Effectiveness of the Assembly – Role of the Speaker

Northern Ireland Assembly
Education Service

Introduction

The Speaker plays a key role in ensuring that the Assembly fulfils its statutory functions in an effective manner. The importance of the position is reflected in the fact that election to this position is the first item of business in a new Assembly mandate. The Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires a Speaker to be elected before any further business can be conducted, including the appointment of Executive Ministers and Committee chairpersons.

The Speaker has a number of key responsibilities that play a huge role in the effectiveness and smooth running of the Assembly.

1. As chairperson in the **Assembly Chamber**, the Speaker has responsibility for ensuring that procedures are correctly followed, that debates are orderly, and that all sides are given an opportunity to put their arguments. The Speaker oversees any votes taken in debates and responds to Points of Order when a matter of procedure is raised. The Speaker also has a number of legal duties in relation to legislation and the appointment of MLAs and Ministers. MLAs frequently seek to submit an Urgent Oral Question or Matter of the Day for debate in the Chamber. It is the Speaker who decides whether or not they are selected. The Speakers also selects amendments to debates and legislation.

2. As chairperson of the **Business Committee**, the Speaker plays a key role in working with the Party Whips to agree the business to be discussed during sittings in the Assembly Chamber.

3. As chairperson of the **Assembly Commission** the Speaker is required under legislation, along with the other appointed representatives of the parties, to ensure that the Assembly is provided with the property, staff and services it requires to carry out its work.

4. The Speaker also performs an important **representational role** which includes receiving VIP visitors to the Assembly, such as Heads of State, Ambassadors and senior political figures, and engaging with other parliaments and regions. The Speaker leads the Assembly on civic occasions such as Armistice Day and in expressing condolences following the death of key figures. The Speaker also ensures key events in the community are marked within Parliament Building and attends external events to lead the engagement of the Assembly with the community it represents.

Managing the Effectiveness of the Assembly

Since the Assembly was restored in January 2020 following political agreement between the parties on the 'New Decade, New Approval' Deal, there have been two Speakers - Alex Maskey MLA (Sinn Féin) from January 2020 to February 2024, and Edwin Poots MLA (DUP) from February 2024 to date.

Both Speakers were responsible for overseeing the return of the Assembly after a period of being 'down', with the Assembly under pressure due to shortened mandates. Speaker Maskey faced the additional challenges brought by the global pandemic.

Speakers have the ability to use their influence to instigate changes to the way the Assembly carries out its business to increase its effectiveness as a scrutiny body. Here are some examples of actions taken in recent years.

Managing the changes in procedure required during the Covid-19 crisis.

The Speaker led the Assembly in adapting its way of working in line with the Covid-19 restriction. Proxy voting, and virtual and hybrid meetings (allowing virtual attendance) were introduced at that time. When the Assembly returned to normal working, it decided to continue to allow proxy voting in the Chamber, in limited circumstances. Speaker Maskey also proposed the creation of the Ad Hoc Committee on Covid-19 which allowed the Assembly to more easily receive updates from Ministers.

Managing the increase in legislative pressure towards the end of a mandate.

Towards the end of the last mandate, when the Assembly was considering a large amount of legislation, Speaker Maskey worked with party whips to manage the consideration of this business. This involved holding extra sittings of the Assembly.

In July 2025, Speaker Edwin Poots wrote to MLAs regarding the management of expected legislation in the remaining 18 months of this mandate, saying that lessons needed to be learnt from the last mandate. He referred to the fact that one of the first pieces of legislation is this mandate was an Executive Bill on Hospital Parking Charges required to deal with issues arising from a Member's Bill passed at the end of the last mandate. He also mentioned the Mediahuis court judgement which ruled that part of the Justice (Sexual Offences and Human Trafficking) Act 2022 which had been passed by the Assembly was 'not law', demonstrating that "legislation is vulnerable to challenge if it has been insufficiently scrutinised."

The Speaker acknowledged that the number of Executive Bills expected before the end of the mandate may require some late-night and additional sittings, and extra committee meetings in order to scrutinise Bills, but that this did pose a risk to effective scrutiny. He said that he would not be advocating the use of Accelerated Passage as a solution, as this "significantly increases the risks of passing legislation which is flawed or vulnerable to challenge." The Speaker said he was not prepared to "sacrifice scrutiny by flooding the system with more Members' Bills than time realistically permits" and that this was an area where the Assembly could control the pressure on the scrutiny process.

Members' Bills

Between January 2020 and March 2022, Speaker Maskey supported the increased interest shown by elected Members wishing to develop their own legislative proposals, called Members's Bills (or Private Members' Bills in Standing Orders.) He considered and approved over 20 Final Proposals from MLAs (a significant increase from previous mandates), enabling those MLAS to access professional drafters to develop a Bill for introduction to the Assembly. A dedicated unit was set up within the Bill Office to handle proposals for Members' Bills. This has increased the support available to Members. Speaker Maskey was the first Speaker to give evidence to an Assembly Committee, when he discussed the matter with the Procedures Committee in 2021, which was looking at how the Assembly could best deal with a high volume of Members' Bills. With a high number of Executive Bills also needing consideration within a relatively short period of time, the Assembly was under considerable pressure, and a number of Members' Bills simply did not have the required time to complete all the stages of the legislative process. By the end of the mandate, 10 Bills had made it, becoming Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Following the return of Government in February 2024, Edwin Poots was elected as the new Speaker. In May 2024 he announced new arrangements for Members' Bills, based on "lessons from the last mandate" and the recommendations of the Procedures Committee, with the purpose of ensuring "effective scrutiny" and "quality legislation". The Speaker referred to the high number of Members' Bills introduced in the previous mandate – 'one third of all bills', which he said was a 'significant imbalance' when compared with Executive legislation. He said that Executive legislation takes priority in recognition of the mandate received by Executive parties in the election. The Speaker also said that "Members are no less accountable than a Minister for the law they seek to introduce, therefore, the proposal for a Member's Bill should not be brought forward lightly."

The new arrangements are set out below and Bill proposals must meet certain requirements before the Speaker will consider whether or not to approve them for drafting.

Members' Bills:

- Proposals are to be submitted to the Bill Office within an 8-week window (in this mandate between 13 May and 5 July 2024)
- The policy area should be narrow and focused
- Research must be carried out
- There must be a public consultation lasting 12 weeks (up from 8 weeks)
- Members must consult the relevant Minister (as the Minister may be planning action in that policy area).

Twenty-seven Bill proposals were received by the Bill Office by the closing date in July 2024.

In 2025, the Speaker wrote to MLAs to let them know that not all of those proposals would make it. He said, "Given previous experience, and the delay in the Executive's legislative programme coming forward in a shortened mandate, it is already clear that there will not be the time to properly scrutinise anywhere near that number of Members' Bills." He added, "While it is too early to predict the exact final figure, it is more likely that only around half of that number can be facilitated."

The final deadline for Bills to be introduced to the Assembly (First Stage) is the end of June of the penultimate session of the mandate, which in this mandate, was 30 June 2026. This is to allow adequate time for proper consideration of the Bill. Once a Bill reaches First Stage, it goes through the same process as Executive Bills. Ten Members' Bills were introduced by the deadline and are now progressing through the scrutiny process.

Members Statements

These were proposed by Speaker Maskey and agreed by the Committee on Procedures and the Assembly in September 2021 as a new category of business for plenary meetings of the Assembly. The aim was to provide greater opportunity for Members to make a statement to the Assembly on a topical matter of public interest, without having to meet the strict criteria for Matters of the Day and Urgent Oral Questions. This development assists MLAs in fulfilling their representational role (raising issues of concern to constituents) and their scrutiny role (highlighting issues which may require action by Ministers).

Questions to Ministers

In the current mandate, Speaker Poots has focused on the Assembly's role of scrutinising Ministers and holding them to account. He has sought to make Question Time more dynamic by seeking to have more questions answered. He has raised the issue of the amount of time that it takes some Ministers to answer questions from MLAs.

More recently, in response to a Point of Order from Philip Brett MLA, the Speaker spoke about importance of Ministers answering questions. Philip Brett had asked the Justice Minster a written question about the expenditure by Office of the Police Ombudsman and the reply said that it was an operational matter for the Police Ombudsman's Office and that 'We do not hold the information requested'. The Speaker said: "I would suggest to ministers that it's not a good look withholding information from Members where you have that information and I will do my utmost as Speaker to ensure that Members get the answers to questions and hold Ministers to account, because that is the role of this body … to hold people who are making decisions on (our) behalf to account."

Standard of Debate

In 2021, Speaker Maskey issued MLAs with a document 'Ten Practical Principles of Debate'. This sought to demonstrate what the Assembly's standards of debate (courtesy, good temper, moderation and respect to other Members) meant in practice. In 2025, Speaker Poots returned to the issue of standards of debate. In a letter sent to MLAs in June 2025, and in comments in the Chamber, the Speaker said that "if the Assembly is to be serious about its scrutiny role, having a strong culture of parliamentary debate is vital." Acknowledging the continued "expectation of good temper, moderation and respect" in the Chamber, he called for more passionate and robust debate, without Points of Order (complaints) being raised frequently about the 'cut and thrust of debate'. He also warned that technology "has created a temptation for members to deliver a pre-scripted text in the Chamber, shortly after which they leave to issue a clip of their speech on social media." He said that debate was not just about stating your own opinion, but about 'listening, responding to and challenging the views of others" and that this was key to the Assembly fulfilling its "core functions of exercising scrutiny, holding Ministers to account and representing our constituents." The Speaker told MLAs that he would be expanding the Ten Principles of Debate document, to "create a stronger culture of debate and challenge." Regarding the core legislative function of the Assembly, the Speaker said, "When the Assembly has responsibility for making legislation which impacts on people's lives, it is vital that members are able to probe all the arguments before the Assembly takes a decision." The current Principles of Debate document can be found on the Speaker's pages of the Assembly website (under Correspondence).

November 2026