

Committee on Procedures

End of Session Report 2024 – 2025

Remit and Powers

1. The Committee on Procedures is a Standing Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly established in accordance with paragraph 10 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement and under Assembly Standing Order 54.
2. The Committee has power to:
 - Consider and review, on an ongoing basis, the Standing Orders and procedures of the Assembly;
 - Initiate inquiries and publish reports;
 - Republish Standing Orders annually; and
 - Call for persons and papers.

Membership

3. The Committee has nine Members, including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, and a quorum of five Members. The membership of the Committee is as follows:

Ms Kelly Armstrong (Chairperson)
Miss Órlaithí Flynn¹ (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Robbie Butler²
Mr Trevor Clarke
Mr Danny Donnelly
Ms Aoife Finnegan³
Ms Cara Hunter⁴
Mr William Irwin⁵
Mr Maolíosa McHugh

¹ Órlaithí Flynn replaced Sinéad Ennis as Deputy Chairperson on 3 February 2025

² Robbie Butler replaced John Stewart as a Member on 5 March 2024

³ Aoife Finnegan replaced Sinéad Ennis as a Member on 17 February 2025

⁴ Cara Hunter replaced Matthew O'Toole as a Member on 28 May 2024

⁵ William Irwin replaced Gary Middleton as a Member on 8 April 2024

End of Session Report

4. This Report details the work of the Committee on Procedures from its establishment in the current mandate and covers the period from its first meeting on 28 February 2024 to 31 August 2025.

Meetings

5. The Committee met on twenty-six occasions during the period of this report. Three meetings were held in public session and twenty-three in part public/part closed session. The Committee met in closed session to receive legal advice, to discuss policy options on a wide range of issues and to agree a committee report. The Committee held an informal strategic planning session in April 2024 to identify the key priority work areas to be taken forward and held a further session in September 2024 to review progress and confirm the priorities for the next nine months.

Visits

6. The Committee undertook a study visit to the Scottish Parliament on 4 and 5 December 2024. The purpose of the visit was to learn from long standing practise established by the Scottish Parliament on proxy voting, electronic voting, oral questions and the use of substitute members in committees. These issues were some of the Committee's agreed priority work areas. Members met with the Presiding Officer, Whips and MSPs from a variety of Parties and officials during the two day visit and also attended parliamentary sessions in the Chamber.



l-r: Danny Donnelly MLA, Maoliosa McHugh MLA, Alison Johnstone MSP (Presiding Officer), Kellie Armstrong MLA (Committee Chairperson), Robbie Butler MLA

Key Activities, Outputs and Achievements 2024-25

7. The Committee held its first strategic planning session on 10 April 2024 to discuss a range of potential work areas and agree the key shorter-term and longer-term priority issues to be progressed. These priorities were subsequently reviewed in September 2024 and several additional work areas were identified and added to the work programme.
8. In accordance with its agreed work programme, the Committee reviewed a range of Standing Orders and procedures of the Assembly, and brought four motions to the Assembly to make changes to Standing Orders during the period covered by this report. All the motions were approved, as required, by a cross-community vote. The main items of business considered are summarised below.

Proxy Voting for Parental Leave in Plenary – Standing Order 27A

9. Proxy voting in Plenary, which had previously been provided under a temporary Standing Order as part of the procedural response to the Covid 19 pandemic and had lapsed at the end of July 2022, was identified by the Committee as one of the first priority issues to be taken forward. Having discussed a range of possible categories for proxy voting the Committee decided to consider proxy voting for parental leave, which is a well-established practise in many other legislatures and had fewer operational issues, first before considering other potential categories.
10. In taking forward this work the Committee consulted closely with the Speaker, commissioned research on how proxy voting for parental leave operates in other legislatures, sought the views and opinions of the political parties and independent Members in the Assembly, gave due consideration to how Temporary Standing Order 112 Proxy Voting operated in the past and received legal advice on a range of issues. The report '[Proxy Voting for Parental Leave in Plenary](#)' outlines how the Committee developed the Standing Order and details its consideration of a range of practical and administrative matters.
11. Standing Order 27A Voting by Proxy defines parental leave as:
 - a) Maternity leave, paternity leave, adoption leave, shared parental leave or parental bereavement leave;
 - b) Complications arising from pregnancy, including miscarriage, stillbirth and baby loss; or
 - c) Fostering responsibilities.
12. It also provides for the Speaker to issue guidance on how the proxy voting scheme will work in practice including the process of designating a proxy, the period for which a proxy may last and how a proxy may be withdrawn or varied.
13. The Assembly debated and approved [Standing Order 27A Voting by Proxy](#) on 22 October 2024 and the Speaker published his [Proxy Voting Scheme guidance document](#) on 14 March 2025. A number of Members have availed of proxy voting for parental leave in Plenary since the introduction of Standing Order 27A and the Proxy Voting Scheme.

Inquiry into the Extension of Standing Order 27A Voting by Proxy

14. Following the approval of Standing Order 27A that provided for proxy voting for parental leave in Plenary the Committee agreed, on 27 November 2024, the [terms of reference](#) for an inquiry on whether eligibility for proxy voting in Plenary should be extended to provide for any of the following categories:

- Long-term illness
- Bereavement
- Absence on official Assembly Business.

15. [The inquiry](#) is on-going and the Committee is undertaking a similar process to that adopted when considering the introduction of proxy voting for parental leave in Plenary. It has considered research papers on the position in other legislatures for each of the potential categories, received legal advice on a number of issues and took the opportunity during its visit to the Scottish Parliament to discuss the categories of proxy voting provided in that legislature and the guidance and operational processes in place.

16. Following consultation with the Speaker and the political parties the Committee will finalise its recommendations and present its findings to the Assembly.

Deadline for Introduction of a Private Member's Bill – Standing Order 30 (2A) and (2B)

17. The Committee considered the provision of a deadline for introduction of a Private Member's Bill (PMB) in Standing Orders as part of a range of issues aimed at improving the effective and efficient operation of both plenary sittings and committee meetings.

18. This change was recommended by the previous Committee on Procedures in its report on its '[Inquiry into Private Members' Bills](#)' which was approved by the Assembly on 14 March 2022. The evidence received by that Committee indicated that the existence of a final deadline for the introduction of a PMB may help the scheduling of plenary time, allow committees to structure their

forward work programme with greater certainty and provide MLAs with more confidence in relation to the timelines for their bills.

19. [Standing Order 30 2\(A\) and 2\(B\)](#), brought forward by the Committee and approved by the Assembly on 17 September 2024, provides for a final deadline for a Private Member's Bill to be introduced to the Assembly of the last sitting day in June of the penultimate session of a mandate. It is important that all Bills introduced to the Assembly should stand a realistic chance of completing their passage before the end of a mandate. It is also important that the Assembly has the opportunity to produce effectively scrutinised and quality legislation. This addition to Standing Orders will support these aims and assist in managing the significant pressures on plenary time experienced at the end of a mandate.

Annual Debate on the Executive's Legislative Programme – Standing Order 18C

20. Section 15(3) of the Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 states that '*Standing Orders must make provision for an annual debate on the Executive legislative timetable.*' The previous Committee on Procedures, noting that such provision had not yet been made, recommended in its report on its '[Inquiry into Private Members' Bills](#)', that this should be rectified as soon as practicable.
21. In developing Standing Order 18C the current Committee considered a range of potential options to provide for such a debate and took full account of the process already adopted by the First Minister and deputy First Minister in this mandate which provided for a debate on the Executive's Legislation Programme in June 2024. The Standing Order provides for an annual debate to take place near the start of each Assembly session on the bills intended to be introduced during that session. It also recognises the need for flexibility as there may be circumstances which affect the motion being tabled within the expected timeframe and provides for the First Minister and deputy First Minister to make a statement setting out the reasons for not meeting the timescale and providing a revised date.
22. New [Standing Order 18C](#), which was agreed by the Assembly on 1 July 2025, provides greater clarity regarding the expected timeframe for the debate and

should assist in the planning and scheduling of plenary time and committee work each Assembly session.

Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee – Standing Order 59A

23. [Schedule 6B of the Northern Ireland Act 1998](#) established the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee (WFDSC) as a Standing Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly and set out its purpose and functions, which are to assist with the observation and implementation of Article 13(3a) and 13(4) of the Windsor Framework.
24. Unlike other Assembly Standing Committees however it was not provided for or referenced in Standing Orders. The WFDSC therefore requested that this gap be addressed. It also outlined that, given its statutory functions and timescales, it was likely that it would need to meet during periods of recess and asked that the Committee on Procedures undertake work to identify options to provide for substitute members and/or proxy voting for it.
25. The Committee undertook detailed consideration of the issues in close conjunction with the WFDSC following which it developed Standing Order 59A. This Standing Order takes a similar approach to that adopted for other Standing Committees in Standing Orders to ensure consistency whilst also recognising that the establishment of the WFDSC and its functions are already provided for in Schedule 6B of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.
26. Given the very strict timeframes within which the Committee must fulfil its statutory functions, which is unique to that Committee, the Standing Order also provides for substitute members, sets out requirements for such members and provides clarity on the chairing arrangements for meetings when substitute members are present. The Committee also agreed that the operational arrangements such as details of the process for nominating a substitute including timescales and other practical administrative processes should be set out in guidance to be developed by the WFDSC rather than included in the Standing Order.
27. New [Standing Order 59A](#) was agreed by the Assembly on 26 November 2024 and the provision of substitute members has been used by the WFDSC since its introduction. The Committee intends to undertake a short review of the

provision of substitute members in conjunction with the WFDSC in autumn 2025.

Schedule 6A of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 - Democratic Consent Process (NI Protocol) – Implications for Standing Orders

28. The Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland (Democratic Consent Process) (EU Exit) Regulations 2020 inserted a new [Schedule 6A into the Northern Ireland Act 1998](#) which provides the mechanism for obtaining democratic consent in Northern Ireland to the continued application of Articles 5 to 10 of the Protocol.

29. The Committee considered whether any provision should be made in Standing Orders in relation to the democratic consent process, particularly given that the first vote was to be held before the end of 2024. The Committee noted the detailed provision in Schedule 6A of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 regarding how the democratic consent process was to be conducted and agreed that it was not necessary to make provision in Standing Orders in relation to Schedule 6A.

Northern Ireland Act 1998 Section 42 – Petitions of Concern

30. [Standing Order 28](#) currently makes provision for procedures to be followed in respect of the tabling of a Petition of Concern (PoC). However, it does not comply with the new provisions of [Section 42 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998](#) (as amended by the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Act 2022). Section 42 also requires the Committee on Procedures to bring forward a new or an amended Standing Order for agreement by the Assembly.

31. The Committee has therefore undertaken substantial work on the policy issues in relation to the development of a new or amended Standing Order including consideration of required provisions and optional/supplementary provisions. The approach adopted by the Committee has included considering written and oral briefings by Assembly officials, the receipt of legal advice on a range of matters and consultation with the Speaker on the role of his office in relation to PoCs.

32. Further work, including consideration of a draft illustrative Standing Order reflecting the Committee's initial indicative position and consultation with the political parties and independent MLA in the Assembly, will take place during the next Assembly session.

Scrutiny of Delegated Powers in Bills by the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly

33. The Chairpersons' Liaison Group in its Report ["Strengthening Committee Scrutiny"](#), published in March 2022, recommended that the Committee on Procedures consider the appropriateness of including in Standing Orders the role of the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly (ESR) in relation to the scrutiny of delegated powers in bills, including those subject to accelerated passage procedure, and that advice provided to committees by the ESR in this regard be published. Publication of the ESR's reports would improve the availability of information on a particular bill and increase the transparency of the Assembly legislative process.
34. To inform consideration of this issue the Committee received a briefing from the ESR in May 2025 during which she provided information on the current position and her role in relation to the scrutiny of delegated powers in bills. Noting that the ESR was supportive of including in Standing Orders her current role in the scrutiny of delegated powers in bills and publication of her reports the Committee has commissioned legal advice and a draft Standing Order and work will continue on this issue in September 2025.
35. The Committee also decided to defer consideration of the inclusion of scrutiny of delegated powers in those bills subject to accelerated passage procedure in Standing Orders at this time given this would require an entirely new process.

Repeal of Standing Order 70 and Consequential Amendments

36. [Standing Order 70](#) deals with how matters of privilege can be raised by Members and dealt with by the Speaker. A need to review Standing Order 70 was initially identified following a Review of the Code of Conduct by a previous Committee on Standards and Privileges during the 2011-16 mandate.

37. The current Committee on Standards and Privileges, having undertaken the review and considered a range of policy and procedural issues, has asked the Committee on Procedures to bring forward changes to Standing Orders to:

- a) Repeal Standing Order 70 Privilege
- b) Rename the Committee on Standards and Privileges to the Committee on Standards by removing the reference to 'Privileges'
- c) Make the consequential amendments to Standing Orders arising from the repeal of Standing Order 70

38. The Committee has requested legal advice on the repeal of Standing Order 70 and the consequential amendments and will consider the issue further in early October 2025.

Electronic Voting in Plenary

39. The Committee has undertaken some initial work in relation to the potential provision of electronic voting in plenary.

40. A [research paper on electronic voting in Parliamentary Chambers](#) was considered at the meeting on 25 September 2024 and this was followed by a briefing on the infrastructure currently available in the Assembly Plenary Chamber to support any introduction of electronic voting. During the study visit to the Scottish Parliament in December 2024 Committee Members also received a briefing on its electronic voting system by officials including the digital voting app now being used.

Review of Assembly Oral Questions

41. Initial work has also been undertaken to inform a potential Review of Assembly Oral Questions (AOQs). This includes the commissioning of a [research paper on a range of issues relating to AOQs](#) and requesting views and suggestions from the political parties in the Assembly and the independent MLA on what should be covered by such a review. Committee Members also discussed question time with the Presiding Officer and observed First Minister's questions and Portfolio Questions during the study visit to the Scottish Parliament.

Expenditure

42. Details of the Committee expenditure is attached at Annex A. It includes the cost of reprinting the relevant sections of Standing Orders to reflect the changes agreed by the Assembly during the period covered by this report.

Key Priorities for the next Assembly Session

43. The Committee will continue to progress work on:

- The Inquiry into the Extension of Standing Order 27A Voting by Proxy
- The Northern Ireland Act 1998 Section 42 – Petitions of Concern
- Scrutiny of Delegated Powers in Bills by the Examiner of Statutory Rules to the Assembly
- Repeal of Standing Order 70 and Consequential Amendments

44. The Committee will also use a planning session in September 2025 to confirm the other key priority work items to be completed before the end of the mandate.

ANNEX A

Committee on Procedures

Expenditure for the period 3 February 2024 – 31 August 2025

Budget area	Details	Expenditure
Committee Travel - committee members and staff travel and subsistence in relation to visits and meetings outside Parliament Buildings	Study Visit to Scottish Parliament in connection with the Committee's strategic priorities	£ 4571.28
Printing of Standing Orders	The cost of design and reprint of sections of Standing Orders in connection with amendments made by the Assembly	£ 547.82
Refreshments & Hospitality	Committee Meetings / Strategic Planning Sessions	£ 1469.30
General expenses	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Gifts to MSPs in connection with Committee Study Visit to Scottish Parliament• Room hire and equipment at Strategic Planning session at Mount Conference Centre, Belfast	£ 446.66
Total Expenditure		£ 7035.06