and concern to **constituents**.

Ministerial Briefing

When a Minister attends a meeting of the Assembly **Statutory Committee,** which advises and assists, and scrutinises the Minister's **Department**, in order to update the Committee on the work of the Department, or on a particular issue of interest or concern to the Committee.

Ministerial Code of Conduct

A set of rules that must be followed by all **Ministers** in the exercise of their duties and responsibilities. Ministers must also affirm a **Pledge of Office** and commit to the Seven Principles of Public Life. For further details, go to **www.northernireland.gov.uk**. See also **Commissioner for Standards**.

Ministerial Statement

Statement made by a **Minister** to the **Assembly**, usually to announce a new policy initiative, but may also be about a **North/South Ministerial Council** meeting or current issue. Following the statement, the Minister takes questions from **MLAs**. If there is an official opposition in place, the first question is asked by a member of the **Opposition**.

Ministers

Ministers are the heads of **Government Departments** who, together with the **First Minister** and **deputy First Minister**, make up the **Executive Committee**. They are responsible for the formulation of **policy** in a particular area, eg, agriculture and environment, health or education. Ministers and their Departments are accountable to the Assembly.

Motion

A motion is a means by which a **Minister**, **Committee** or **Member** can initiate an Assembly **debate** in which a course of action is proposed, or an Assembly decision sought, on a relevant issue.

N

New Decade New Approach (NDNA)

This deal was the basis for the return of devolved government in January 2020. Following talks, it was presented to parties by the British and Irish governments. It sought to make government more stable, and more open and transparent. It resulted in reform of the **Petition of Concern**, enhanced entitlements for the **Opposition** and extension of the time allowed to form an Executive following an election.

Non-Executive Bill

A Bill introduced to the Assembly by an individual **MLA** (Member's Bill), a **Committee** (Committee Bill) or the **Assembly Commission**.

Northern Ireland Act (1998)

The law passed by the UK **Parliament** to implement the **Belfast/Good Friday Agreement**. The Assembly's powers come from this law and the **St Andrews Agreement Act** (2006).

Northern Ireland Assembly

The Northern Ireland Assembly, commonly referred to as 'the Assembly', is the devolved **legislature** for Northern Ireland, established following the **Belfast/Good Friday Agreement**. It is responsible for making laws on **devolved (transferred) matters** in Northern Ireland and for scrutinising the work of **Ministers** and **Government Departments**. Ministers are appointed by the Assembly and form the **Executive Committee**, which is the Northern Ireland Government. The Assembly is made up of 90 elected **MLAs who also carry out a representative role.** See **Devolution, Scrutiny** and **Representation.**

Northern Ireland Office (NIO)

The UK **Government Department** that serves the **Secretary of State** for Northern Ireland. With powers over **transferred matters** devolved to the Northern Ireland **Assembly**, the Secretary of State retains responsibility for **reserved matters** and **excepted matters**. The NIO is based at Erskine House, Belfast city centre.

North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC)

Established by the **Agreement**, the Council is a forum for **Ministers** from Northern Ireland and the Irish Government to consult and co-operate, on an all-Ireland basis, on matters of mutual interest, including agriculture and transport. Six North/South Implementation Bodies carry out agreed policies: Waterways Ireland; The Food Safety Promotion Board; InterTradeIreland; The Special EU Programmes Body; The Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission; and The Language Body, composed of Foras na Gaeilge and Tha Boord o Ulster-Scotch.

O

Official

A person who works for a **Government Department**, or the Northern Ireland Assembly. Officials working for Departments are called 'civil servants' and those working for the Assembly are collectively known as the **Assembly Commission** Staff.

Official Report

The official record of what is said in the **Assembly** each day, and of all decisions made by the Assembly. It also records written answers to Assembly **questions** and reports specific **Committee** meetings. The Official Report is also known as **Hansard,** after Thomas Hansard who began publishing a daily record of proceedings in the House of Commons in the early 19th Century.

Opposition (official)

Refers to a **party,** or parties, outside the **Government/Executive**, with a formal opposition role. The task of the Opposition is to question and criticise the work of the Government. Due to the inclusive nature of the power-sharing institutions in Northern Ireland, established by the **Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998**, provision was not made for an official opposition at that time. However, the **Stormont House Agreement** (December 2014) led to the introduction of arrangements to allow the formation of an official opposition following the May 2016 election. As a result of the **New Decade, New Approach** deal (January 2020), there were changes to arrangements regarding entry into the Opposition, and an increase in the entitlements of the Opposition. Any party with more than 8% of the seats in the Assembly may form/join the Opposition, which receives extra financial and research assistance, and rights in relation to speaking and asking **questions** to **Ministers** in the **Assembly Chamber**. The Opposition proposes the motions for debate on 10 'Opposition Days' per year. The Leader of the Opposition appoints the Chair of the **Public Accounts Committee**.

Oral Questions

Questions put by **MLAs** that require a **Minister** to give an oral answer in the **Assembly Chamber**. See **Question Time**, **Topical Questions** and **Urgent Oral Questions**.

Order paper

The agenda for **plenary** meetings, or 'sittings', in the **Assembly Chamber**.

P

Parliament

The UK Parliament at Westminster, London. Northern Ireland elects 18 Members of Parliament (MPs). The UK Parliament legislates for Northern Ireland in respect of **reserved matters** and **excepted matters**.

Parliament Buildings

The meeting place of the Northern Ireland Assembly on the Stormont Estate, Belfast. The **Executive** meets in **Stormont Castle**.

Petition of Concern

A request to the **Speaker** that a vote on a particular motion be subject to **cross-community support**. A petition must be signed by at least 30 **MLAs**, from more than one party, and the vote on the motion will be postponed for 14 days. If, at the end of that period, the petition is confirmed by at least 30 MLAs, the vote on the item will be subject to cross-community support. Petitions are not permitted on matters regarding the conduct of a **Minster** or MLA, or at the Second Stage of the legislative process (when the Assembly votes on the principles of a **Bill**).

Pledge of Office

A promise made by **Ministers** to uphold peaceful and democratic principles; to serve and promote the interests of all the people of Northern Ireland equally; to participate fully in all government institutions, including North-South and British-Irish institutions; to respect the joint nature of the office of **First Minister and deputy First Minister**; to participate in preparing and implementing a **Programme for Government**; and to act in accordance with the decisions of the **Executive** and Assembly.

Plenary

Meeting, or 'sitting', of the **Assembly** in the **Assembly Chamber**. Plenary meetings are usually held on Mondays and Tuesdays and are open to the public.

Policy

A course of action intended to change a certain situation. **Ministers** develop policies to improve public services. They might change the school curriculum or how hospital services are delivered. The policy making process involves recognition of a problem; assessment of possible solutions; selection of a preferred option; implementation; and then evaluation and review.

Political Party

An organised group of people with the same views about how a country/region should be run. Political parties seek to get members elected so that they will have the power to influence decisions and **laws**.

Prayer of Annulment

A **motion** to annul a piece of **delegated legislation** (Statutory Rule).

Primary Legislation

An **Act** or Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly (or **Parliament**) which set out the framework of the law. They are introduced as **Bills** and pass through the required stages of the **legislative process**. Secondary legislation, called **delegated legislation**, refers to details or small changes to an Act. In Northern Ireland, pieces of delegated legislation are called Statutory Rules. Statutory Rules are made by **Ministers** under powers given to them in the parent Act. See **Delegated Legislatio**n.

Private Members' Motions

Motions for **debate,** proposed by **MLAs**. The **Business Committee** agrees the agenda, or **Order Paper**, for **plenary** sessions and, if there is time available, parties get to pick motions in turn, according to **D'Hondt**.

Programme for Government (PfG)

Outlines the **Executive Committee's** priorities and plan of action, and is linked to the **Budget**. The PfG must be passed by the **Assembly.**

Proportional Representation (PR)

An electoral system (there are several types) in which the number of seats won corresponds closely with the proportion of total votes cast for each party. For example, in a perfectly proportional system, a **political party** gaining 30% of the votes in an election will win 30% of the seats. The Assembly is elected by the **Single Transferable Vote** PR system.

Protocol on Ireland/ Northern Ireland

A post-Brexit trading arrangement to allow the European Union (EU) to check goods entering the EU (Ireland) from the UK (Northern Ireland), without creating a 'hard' border between North and South. Goods coming from Great Britain are checked at Northern Ireland ports instead. Opposition to the Protocol by the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) prevented the formation of an **Executive** following the May 2022 election. The **Windsor Framework** made changes to the operation of the Protocol, in an effort to alleviate concerns about checks on goods travelling within the United Kingdom.

Public Accounts Committee

This **Standing Committee** holds **Departments** and other public bodies to account for spending decisions. It does this by considering reports by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), headed by the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG). When there is an official opposition in place, the Leader of the **Opposition** nominates the Chairperson.

Q

Question Time

The time set aside each week for **MLAs** to question **Ministers** about the work of their **Departments**. These questions, asked during **plenary** meetings in the **Assembly Chamber**, are known as **Oral Questions**. Each Minister answers questions for 45 minutes, on a rota basis. The first 30 minutes are for listed oral questions, which are published in advance. Fifteen Members are randomly selected by computer to ask an oral question. They may also ask a supplementary question and the Speaker may allow further supplementary questions from other MLAs. If time runs out before all the listed questions are answered, the unanswered questions will receive a written reply from the Minister. The remaining 15 minutes are for **Topical Questions**. Ministers only know the names of the 10 Members who will be asking a topical question – they do not know the questions in advance. When there is an official opposition, a member of the **Opposition** asks the first topical question. See also **Urgent Oral Question**.

R

Referrals for Executive Review

Procedure by which **MLAs** may refer a ministerial decision to the **Executive Committee** for consideration. Thirty Members may petition the **Speaker**, expressing concern that the decision contravenes the **Ministerial Code** or is a matter of public importance which needs to be considered by the Executive as a whole. If the Speaker is content that the petition meets the requirements in **Standing Orders**, the matter is referred to the Executive Committee.

Register of Members' Interests

MLAs must declare any interests held outside the Assembly (eg, jobs, consultancy work, membership of organisations, and gifts) that might affect their behaviour in the Assembly. See **Code of Conduct**.

Representation

Refers to representative **democracy** – people electing representatives to make decisions on their behalf. The people of Northern Ireland elect **MLAs** to the **Assembly**, Members of **Parliament** (MPs) to the House of Commons at Westminster, and Councillors to Northern Ireland's 11 local councils.

Reserved Matters

Areas in which the power to make laws has not been transferred from the UK **Parliament** to the **Assembly** but which may be transferred in future, eg, postal services and the minimum wage. Policing and justice powers were transferred in April 2010. Assembly **Bills** may include references to reserved matters only with the **Secretary of State's** consent. See **Excepted Matters** and **Transferred Matters**.

S

Scrutiny

This refers to the monitoring and investigation of the work of **Ministers** and their **Departments**, carried out by the Assembly. The Assembly appoints Ministers to the **Executive Committee** and holds them to account for their decisions. See **Opposition**, **Statutory Committees**, **Public Accounts Committee**, **Oral Questions**, **Question Time**, and **Written Questions**.

Secretary of State

A senior **Minister** of the UK **Government** who is in charge of the **Northern Ireland Office** and represents Northern Ireland's interests in the UK Cabinet. The Secretary of State is responsible for **reserved matters** and **excepted matters**.

Single Transferable Vote (STV)

The voting system used to elect MLAs to the **Northern Ireland Assembly**. It is a **Proportional Representation (PR)** system. In a multi-member **constituency**, parties may put forward more than one candidate. The voter ranks the candidates in order of preference, with '1' being their first choice. Voters do not have to rank-order all candidates, but may choose as many or as few as they like. Lower preferences may influence who gets elected in later stages of the count, so a ballot paper is potentially more influential the more candidates are ranked. A candidate is elected once his or her votes reach a set quota (target). If a candidate has a surplus of votes, the value of that surplus is transferred to other candidates, according to the second preferences on the ballot papers. All the candidate's votes are redistributed, so that the second preferences of everyone who voted for that candidate are taken into account, with a formula being used to reduce the value of each vote, so that the transfer value is equal to the surplus value. If there are still seats unfilled, candidates with the least number of votes are eliminated and their votes transferred, at full value, to second preference candidates.
The process continues until all 5 seats in the constituency are filled.

Speaker

The Presiding Officer of the **Assembly**. The Speaker is elected by the **Assembly** with **cross-community support**, to chair **plenary** meetings of the Assembly and ensure that the rules regarding the operation of the Assembly are followed at all times. The Speaker has a role in determining whether **Bills** are within the **legislative competence** of the Assembly (deal with **devolved matters** and comply with human rights and equality legislation). The Speaker also has a role in the selection of **Questions for Urgent Oral Answer** and **Matters of the Day**, and amendments to **motions** and **legislation**. The Business Committee, which schedules plenary business, is chaired by the Speaker, as is the **Assembly Commission**, the corporate body of the Assembly. The Speaker plays an ambassadorial role which includes hosting VIP visitors and attending external events on behalf of the Assembly. The Speaker also hosts events at **Parliament Buildings** with the aim of widening public access to the Assembly. Three Deputy Speakers are appointed to assist the Speaker, including a Principal Deputy Speaker. The Speaker maintains a politically neutral stance and does not vote on any matter in the **Assembly Chamber**.

St Andrews Agreement

The St Andrews Agreement, reached on 13 October 2006 between the British and Irish Governments, and **political parties** in Northern Ireland. It led to the restoration of the **Northern Ireland Assembly** (suspended since 14 October 2002) on 8 May 2007.

Stages

See **Legislative Process**

Standards and Privileges Committee

This **Standing Committee** considers matters relating to the conduct of **MLAs**, including reports from the Northern Ireland Assembly **Commissioner for Standards** on investigations into complaints that a breach of the **Code of Conduct** has occurred.

Standing Committees

Permanent **Committees** of the Assembly (currently 7), mostly concerned with the running of the **Assembly**:

- **Business Committee** (arranges **plenary** business)
- Committee on Procedures (reviews **Standing Orders**)
- Committee on **Standards and Privileges** (considers matters relating to the conduct of MLAs)
- **Assembly and Executive Review Committee** (considers matters relating to the functioning of the Assembly and Executive)
- **Public Accounts Committee** (scrutinises the use of resources by Departments and other public bodies)
- **Audit Committee** (scrutinises annual spending plans and accounts of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO)
- **Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee** (assists with the observation and implementation of the Windsor Framework)

Standing Orders

Rules governing the operation of the **Assembly**, agreed by **MLAs**. They are reviewed by the Committee on Procedures and any change to Standing Orders requires **cross-community support**.

Statutory

Required or permitted by law. Statute is another word for law.

Statutory Committees

There are 9 Statutory **Committees** which scrutinise the work of the 9 **Government Departments**, including proposals for **legislation** (**Bills**). They are consulted by **Ministers** on the development of new **policy** and also have the power to hold inquiries, send for persons and papers, and introduce legislation. There are 9 **MLAs** on each Committee, with membership broadly reflecting party strength in the Assembly. Chairs and Deputy Chairs are appointed using the **D'Hondt** system.

Statutory Rules

See **Delegated Legislation**

Stormont Brake

Under the **Windsor Framework**, certain laws relating to the European Union (EU) single market for goods apply in Northern Ireland. In the original **Protocol**, when this EU law was amended or replaced, it would automatically apply to Northern Ireland. The EU and UK agreed a new mechanism in the Windsor Framework, called the Stormont Brake. Under the terms of the Stormont Brake, 30 MLAs from at least two parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly can notify the UK Government that they want the "emergency brake" to be pulled on an EU law, to stop the application of an amended or replacement EU law in Northern Ireland.

Stormont Castle

The **Executive Committee** meets in Stormont Castle, home of The Executive Office, the **Department** of the **First Minister and deputy First Minister**. Stormont Castle is located on the Stormont Estate, Belfast, close to **Parliament Buildings**.

Stormont House Agreement

Reached in December 2014 between the British and Irish Governments and the 5 main parties, the primary aim of this agreement was to resolve a dispute over the issue of welfare reform. Other issues addressed included institutional reform (reduction in size of the **Assembly** and **Executive**, establishment of an official **opposition** and reform of the **Petition of Concern**); the Irish language, flags and parades; and how to deal with the past. In November 2015, there was also the **Stormont House Fresh Start Agreement**.

Stormont House Fresh Start Agreement

Reached in November 2015, this agreement was necessary due to the failure to implement the welfare reform element of the **Stormont House Agreement** (December 2014) and concerns about continuing paramilitary activity, which had led to the withdrawal of UUP and DUP **Ministers** from the **Executive**. It was agreed that the **legislation** on welfare reform would be passed by the **UK Parliament**; a body would be set up to report on paramilitary activity; and the rest of the Stormont House Agreement would be implemented.

T

The Executive Office (TEO)

Headed by the **First Minister** and the **deputy First Minister**, TEO co-ordinates the work of the **Executive Committee** and has overall responsibility for the **Programme for Government**, and for other matters including equality and good relations, strategic investment and regeneration, external relations, and tackling disadvantage and inequality.

Topical Questions

Questions to **Ministers** on topical (current) issues, asked for 15 minutes at the end of the traditional 30 minutes of **Question Time**. Ministers are advised 3 days in advance of the names of **MLAs** asking questions, but not the questions. Topical questions can be about any **constituency** or regional matter within the Minister's area of responsibility. Apart from the Member asking the topical question, who gets one supplementary question, no further supplementary questions are allowed. If there is an official opposition, the first topical question is asked by a member of the **Opposition**.

Transferred Matters

Matters on which the **Northern Ireland Assembly** has been given power, under **devolution**, to make laws. They are also known as devolved matters. The Assembly appoints the **Executive Committee** to govern in these areas. See **excepted matters** and **reserved matters**.

U

Urgent Oral Question

Questions for Urgent Oral Answer are questions which do not appear on the **Order Paper** but which, in the opinion of the **Speaker**, are of an urgent nature and relate to matters of public importance. They will normally be asked immediately after **Question Time**.

V

Voting

The method by which decisions are made in the Assembly. MLAs vote by saying “Aye” or “No”. The **Speaker** then decides if the **motion** is carried (passed) or not. If the result is unclear, or the Speaker’s decision is challenged, the Speaker may call for a **division** to take place, so that votes can be counted in the division lobbies beside the **Assembly Chamber**. The “Ayes” go through the lobby on the Speaker’s right-hand side and the “Noes”, through the lobby to the Speaker’s left. Most votes in the Assembly are passed by a majority of those voting. However, certain votes require **cross-community support**. In October 2024, the Assembly approved **Standing Order** 27a, which introduces voting by proxy in the Chamber, in limited circumstances. This means that an MLA’s vote can be counted if they are unable to attend a plenary sitting.

W

Whips

MLAs in political parties who are responsible for keeping party members informed about **Assembly** business and ensuring their attendance in the **Assembly Chamber**, especially when a **vote** is anticipated. Whips try to ensure that MLAs of the party vote in line with its policies. Most parties appoint a Chief Whip. The **Business Committee**, chaired by the **Speaker**, is made up of Chief Whips of the main parties and a representative of smaller parties and **independent** MLAs. The Business Committee agrees the agenda for **plenary** meetings.

Windsor Framework

The Windsor Framework is a post-Brexit legal agreement between the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom (UK) which adjusts the operation of the **Northern Ireland Protocol**. It introduced a UK Internal Market Scheme for goods coming in from the rest of the UK and remaining in Northern Ireland. These goods are not subject to the checks required at Northern Ireland ports on goods travelling across the Irish border into the EU. This is designed to allow the smoother flow of trade within the UK.

Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee

A Committee established to assist with the observation and implementation of the new procedures – the '**Stormont Brake**' and **applicability motions** – for amended or new European Union (EU) law which may apply in Northern Ireland under the **Windsor Framework**. The Assembly votes on applicability motions in relation to any new EU laws which would apply under the Framework, and may exercise its right to apply the 'Stormont Brake' on laws which amend or replace existing EU laws.

Written Questions

Questions to **Ministers** about the work of their **Department** that are not requesting an oral answer in the **Assembly Chamber**. Questions are submitted almost 2 weeks in advance, although members may also ask priority written questions, for answer within 2-5 working days. MLAs may ask up to 5 written questions per working day. Replies are sent to the **MLA** who asks the question and are published weekly in the Written Answers Booklet.

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