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The  
Electoral  
Commission



# Democracy

**Activities for youth groups in  
Northern Ireland**

**Co-created with the Northern  
Ireland Youth Forum**



[electoralcommission.org.uk/learning](https://electoralcommission.org.uk/learning)

**YOUR VOTE MATTERS  
DON'T LOSE IT**



## 01.

# Introduction and foreword

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**The Electoral Commission works with their youth voice network across the UK to create democracy education resources for young people, by young people.**

**Thank you to the young people with the Northern Ireland Youth Forum for creating this booklet and allowing it to be adapted for use in other parts of the UK.**

Hi, I'm Aoife. I am a member of the Youth Engagement Panel, a group facilitated by the Northern Ireland Youth Forum in partnership with the Electoral Commission.

14 of us aged between 14 and 18 from all across Northern Ireland have worked hard to create this resource booklet, which has been a long but rewarding process.

We hope young people from across Northern Ireland use this resource booklet and that it creates understanding and awareness of:

- political education
- what democracy is
- the Northern Ireland Government
- voting systems

Our Youth Engagement Panel think political education is really important for young people and we hope that this resource starts a conversation and encourages social change.

**Aoife Murphy, on behalf of the Youth Engagement Panel at the Northern Ireland Youth Forum.**



## 02.

# Facilitator Guide

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Throughout this resource there are a range of activities to facilitate or take part in.

These can be done anywhere there are young people, such as youth clubs and schools. We have provided some instructions and tips on how to do this. At the back of the resource, you will find the answers to the written activities to help ensure you're on the right track.

You will also find reflection prompts for each activity. These are there to help unpack activities and further explore the learning from it. These prompts may encourage conversation around differences of opinions, personal challenges in doing activities and exploring definitions and meanings.

There is also a glossary towards the back of the resource to help

support learning and to explain some of the big and complicated words used when talking about the topic.

Some words or phrases will have acronyms after them as the acronyms may be more commonly used without many people knowing what it means. We have used this as an opportunity to hopefully give more understanding to these terms.

We encourage you to embrace learning, promote sharing your opinions and our Youth Engagement Panel think it is super important to create a safe and non-judgmental space to have these conversations and complete the activities.

Most of all, have fun!



## 03.

# Group Agreement

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To create a safe, comfortable and non-judgmental environment we suggest everyone works together to complete a group agreement.

As a full group, come up with words or phrases that will help with everyone's participation throughout this process. It is important that everyone agrees with the topic being discussed and has their views and feelings heard. Write these down around the cloud so that everyone can see. It is sometimes good to go back to your group agreement as a reminder in sessions or activities.

## Group Agreement



### Reflection prompts:

- Did everyone have a chance to speak?
- Did you explore what challenges could come up?
- Was everyone in agreement?
- Do you feel that this will help with differences of opinions and respecting each other's views?



## 04.

# Walking Debate

With the participants standing in the middle of a space - select one side of the room to stand for agree and the other as disagree.

Use the statements below to encourage conversation and introduce the theme of democracy. When participants have decided on agree or disagree get them to walk to the side of the room that matches their decision, it's ok to be in the middle!

Use these statements in a particular order to create a comfortable and fun environment before using the more thought-provoking statements.

- Pineapple belongs on pizza
- Vanilla is the best ice-cream flavour
- 'Elf' is the best Christmas film
- The book is always better than the film
- McDonald's is overrated
- I care about my community
- I make a difference in my community
- I make a difference to the place I live
- I have the opportunity to create change
- Politics is complicated
- I enjoy knowing more about how society works
- Young people's views, opinions and thoughts on issues that impact them matter
- Young people should be able to elect representatives
- Young people should be able to meet with decision makers
- Politicians and decision makers don't value young people's views



## Reflection prompts:

- How did it feel when people disagreed with you?
- Did it get challenging to have different opinions?
- Did you get the opportunity to have your voice heard?
- Did everyone get a chance to speak?



## 05.

# Democracy Word Dump

When you think of the word 'democracy' what thoughts come to mind? Write or draw these around the cloud and then come up with a group definition for the word 'democracy'.

**Democracy**

**Our definition of democracy:**

**Reflection prompts:**

- How did it feel thinking about democracy?
- Was it challenging to think of what it means?
- Has your opinion changed?
- Was it easy to come up with a definition that everyone agrees with?



## 06.

# Democracy Definition

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Here's a definition of democracy - How does it compare to yours?

Use the two definitions to help you answer the quiz on the next page

### What is democracy?

Democracy means 'rule by the people'. In a democracy, like the United Kingdom, the people vote in politicians at election times. These politicians make up government who make decisions on how the country is run.

There are two main forms of democracy:

**Direct Democracy** - all voters come together in one place to make laws and decisions. Often there are too many people for a direct democracy to work.

**Representative Democracy** - the people elect representatives, or other people to speak for them. The elected representatives make the laws and decisions.



## 07.

# Yes/ No Quiz

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- Read the below statements and decide whether they are democratic or not. Use 'yes' for democratic and 'no' for not democratic.
  - See activity answers at the back of this booklet.
1. There is a group vote to decide what type of food to order
  2. Someone is picked for a leadership role within a school with no election
  3. Your youth space is getting painted and all members vote on what colour
  4. The opening times of your local sports centre are changing and regular users haven't been asked for their thoughts
  5. You go to see a film at the cinema with five other friends. Four of your friends wanted to see this film. You and one other friend wanted to see something else
  6. You have a vote in school to ask if pupils want to change the school uniform



### Reflection prompts:

- How did you feel about answering the questions?
- How many did you answer correctly?
- Did it make you think about anything else, such as your society or your community?





## 08.

# Democracy Definition 2

In groups, talk about the pros and cons of a democratic society. There's space below to write your thoughts. Sometimes things can be pros as well as cons, there is space to write these too. Think about the impact this could have in different places such as in a school, a sports team or in your community.

**Pros**

**Cons**

**Both Pros and Cons**



### Reflection prompts:

- How did you find thinking of pros and cons?
- Did your group agree on everything?
- When something is both a pro and con, can this be a good thing?

We hope you have learnt more about democracy and what it looks like in society. We would love for you to continue the conversation with your friends, in school or with people at home.



## 09.

# How does government work in Northern Ireland?

Different governments around the world make decisions in different ways. In Northern Ireland we have our own way of working - through the Northern Ireland Assembly.

Now let's test your knowledge of the Northern Ireland Assembly by filling in the blanks. Check out how you did with the answers at the back.

1. Northern Ireland Government is often referred to as a \_\_\_\_\_- sharing government.
2. The Northern Ireland Assembly was set up in \_\_\_\_\_ following the \_\_\_\_\_ Agreement.
3. There are \_\_\_\_\_ MLAs from different political parties are elected to represent the people.
4. MLAs have power to make and change \_\_\_\_\_ on local issues.
5. Parliament buildings is in the City of \_\_\_\_\_.
6. People often refer to Parliament buildings as \_\_\_\_\_



### Top tip

You can find a lot of this information online at:

- [electoralcommission.org.uk/learning](http://electoralcommission.org.uk/learning)
- [NIAssembly.gov.uk](http://NIAssembly.gov.uk)



## 10.

# Word Connection

Using these words to have a think or discussion with your group:

- Do you see them on social media or the news?
- How many words do you recognise?
- Do you hear them often in conversations?

stormont defence  
 transport civil power  
 designation mlas foreign  
 councillors council  
 westminster mandatory  
 tax  
 agriculture affairs coalition  
 finance mps  
 environment service devolution

**Reflection prompts:**

- Were you able to fill in the blanks on page 9?
- Do you feel you understand the words in the picture?
- Is there a common place where you have heard about or learnt these words?



## 11.

# The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and Devolution



- Signed on Friday 10 April 1998
- A political agreement in the Northern Ireland Peace Process during 'The Troubles' signed by the British and Irish governments as well as most of the political parties in Northern Ireland
- On 23 May 1998, the Agreement got the support of voters of Northern Ireland in a referendum. Also on the same day, voters in the Republic of Ireland voted separately to change their constitution in line with the Agreement
- Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) was the only large party in the whole of Ireland that was against the Agreement
- Included 'Mandatory Coalition'. This means that a government can only be formed when it has representatives from the two largest parties. One party must identify as Unionist. The other must identify as Nationalist



## 12.

# The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement and Devolution



A part of the Belfast /Good Friday Agreement included a process called 'Devolution'. This means that the power has been given from the UK Parliament in London to the Northern Ireland Assembly. Laws that affect the whole of the UK are made by the UK Parliament

Things the UK Parliament make decisions on:

- Foreign Affairs – how the UK works with other countries
- Income Tax – how much money you to the government from your wages
- Importing and exporting – what is brought into the UK and what is sold to other countries

The Northern Ireland Assembly make decisions on things such as:

- Education – such as what students are taught in school
- Health – such as what can be done to tackle hospital waiting lists
- Policing - including what is done to reduce crime



## 13.

## Matchy Matchy: Who makes decisions in Northern Ireland?

Can you match the decision-making role to its responsibilities?

Draw a line to match the answers.

Roles	Responsibilities
Ministers	Make decisions on local issues like when bins get emptied, when parks are open and providing community support.
MPs	Make decisions on Policing, Housing, Education & the Environment.
MLAs	Are elected to represent the people in the NI Assembly.
Councillors	Work in the UK Parliament to represent the people of Northern Ireland.



### Reflection prompts:

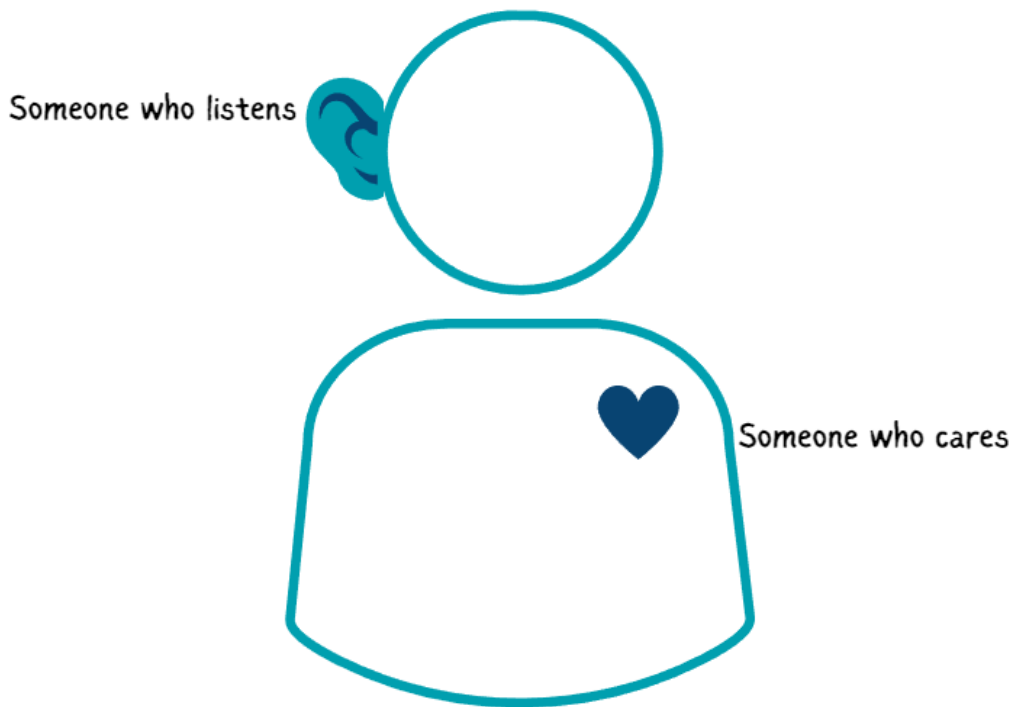
- Were you able to work out what role holds the responsibilities?
- Was it clear what is different in the roles?
- Do you feel more aware of what roles are held?



## 14.

# My Ideal Decision Maker

There may be certain things you hope for in a decision-maker or politician. Use the image below to draw or list qualities or skills you think they should have. We have given you a couple of examples of things that may be important to you. When you finish, share with the group and see how they compare.



### Reflection prompts:

- How did you find the activity? Was it easy or hard?
- Was it difficult to think of skills and qualities important to you?
- How did your ideal decision maker compare to others?



## 15.

# Elections and Voting Systems in Northern Ireland

In Northern Ireland, we have elections. An election is a public vote for anyone who is 18 or over. Voters choose who will represent them in government and make decisions/laws on their behalf.

There are different ways of voting to elect people, and these depend on the type of election:

**UK Parliament General elections** (sometimes known as Westminster elections) is when voters elect a representative to the UK Parliament in London.

These elections are usually held every five years. Voters mark their vote by putting an 'X' beside the name of the one candidate they want to represent them. The candidate with the most 'X's wins and becomes a Member of Parliament (MP). One MP is elected from each of the 18 Northern Ireland constituencies / voting areas. This system is called 'First Past the Post'.

## Northern Ireland Assembly

elections are normally held every four years. In elections for the Northern Ireland Assembly, voters use numbers to rank candidates in order of preference: 1 for first choice, 2 for second choice and so on. Voters can elect more than one candidate. In the Assembly elections, voters can elect five MLAs from each of the 18 constituencies / voting areas. This system is called Single Transferable Vote (STV).

Local council elections are held every 4 years, and 462 councillors are elected to represent voters across the 11 councils. Councillors are elected using the Single Transferable Vote system.





## 16.

# Voting Checklist

Here's what you need to do to make sure you can vote.

- ❑ Make sure I am registered to vote.
- ❑ Do my own research about who to vote for. (Read manifestos and flyers)
- ❑ Check which voting system is being used – Rank candidates with numbers.
- ❑ Reach out to candidates if I have any questions.
- ❑ Bring photo ID with me to my local polling station.

- "It is important for young people to talk about democracy and politics because they will be able to change society, this effect will allow for greater participation and understanding. It is important for young people to be aware of the impact their voice and vote has on society."

Eoin, Youth Engagement Panel



## 17.

# Who has power?

## The people who vote!

How much do you know about voting? Fill in the gaps to test what you know. Answers are at the back of this booklet.

1. You have the right to vote when you turn \_\_\_\_ years old. However, there are some other things that need to be in place.
2. You must be on the \_\_\_\_\_ Register.
3. You can register to vote online at this website \_\_\_\_\_
4. In Northern Ireland, you must bring \_\_\_\_\_ ID with you to vote. You can get this for free from the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland
5. In Northern Ireland we vote in Westminster, \_\_\_\_\_ and Council elections.
6. People voted to Westminster are referred to as \_\_\_\_\_; those elected to work in the Northern Ireland Assembly as referred to as \_\_\_\_\_.
7. In Northern Ireland, there are \_\_\_\_\_ councils who have responsibility for issues such as: \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_



### Top tip

You can find a lot of this information online at:

- [electoralcommission.org.uk/learning](http://electoralcommission.org.uk/learning)
- [eoni.org.uk](http://eoni.org.uk)



## 18.

# Decision Making and Creating Change

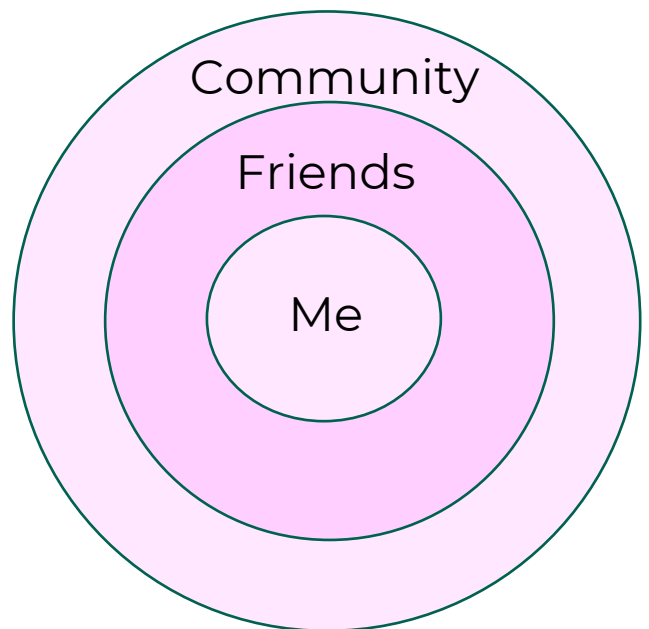
There are many ways to create change in Northern Ireland. This can be through petitions, consultations, policy changes, legislation and law. When creating change, we must look at how it impacts on different people.

In pairs, look at the diagram and draw it on a big sheet of paper. Think of one issue that is important to you, your friends, the people in your community and everyone in society.

When you have an issue in mind, think of how each group can play their part in creating positive change to find a solution. Think about:

- What steps would need to happen?
- Who would need to take action?
- Who needs to listen?
- What is your overall goal?

Everyone in society



### Reflection prompts:

- Did you find it easy to come up with an issue to change?
- What feelings or emotions did this bring up within you?
- Do you feel more comfortable in how you could approach creating change?
- Do you feel this is something that could be actioned? What support would you need, if any?



## 19.

## How are laws made in Northern Ireland?

The NI Assembly debates and votes on whether laws should be made. When someone wants a new law, it is called a 'Bill'. Bills can be introduced by a Minister, or a group of MLAs called an 'Assembly Committee' or by an individual MLA.

There are a number of steps which must be followed to make sure that the law does what it says, including:

- Making policy that includes rules
- Asking members of the public (from different ages and backgrounds) their thoughts
- Finding out what other experts think (for example - Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young people and public bodies such as Translink and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive)

### What's the point in laws?

- Stop abuse of power
- Fairness and equality
- Rights
- General safety
- Peace



## 20.

# What are the steps in making laws?

A Bill must pass through different stages in the Northern Ireland Assembly to become a law. There are different stages that must happen first.

Below are the different steps Bills must go through before becoming a law.

However, they are jumbled up! Can you put them in the correct order by numbering them 1-5. Check out how you did with the answers at the back of this booklet.



- Research and consultation
- Becomes an Act of Northern Ireland Assembly
- Royal approval
- Pass in Northern Ireland Assembly
- Debate and vote in Assembly

This topic can be really heavy and difficult to understand, but that's ok! There are so many places to get factual and up-to-date information. There's some ideas for this at the back of this resource. In the meantime, have conversations with friends and adults that you trust.



## 21.

# What role do other governments have?



## UK Parliament

The UK Parliament used to govern Northern Ireland. In 1998, the then Prime Minister Tony Blair signed the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement on behalf of the British Government.

This included the set up of the Northern Ireland Assembly which has devolved powers. There is a Secretary of State for Northern Ireland who looks after Northern Ireland issues. This includes stepping into decision-making roles when the Northern Ireland Assembly collapses.



## Republic of Ireland

The Republic of Ireland is physically connected to Northern Ireland by a land border.

The Irish Government also signed the Belfast / Good Friday Agreement via the Taoiseach Bertie Ahern. The agreement included the creation of the North South Ministerial Council in which representatives from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland work together on issues that impact both communities.



## 22.

# Big Words and Big Systems

## Abstentionism

Abstentionism means standing for election but deciding not to take their seats in their Parliament. This can be for a range of reasons.

An example of this is when a party does not take their seats in UK Parliament as they do not recognise the power of the UK Government in Northern Ireland.

## D'Hondt

This is a system that the Northern Ireland Assembly uses to put people in certain roles such as Ministers and Chairs of committees within government departments.

This system is used so that the seats are filled based on the parties with the most overall votes from election results. This system continues until all seats are filled. Some people find this super confusing and that's okay.



### Find out more!

[Learn more about the D'Hondt system on the Northern Ireland Assembly's website](https://www.niassembly.gov.uk) at [niassembly.gov.uk](https://www.niassembly.gov.uk)



## 23.

# Want to find out more?



Here are some useful links that may help:

- Electoral Commission UK: [electoralcommission.org.uk](http://electoralcommission.org.uk)
- Northern Ireland Assembly: [niassembly.gov.uk](http://niassembly.gov.uk)
- Northern Ireland Assembly Education: [education.niassembly.gov.uk](http://education.niassembly.gov.uk)
- UK Parliament Education: [learning.parliament.uk](http://learning.parliament.uk)

## Top tips for sharing your learning

Many young people highlight the lack of political education they receive. This resource could be one way of tackling this. Here are some other tips.

- **Talk** - to family, friends and supportive adults about your learning in this resource and how you can act on this.
- **Act** - Perhaps you could hold a vote to try out voting systems, help build your understanding and to get ready for the real thing!
- **Follow** - the Electoral Commission on social media as they share important learning and reminders about elections and voting.
- **Share** - this resource with friends who may find it useful. Maybe you attend a club or a group who would like to complete this resource.





## 24.

# Glossary

What is a glossary? Why have one?

A glossary is to help you understand words you may not have heard of before so that the information you are learning hopefully makes sense.

## **Assembly Election (AE)**

Election for MLAs / NI Assembly

## **Council Election**

Election for local councillors to councils

**EONI** – the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland

## **General Election (GE)**

Election for MPs to Westminster Parliament

## **Member of the Legislation Assembly (MLA)**

Elected representative who scrutinises, represents and legislates

## **Minister**

An MLA with responsibility for a government department

## **Nationalist**

Someone who agrees and identifies with a united Ireland

## **Northern Ireland Assembly**

The body which creates laws for Northern Ireland

## **Northern Ireland Office (NIO)**

They ensure smooth working of the devolved government in Northern Ireland

## **North-South Ministerial Council**

Where elected representatives from Northern Ireland and Republic of Ireland meet to consider issues they both face

## **Referendum**

An example of direct democracy where a question is put to every voting age citizen

## **Secretary of State (SOS)**

Elected MP who is placed in position to lead the Northern Ireland Office

## **Taoiseach**

Prime Minister of Ireland

## **Unionist**

Someone who supports being part of the UK.



## 25.

# Quiz Answers

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## Yes or No? Quiz – page 7

1. There is a group vote to decide what food is about to be ordered - Yes
2. Someone is picked for a leadership role within a school with no election - No
3. Your youth space is getting painted and all members vote on what colour. – Yes
4. The opening times of your local sports centre are changing and regular users haven't been asked for their thoughts – No
5. You go to see a film at the cinema with five other friends. Four of your friends wanted to see this film. You and one other friend wanted to see something else – Yes
6. You have a vote in school to ask if pupils want to change the school uniform – Yes

## How government works in NI – page 9

- The devolved government in Northern Ireland is often referred to as a **power**-sharing government.
- The NI Assembly was set up in 1998 following the **Belfast / Good Friday** Agreement.
- **90** MLAs from different political parties are elected to represent the people.
- MLAs have power to make and change **laws** on local issues.
- Parliament buildings is in the city of **Belfast**.
- People often refer to Parliament Buildings as **Stormont**.



## 26.

# Quiz Answers

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## Matchy Matchy – page 13

Who makes decisions in Northern Ireland?

- Roles - Responsibilities
- Ministers - Make decisions on Policing, Housing, Education and the Environment
- MPs- Work in the UK Parliament to represent the people of Northern Ireland
- MLAs - Are elected to represent the people in the Northern Ireland Assembly
- Councillors - Make decisions on local issues like when bins get emptied, when parks are open and providing community support.

## Who has Power? – page 17

- You have the right to vote when you turn **18** years old, however there are some other things that need to be in place.
- You must be on the **Electoral** Register.
- You can register to vote online at **gov.uk/register tovote**
- In Northern Ireland, you must bring **photo** ID with you to vote. (You can get this for free from the Electoral Office of Northern Ireland)
- In Northern Ireland we vote in **Westminster, Northern Ireland Assembly and Council elections.**
- People voted to Westminster are referred to as **MPs**; whereas those elected to work in Stormont as referred to as **MLAs**.
- In Northern Ireland, there are 11 councils who have responsibility for issues such as: **bins , parks, litter, communities.**



# 27.

## Quiz Answers

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**What are the steps in making law?** – page 20

Correct order:

- Research and consultation
- Debate and vote in Northern Ireland Assembly
- Pass in Northern Ireland Assembly
- Royal approval
- Becomes an Act of Northern Ireland Assembly

