

# An Engaging Assembly

Whilst recognising that Members have primary responsibility for maintaining links between the Assembly and the public, the Assembly Commission has set out the development of a dynamic and responsive strategy for outreach and public engagement as a key strategic priority.

The Assembly Commission believes there is a clear role for the Assembly in engaging with the public, involving the development of a formal engagement and outreach policy and programme, driven by this vision of a vibrant civil society working in partnership with its politicians.

The Assembly Commission feels that it is important that the Assembly has a clear, consistent and long-term strategy in place to engage with members of the general public.

Improving public access to the Assembly, and knowledge and understanding of its work and role, is a primary objective of this Engagement Strategy.



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## Events: Welcoming People from Home and Abroad

The Events Office provides an invaluable service to the Northern Ireland public and visitors from around the world. Guests to Parliament Buildings can receive a comprehensive tour of the Great Hall, Senate Chamber and Assembly Chamber, which details the history and architecture of Parliament Buildings. They can also find out how the Northern Ireland Assembly functions today.

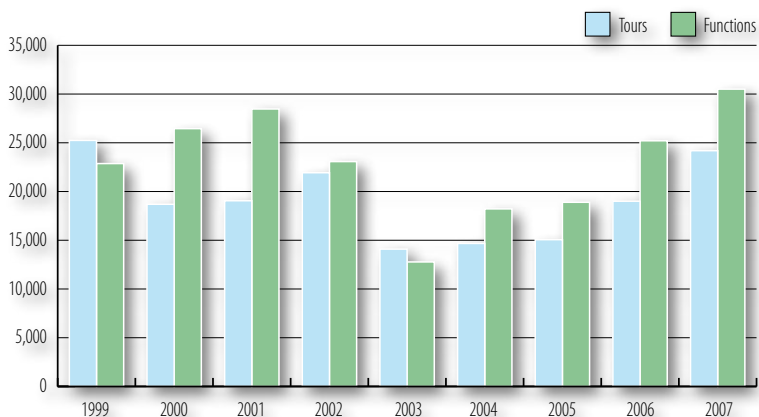
Since the Northern Ireland Assembly opened its doors, guests have hailed from 130 countries, including Sri Lankan and Iraqi Parliamentarians.

The Events Office also supports the 108 MLAs with the planning and managing of functions they wish to hold at Parliament Buildings. Assembly Commission legislation was revised so that each Member's proposed function at Parliament Buildings requires cross-community support and sponsorship from three other Members.

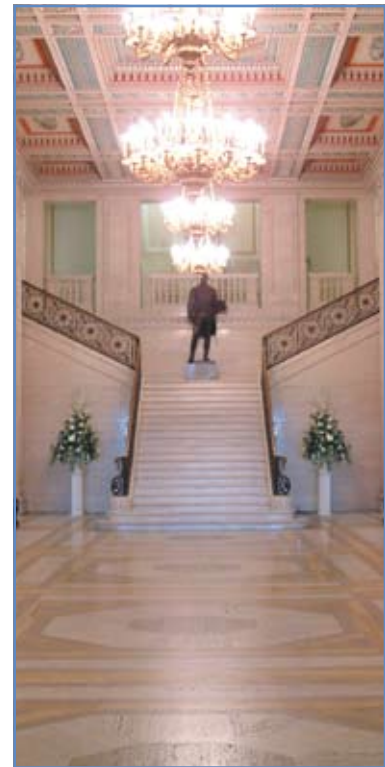
Between May 2007 and July 2008, the Events Office had the largest number of guests for any year since it opened in 1998. The following details the number of events and tours held and guests received:

- 656 functions were held, which were attended by 43,855 guests.
- 34,960 people took part in 1,381 tours.
- The total number of visitors to Parliament Buildings for tours and functions during the period of this report was 78,815.

**Fig 1: Events Office guests numbers for the period 1999 – 2007**



Great Hall



Senate Chamber



Assembly Chamber



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*Celebration Youth Event*



*Keltic Dreams Event*



*Celebration Youth Event*



*Royal National Institute for the Blind Event*



A host of distinguished guests from around the world, including US President George W Bush, visited Stormont during the 2007/08 period. The Events Office played a vital role in the smooth and efficient running of Devolution Day on 8 May 2007, attended by former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, and the US Investment Conference on 8 May 2008, held under the patronage of Mayor Bloomberg of New York.



The Northern Ireland Assembly does not host profit-making events at Parliament Buildings, but it does host charitable fundraising functions. Charities and not-for-profit organisations have used this magnificent venue and the services provided by the Events Office. During the year Amnesty International, the Zimbabwe Solidarity Campaign, the Make-A-Wish Foundation and Marie Curie were just some of the organisations that used Parliament Buildings for their events.

On Saturday 4 April 2008 the normally quiet Parliament Buildings became a noisy, bustling cauldron of activities. The Celebration Youth organisation took over the premises for their headline event for Community Relations Week. Committee rooms and even the Great Hall became venues for non-parliamentary business including dance, drama, circus skills, break-dancing, rock music lessons, wall-climbing and even graffiti wall painting. This was an extremely busy and successful day attended by over 250 young people. Everyone, including staff, went home afterwards feeling both exhausted and fulfilled.

The Diversity Day Reception hosted by the First and deputy First Ministers is an example of the forward-thinking and inclusive nature



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of the Assembly's events. Its aim was to reach out to minority groups in Northern Ireland and further afield. A group of children from various ethnic minorities from the Bronx in New York performed traditional Irish dance in the Great Hall.



For the 2007 Christmas tree lighting ceremony, the Speaker, William Hay, had representatives from Northern Ireland's older community as the key guests. Over 200 guests were enthralled by the famous Anúna choral, whose enchanting cathedral chant style was particularly suited to the Great Hall. Young harpists, Jack and Katie Patience, provided ambient background music and later had the honour of switching on the tree lights to the applause of all guests.

### Education Service

The Education Service provides an Educational Visits Programme in Parliament Buildings. It also provides educational resources to support teaching and learning about the Northern Ireland Assembly, including an education website, <http://education.niassembly.gov.uk>. The Education Service seeks to encourage young people and others



*St. Patricks Day Event*

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to learn about the Assembly, to understand how it affects their lives and to take part in the democratic process.

The Education Programme has been operating since 2003, and demand has always been high. However, the restoration of devolution has seen even greater interest in visiting Parliament Buildings and the Education Service has never been busier. From 8 May 2007 to 4 July 2008, 519 groups, comprising 16,565 participants, took part in the Education Programme. Due to such high demand, the Education Service had to stop taking bookings after 31 March 2008 for the rest of the academic year.

Although the main focus of the Education Programme has been on schools and young people, it is open to any group wishing to learn about the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Education Service has developed a range of programmes to suit different group types, taking account of age and ability levels.

### ***What does the Education Programme involve?***

All groups receive a Powerpoint presentation on the Assembly and a tour of the building (including a visit to the Public Gallery when the Assembly is sitting). Depending on the needs of the group, the programme may also include one or more of the following: an activity session (schools); meetings with MLAs or party staff; or an address by Assembly staff such as a committee clerk.

Everyone taking part receives an educational pack containing relevant information and educational resources.

### ***Participants in the Education Service Programme from 8 May 2007 – 4 July 2008.***

Type of group	Number of groups	Percentage of groups	Number of participants	Percentage of participants
Schools	371	71.48%	12,953	78.19%
Youth	46	8.86%	1,178	7.11%
University	50	9.63%	1,353	8.17%
Adult	33	6.36%	604	3.65%

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Type of group	Number of groups	Percentage of groups	Number of participants	Percentage of participants
Further & Higher Education	11	2.12%	242	1.46%
Exchange	8	1.54%	235	1.42%
<b>Totals</b>	<b>519</b>		<b>16,565</b>	

The majority of groups came from Northern Ireland (430 groups). Groups also visited from other parts of the UK, Republic of Ireland, USA, France, Spain, Germany, Sweden and Denmark.

School groups made up over 70 per cent of participants and included a range of primary and post-primary students studying citizenship, government and politics, history, and education for mutual understanding. Youth groups included alternative education and youth participation groups.

Visiting universities came from Northern Ireland, England, Sweden, Denmark and the USA. Adult groups included many from the voluntary sector, citizenship teachers and visitors from abroad.

### **Other Education Service Events**

The Education Service worked with the External Liaison Unit to organise a Youth Parliament to mark Commonwealth Day on 10 March 2008. Forty students from four local post-primary schools took part in debates on the theme 'Environment – Our Future'. The YMCA also held a Youth Parliament on 31 March 2008. The Education Service contributed to the Good Morning Ulster radio broadcast on 8 May 2008, which celebrated one year of devolution.

A seminar for post-primary teachers on the work of Parliament was organised on 13 June 2008 by the Education Service and delivered by the Westminster Education Service Outreach Team. On 2 and 3 July 2008 a group of interns from the Ontario Legislature took part in a programme created by the Education Service.

*Dalriada Grammar School*



*Good Morning Ulster Radio Broadcast*



*Strathearn Grammar School*



*Engage Youth Participants*



*Dalriada Grammar School*



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*Iraqi Commissioners*



The Education Service continues to develop links with relevant outside institutions, including other legislatures, the Electoral Commission and the Education and Library Boards.

## External Liaison

### Outreach

The External Liaison Unit provided an outreach service to representatives from statutory agencies, the voluntary and community sector and business groups, to explain how the Assembly works and to encourage their involvement. Organisations included the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, the Children's Commissioner, the Consumer Council, NICVA, Rotary Clubs, development organisations and residents' associations.

*Iraqi Commissioner meets the Speaker*



### Inward Visits

Since restoration, the External Liaison Unit has tailor made programmes to meet the needs of the many delegations requesting visits. Delegations have included presidents, ambassadors and politicians from around the world, from areas of conflict or post conflict such as Burundi, Slovenia, Sri Lanka, Iraq and Iran.

*Commonwealth Day*



### Outward Visits

Members of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (NI) branch attended the annual conference in New Delhi to discuss urgent global issues including pollution, poverty, water supplies and human trafficking. They also visited the ASHA Community Education Project, which is supported by a number of local schools.

*Sri-Lankan Delegation meets Deputy Speaker*



Assembly Members attended the 10th European Parliament's Research Initiative conference on ICT for Parliamentarians hosted by the Houses of the Oireachtas in Dublin in March 2008. Parliamentarians got to share experience on how to secure greater voter participation at elections and increase public interest in politics using ICT.

*Basque Parliamentarians*

