

Background to forming the Northern Ireland Assembly Parliamentary Group on the USA.

1. The primary objective which led to the Speaker originally giving a commitment to explore this issue was establishing a NI Assembly counterpart to engage with the Friends of Ireland Group in the US Congress. The Speaker made a short visit to the United States in September 2011 during which the demand for such a group was reaffirmed by politicians and officials. With the political progress made since the return of devolution, the political mood and relationship with the US has shifted to a greater focus on common interests, particularly economically. In this context, it is arguable that there is an even greater opportunity for contact between legislators in the US and interested MLAs and the initiatives which might flow from it.
2. The Group would provide a platform for engagement between legislators of all parties in the Assembly and Congress and not just between the US Administration and the Executive. Such networking between politicians would not be restricted to Congress, but could arguably hold even greater value at State level. In this context, both the NI Bureau in Washington and the US Consulate in Belfast are supportive. Any grouping should not be there to substitute or duplicate the work of the Executive or committees but should complement it, with appropriate developments being passed to Departments.
3. The Assembly Secretariat already facilitates a large number of US delegations which visit the Assembly by arranging hospitality and sessions with Members. The proposed group would provide a platform for this existing work. Engagement with legislators is an issue for the Assembly and both the NI Bureau in Washington and the US Consulate refer delegations expressing an interest in visiting to the Assembly. Indeed, at least two delegations of US legislators are expected to visit to the Assembly in 2012 both focused on economic opportunities.
4. During his visit to the US in September 2011, the Speaker held a number of meetings to explore potential links and initiatives for the Assembly. These include Boston College focusing one of its annual programmes on legislative skills and the American Council of Young Political Leaders initiating an exchange programme with state legislators likely to be future key players in the US. These programmes would require minimal resource from the Assembly and be primarily supported by the State Department and the NI Assembly Legislative Strengthening Trust. The Group could provide a useful platform to identify and develop such initiatives in the future, including those which may offer funds and other benefits to the Assembly.