Northern Ireland Assembly

# Committee for Infrastructure

# End of Session Report

# 1 September 2025 – 31 August 2026

# Contents

**Contents** ..... **2**

**List of abbreviations and acronyms used in the report** ..... **4**

**Primary Legislation** ..... **6**

Water, Sustainable Drainage and Flood Management Bill ..... 6

Harbours Bill ..... 7

Tree Protection Bill ..... 8

Display of Flags and Emblems Bill ..... 9

**Subordinate Legislation** ..... **9**

**Legislative Consent Motions** ..... **11**

**Inquiries** ..... **11**

**EU Scrutiny** ..... **12**

**Budget Scrutiny** ..... **12**

**Policy Scrutiny** ..... **13**

Northern Ireland Water ..... 13

Translink ..... 13

**Engagement** ..... **14**

Committee Motions ..... 15

Likely key priorities for the next session ..... 15

External meetings ..... 15

Outputs to date ..... 15

**Appendix 1 – Session facts and figures** ..... **15**

Committee meetings & visits ..... 15

Statutory Rules ..... 16

Witnesses ..... 16

# List of abbreviations and acronyms used in the report

| | |
|---|---|
| DfI | Department for Infrastructure |
| DoF | Department of Finance |
| GDL | Graduated Driver Licensing |
| ONS | Office for National Statistics |
| PC21 | Price Control 2021 |
| PC28 | Price Control 2028 |
| RSPB | Royal Society for the Protection of Birds |
| SuDS | Sustainable Drainage Systems |
| TPO | Tree Preservation Order |

# Remit, Powers and Membership of the Committee

The Committee for Infrastructure is a Statutory Departmental Committee established in accordance with paragraphs 8 and 9 of the Belfast Agreement, Section 29 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and under Assembly Standing Order 48. The Committee has a scrutiny, policy development, and consultation role with respect to the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) and has a role in the initiation of legislation.

The Committee has the power to:

- consider and advise on Departmental budgets and annual plans in the context of the overall budget allocation;
- approve relevant secondary legislation and take the Committee Stage of primary legislation;
- call for persons and papers;
- initiate inquiries and make reports; and
- consider and advise on matters brought to the Committee by the Minister of Infrastructure.

The Committee has nine members, including a chairperson and deputy chairperson, with a quorum of five members. The membership of the Committee during the current mandate has been as follows:

- Mr Johnathan Buckley MLA[1] (Chairperson)
- Mr John Stewart MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
- Mr Paul Boggs MLA[2]
- Mr Cathal Boylan MLA[3]
- Mr Stephen Dunne MLA
- Mr Harry Harvey MLA[4]

[1] With effect from 7 September 2026 Mr Johnathan Buckley replaced Mr Peter Martin.

[2] With effect from 15 September 2026 Mr Paul Boggs replaced Mrs Sinéad Ennis.

[3] With effect from 7 September 2026 Mr Cathal Boylan was appointed as a member of the Committee.

[4] With effect from 23 September 2025 Mr Harry Harvey replaced Mr Keith Buchanan.

- Mr Andrew McMurray MLA[5]
- Mr Justin McNulty MLA[6]
- Mr Peter McReynolds MLA

# Review of 2025 – 2026 Session

## Primary Legislation

### Water, Sustainable Drainage and Flood Management Bill

Following its introduction on 23 June and completion of the second stage on 16 September, the Bill stood formally referred to the Committee for its scrutiny. Having received oral evidence from departmental officials, the Committee published its call for evidence seeking views on the provisions as set out in the Bill.

Having noted that the Bill seeks to introduce legislative changes that will reduce water pollution, strengthen flood resilience, promote sustainable drainage and improve water resource management, the Committee received oral evidence from a range of stakeholders, including the Construction Employers Federation, Institution of Civil Engineers, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) and the Woodland Trust.

Throughout the Committee's scrutiny of the Bill, it closely focussed on the provisions contained at Clauses 2 and 3 in relation to sustainable drainage systems (SuDS), the provisions for flood protection grants under Clause 6 and the commencement provisions under Clause 15.

In the course of its scrutiny, the Committee considered a number of areas where a range of amendments and technical improvements would strengthen the Bill, including requirements for notifying the public when there is a need for temporary

[5] With effect from 20 May 2024 Mr Andrew McMurray replaced Mr Patrick Brown.

[6] With effect from 9 September 2025 Mr Justin McNulty replaced Mr Mark Durkan.

water use restrictions, delegated legislation procedures (including the scope and parameters of new departmental powers) and commencement arrangements, reporting requirements and mandatory duties. The Committee report indicated a number of areas for improvement in the Bill.

*External Committee Meeting at the St Patricks Centre, Downpatrick*




*Pictured left to right: - Mr Andrew McMurray MLA, Mr Justin McNulty MLA, Mr Peter Martin MLA (Chairperson), Mr Stephen Dunne MLA, and Mr Harry Harvey MLA*

The Committee also agreed a number of recommendations for the Department regarding the development of future regulations, guidance and implementation arrangements which will help to inform the Assembly at Consideration Stage.

**Report on the Water, Sustainable Drainage and Flood Management Bill**

## Harbours Bill

The Harbours Bill was introduced by the Minister for Infrastructure on Monday 15 June 2026 and, following Second Stage on Tuesday 23 June 2026, the Bill was referred to the Committee for Infrastructure for scrutiny.

The stated purpose of the Bill is to modernise the legislative and governance framework for Northern Ireland's Trust Ports which, as autonomous, statutory bodies, are run for the benefit of all their stakeholders.

Through the proposed legislative changes, the Bill seeks to enable Trust Ports to operate more efficiently and strengthen their contribution to the regional economy and, through delegated legislation as provided for by the Bill, will afford enhanced commercial powers to support their objectives and maintain financial health.

The Bill seeks to facilitate the reclassification of Trust Ports by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). While the ONS's classification has no legal effect on the statutory powers, functions, or ownership of Trust Ports in Northern Ireland, it is necessary to decouple the accounting requirements of borrowing by Trust Ports from the Department.

Having published its call for evidence, the Committee will consider the responses received to inform its continued scrutiny of the Bill over the remaining months of the mandate.

## Tree Protection Bill

The Tree Protection Bill was introduced by the Bill sponsor, Mr Peter McReynolds MLA, on 29 June 2026. At its meeting on 1 July, the Committee received oral evidence from the Bill sponsor for an introductory overview on the background to and provisions of the Bill.

The Committee noted that the Bill seeks to amend existing primary legislation to strengthen the legal protection for Northern Ireland's oldest and most significant trees and woodlands, and the Bill sponsor's intention that protections reflect a modern understanding of the role trees play in climate resilience and public health.

In addition, the Bill sponsor has noted the Bill aims to reform the systems around Tree Preservation Orders (TPO) to align with England, Scotland, and Wales in certain respects, with the objective of ensuring consistent enforcement across local authorities. It includes broader designation criteria for tree protection and obligations to replace felled trees. It also includes new legally enforceable limitations against development in pursuit of the Bill Sponsor's policy intention.

In order to maximise its time for the remainder of the mandate, the Committee agreed to issue its call for evidence to allow respondents to provide their view over

the summer months. Should the Bill formally pass the Second Stage, the Committee will consider these responses to inform its detailed scrutiny of the Bill.

### Display of Flags and Emblems Bill

The Display of Flags and Emblems Bill was introduced by the Bill sponsor, Mrs Paula Bradshaw MLA, on 30 June 2026. At its meeting on 1 July, Committee received oral evidence from the Bill sponsor for an introductory overview on the background and provisions to the Bill.

The Committee noted that the stated purpose of the Bill is to address the ongoing misuse of public property for the display of flags or emblems intended to exclude, intimidate, or assert control. The Bill sponsor has stated her intent to establish a clear and fair legal framework governing when and how flags or emblems that respect cultural expression may be displayed. There is a public interest test, a proposed code of practice and connected factors to be considered.

In order to maximise its time for the remainder of the mandate, the Committee agreed to issue its call for evidence to allow respondents to provide their view over the summer months. Should the Bill formally pass the Second Stage, the Committee will consider these responses to inform its detailed scrutiny of the Bill.

## Subordinate Legislation

During the session the Committee has considered a total of 85 Statutory Rules laid by the Department for Infrastructure and, following scrutiny, the Committee agreed that it had no objection to the Rules.

In addition, the Committee has been further examining a number of proposals for Statutory Rules that seek to implement provisions of the Reservoirs Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.

The Committee agreed to defer its consideration of the legislative proposals pending the completion of a consultation in respect of a proposal for a grant

scheme with the intention of providing financial support to eligible reservoir owners for supervision and inspections costs.

Following the conclusion of the consultation, the Committee received oral evidence from the Department providing an overview of the outcome of the consultation and intended approach.

The Committee recognises that, at the heart of the legislative proposals, public safety is a key consideration. However, it also recognises the potential for a number of unintended consequences on the environment and challenges in the event that reservoir owners lack the sufficient financial resources to achieve compliance as required under the proposals.

The Committee has also taken considerable interest in respect of legislative proposals announced by the Minister for Infrastructure in January 2026 around graduated driver licensing (GDL) for new drivers.

While supportive of the need to develop mechanisms to improve road safety across Northern Ireland, the Committee expressed its concern around the Department's lack of engagement with it prior to the announcement being made.

During oral evidence with departmental officials, the Committee noted the background to the proposals originate from powers contained in the Road Traffic (Amendment) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016.

Having examined the outline proposals, the Committee issued a call for views to ascertain the views on the impacts under the new requirements, including for new drivers and wider stakeholders.

In response to its call for evidence, the Committee received oral evidence from the Association of British Insurers, the Driving Instructors Association, the Northern Ireland Approved Instructors Council and the Youth Assembly.

During this evidence, concerns were expressed by driving instructors regarding the readiness of the sector by the anticipated operational date and by Youth Assembly Members, who highlighted the lack of any recent consultation with younger people, who are most likely to be impacted by the new requirements.

# Legislative Consent Motions

During the period covered within this report, no Legislative Consent Motions have been laid by the Minister for Infrastructure.

# Inquiries

Due to concerns around delays and uncertainty in the planning system and their impacts on Northern Ireland's economic and social development, the Committee undertook a short review of aspects of planning, focussing on Regionally Significant Developments and judicial reviews.

The Committee conducted a stakeholder event to hear the issues facing those that regularly interact with the current planning system from local councils and industry to identify the key challenges that remain present when progressing development proposals.

The Committee noted that stakeholders highlighted that the planning system is overly complex due to a range of factors, including environmental and climate change requirements, delays in responses from statutory consultees, a lack of clarity around the 'Call-In' process and the thresholds for judicial reviews compared to other jurisdictions.

The Committee published a report containing a number of recommendations to the Department which include:

- Reviewing Northern Ireland's existing planning legislation drawing upon lessons from recent reforms in England, Wales, and the Republic of Ireland;
- Introducing mandatory pre-application consultation with communities;
- Introducing planning performance agreements to improve accountability and timelines;
- Establishing a more centralised and coordinated consultee system;

- Reviewing thresholds for renewable energy and regionally significant developments to ensure they reflect modern technologies and circumstances; and
- Considering a 28-day response limit for statutory consultees.

Report on the Water, Sustainable Drainage and Flood Management Bill

# EU Scrutiny

The Committee did not undertake any EU-related scrutiny during the session.

# Budget Scrutiny

The Committee scrutinised the Department's position and anticipated requirements in line with its submission to the Department of Finance (DoF) for the in-year monitoring rounds through oral evidence.

Following the publication of a Draft Budget published by the Department of Finance in January 2026, the Committee agreed that, in the absence of Executive agreement on the amounts proposed, to receive written evidence from the Department, Northern Ireland Water, Translink and Waterways Ireland on their indicative allocations.

In addition, the Committee provided a response to the Committee for Finance's correspondence highlighting its intention to co-ordinate responses by Assembly committees.

The Committee highlighted that in seeking written evidence to establish each organisations assessment of their resource and capital requirements, this was agreed on the basis that the amounts may be subject to significant changes in the event of the Executive agreeing a revised budget.

# Policy Scrutiny

## Northern Ireland Water

The Committee has examined a wide range of matters in respect of the role Northern Ireland Water plays in delivering its vital services across Northern Ireland.

Given the current financial constraints being faced across all public services, the Committee noted during oral evidence that funding determined under the current Price Control period (PC21) is underfunded by approximately £470 million, which, as a result, equates to 25% of work determined to be essential not being delivered.

The Committee noted that Northern Ireland Water highlighted that this restricts capacity across the network and estimates that the development of 19,000 properties is delayed or constrained.

Moreover, Northern Ireland Water's ability to undertake essential upgrades to its existing aging infrastructure is limited and therefore increases the impacts on the environment. The Committee noted that key projects have had to be paused until Northern Ireland Water's funding requirements can be met.

The Utility Regulator for Northern Ireland is currently developing its approach for the incoming Price Control (PC28) and therefore the Committee will continue to engage the Department, Northern Ireland Water and other stakeholders as this process continues.

## Translink

The Committee has received oral evidence from representatives throughout the session to examine a number of key issues relating to Translink's services and in particular, its current funding challenges and position of its cash reserves.

The Committee notes that funding from the Department does not provide sufficient resource to Translink to fulfil its obligations and represents the lowest subsidy per passenger when compared with the Republic of Ireland and in Great Britain.

A consequence of this underfunding has been that Translink has to draw from its cash reserves to bridge the gap to operate its services. However, these reserves are at critically low levels to allow it to manage its daily operating costs. While taking evidence, the Committee noted Translink's intention to commence a public consultation as part of its consideration for the potential changes in services offered and on the cost of fares.

In the course of the evidence, the Committee noted that there have been fare freezes in five of the last nine years which, when taken cumulatively, has reduced Translink's revenue by more than £20 million.

The Committee further notes that the Minister for Infrastructure confirmed that the fares will be frozen for the 2026-27 financial year.

While the Committee acknowledges and accepts that such freezes provide much needed relief to users of public transport, it also recognises that this will have a corresponding and direct impact on Translink's ability to manage its cash reserves.

The Committee will be monitoring closely the outcome of the consultation once it has concluded.

# Engagement

The Committee has sought to maximise its available time to concentrate on receiving oral and written evidence from a wide range of groups on matters that fall within the Department's responsibility.

Through this work, the Committee has conducted two external meetings to receive oral evidence from departmental officials and key stakeholders to examine relevant matters within the Committee's remit.

The first external meeting was conducted at the Antrim Civic Centre to receive oral evidence from departmental officials on the October monitoring round and was then followed by an external site visit to a new housing development to see first-

hand the role of sustainable drainage systems as part of its ongoing scrutiny of the Water, Sustainable Drainage and Flood Management Bill.

The Committee also held an external meeting at the St Patrick's Centre in Downpatrick to hear from a local residents group impacted by flooding as part of as part of its scrutiny of the Water, Sustainable Drainage and Flood Management Bill.

### Committee Motions

During the period of this report, no Committee motions have been agreed.

### Likely key priorities for the next session

Given the limited remaining time in this mandate, the Committee will be prioritising its scrutiny on a range of legislative proposals that are anticipated. These include the Harbours Bill, referred to the Committee on 24 June 2026, and the potential scrutiny of the Tree Protection Bill and Display of Flags and Emblems Bill, should they pass Second Stage. The Committee will also need to consider commencement of the Reservoirs Act 2015, and associated delegated legislation, and anticipated delegated legislation in relation to the Minister's announced Safer Journeys to School initiative.

### External meetings

As part of its ongoing programme of work, the Committee undertook the following external meetings:

| Location | Date |
|---|---|
| The St Parick's Centre, Downpatrick | 18 March 2026 |
| Antrim Civic Centre | 3 December 2025 |

### Outputs to date

## Appendix 1 – Session facts and figures

### Committee meetings & visits

| Session | Number of meetings held | Percentage minutes public/closed | Number of meetings held outside Parliament Buildings | Number of committee visits |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2025/2026 | 38 | Public – 85.28%<br>Closed – 10.82%<br>Suspended – 3.9% | 2 | 1 |

## Statutory Rules

| Session | Negative Resolution | Affirmative Resolution | Draft Affirmative | Confirmatory | Not laid | Total |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2025/2026 | 25 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 56 | 85 |

## Witnesses

| Session | Organisations which gave evidence to the committee |
|---|---|
| 2025/2026 | Association of British Insurers<br>Construction Industry Research and Information Association<br>Cycling UK<br>Driver and Vehicle Agency<br>Driving Instructor Association<br>Environment Link<br>Institution of Civil Engineers<br>Marine Task Force<br>Mineral Products Association<br>Mobile Infrastructure Forum<br>Mobile UK<br>Newcastle Concerned Residents' Group<br>Northern Ireland Approved Instructor Council<br>Northern Ireland Youth Assembly<br>Northern Ireland Water<br>Planning Statutory Consultee Forum<br>Translink<br>Utility Regulator for Northern Ireland<br>Woodland Trust |

# Appendix 2 – Committee expenditure

*Table 1 – Expenditure for the period 1 April 2025 – 31 August 2026*

| Budget area | Details | Expenditure |
|---|---|---|
| Committee Travel | Committee members, staff travel and subsistence relating to visits and meetings outside Parliament Buildings | £56.00 |
| Advertising | Includes the cost of advertising relating to the Harbours Bill | £1789.88 |

| Budget area | Details | Expenditure |
|---|---|---|
| External Consultancy | Includes costs associated with committee use of external consultants to assist in consideration of legislation, inquiries, etc. | £0.00 |
| Refreshments and Hospitality | Stakeholder event – Planning Review | £260.75 |
| General expenditure | Cost of refreshments for committee meetings, committee events, working lunches, seminars, room hire, witness expenses, and conference fees for members etc. | £1405.51 |
| **TOTAL** | | **£3512.44** |

You may re-use this publication (not including images or logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Northern Ireland Assembly Licence.

Find out more about the Open Northern Ireland Assembly Licence.

This Report can be made available in a range of formats including large print, Braille etc. For more information please contact:

Clerk to the Committee
Committee for Infrastructure
Northern Ireland Assembly
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast BT4 3XX

Telephone: 028 90 521830
Email: committee.infrastructure@niassembly.gov.uk
X (formerly Twitter): @NIAInfra