

Response ID ANON-5M7G-6A6S-Z

Submitted to Display of Flags and Emblems - Call for Evidence
Submitted on 2026-07-27 21:25:10

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:
Leigh O'Walsh

3 What is your email address?

Email:


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

Organisation:

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:

Permitting the public promotion of proscribed paramilitaries and extremist groups normalises division and undermines public safety.

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:

Permitting the public promotion of proscribed paramilitaries and extremist groups normalizes division and undermines public safety.

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

10 Do you agree with Clause 3 of the Bill?

No

11 Please provide information to support your answer here

Accessible:

Members of the public should not be expected to monitor, report, or debate the display of flags and emblems through an online portal. Placing the burden on local communities to lodge concerns not only wastes public time, but it can also expose individuals to intimidation in areas where paramilitary or sectarian influence is strong.

Rather than establishing an administrative portal to manage complaints after the fact, the Department should introduce clear, primary legislation that

proactively prevents the unauthorised display of paramilitary flags, emblems, and aggressive territorial marking in public spaces in the first instance.

The public interest is best served by unambiguous laws and active enforcement, not by crowdsourcing local opposition to illegal or divisive displays.

Clause 4: Code of Practice

12 Do you agree with Clause 4 of the Bill?

No

13 Please provide information to support your answer here

Accessible:

No, this timeline is too slow. The process needs to be accelerated. Waiting up to 18 months for a Code of Practice leaves communities vulnerable to intimidation for far too long. The Department should reduce the implementation window to ensure swift, decisive regulation on the display of flags and emblems.

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

14 Do you agree with Clause 5 of the Bill?

No

15 Please provide information to support your answer here

Accessible:

Fines are an ineffective, counterproductive penalty for these offences, and Clause 5 should be replaced with restorative justice measures.

Many contentious flags and emblems are erected in socioeconomically deprived neighbourhoods. Imposing punitive financial penalties on individuals in poor communities does nothing to address the root causes of territorial marking; it compounds poverty, fuels local resentment, and risks driving individuals further into debt or the court system.

Financial penalties do not change mindsets: Paying a fine—or absorbing it as a community "badge of honour"—does not foster mutual respect or cross-community understanding.

Rather than issuing fines, penalties for obstructing the removal of illegal or unauthorised displays should focus on restorative justice and compulsory education.

Offenders should be required to complete mandatory community education days led by cross-community, mediation, or reconciliation organisations. Spending time actively learning about the history, culture, and perspectives of the communities they are targeting addresses the underlying sectarianism directly—something a court fine will never achieve.

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:

Clause 6 should not just permit the Department to request PSNI assistance—it should establish a clear statutory obligation on the PSNI to provide direct protection and operational support whenever public authorities carry out flag removals.

PSNI involvement is vital. Attempting to enforce flag removal without police presence places civilian workers at unacceptable risk and surrenders public space to paramilitary intimidation.

The primary duty of the PSNI is to uphold the law and prevent crime: The illegal erection of paramilitary symbols, hate expression, and the obstruction of public workers are criminal matters. The PSNI exists to preserve public order and ensure that statutory bodies can carry out their legal duties safely.

Clause 7: Interpretation

18 Do you agree with Clause 7 of the Bill?

Yes

19 Please provide information to support your answer here

Accessible:

Clause 8: Commencement

20 Do you agree with Clause 8 of the Bill?

No

21 Please provide information to support your answer here

Accessible:

A delay until 1 January 2028 is completely unacceptable. The government has repeatedly demonstrated that when an issue is treated as an urgent priority, legislation and enforcement can be implemented in days, not years.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the government drafted, passed, and enforced complex public health regulations almost overnight to protect public safety. The ongoing open display of paramilitary illegal symbols, territorial marking, and sectarian intimidation is an ongoing public safety and community relations crisis that requires the same urgency.

Implementation doesn't require new technology: The mechanisms to remove illegal displays and protect public workers already exist—what has been lacking is political will and statutory authority. Waiting years to enact basic enforcement provisions is an administrative excuse, not a operational necessity.

It undermines public confidence in the legislation: If the government itself treats flag removal and paramilitary glorification as a low-priority task to be phased in slowly over several years, the public will not take the Bill seriously either.

Clause 9: Short title

22 Do you agree with Clause 9 of the Bill?

No

23 Please provide information to support your answer here

Accessible:

The short title "Display of Flags and Emblems" is dangerously vague, overly broad, and poses a threat to legitimate freedom of expression.