

Speaker of the NI Assembly
Edwin Poots MLA
Parliament Buildings
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3XX

7 September 2026

RE: Conduct of MLAs towards officials

Dear Mr Speaker,

I am writing to you today, on behalf of the FDA union, ahead of the return of the NI Assembly from Summer recess on Monday 7th September.

As you are aware, officials from across the NICS regularly appear before Assembly committees to ensure MLAs can exercise their accountability function, and officials can uphold their duties of transparency and openness.

Accountability is vital - it is a cornerstone of any decent democratic society, ensuring trust between the public and the government and allowing for better decision-making. This is particularly important given the significant challenges facing public administration in NI, not least the ongoing budgetary challenges.

While MLAs have a duty to scrutinise officials at committee hearings, there is a deep concern that the conduct of some MLAs goes beyond scrutiny, with criticism that is both personal and insulting. This has included baseless accusations that officials have lied to committees and breached their code of ethics as well as MLAs joining calls from lobbying organisations for officials to resign for simply carrying out their responsibilities as defined in law.

Additionally, we have seen MLAs ask officials inappropriate questions that are inherently political and should be directed towards Ministers, not officials. It is important for MLAs to remember that officials do not appear before committees to be political spokespeople for their Minister. Civil servants must serve Ministers irrespective of their party affiliation and, while they should answer questions on operational matters, policy approaches and spending across the Department, they should not be expected to answer questions that would undermine their impartiality.



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Our politics must allow for open debate and, at times, issues can be emotional. We do not underestimate that MLAs are often articulating the views of their constituents, but this should not descend into mudslinging, vilification or undermining officials' duty to uphold impartiality.

When officials attend committees, they do so as part of their professional duties as a civil servant and the same policies regarding respect and dignity in the workplace still apply.

As we head towards the election in May, it is likely this Assembly session will see increase political debate and disagreement. We would simply ask you, as Speaker, to remind MLAs that while they can engage in robust political debate, they must respect the position of officials who are doing their best to carry out the direction set by their Minister in very challenging circumstances.

Civil servants and the impartiality of the civil service must not become collateral damage in a rising political temperature.

The FDA would welcome an opportunity to meet with you to discuss this matter in further detail.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'RM', followed by a period.

Robert Murtagh
FDA National Officer (Northern Ireland)