

Inquiry into Backbench Business Committee and Petitions Committee Debates

Thank you for your correspondence dated 27 March 2026 requesting a written response to your Committee's inquiry into Backbench Business and Petitions debates.

You had specifically asked for information on how the Northern Ireland Assembly (the Assembly) organises debates initiated by backbench Members, and wider reflections regarding whether there is a mandated number of days or hours per week allocated to backbench Members debates, including any calls to change that allocation.

How the Assembly organises debates initiated by a backbench Member

In the Assembly, backbench business is known as Private Members' Business. This can take the form of a Private Members' Motion or a Member's Bill. In addition, Private Members may raise topics as the subject of adjournment debates.

When the Assembly is not in recess, it meets on a Monday (from noon to 6pm) and on a Tuesday (from 10.30am and 6pm). In practice, the timing of the adjournment depends on when the items on the Order Paper have been disposed of, and there are provisions and mechanisms in place to allow the Assembly to sit beyond 6pm.

The Assembly's Standing Orders¹ state that the allocation of time for business within these sittings shall be determined by the Business Committee, except that:

¹ Standing Order 10(2)

- (a) There shall be a period for Questions for Oral Answer for Ministers taken between 2pm and 3.30pm on those Mondays and Tuesdays on which the Assembly is sitting²;
- (b) And at the end of each sitting there may be up to one hour set aside for an adjournment debate³.

Requests to the Business Committee to schedule Executive Business and Committee business are given priority over Private Member's Business. This means that the Business Committee may only consider scheduling Private Members' Business if there is time remaining on the Order Paper after Executive and Committee Business has been scheduled.

If time is remaining on the Order Paper, the Business Committee will prioritise scheduling a Members' Bill (upon request) before a Private Members' Motion.

Based on the remaining time available on the Order Paper, the Business Committee agrees the number of slots available for Private Members' Motions (based on a debate lasting 1 hour 30 minutes).

How Private Members' Motions are Selected

Since 21 October 2008 the Business Committee has allocated Private Members' Motions on the basis of a rota determined by party size, using the d'Hondt formula.

Once the Business Committee has determined the number of slots available, the next party/parties on the rota are invited to select a motion for debate from the No Day Named List of Motions, or from a Daily List of Motions.

Selection of adjournment topics

The same rota-based approach used for selecting Motions was also adopted for adjournment debate topics on 29 September 2009. A separate rota, also based on d'Hondt, allows each party to have the number of selection opportunities directly proportionate to its party size.

How Members' Bills are Selected

The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (the Commission) provides support to Members seeking to introduce a Member's Bill, including funding for drafting. The Speaker decides on access to funding for drafting, and takes into account

² In practice, Questions for Oral Answer (Question Time) last from 2pm to 3.30pm on Mondays, and from 2pm to 2.45pm on Tuesday (unless the Assembly Commission is also answering questions, when it lasts to 3.15pm).

³ Generally, the Business Committee agrees to schedule an adjournment debate each Tuesday, when there is time permitting

- compliance with the process and requirements for accessing the Assembly Commission-supported Members' Bills service;
- available plenary time and the volume of legislation within the system, including with reference to the Executive's Legislative Programme and upcoming business;
- the workload across committees and the prospects for new Bills making progress; and
- the desirability of ensuring an inclusive spread of Members/parties and political balance across the Bills being supported.

A Member can ask the Business Committee to schedule their Bill for introduction and subsequent stages, when the Speaker confirms that the Bill is within the Assembly's legislative competence.

All Members' Bills, including those not accessing the Commission's drafting services, must be introduced by the final sitting day in the month of June in the calendar year immediately preceding a poll for the election of an Assembly.

All-party motions

There is also time available for All-party motions (which are motions supported by Members of the five largest parties of the Assembly). All-party motions would generally be scheduled over a Private Members' Motion, upon request to the Business Committee. A political party will not lose their selection from the Private Members' Motions rota if it requests that the Business Committee schedule an All-party motion.

Opposition Business

In addition to Private Members' Business, the Assembly also debates Opposition Business.

Section 8 of the Assembly and Executive Reform (Assembly Opposition) Act 2016 requires that Standing Orders make provision for a minimum of 10 days per year to be set aside for Opposition business and the Assembly agreed a new Standing Order to this effect on 1 March 2022⁴.

Opposition business usually consists of four hours of business selected by the Opposition.

The Business Committee will not schedule any other debates on an opposition day unless, exceptionally, it is satisfied that a matter is so urgent it cannot be scheduled on any other day, in which case it will be scheduled after Opposition Business. However, adjournment debates may still be scheduled on an opposition day.

⁴ Standing Order 12(4A) Where there is an opposition, in each session of the Assembly ten days shall be allotted for opposition business.

Wider Reflections

Generally, Private Members' Motions are more prominent on the Order Paper in the few years of the start of a mandate. As the Assembly approaches dissolution before an Assembly election, there is usually more focus on considering legislation than Private Members' Motions.

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