

Northern Ireland Assembly submission to the Speaker's Commission on Digital Democracy

Introduction

The Northern Ireland Assembly has established a strategic vision for the exploitation of information both within the Assembly and in its dealings with external stakeholders. This vision promotes modern, open, inclusive and efficient ways of working and reflects the importance of efficient information management and the use of Information Technology.

The Assembly has sought to grasp opportunities for adopting best practices in information management – to get it right from the start. Our size, focus and lack of historical legacy means that we can be nimble in addressing information needs and adopting best practices in information management. This approach led directly to the development of the **Assembly Information Management System (AIMS)** - a centralised database which records and publishes information on Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) and the procedural business of the Assembly. This database forms the basis for most of the procedural information services described in the body of this submission.

Work is almost complete on the Assembly's '**Digital First Strategy**'. 'Digital first' is a term that has been coined by the newspaper and magazine industry to explain the creation of digital content first, followed by distribution via appropriate platforms e.g. websites, mobile devices, paper. It does not mean 'web-first' or 'web-only' given the proliferation of mobile devices such as smartphones and tablet computers. It is not the end of printing altogether; rather it is a 'platform free' mind-set and all-inclusive approach to content production.

The NI Assembly is moving towards an all-inclusive approach in content production:

- When planning the communication of information we will continue to consider all forms of content e.g. video, audio, photo, interactive features etc.
- All content will continue to be equally well-produced and then pushed through appropriate platforms i.e. web / mobile first and paper later if necessary.
- There will be further reductions in printing – both through the contract with a private sector partner and using printers in Parliament Buildings and constituency offices.
- We will make further improvements to digital production (mobile friendly layouts) of information and retain minimal re-focused print – possibly through a private sector partner.
- There will be further proliferation of mobile devices e.g. smartphone and tablet computers.

Deploying a 'Digital First' strategy will require significant changes to the Assembly's operations, products and culture. The biggest hurdle to implementation of a successful 'Digital First' Strategy is changing culture. We will have to be mindful of the digital divide in the community and the need to identify change agents and proponents of the status quo. Commission Members and committee chairs have shown strong leadership in relation to the Electronic Committee Pack Project and this will continue through the development and implementation of a 'Digital First' Strategy.

Issue 1 – ‘The role of technology in helping Parliament and other agencies to scrutinise the work of government’

One of the key information systems that the NI Assembly uses to assist Members in scrutinising the work of government is the recently introduced **Electronic Committee Pack (ECP) System**. Following a successful pilot project to assess and define the needs of MLAs regarding the use of technology in committees, the Assembly implemented an electronic system in 2012 to better support Members in their scrutiny role and to enhance overall committee effectiveness.

The ECP system manages the creation of a composite pdf file, bookmarked and page numbered, containing all the committee papers in a single document. It reads and feels like an e-book, rather than a series of individual papers and is capable of being marked up or annotated without changing pagination or format. This composite pdf is created by committee teams using bespoke software and copies are automatically distributed to Members cloud based Office 365 SharePoint storage.

The main business drivers for the project were:

- Reliance on paper. Committees were creating large paper Committee Packs of up to 800 pages with up to 15 individual packs being printed, tabbed and checked for each Committee meeting. As the Assembly facilitates up to 600 committee meetings per parliamentary year this represented a huge investment in staff time and resources.
- Business efficiency programmes being conducted due to the Comprehensive Spending Review. An electronic system was identified as desirable in order to provide an efficient and standardised solution for the management of Committee Packs. This required considerable analysis and discussion to achieve an acceptable degree of standardisation across all committees.
- MLA expectations. Many MLAs were already using their own personal tablet devices and there was a growing demand for access to electronic papers.

After a period of detailed planning, a programme of complementary projects was initiated to create, deliver and manage committee meeting papers electronically. These include the in-house development of ECP software - a bespoke application built using the Assembly AIMS database as its platform; the provision of SharePoint 365 cloud storage for MLAs; the provision of Windows 8 tablet computers to all MLAs and the installation of new wi-fi network in Parliament Buildings.

Benefits

The level of uptake of the ECP has been very encouraging with the majority of committees now adopting electronic-only meeting packs. Many committees have now chosen to be completely paper-free, and most others have greatly reduced their requirement for paper packs. Since the introduction of the ECP system in September 2013 the following major benefits have been realised:

- The use of electronic packs has delivered staff efficiencies and cost savings in reduced print and paper handling costs.
- Once trained and familiar with the technology, Members were able to move reasonably seamlessly from a paper pack to the new format.
- Ability to search across previous Committee packs
- Single standardised pack structure across all Assembly committees

- Secure access to committee papers from any location with an internet connection
- Ability to share, mark and annotate electronic packs in advance of committee meetings

Challenges and lessons learned

Some of the key challenges encountered during the project include:

- Ensuring that the system was easy to use for both administrative staff and Members to address the 'fear' of moving away from paper to soft-copy.
- Resourcing the training and familiarisation effort required to ensure a smooth transition to the new technology. A varied range of technical skills exists amongst Members so we had to ensure that effective one-to-one training was delivered at the Members' convenience.
- Facilitating the use of non-Assembly devices e.g. Apple iPads.
- Ensuring effective contingency in place.
- Handling and responding to press scrutiny.

Future plans

The new tablet technology allows MLAs to securely access other information on the Assembly network and Information Systems Office is currently enhancing the system to allow access to committee papers relating to Assembly legislation and committee inquiries. These SharePoint sites typically contain information relating to draft bills (Explanatory and Financial Memoranda, submissions on draft Bills, Bill amendments etc) and committee inquiries (consultation submissions, departmental and research papers, correspondence etc.)

The Assembly is continuing to develop other systems which will enhance services provided to Members via their tablet computers. As part of the Assembly Information Management System (AIMS), a 'self-service' portal for Members is being developed to allow MLAs to remotely table Motions and Amendments for Plenary Debate. The system will also allow Members to table and track Assembly Questions and Answers and to submit their names for selection to ask Oral or Topical Questions. Members and their staff will have immediate electronic access to written answers and can receive automated alerts when answers are due or overdue.

Fig 1 – Committee for Employment and Learning, Parliament Buildings, June 2014



Fig 2 - Typical Committee Pack as displayed on the Acer tablet computer

Northern Ireland Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Details of Meeting:

Date: Thursday 19 June 2014
Time: 10:00 AM
Venue: Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings

Meeting Agenda:

The meeting will commence in public session.

1 Apologies 3

Bookmarks

- Agenda
- 1. Apologies
- 2. Chairperson's Business
- 3. Draft Minutes
- 4. Matters Arising
- 5. Ministerial briefing - Briefing by Mark H Durkan
- 6. Consultation on the Proposed Nitrates Action Programme Regulations (Northern Ireland)...
- 7. Consultation on the Shares (Northern Ireland) Order - Synopsis of Responses
- 8. Consultation of Proposed Police Exemptions from In-Car Screens Usage. - Synopsis of Responses
- 9. Consultation on Waste Duty of Care - Code of Practice Revision 2014 - Synopsis of Responses
- 10. Consultation on the Introduction of Restrictions on the Landfilling of Food Waste -...
- 11. Consultation on the Draft Local Government (Standing Orders) Regulations (Northern...

Issue 2 – ‘The role of technology in helping citizens to scrutinise the Government and the work of Parliament’

Social Media

Technology is increasingly allowing and empowering citizens to interact with government and national and devolved legislatures. Evidence shows that people are increasingly using social media tools to contact their elected representatives, to comment on topical issues and to scrutinise (and criticise) NI Assembly decisions. The Assembly encourages citizens to engage with the political process via its Twitter and Facebook presence and some Assembly committees are currently using Twitter to publicise their inquiries and committee sponsored events. Other committees are considering how their reach could be extended through the use of such new technologies. The Assembly will continue to encourage feedback via social media and will review and respond to comments as necessary.

The Information Systems Office has developed an online [AIMS Portal](#) on the Assembly website to provide the public with access to Assembly procedural information in a user-friendly way. The AIMS Portal allows visitors to browse and search for information on:

- [All current and previous MLAs and their roles](#) within the Assembly
- [Contact information](#) for MLAs including constituency office mapping tools
- [Information on all plenary business](#) and the decisions of the Assembly
- [Assembly Questions and answers](#)
- Information on the [activities of Assembly Committees](#)
- The [Register of Members' Interests](#)
- Structured, [subject-based searching](#) across all outputs

The AIMS system architecture allows for easy access to real-time procedural information - for example voting results from Assembly Divisions are available to the public within six seconds of the result being announced in the Assembly Chamber. This service has received a very positive response from local journalists and media outlets.

The AIMS Portal also provides a vastly improved [flexible search tool](#) that exposes the AIMS subject index. The AIMS subject index is based on a taxonomy inherited from the Westminster POLIS and PIMS systems and contains some 30,000 subject terms. The Assembly Library staff have a dedicated team that revisits all Assembly Procedural content on the AIMS system and tags items according to the standard terms contained within the AIMS index. This is specialised work as it demands a knowledge of, and maintenance of the Assembly vocabulary, however the Assembly feels that although resource intensive, it offers an easy mechanism for citizens to search across the entire range of Assembly procedural outputs. For example if a visitor to the website is interested in finding out about a specific topic, the search tool will query the index and provide results from across all Plenary motions, Committee and Assembly Question content. This will soon be extended to cover the Official Report (Hansard) and all Research publications.

For economic reasons, some legislatures have recently scaled back or ceased efforts in the subject indexing of content, however the Assembly considers this work to be beneficial not only for citizen engagement but for internal and external research purposes. Indexing might be an easy target in terms of efficiency as hard business benefits can be difficult to quantify,

but the Assembly views it as essential to providing an effective, over-arching subject based search tool.

Assembly Open Data Project

Mr William Hay MLA, Speaker of the NI Assembly, launched the [Assembly Open Data Project](#) in May 2012. The project allows data on the work of the Assembly and its committees to be published in its raw form, increasing the ways in which the data can be used. Data can be accessed under the [Open Northern Ireland Assembly Licence](#) where citizens and organisations are free to copy, publish, distribute and transmit Assembly information. Organisations can exploit the information commercially, for example, by combining it with other information, or by including it in their own products or applications. We used the Westminster Open Parliament Licence as the basis for developing our own and had some very useful input from The National Archives. Once we had considered their comments, we involved our Legal Services Team and Information Standards Officer in developing the licence terms and conditions.

The Open Data service allows for real-time calls to a number of web services, delivering accurate and up-to-date data relating to the business of the NI Assembly. The data can be copied, published and adapted, as well as collated with other statistics and information to create new products such as web and mobile phone applications.

Throughout the project we identified a number of potential stakeholders and worked closely with them to refine the functional services. The stakeholders we identified and consulted ranged from NI Executive Departments, Parliamentary Monitoring Organisations (e.g. Randalls, Dods and MySociety), charitable sector groups (e.g. NICVA - www.nicva.org/niassembly), lobbying groups (e.g. MCE Public Relations - www.mcepublicrelations.com/mceconnect) and various interested hobbyists and hackers. We continue to engage with these organisations, providing clarification and advice on use of Assembly data and seeking feedback and suggestions for improvement on the services currently offered. In response to feedback we now offer NI Assembly data in differing formats including XML and JSON) we shortly intend to publish detailed guidance on the practical use of open data for novice consumers.

The Open Data service provides for openness and transparency of the NI Assembly procedural function, which in turn reduces the number of Freedom of Information requests being received. We are also happy that any interested parties can use this data in a commercial context, allowing for enterprise and innovation through the delivery of apps and data visualization.

In future we plan to expand the data services to include Official Report (Hansard) debates, Register of Members Interests and the publication of Members' expenses. We will also provide practical examples of how to consume and re-purpose Assembly data and discussions are currently ongoing with the NI Civil Service and other public bodies to provide more linked data services, facilitating joined-up government data publishing. We have begun early discussions with local broadcasters to provide bespoke data services and information for the forthcoming Assembly elections.

Future

Several Assembly committees have recently held successful evidence sessions from remote locations using Skype technology. A project has been initiated to assess the feasibility of extending its use to all Statutory Committees. There may be merit in legislatures extending their reach to new audiences (particularly young people) by

encouraging and accepting evidence or submissions via new technologies such as Vine and Instagram.

We note that the House of Commons' Backbench Business Committee is considering the process by which issues raised via e-petitions can be debated in the House. Whilst the issue of e-petitions in a Northern Ireland context is yet unclear we feel that there is merit in further discussing the use of such tools to stimulate debate in the Assembly. The technology can clearly deliver the means for people to raise and support topics of concern and the outstanding issues appear to be more around editorial governance and the processes of how debates are facilitated.

Issue 3 – ‘The nature and format of information and data about Parliament and government that is published online’

The AIMS system places the NI Assembly at an advantage from other legislatures in that the complete historical record of Assembly Membership and proceedings is available within a single repository. As described earlier, the Assembly has been proactive in re-purposing this information in an easy-to-access way via its website. Close collaboration between technical staff and web publishers means we can provide a streamlined response to demands for new and improved web-based services. This has already provided easier navigation for the general public who do not necessarily have a full understanding of Parliamentary procedure.

Internal research and recent reports have highlighted a number of ways that the Assembly could further improve and increase access to Assembly information:

- Procedural and corporate information should be open, easily accessed and understood therefore we try to avoid jargon and use Plain English where possible.
- Some job titles have contributed to confusion about the role of the holder of the title.
- The Assembly regularly reviews the frequency and nature of requests for information under Freedom of Information and from the media. In the interests of transparency and efficiency, where appropriate we have revised our publication scheme to proactively publish certain information such as MLA salaries and expenses.
- Through initiatives such as ‘Assembly Community Connect’ (<http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/Visit-and-Learning/Connecting-With-Community/>), the Assembly Education and Outreach Services have been very active in promoting improved understanding and access to information on the Assembly particularly amongst those sections of the community most difficult to reach.
- Information Systems Office has been promoting training and awareness in consuming Parliamentary procedural information by attending external events such as ‘Hackathons’ for software developers and designers. The Assembly recognises the importance of these engagements and resources this accordingly.
- Future plans for ECP - Senior Clerking staff are considering the merit of providing a modified committee pack for public consumption to accompany the agenda published on the Assembly website and linked to from the live video stream.
- Information Systems Office is currently researching how the use of geo-tagging and location information could provide valuable data for the public, politicians and research staff.

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