

Committee on Procedures

Proxy Voting Request

SDLP Response – April 2021

The SDLP welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee on Procedures request for views on the use of Proxy Voting on a more permanent basis.

The introduction of proxy voting in the Northern Ireland Assembly throughout the Covid-19 crisis has allowed MLAs to continue to exercise their democratic mandate while complying with social distancing requirements. We believe that this has made an immense difference to members, particularly those who were forced to shield during the first wave of the virus, and we appreciate the flexible approach adopted by Assembly Commission.

Now that proxy voting has been allowed in these circumstances, there is a strong argument for retaining the provision in some limited instances where members are not in a position to vote due to health or other constraints. The SDLP is of the view that proxy voting should be the exception, not the norm.

The SDLP believes that it is clearly in the interests of democratic accountability that members should, where possible, exercise their vote in person. Each member was elected to the Assembly and has a responsibility to their constituents to represent them faithfully in all aspects of their work, but particularly when it comes to casting their vote. There are, however, instances when a member cannot legitimately be expected to cast a vote in person and there should be a mechanism through which their mandate can be expressed.

The SDLP believes that during public health emergencies, either at a local, regional or island-wide level, a special dispensation should be granted to members affected to nominate a proxy to cast their vote. This is in line with the current approach during Covid-19 and could be activated at the discretion of the Speaker.

The SDLP also believes that where a member is unable to attend a physical sitting of the Assembly due to a medical emergency, they should be able to nominate a proxy to cast their vote. This should include an option for pregnant women who have to miss sittings for appointments or during periods of parental leave to nominate a proxy. This can be judged against a set of criteria which outline the seriousness of the condition and protect against abuse by members.

The SDLP would encourage the committee to explore the possibility of introducing a paired voting system, similar to that used at Westminster, which allows members who cannot attend sittings for other, less urgent, reasons to pair with another member voting in the opposite direction.