# Stormont vote on Data (Use and Access) Bill criticised as 'shambolic' and potentially too late



Concerns have been raised about the Northern Ireland Assembly's handling of the Data (Use and Access) Bill, which aims to modernise laws governing data sharing. Criticism has intensified after it was revealed that a forthcoming vote by MLAs could be too late to affect the bill’s passage, as it may already have been enacted by Westminster. This so-called "shambolic" situation has prompted an apology from the Department of Finance and raised significant questions about the legislative process at Stormont.

The Assembly's Finance Committee, tasked with reviewing the bill, has expressed dissatisfaction over the perceived lack of timely engagement from the Department of Finance. Committee members learned that, unlike their counterparts in Scotland and Wales, who had already voted on similar motions, their opportunity to debate and potentially reject the bill might not matter by the time they gather to consider it. The committee chair, SDLP MLA Matthew O'Toole, voiced his disbelief, stating that it discredits the Assembly’s reputation when scrutiny is not taken seriously. He described the scenario as "totally shambolic", indicating a breakdown in governance and protocol that undermines the assembly's role as a legislative body.

Compounding this issue are the complexities introduced by the post-Brexit Windsor Framework, which governs the relationship between Northern Ireland and both the UK and the European Union. The Department of Finance's deputy secretary, Paul Duffy, suggested that delays in addressing the bill’s implications stem from the need to ensure that these new data-sharing laws do not conflict with previously established frameworks meant to protect human rights. He acknowledged that the department had not intended for the process to unfold in this manner, expressing regret that the committee had not been afforded adequate time for consideration.

The political landscape heightens the stakes surrounding the bill, as various parties hold differing views on the relevance and necessity of the proposed changes. Sinn Féin MLA Deirdre Hargey highlighted the need to consider human rights concerns and the implications of the Windsor Framework, indicating a cautious approach among some members regarding the data-sharing legislation. Conversely, other political actors, such as DUP MLA Paul Frew, have labelled the situation as “farcical,” reflecting a growing sentiment that the Assembly's processes must improve to regain public trust.

This debacle highlights not only the internal complexities of the devolution process in Northern Ireland but also the broader implications of Brexit on its governance. For the future, as illustrated by other recent votes in the Assembly, including those concerning EU laws and cross-community support, the efficacy of the Northern Ireland Assembly in protecting its unique interests will be closely scrutinised. Political leaders are now being called upon to convene and reassess their strategies regarding future legislation, particularly those laws that will shape the operational landscape of post-Brexit Northern Ireland.

Amidst this turmoil, the overarching message appears to be a pressing need for reform and renewed commitment to effective scrutiny within the Assembly. As O’Toole poignantly noted, there is a shared responsibility amongst members to ensure that their legislative processes are respected and taken seriously, or risk diminishing their authority in the eyes of the public.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/shambolic-stormont-vote-on-new-uk-law-could-be-too-late-F53TX2D4QNCXJDAVRF7UBMCEVM/), [[2]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/shambolic-stormont-vote-on-new-uk-law-could-be-too-late-F53TX2D4QNCXJDAVRF7UBMCEVM/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/shambolic-stormont-vote-on-new-uk-law-could-be-too-late-F53TX2D4QNCXJDAVRF7UBMCEVM/), [[2]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/shambolic-stormont-vote-on-new-uk-law-could-be-too-late-F53TX2D4QNCXJDAVRF7UBMCEVM/)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/shambolic-stormont-vote-on-new-uk-law-could-be-too-late-F53TX2D4QNCXJDAVRF7UBMCEVM/), [[3]](https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2024/11/01/stormont-vote-on-continuing-brexit-deal-the-most-significant-in-assemblys-history-allister/), [[5]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cgr029lq1yeo)
* Paragraph 4 – [[2]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/shambolic-stormont-vote-on-new-uk-law-could-be-too-late-F53TX2D4QNCXJDAVRF7UBMCEVM/), [[4]](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-68601764), [[6]](https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2024/11/01/stormont-vote-on-continuing-brexit-deal-the-most-significant-in-assemblys-history-allister/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[7]](https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/shambolic-stormont-vote-on-new-uk-law-could-be-too-late-F53TX2D4QNCXJDAVRF7UBMCEVM/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/shambolic-stormont-vote-on-new-uk-law-could-be-too-late-F53TX2D4QNCXJDAVRF7UBMCEVM/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/shambolic-stormont-vote-on-new-uk-law-could-be-too-late-F53TX2D4QNCXJDAVRF7UBMCEVM/> - The article reports on criticism of the Northern Ireland Assembly's handling of the Data (Use and Access) Bill, which aims to modernise data-sharing laws. MLAs were informed that their vote on the bill would be too late to influence its passage, as it might already have become law by the time of the vote. The delay was partly attributed to the need to assess the bill's implications for the post-Brexit Windsor Framework and to consult the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. The situation was described as 'totally shambolic' and prompted an apology from the Department of Finance.
3. <https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2024/11/01/stormont-vote-on-continuing-brexit-deal-the-most-significant-in-assemblys-history-allister/> - This article discusses the significance of a Stormont vote on continuing post-Brexit trading arrangements for Northern Ireland. TUV leader Jim Allister described the vote as the most significant in the history of devolved governance, arguing that MLAs were being asked to 'surrender' sovereignty over numerous areas of law to Brussels. The article also highlights the differing perspectives of other political leaders, including SDLP MLA Matthew O'Toole, who supports the arrangements as necessary protections against negative Brexit consequences.
4. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-68601764> - The BBC article reports on the first vote in the Northern Ireland Assembly regarding the adoption of a new EU law on the protection of geographical indications for craft and industrial products. Unionist parties voted against the move, while Sinn Féin, Alliance, and the SDLP supported it. The vote failed to achieve cross-community consent, meaning the new law cannot automatically apply in Northern Ireland. The UK government will ultimately decide whether to introduce or veto the law.
5. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cgr029lq1yeo> - In this article, SDLP MLA Matthew O'Toole expresses the need for Northern Ireland to have the protections offered by the protocol. He intends to gather support for the protocol and believes there are economic advantages to it. O'Toole aims to build support across the community for the protections that are in the protocol, highlighting its importance for Northern Ireland's interests.
6. <https://www.irishtimes.com/politics/2024/11/01/stormont-vote-on-continuing-brexit-deal-the-most-significant-in-assemblys-history-allister/> - This article discusses the significance of a Stormont vote on continuing post-Brexit trading arrangements for Northern Ireland. TUV leader Jim Allister described the vote as the most significant in the history of devolved governance, arguing that MLAs were being asked to 'surrender' sovereignty over numerous areas of law to Brussels. The article also highlights the differing perspectives of other political leaders, including SDLP MLA Matthew O'Toole, who supports the arrangements as necessary protections against negative Brexit consequences.
7. <https://www.irishnews.com/news/northern-ireland/shambolic-stormont-vote-on-new-uk-law-could-be-too-late-F53TX2D4QNCXJDAVRF7UBMCEVM/> - The article reports on criticism of the Northern Ireland Assembly's handling of the Data (Use and Access) Bill, which aims to modernise data-sharing laws. MLAs were informed that their vote on the bill would be too late to influence its passage, as it might already have become law by the time of the vote. The delay was partly attributed to the need to assess the bill's implications for the post-Brexit Windsor Framework and to consult the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission. The situation was described as 'totally shambolic' and prompted an apology from the Department of Finance.