Northern Ireland Assembly

Education Service

The Work of the Business Office

The Business Office exists to:

1. support plenary meetings of the Assembly in the Chamber;
2. provide information for MLAs and the public;
3. provide procedural advice to the Speaker and MLAs;
4. enable MLAs to ask questions to Ministers; and
5. keep the legal record of the Assembly's proceedings.

In everything it does, the Business Office operates in accordance with:

- the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (the law); and
- Standing Orders of the Northern Ireland Assembly (the Assembly's rules);

It is further guided by:

- Speakers' rulings (interpretation of Standing Orders by various Speakers over the years);
- Assembly precedents (what has happened in the Assembly previously in similar circumstances); and
- Precedent in other parliaments (procedures other parliaments have used in similar circumstances).

1. Support plenary meetings of the Assembly in the Chamber

The main role of the Business Committee is to make arrangements for the business that is to be considered when the Assembly meets in plenary session in the Chamber, and most parties are represented on it. The Business Office provides secretariat support to the Business Committee.

After its weekly meeting, the Business Committee issues order papers (agendas), listing the items of business that will be considered during the following week. The Committee, which is chaired by the Speaker, meets in closed session, but minutes of its meetings are published on the Assembly's website.

There is a range of business that may need to be considered by the whole Assembly. It may relate to the Assembly itself, such as changing committee membership, or be requested by the Executive, for example, a Minister may want to make a statement or seek the Assembly's approval for proposed legislation. Assembly Committees or individual MLAs may also ask for debates on their motions. The Business Office ensures that requests for business are presented in time and in a format that allows the Business Committee to schedule them so that the Assembly can debate and decide on issues.

The Business Office provides a brief to the Speaker and Deputy Speakers outlining what is required for them to ensure that the business taking place during plenary is conducted in accordance with the law and Assembly rules. For example, whether a motion requires cross-community support by the Assembly or for how long a Member is allowed to speak during a debate.

The Business Office is also responsible for counting MLAs' votes when the Assembly divides on a matter in the Chamber and for ensuring that MLAs are content that divisions have taken place in accordance with Assembly rules.

2. **Provide information for MLAs and the public;**

The law requires that certain documents are provided formally to the Assembly for all MLAs to see. Most, but not all, of these documents are produced by government departments. Such documents are said to be 'laid' or 'presented' and it is the role of the Business Office to facilitate this process. The Business Office also publishes a list of these documents on the website.

Statutory Rules[1] are an example of laid papers and are included in the list above. However, as most statutory rules are also subject to various deadlines while they are being considered by the Assembly, the Business Office provides a statutory rule tracker to assist MLAs and the public in following their progress.

3. **Provide procedural advice to Members and the Speaker**

Once an order paper has been agreed, it cannot be changed unless formally revised by the Business Committee, which is rare. However, MLAs can seek to amend certain proposals listed for debate[2],or request to speak on[3] or ask a Minister about[4] something important or urgent that has occurred since the Assembly last met. The Business Office assists MLAs in following the correct procedure to make these requests and also provides procedural advice to the Speaker, who must decide whether or not to accept a request. Once a decision has been made, the Business Office informs all MLAs and the public about requests that have been accepted via the links on the Assembly website, highlighted above.

MLAs are able to express their position and seek the support of other MLAs on any matter by tabling a motion. There are very few rules about how a motion should be worded, but it is the role of the Business Office to ensure the phraseology used is consistent with the accepted parliamentary style. Some motions may be chosen by the Business Committee for debate, but until they are debated or withdrawn by the MLA(s) who tabled it, they are placed on a No Day Named List of motions which is maintained on the Assembly website by the Business Office for the duration of a mandate.

[1] Statutory Rules are a type of legislation. You can find out more about them here.

[2] Link to Marshalled List of Amendments

[3] Link to Matters of the Day requests

[4] Link to Urgent Oral Question requests

4. Enable Members to ask Ministers questions

The Business Office facilitates MLAs in tabling questions to Ministers and the Assembly Commission[5], which includes providing advice on admissibility and timing of questions. The Business Office is also responsible for publishing all questions submitted by MLAs and the answers provided by Ministers or the Assembly Commission.

More about Assembly Questions is available in the separate resource on Questions to Ministers

5. Keep the legal record of the Assembly's proceedings

In addition to the substantially verbatim report of all plenary proceedings produced by Hansard[6], standing orders require that a minute of proceedings, a note of all key decisions made, is 'perused and signed' by the Speaker before being printed in the Journal of Proceedings of the Assembly. The Business Office produces these minutes and, once agreed by the Speaker, makes them available on the website here.

[5] The Assembly Commission is the body corporate of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

[6] Hansard, or the Official Report of the Northern Ireland Assembly, is the authoritative record of the proceedings of the Assembly. It is a substantially verbatim transcript of the proceedings; it records what was said as well as what was decided. You can find out more about it on the Assembly website.