

Submitted to Display of Flags and Emblems - Call for Evidence
Submitted on 2026-08-26 14:31:17

Introduction

1 Confirmation of having read the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee's Privacy Notice.

I confirm that I have read the privacy notice.

2 What is your name?

Name:
Matthew Dodds

3 What is your email address?

Email:
[REDACTED]

4 If you are providing a submission on behalf of an organisation or business, please state its name.

Organisation:
N/A

5 The Committee for Infrastructure has agreed to publish all responses as part of the survey results. If you would like to have your survey results anonymised and for us not to publish your name or organisation, please indicate so here.

I am content for my information, including details of my name and organisation, to be published in the survey results.

Clause 1: Removal of flags or emblems in the public interest

6 Do you agree with Clause 1 of the Bill?

Yes

7 Please provide information to support your answer here

Accessible:

I agree with Clause 1 and the principle that the Department should have a duty to remove flags or emblems displayed in public places where their removal is considered to be in the public interest.

In my view, flags displayed in public places in Northern Ireland are often used as territorial markers rather than simply as expressions of identity, culture or heritage. In some areas, the display of flags can be intended, or can reasonably be perceived, as a way of marking an area as belonging to one particular community. This can make people from other backgrounds feel unwelcome, uncomfortable or intimidated when entering, living in, working in or travelling through that area.

For that reason, I believe there should be an effective and clearly defined process for removing flags and emblems where their display has a negative impact on the wider community. Public places should, as far as possible, be environments which everyone can use without feeling that a particular political, national, cultural or community identity is being imposed upon them.

I therefore support the requirement in Clause 1 for the Department to consider whether removal is in the public interest. In making that decision, I believe particular importance should be given to whether the location, manner and circumstances in which a flag or emblem is displayed could reasonably be regarded as territorial, threatening or intimidating, and to the effect that its continued display may have on community relations and people's ability to feel safe and welcome in public spaces.

This does not mean that every display of a flag or emblem is necessarily intended to intimidate. However, the context in which flags are displayed is important. Where flags are being used primarily to mark territory, create division or cause intimidation, I believe the public interest is best served by their removal. Clause 1 should therefore provide a practical and consistent means of addressing such displays rather than allowing them to remain indefinitely because responsibility for dealing with them is unclear.

Clause 2: Sensitive places

8 Do you agree with Clause 2 of the Bill?

Yes

9 Please provide information to support your answer here

Accessible:

I agree with Clause 2 and believe that particular consideration should be given to the display of flags and emblems in and around sensitive places.

My general view is that flags displayed in public places in Northern Ireland are often used as territorial markers and, in some circumstances, can have an intimidating effect. This is especially concerning when flags are displayed close to places that are intended to serve the whole community, regardless of a person's political opinion, religion, national identity or community background.

Places where public services are provided, such as schools, medical facilities, leisure centres and libraries, should be welcoming and accessible to everyone. People should be able to attend a school, visit a doctor or hospital, use a leisure centre or access a library without feeling that they are entering an area associated with, or claimed by, one particular section of the community. Where flags or emblems are being used to mark territory around these facilities, I believe they can undermine the shared and neutral character that public services should have.

The same principle applies to shared communal places such as shopping centres, arterial roads and public parks. These are spaces used by people from a wide range of backgrounds and should not be made to feel as though they belong to one particular community. Flags displayed extensively on roads, lampposts, entrances to neighbourhoods or other prominent locations can create a perception of territorial ownership and may make some people feel unwelcome or intimidated.

I therefore support the Bill allowing flags and emblems to be removed from the vicinity of sensitive places where their display is territorial, intimidating or otherwise contrary to the interests of a shared community. I believe the definition in Clause 2 appropriately recognises that the impact of a flag depends not only on the flag itself but also on where and how it is displayed.

In particular, I believe there should be a strong expectation that public services and genuinely shared communal spaces remain welcoming to everyone. Where the display of flags or emblems compromises that principle by marking territory or creating an intimidating environment, I believe there is a clear justification for their removal.

Clause 3: Procedure for / notification of, or giving views on, flags or emblems

10 Do you agree with Clause 3 of the Bill?

Yes

11 Please provide information to support your answer here

Accessible:

I agree with Clause 3 and believe there should be a clear, accessible and transparent procedure through which people can notify the Department about the proposed or existing display of flags and emblems and express their views or concerns.

My general view is that flags displayed in public places in Northern Ireland are often used as territorial markers and, in some circumstances, can create an intimidating or unwelcoming environment. For that reason, it is important that decisions about flags in public spaces are not based solely on the wishes of the individuals or groups displaying them. The views and experiences of other people who live in, work in, travel through or use the affected area should also be taken into account.

I therefore support the proposed online portal. It would provide a formal mechanism for people who are concerned about a display to make those concerns known, particularly where they believe flags or emblems are being used to mark territory, cause intimidation or discourage people from using a public or shared space. Equally, allowing those wishing to erect flags or emblems to provide information about the purpose and circumstances of the display should help the Department reach a more informed decision.

I also support the principle that displays should, as far as practicable, comply with an established Code of Practice. Clear guidance about where, when and how flags may appropriately be displayed could help distinguish legitimate cultural expression or commemoration from displays that effectively amount to permanent territorial marking or intimidation.

However, the notification and consultation process should not become a means of legitimising an inappropriate display simply because it has significant support within the immediate area. A flag used as a territorial marker may be supported by a majority within a particular neighbourhood while still having an intimidating effect on minorities, visitors or people from other backgrounds. The Department's public interest assessment should therefore consider the wider impact of the display and not simply the number of people expressing support or opposition.

Overall, I believe Clause 3 would provide greater transparency and accountability around the display of flags and emblems. Given the potential for flags in public places in Northern Ireland to be used to mark territory or create intimidation, there should be an effective way for concerns to be raised and independently considered, with removal remaining an available and meaningful response where a display is contrary to the public interest.

Clause 4: Code of Practice

12 Do you agree with Clause 4 of the Bill?

Yes

13 Please provide information to support your answer here

Accessible:

I agree with Clause 4. A clear Code of Practice is important to ensure that decisions about the display and removal of flags and emblems are made consistently and fairly across Northern Ireland.

The Code should provide clear guidance on what constitutes an appropriate display, taking account of factors such as location, the number of flags displayed, how long they remain in place and whether the overall effect is to mark territory or create an intimidating or unwelcoming environment.

I support consultation with organisations such as the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission, the Equality Commission and the PSNI, as this should help ensure that the Code appropriately balances cultural expression with equality, community relations, public safety and the rights of others.

I also support periodically reviewing the Code to ensure that it is effective in practice. In particular, it should be assessed on whether it is successfully addressing the use of flags and emblems as territorial markers or as a means of intimidation, with the guidance strengthened where necessary.

Clause 5: Offence of obstructing the Department in removal of flag or emblem

14 Do you agree with Clause 5 of the Bill?

Yes

15 Please provide information to support your answer here

Accessible:

I agree with Clause 5. If the Department has properly determined that a flag or emblem should be removed in accordance with the legislation, it must be able to carry out that decision without obstruction.

Without an offence for deliberately preventing or interfering with removal, there is a risk that the wider provisions of the Bill would be difficult to enforce. This is particularly important where flags or emblems have been identified as territorial, intimidating or contrary to the public interest.

I therefore believe that there should be an appropriate penalty for deliberately obstructing authorised removal. A level 3 fine appears to provide a reasonable deterrent while remaining proportionate to the nature of the offence.

Clause 6: Request for assistance from police

16 Do you agree with Clause 6 of the Bill?

Yes

17 Please provide information to support your answer here

Accessible:

I agree with Clause 6. If the Department has determined that a flag or emblem should be removed, those carrying out the removal should be able to do so safely and without intimidation or obstruction.

Given the sensitivity surrounding flags and emblems in Northern Ireland, there may be circumstances where their removal could lead to confrontation or a breach of the peace. In those situations, it is reasonable for the Department to request assistance from the PSNI.

This provision should help ensure that lawful decisions to remove flags can actually be implemented and are not prevented by the threat of disorder or obstruction.

Clause 7: Interpretation

18 Do you agree with Clause 7 of the Bill?

Yes

19 Please provide information to support your answer here

Accessible:

I agree with Clause 7. It is important that the legislation clearly defines what is meant by terms such as "flag or emblem", "public place" and "public street furniture" so that there is as little uncertainty as possible about where the provisions apply.

I particularly support the broad definition of a flag or emblem to include bunting, posters, banners and similar displays. Territorial marking or intimidation is not necessarily limited to traditional flags, and excluding other forms of display could create an obvious loophole.

The inclusion of lampposts, bus shelters, street signs, railings and other public street furniture is also appropriate, as these are commonly located in prominent shared spaces. Overall, these definitions should help ensure that the legislation can be applied consistently and effectively.

Clause 8: Commencement

20 Do you agree with Clause 8 of the Bill?

Unsure

21 Please provide information to support your answer here

Accessible:

I broadly agree with Clause 8, as it is reasonable to allow the Department sufficient time to put the necessary procedures, guidance and resources in place before the legislation becomes fully operational.

However, I would prefer the provisions to come into effect as soon as reasonably practicable. If the purpose of the Bill is to address flags and emblems that are being used for territorial marking or intimidation, a lengthy delay could mean that problematic displays continue without an effective mechanism for their removal.

Any period before commencement should therefore be used to ensure that the Department is fully prepared to implement and enforce the legislation effectively from the date it comes into operation.

Clause 9: Short title

22 Do you agree with Clause 9 of the Bill?

Yes

23 Please provide information to support your answer here

Accessible:

I agree with Clause 9. The title "Display of Flags and Emblems Act (Northern Ireland) 2026" clearly and accurately describes the subject matter and scope of the legislation.

The title is straightforward and makes it clear that the Act relates specifically to the display of flags and emblems in Northern Ireland. I therefore have no concerns with the proposed short title.