

Committees of the Northern Ireland Assembly

KEY:

N: Narrator

N: Committees of the Northern Ireland Assembly shape legislation, influence government policy, and hold the Executive Departments to account.

Committees are made up of between 5 and 9 MLAs from different political parties. Like Executive Ministers, committee chairpersons and deputy chairs are appointed using the d'Hondt mathematical formula. This means that the more 'seats' parties win in the election, the more committees they're entitled to chair.

Most committee meetings take place weekly, on Wednesdays and Thursdays, in Parliament Buildings. They tend to last about two to three hours, and members of the public may attend as observers or watch online.

There are three main types of Assembly committee: standing, ad hoc and statutory. Each committee specialises in an area of work.

The six standing committees each have specific roles assigned to them. For example, the Business Committee agrees the agenda – called the Order Paper – for plenary meetings in the Assembly Chamber; the Committee for Procedures reviews the rules of the Assembly, known as Standing Orders; and the Public Accounts Committee works with the Northern Ireland Audit Office to hold government departments to account for how they have spent public money.

Ad hoc committees are set up for a limited time to look at specific issues. These can be 'joint committees', with MLAs from two or more committees working together.

There are nine statutory committees, one for each Northern Ireland government department. Statutory committees play a big part in the law-making process. They scrutinise the work of ministers and departments, and allow the people of Northern Ireland to have their say on proposed new laws and government policy.

Most bills passed by the Northern Ireland Assembly are Executive Bills, proposed by ministers. After a Second Stage debate, when the Assembly votes to consider a bill further, it moves on to the Committee Stage. The relevant committee studies the bill line by line, consults researchers and experts, and asks groups of people affected by the law – called stakeholders – to comment. Members of the public may also write to the Committee with their views. The Committee invites some people to attend a meeting, to give 'oral evidence' and answer questions. It then produces a report on the bill, which often recommends changes, called 'amendments'. The Assembly debates the report and usually votes in favour of committee amendments.

Committees do have the power to introduce bills, although committee bills are rare.

Committees can also hold inquiries into issues raised by interest groups or members of the public, or to scrutinise an aspect of the department's work. They commission research papers, hear from experts, stakeholders and the public, and produce a report with recommendations.

The report is debated and the relevant minister responds in the Assembly Chamber, as well as having to respond to the Committee's recommendations in writing within 2 months.

Committees have a legal right to 'send for persons and papers' to help them do their job. They call on ministers and government officials to brief them on issues and answer questions. Refusing to provide documents or attend a meeting could result in a substantial fine or a prison sentence. So, committees are pretty powerful.

While meetings in the Chamber may often highlight divisions between parties, working relationships in committees are usually harmonious. Members work constructively while representing the interests of the people who voted for them.

To find out more, go to www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/