



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Get Involved

The work of the Northern Ireland Assembly



Pól Callaghan MLA, Tom Elliott MLA, Gregory Campbell MP MLA and Martina Anderson MLA answer questions on local issues at Magee.

Contents

This first edition of the community newsletter features our recent conference at Magee and a number of events in Parliament Buildings. It is a snapshot of the Community Outreach Programme in the Assembly.

We welcome your feedback

We welcome your feedback on the Community Outreach programme and on this newsletter. Please let us know what you think by emailing outreach@niassembly.gov.uk or by calling 028 9052 1785

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Speaker's Introduction

Representative democracy through civic participation

As Speaker, I have always been very clear that genuine engagement with the community is essential to the success of the Assembly as an effective democratic institution. We know that the decisions and legislation passed in the Assembly are best when they are informed by the views and experiences of the people we represent.

Every MLA would recognise the important work carried out by the community and voluntary sector in their



constituency. The event at Magee was the first time we had tried such a specific approach with MLAs giving support and advice to community groups including on how to get involved with the process of developing policy and legislation at the Assembly. This was in direct response to the needs identified by community groups themselves. We have equally listened to feedback from the event and it has been

overwhelmingly positive. I was deeply impressed by how passionately those who attended articulated the interests of their own causes and communities. I have spoken to many individuals and I am greatly encouraged that they intend to get more involved with the Assembly as a result.

The Community Outreach unit is available to support, advise and liaise with the community and voluntary sector. It helps provide opportunities for local groups to get involved with the Assembly. It is a great resource for community and voluntary groups and I urge you to use it.

William Hay MLA, Speaker

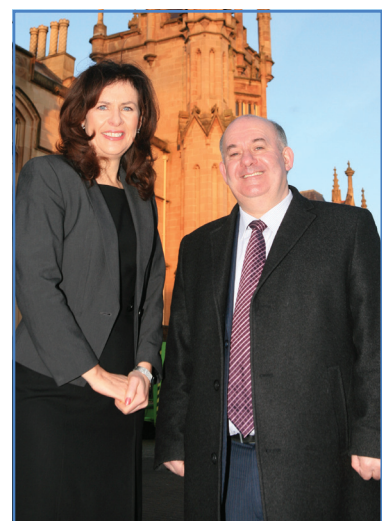
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Loud and clear!

The Northern Ireland Assembly held a very successful community and voluntary sector event at the University of Ulster at Magee at the end of January.

Designed to get your voice heard in the Assembly, the event targeted smaller local groups from the North West constituencies of Northern Ireland.

The day kicked off with an address from the Speaker of the Assembly, William Hay MLA. The Speaker, whose constituency is Foyle, spoke about how central the Third Sector has been to the development of society and services in Derry/Londonderry and the surrounding area. He also spoke about how the Assembly can only be truly successful when all sections of society, their opinions and their needs, find a voice in the Assembly.



Northern Ireland Assembly Speaker, Mr. William Hay, MLA, and Professor Deirdre Heenan, Dean of Academic Development and acting Provost, Magee campus.

All Magee photographs appear courtesy of Lorcan Doherty Photography

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Fergal O'Donnell of the Rural Community Network put questions to the panel



Sean McMonigle of the Bogside and Brandywell Initiative makes his point

Eamonn Maillie, a veteran Assembly broadcaster, hosted a robust Question and Answer session with MLAs which focused on a number of local questions. The MLAs,

pictured on the front page, were involved in some spirited debate. In fact, the audience responded with as many opinions and answers as the panel.

The workshops sessions were a high point for many of the participants. The session was chaired by MLAs and assisted by Assembly clerks. The participants had the opportunity to present an issue to a mock Committee, get feedback directly from the Chair (MLA) and the clerk on the processes that govern a committee and pointers on how to make the best of the evidence sessions for organisations.



Maureen Fox of Women into Public Life asks MLAs to explain

Feedback on this section was tremendous with groups identifying how practical and valuable this session was.

Thanks go to the MLAs who ran the sessions - Mary Bradley, SDLP; Raymond McCartney, Sinn Fein; David McClarty, Independent; Basil McCrea, UUP and Pat Ramsey, SDLP all of whom were ably assisted by the Assembly clerking team.

MLAs who chaired the sessions



David McClarty MLA



Mary Bradley MLA



Basil McCrea MLA



Raymond McCartney
MLA



Pat Ramsey MLA

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Next Steps - your thoughts on getting groups and individuals involved in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The afternoon session of the Magee event focussed on listening to what the community and voluntary sector had to say about being heard in the Assembly.

The delegates were asked to suggest how the Assembly can better engage with its citizens, particularly young people, women and lower income groups who have not traditionally become involved with the legislature.

There were lots of opinions and the feedback fell into 5 main strands:

Getting information	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ There is a need to improve Assembly website to make it more available especially via electronic means.■ More user friendly language.■ More workshops and fact sheets that are relevant to constituencies should be provided by the NIA	<p>We are working hard to design a website that is more user friendly, more interactive and that really meets the needs of all our users - we hope to launch this within the next 12 months.</p> <p>In the meantime you can have your say on Assembly business on our facebook page or send us questions and feedback via twitter @niassembly.</p>
Demonstrating local issues at the Assembly	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ How does the community and voluntary sector get access to the Assembly? Innovative ideas can be used when approaching the committees.	<p>There are lots of ways of getting your voice heard from the Assembly. Future copies of this bulletin will be focusing on the different methods in detail but they can include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">■ responding to a consultation■ asking an MLA to consider a debate on an important constituency matter■ asking an MLA to put a question to a Minister■ holding an event in Parliament Buildings■ asking MLAs or Ministers to an event in your local community■ asking for quotes from your local MLAs■ attending an outreach event
Bring Assembly issues and decisions to a local audience	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Establish regular opportunities for representatives from voluntary sector who can express issues with MLAs on a regular basis.	<p>The Magee event was the first time that we tried a workshop approach to practice giving evidence to a Committee with the huge benefit of having MLAs on hand to give direction and guidance. Feedback said it was invaluable and will be used more widely in future.</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ Politicians in committees do not consult with the voluntary/community sector before making decisions in these areas	<p>Committees have been working hard to widen their engagement with groups and individuals. Most committees have held large scale events in Parliament Buildings as well as smaller meetings on specific issues like Bills or departmental programmes. Committees now also hold regular meetings and undertake visits across Northern Ireland. This means a growing number of groups have met with MLAs and we will continue to develop this after the election.</p>
Better education	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">■ There is a need for more neutral representatives to come out and break processes and systems down and explain them more clearly.	<p>Providing an Assembly for the people of Northern Ireland is a pretty rigorous process. We recognise that there are some elements that can seem impenetrable. Here in the Outreach team we are keen to help navigate the paths into the Assembly.</p>

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Better education (*continued*)

- Could we offer an education programme for the community and voluntary sector.
- Assembly representatives need to be on the ground more explaining to the people how the Assembly works

We are also planning to run a number of workshops on how the Assembly works and are always on call to answer your queries.

Better connections

- Politicians should try and meet community groups regularly
- Politicians need to engage with all voluntary sector- a meeting space or forum will provide new and innovative ways of engaging, sharing views and highlighting issues.
- Women's networks and youth information centres have databases that the Assembly can use
- Inclusion needs to be the name of the game: include more marginalised groups again issues based, deaf, blind etc and will be seen as a very positive step.

We know that MLAs regularly meet groups but there may be opportunities to hold events to bring MLAs and groups together. Committees have already been doing a considerable amount of this and it has proven very successful. The Outreach team are looking at additional ways of connecting with the Assembly. We will have more info for you soon.

We are keen to widen the net and ensure that all community and voluntary organisations are connected. Pass this on to other interested groups. Send us your contact details. We are particularly interested in email addresses as we wish to minimise printing and postage costs.

The Assembly Commission abides by the statutory list for consultation. We also add additional names to that list depending on that consultation. Send us your details to be included on that lists.

We have made great strides in publishing material in other languages and formats. We are working to ensure better inclusion for all. Committees identify specific groups and organisations of relevance to the subject under inquiry or scrutiny and then call for evidence from such groups.

Committee Hears Concerns on Social Development

The Committee for Social Development held an event recently to give charities and groups from across Northern Ireland the chance to raise their concerns on topics such as welfare reform and the credit crunch, disability issues, housing association procurement and volunteering.

Simon Hamilton MLA, Chairperson of the Committee said:

"The Committee for Social Development has responsibility for a wide range of issues including housing, social security and pensions. With the large volume of Bills being looked at by the Committee, there are fewer opportunities for us to hear directly from groups and individuals affected by these issues.

"The Committee is keen to reach out, hear people's views and discuss the issues concerning them. This is the fourth event we have organised like this. They are a useful way of bringing people and the Committee together. At the meeting we heard how important volunteers are to charities and community groups, the procurement challenges facing the Housing Associations and the impact of planning on the social economy.

"What we hear at these meetings informs the work of this Committee and quite possibly the Committee in the next mandate."



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Getting results - Age NI and Age Sector Platform



Supporters from Age NI and Age Sector Platform meet MLAs

The final debates on the Older People's Commissioner Bill that took place on 29th November and 7th December, proved to be a big attraction for Northern Ireland's older generation, despite the weather. Supporters of the 'We Agree' campaign led by Age NI in partnership with Age Sector Platform met with several MLAs in the Great Hall beforehand and filled the public gallery to capacity during the debates.

'We Agree' Project Leader Michele Smyth said:

"There was a real buzz in the air and older people came away feeling that they had been part of an historic event that was a great example of democracy in action. We were delighted to see the passage of the Bill and are especially grateful to the Assembly Outreach team who worked extremely hard to provide easy access for older people during these events and showed great professionalism and hospitality."



Attendees in the Great Hall before the debate

Finding out more - Tor Bank school

The students from Tor Bank school requested a visit to Parliament Buildings to find out more about the work of the Assembly. The young people, all of whom have severe learning needs, were interested in finding out about the jobs that people do in the building as they prepare to leave school. They also met the Education Committee members and used the opportunity to ask about funding for new buildings at their school.



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Starting Conversations - Bridge of Hope

A series of locally-led bus tours looking at the history of North Belfast, Stormont and Dublin took place in October 2010 as part of the North Belfast Respect Programme. The programme, funded by OFMDFM and the Housing Executive, raise awareness and understanding around a range of political, social, economic, historical and cultural issues affecting society.

The Outreach team gave participants a tour of Parliament Buildings and an historical overview of the institution's varied social and political chapters including devolution.

North Belfast MLAs Gerry Kelly and Fred Cobain and Councillor Niall Kelly met visitors and took part in a question and answer session on local and Northern Ireland issues.

Aine Magee of Bridge of Hope said:

"This project brings together single-identity communities who were once seen at war with each other. Today levels of unemployment, deprivation and poor health unite them all. In recent years enlightened community groups have spearheaded several major bridge building processes and as a result of this, a unique set of intra-community relationships exist. These unique cross community tours are the result of years of hard work.

"For many, this was the first time that they had come to Parliament Buildings or spoken to a politician. It opens the channels of communications that lead to better representatives and better communities."



Fred Cobain MLA



Gerry Kelly MLA

Our plans...

The Outreach team are currently writing its plans for the next mandate which starts after the elections in May.

However, we are keen to link in with community and voluntary groups at any time. We input into the free Vital Links programme, run by NICVA, which gives an insight into how the Assembly works. To find out more, contact NICVA on 028 9087 7777.

We can also offer tailored information sessions to any group about the work of the Assembly and, following the success of the Magee event, we are keen to develop the workshops element as the groups felt it was this was a very useful format.

If you have an idea for engaging with the Assembly and you want to explore the possibilities, then call Stephanie Mallon on 028 9052 1785 or email outreach@niassembly.gov.uk

We are keen to keep in contact with you and your community and are currently developing a database of community contacts. We will be sending information, details of future events, help and tips on getting involved with the Assembly.

Drop us an email with your name, organisation, address, phone number and email. We are keen to keep costs to a minimum and help the environment so we will be communicating with you by email. We look forward to hearing from you.

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Feedback Report

Delegates at the Magee event took time to let us know how much they have engaged with the Assembly and the results are displayed below.

In the past have you or your organisation:

Getting Involved	
Visited Parliament Buildings	77%
Attended a Committee meeting	14%
Attended an Assembly plenary session	18%
Getting Information	
Visited the Assembly website	66%
Received an educational presentation from the Assembly	23%
Signed up for the Assembly twitter feed	0%
Signed up to receive press releases	5%
Local Representation	
Visited your local constituency office	41%
Met with local MLA	25%
Strengthening Democracy	
Provided written evidence for a consultation	16%
Attended and provided evidence at a Committee meeting	9%

Getting Involved

Over 77% of delegates have visited Parliament Buildings, but only 18% have viewed a Plenary in action and 14% have attended a Committee meeting.

Did you know that Parliament Buildings is open to the public between 9.00am and 4.00pm Monday to Friday?

Members of the public can watch Plenary Sittings from the Public Gallery on Mondays from 12 noon and Tuesdays from 10.30am and are able to attend Committee meetings held in public session. To find out what is being debated and for details of meetings you can attend please visit the business diary.

Guided tours

There are two ways to get a guided tour of Parliament Buildings. You can contact your local MLA and ask him to sponsor a tour. Alternatively, there are scheduled tours available during the week.

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To find out more about arranging tours or functions in Parliament Buildings please contact the Events Office on 028 9052 1362 or by emailing the Events Office at eventsoffice@niassembly.gov.uk

Getting Information

Education

Our education programmes promotes citizenship and aims to increase parliamentary knowledge. The Education service delivers programmes in Parliament Buildings as well as in schools as part of Outreach – this is supported by MLAs who participate in both Parliament Buildings and in schools. It is the Northern Ireland Assembly's aim that all young people will go to the polls when they reach 18 with a clear idea of the power that their vote holds and the impact that their representatives will make on all aspects of their life. To find out more about this programme by visiting www.education.niassembly.gov.uk

A community programme for groups is also available by emailing outreach@niassembly.gov.uk or by calling 028 9052 1785.

The Assembly online

The Assembly website is the source of a wealth of information. All debates in plenary, discussions in committees and decisions in the Assembly are online for you to see.

However, you can also receive essential information direct to your inbox or phone. Only 5% of the delegates had signed up to receive Assembly press releases and none for the Twitter service. Both of these resources will give you instant access to the most up to date activities happening in the Assembly. They will tell you what you want to know when you need to know it.

To sign up for press releases visit www.niassembly.gov.uk/media.htm and enter your email address.

Follow [@niassembly](https://twitter.com/niassembly) on twitter to receive updates on all aspects of Assembly business.

Local Representation

The first step to getting your voice heard is by visiting your local constituency office or meeting with your MLA. Only 41% of delegates surveyed had visited their local constituency office and 25% had met one of their MLAs.

MLAs are very clear about their responsibility to represent their constituency and welcome all into the constituency office. To find out who your local representatives and where they are based in your community then visit www.niassembly.gov.uk and click on Your MLAs. Alternatively you can call 028 9052 1137.

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Strengthening democracy

The Northern Ireland Assembly will continue to provide advice and support to those who are coming to provide evidence. 16% of respondents had provided written evidence to a committee and 9% had given evidence to a committee. These have all been part of a consultation process which is central to how the Northern Ireland Assembly works — to find out more and to get involved contact the Outreach team.

The conference provided the opportunity for attendees to learn about legislative processes and how to provide evidence successfully. The feedback provided a clear indication that knowledge was increased across the board, with 93% feeling the conference improved their knowledge; however a number still felt that they would not feel confident in understanding the process. We hope to continue to run information sessions to address this and provide additional information and resources through the Community Outreach newsletter.

93% of delegates felt the conference improved their knowledge

Useful Numers and contact details

Service	Phone number	Email address	Details
General Information	028 9052 1137	info@niassembly.gov.uk	A good place to start for general information
Community Outreach	028 9052 1785	outreach@niassembly.gov.uk	This unit supports charities, community groups and individuals.
Events and tours	028 9052 1948	eventsoffice@niassembly.gov.uk	This staff team are on hand to discuss opportunities for tours and events
Education programme	028 9052 1833	education.service@niassembly.gov.uk	This unit offers an education programme to schools both in Parliament Buildings and in schools

Our textphone number is 028 9052 1209

You can get this newsletter in larger print or in Braille formats on request. Contact the Community Outreach unit for more details.