The role and functions of the Bill Office

The Bill Office supports Members, the Speaker, Assembly Committees, and Departments in navigating the process of making laws in the Assembly.

It does this by providing them with advice on:

- The procedures which govern the legislative process, including the Assembly's Standing Orders;
- The mechanics of how each plenary stage works in practice, including developing amendments to legislation;
- The requirements of their specific role during each plenary stage.

The Bill Office also oversees the proofing, printing and circulation of all key Bill documents, to ensure that Members have the most up to date information to support them in making decisions on Bills. For example, the Bill Office provides updated versions of Bills which incorporate the relevant changes made at amending stages. Accessing this information before debates is key to enabling Assembly Members to determine how they intend to vote.

Where do Bills come from?

The majority of Bills are initiated by Executive Ministers and drafted by the Office of the Legislative Counsel ('OLC'). This is a team of specialist legal professionals dedicated to the drafting of legislation. Other Bills may be initiated by Members, committees and the Assembly Commission. These Bills are normally drafted by external drafters with experience in developing legislation.

Amendments proposed by Ministers are drafted by OLC, whereas amendments proposed by Members and committees are supported by the Bill Office.

What is a Member's Bill?

A Member's Bill (previously called a Private Member's Bill) is a proposal for a new law introduced by an individual Member. Bills brought to the Assembly by individual Members have an important role to play in shaping the public debate, influencing policy and making law, for example, where a Minister has no plans to legislate to address a particular social problem which the Member thinks is necessary.

Procedurally, there is no difference between a Bill brought forward by an Executive Minister and a Bill brought forward by an individual Member. That is, all public legislation must follow the same procedural requirements, once it has reached Introduction.

What support does the Bill Office provide for Members' Bills?

The Bill Office has a dedicated unit, the Members' Bills Development Unit, which assists Members in developing and drafting a Private Member's Bill with the support of Assembly resources.

The Unit provides guidance and advice to Members on developing their proposal for legislation, ensuring it meets a range of requirements to access Assembly resources. Officials in the Unit help Members wishing to bring forward a Private Member's Bill to access research, legal advice and specialist drafters. The Member is required to conduct a public consultation and is provided with advice on key principles of effective consultation.

The Speaker makes decisions on how the service operates, including the requirements placed on the Member to research, consult and reflect on their proposal for legislation. The Speaker decides which proposals have met the criteria to access Assembly resources and are thereby drafted for the Member to introduce to the Assembly.

Sometimes Members will seek to have a Bill which has been drafted outside the Unit introduced.

How long does it take for a Bill to become law?

This depends on a range of factors including the complexity of the issues being dealt with in the Bill, the size of the Bill, the level of public interest in the subject matter, and the degree of political consensus on the Bill. Proposed amendments will require careful consideration and the range of issues arising at Committee Stage will be an important factor.

Some Bills may be passed in a number of weeks, but most will take many months to pass all their stages in the Assembly and receive Royal Assent. Bills going through by accelerated passage (other than Budget Bills) require appropriate justification to the Assembly and the relevant committee to explain the reasons for its urgency and the repercussions of a Bill not being progressed at pace.

How many Bills does the Bill Office process?

This depends on the Executive's Legislative Programme and the number of Private Members' Bills that are developed and introduced.

During the **2017 to 2022 mandate** (in practice January 2020 - March 2022), 56 Bills were introduced to the Assembly – 36 Executive Bills and 19 Members' Bills. Of these, a total of 46 completed all of their stages and became law – the 36 Executive Bills and 10 Members' Bills.

The general trend is that there has been an increase in the number of Private Members' Bills introduced to the Assembly. The Committee on Procedures

conducted an Inquiry on Private Members' Bills within the Assembly to consider how the Assembly should best manage this increasing demand whilst delivering a fair service which provides value for money. As a result of this, there are new rules regarding Members' Bills, including a date by which initial proposals should be submitted to the Bill Office, and a date by which a Bill must be introduced to the Assembly – the end of June of the penultimate year of a mandate (30 June 2026 in this mandate.)

To date in the **2022 to 2027 mandate** (11 November 2026), 36 **Executive Bills** have been introduced to the Assembly. Nineteen have received Royal Assent and are now Acts of the Northern Ireland Assembly and one is waiting for Royal Assent. The others have not completed all stages in the Assembly's legislative process.

Twelve Non-Executive Bills have been introduced to the Assembly, including an Assembly Commission Bill to set up a new independent body to determine the salary of MLAs and a Committee Bill – the School Uniform (Trousers) Bill, introduced by the Committee for Education. Ten Members' Bills made it to Introduction Stage by 30 June 2026 out of a total of 23 proposals:

- Declan McAleer MLA – *Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill* - support for uplands farmers
- Danny Baker MLA - *Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill*
- Pat Sheehan MLA - *Irish Medium Education (Workforce Plan) Bill* - to address recruitment issues in Irish medium schools – duty on the Department to provide incentives
- John Blair MLA - *Hunting with Dogs Bill* (ban on fox hunting with dogs)
- Sinead McLaughlin MLA - *Regional Balance Bill* – duty on government to consider regional balance in strategic economic planning
- Eoin Tennyson MLA - *Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Bill* – to ban conversion practices
- Peter McReynolds MLA - *Trees Protection Bill*
- Colm Gildernew MLA - *Housing Bill*
- Paula Bradshaw MLA - *Display of Flags and Emblems Bill* - duty on Department of Infrastructure to remove flags and emblems in public places if it is in the public interest to do so
- Clare Sugden MLA - *Age Discrimination Bill* - to prevent discrimination against older people and young people from age 16

To date, one Member's Bill has been passed by the Assembly – the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill. Final Stage took place on 10 November 2026 and the Bill awaits Royal Assent.

A Petition of Concern has been tabled at the Final Stage of the Irish Medium Workforce (Recruitment) Bill, delaying the vote on the Bill by 14 days. If the Petition is confirmed after that, the vote to pass the Bill will require cross-community support.

Some Bills do not complete all their stages for a number of reasons. The most common reason is that the Assembly does not support the principles of the Bill and votes it down. For other Bills, it can be the case that the sponsor introduces it very

late in the mandate, and there is simply not enough plenary time available for it to complete all of the necessary stages.

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