

The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Meeting Venue: Long Gallery, Parliament Buildings

Meeting date: Wednesday 24 November 2021

Meeting Time: 2.15 pm



Assembly Commission Members:

The Speaker
 Mr John O'Dowd MLA (joined remotely)
 Mr Trevor Clarke MLA
 Mrs Dolores Kelly MLA
 Mr Robbie Butler MLA
 Mr John Blair MLA (joined remotely)

Officials present:

Mrs Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive
 Ms Tara Caul, Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services
 Dr Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services
 Mr Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support
 Mrs Janet Hughes, Clerical Supervisor

Others in attendance:

Mr Jim Brooks, Secretariat Audit and Risk Committee (SARC) Chairperson
 Ms Frances Leneghan, Private Secretary to the Speaker (Items 9 and 10)
 Dr Dan Hull, Senior Research Officer (Item 11)
 Miss Karen McCallion, Research Officer (Item 11)
 Mrs Sinéad McDonnell, Head of HR (Item 16)
 Mr David Lynn, Building Services Manager (Item 17)
 Mrs Alice McKelvey, Legal Adviser (Item 17)
 Dr Kevin Pelan, Clerk Assistant (Item 19)
 Ms Susie Brown, Head of Communications (Item 20)
 Miss Tracey Wilson, Information Officer (Item 20)

The meeting commenced at 2.23 pm.

1. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

3. CHAIRPERSON'S BUSINESS

The Speaker informed Members that Oral Questions to the Assembly Commission were scheduled for 7 December 2021 and that questions would be issued to Members following receipt from the Business Office on 25 November 2021.

4. DRAFT MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

Minutes from the Assembly Commission meeting on 20 October 2021 were approved for publication.

5. MATTERS ARISING

There were no matters arising.

The Speaker proposed a change to the agenda running order to accommodate other engagements notified by Members.

Dan Hull and Karen McCallion joined the meeting at 2.25pm for agenda item 11.

11. EXHIBITION ON ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF WOMEN IN PARLIAMENT

Karen McCallion noted that following previous agreement at the Assembly Commission meeting, officials had produced an exhibition, consisting of 15 panels, highlighting the women who had served as members of the local parliamentary and political institutions over the last 100 years.

Dan Hull subsequently presented the draft panels to Members and sought their views on the design and content of each. Dr Hull also informed Members that an additional panel containing images of all of the women members who had served in the parliamentary and political institutions, was in the process of being created. It was noted that an online version would launch alongside the exhibition.

Members thanked officials for the good work that had been done and made some suggestions, including:

- Changing the order of those listed on some panels;
- Ensuring consistency in the descriptions listed for each individual e.g. the use of quotes;

- Changing the title of the “Different Voices” title;
- Ensuring appropriate consent had been obtained for the photograph of young people; and
- Consulting those individuals still living on the images and text to be used.

Members agreed that they were content to proceed with the proposed exhibition, subject to these changes being made.

Dan Hull and Karen McCallion left the meeting at 2.49 pm.

Frances Leneghan joined the meeting at 2.49 pm for agenda items 9 and 10.

9. UPDATE ON THE RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE WORKING GROUP REPORT ON THE REVIEW OF THE DISPLAY OF ARTEFACTS IN PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

Robin Ramsey provided Members with an update on the further work that had been undertaken on the review of the display of artefacts in Parliament Buildings, following consideration of the Working Group’s Report at the Assembly Commission meeting on 20 October 2021.

Members were provided with a copy of the images envisaged for the display along with the accompanying storyboards. Mr Ramsey noted that he intended to continue to produce the narrative for each individual image in order that a final draft of the overall content would be completed before Christmas.

Mr Ramsey explained that the majority of the Working Group’s recommendations had been incorporated in the proposed display and he therefore focused on the remaining recommendations outlined in the paper.

Mr Ramsey advised that officials were working towards having the display installed in early February 2022, and it was noted that in order to meet this timeframe the artwork needed to be approved and forwarded to the printers before Christmas.

The Speaker thanked Mr Ramsey and Ms Leneghan for the work done thus far.

Members agreed to give the proposals for the display further consideration and to provide any feedback to Mr Ramsey during the week beginning 6 December 2021. Mr Ramsey also offered to meet Members individually if that was helpful.

Dolores Kelly MLA left the meeting at 3 pm.

10. FORMALISING ASSEMBLY COMMISSION POLICY ON THE COMMISSIONING OF OFFICIAL PORTRAITS

Mr Ramsey sought Members approval on a draft policy on the commissioning of official portraits. He noted that the policy had been prepared in line with previous Assembly Commission decisions and practices on this matter.

Mr Ramsey informed Members that he wished to proceed to produce those portraits which were currently outstanding but that the previous budget agreed by the Assembly Commission was significantly lower than market prices. Mr Ramsey therefore proposed that the Assembly Commission agree a negotiating limit for officials for commissioning artists.

The meeting went into closed session from 3.09 pm until 3.11 pm.

The Assembly Commission agreed the policy and in closed session agreed a negotiating limit for officials.

John O'Dowd MLA left the meeting at 3.11 pm.

Frances Leneghan left the meeting at 3.14 pm.

John O'Dowd MLA re-joined the meeting at 3.14 pm.

15. REVIEW OF THE FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FOR POLITICAL PARTIES SCHEME ('FAPP SCHEME') 2016

It was noted that a paper on the Review of the FAPP Scheme 2016 had been considered by Members at the Assembly Commission meeting on 9 September 2021, when it was agreed that final decisions would be taken after consideration of an Assembly and Executive Review Committee's (AERC) Report, on its Review of Adequacy and Effectiveness of the Statement of Entitlements for an Official Opposition, and any recommendations made by AERC in plenary.

Mrs Hogg subsequently presented a further paper on the Review of the FAPP Scheme which had been updated to take account of the plenary debate on 9 November 2021 and the resolution agreed by the Assembly. Members' attention was drawn to the section within the paper on indicative funding for parties under a future FAPP Scheme.

Following discussion, Members requested more time to consider the content of a future FAPP Scheme and it was agreed to defer a decision until a future meeting, to allow time for Members to consult with their parties. Mrs Hogg was content to meet individually with Members on the key issues involved.

6. COMMISSION ACTIONS

Members noted the status of actions.

7. CORRESPONDENCE

Members noted the following items of correspondence.

Letter dated 28 September 2021 from Philip Thompson, Director of Operations, Mid and East Antrim Borough Council, regarding a council motion on a Northern Ireland Centenary Stone and the Speaker's response dated 26 October 2021.

Letter dated 29 September 2021 from the Chairperson of the Audit Committee, in relation to the consideration of Threshold for In-Year Monitoring: Northern Ireland Assembly Commission and the Speaker's response dated 21 October 2021.

Letter dated 29 September 2021 from the Chairperson of the Audit Committee, on the codification of the Audit committee's function in relation to agreeing the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission Budget and the Speaker's response dated 29 October 2021.

Letter dated 29 September 2021 from the Chairperson of the Audit Committee, regarding the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission Annual Report and Accounts and the Speaker's response dated 29 October 2021.

Letter dated 18 October 2021 from the Speaker to the Chief Constable of the PSNI in relation to MLA security and the PSNI's response dated 2 November 2021. Mrs Hogg noted that a 'Personal Security' online session facilitated by the PSNI was arranged for mid-December and that a refresher session on 'Lone Working' would take place in February 2022.

Letter dated 26 October 2021 from the Speaker to the Chairperson of the Audit Committee, regarding the recruitment of a Comptroller and Auditor General and the Chairperson's response dated 4 November 2021.

Letter dated 26 October 2021 from the Speaker to the Chairperson of the Public Accounts Committee, regarding the recruitment of a Comptroller and Auditor General and the Chairperson's response dated 10 November 2021.

Letter dated 3 November 2021 from the Chairperson of the Audit Committee, regarding the Assembly Commission's Draft Budget 2022-25 and the Speaker's response dated 19 November 2021. The Speaker commented on the number of pieces of correspondence from the Audit Committee, and reiterated his concerns about the Audit Committee dealing with issues beyond its agreed remit, particularly in relation to the letter of 3 November 2021.

John O'Dowd MLA left the meeting at 3.31 pm.

Letter dated 19 November 2021 from the Chairperson of the Committee on Procedures, regarding Electronic Voting. The Speaker advised that general infrastructure to allow electronic voting to be taken forward in the future, would be considered in the specification for the upgrade of the audio and video

systems in the Assembly Chamber, as outlined at agenda item 20 and proposed responding to the Committee on Procedures on that basis. Members were content with the proposed response.

8. CLERK/CHIEF EXECUTIVE UPDATE

Support Services Contract and Re-tendering

Lesley Hogg noted that the Assembly Commission had agreed at its meeting on 9 September 2021, that officials approach the support services contractor to seek a four-month extension to the current contract. Mrs Hogg confirmed that the contractor would not agree to a four-month extension and following negotiation an extension of approximately 7.5 months was agreed.

Comptroller and Auditor General Recruitment

Mrs Hogg advised that the Panel to identify a person suitable for appointment as Comptroller and Auditor General had been agreed.

Secretariat Audit and Risk Committee (SARC) Recruitment

Mrs Hogg confirmed that interviews for a SARC Chairperson and Independent Member had taken place and that preferred candidates had been identified for both posts.

Impact of End of Mandate Pressures on Staff

Mrs Hogg highlighted the impact of current additional committee meetings and the potential for late and additional Plenary sittings, on both staff and contractors, during the remainder of the mandate.

Youth Assembly Update

Mrs Hogg commented on the successful second plenary sitting of the Youth Assembly which was held on 6 November 2021 in Parliament Buildings, and it was noted that the third sitting would take place in late February/early March 2022.

12. ASSEMBLY COMMISSION ANNUAL PLAN 2021-22: IN-YEAR REVIEW AS AT 30 SEPTEMBER 2021

Mrs Hogg noted that Members had approved the Annual Plan for 2021-22 at the Assembly Commission meeting on 8 July 2021 and advised that the paper presented provided an update on the status of the outcomes within the Plan. Mrs Hogg confirmed that one outcome was fully completed, 28 were in progress and/or on track for completion by the end of the year and 10 were not expected to be fully completed by the end of the year.

John O'Dowd MLA re-joined the meeting at 3.41 pm.

Members noted and were content with the update provided on the in-year review of the Assembly Commission Annual Plan 2021-22.

13. DRAFT ANNUAL PLAN 2022-23

Mrs Hogg presented and sought Assembly Commission approval of the Annual Plan 2022-23, which she noted contained 35 outcomes with supporting actions for each outcome.

Members approved the draft Annual Plan 2022-23 as presented.

14. PAY CLAIM 2021

The Speaker noted that a paper detailing the pay claim for 2021 submitted by NIPSA, had initially been considered at the last Assembly Commission meeting on 20 October 2021, when it was agreed that officials would update the paper to include details of pay settlements by other public sector bodies.

Mrs Hogg presented the updated paper in relation to the pay claim for 2021 and sought guidance from Members, in relation to the six elements of the claim.

Trevor Clarke MLA left the meeting at 3.46 pm and re-joined at 3.53 pm.

Following discussion, Members agreed a negotiating position for officials to take forward with TUS, for each of the elements of the pay claim 2021.

Dolores Kelly MLA re-joined the meeting at 4.03 pm.

Sinéad McDonnell joined the meeting at 4.04 pm for agenda item 16.

16. STANDARDS OF CONDUCT POLICY: POLITICAL ACTIVITIES

Sinéad McDonnell presented and sought Assembly Commission approval of proposed changes to the Political Activities section of the Standards of Conduct Policy.

Members were content with the changes proposed and it was noted that Mrs McDonnell would now further consult with and seek agreement from TUS on the revised policy.

Sinéad McDonnell left the meeting at 4.08 pm.

David Lynn and Alice McKelvey joined the meeting at 4.11 pm.

17. DEFECTS IN THE ROOF OF PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS AND INVESTIGATION OF POTENTIAL LIABILITY

David Lynn provided Members with an update on the potential legal action against those responsible for undertaking the roof refurbishment works that were completed in 2015.

Members noted the current position and Mr Lynn confirmed that a further update would be provided in due course.

David Lynn and Alice McKelvey left the meeting at 4.19 pm.

18. SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETATION OF ASSEMBLY BUSINESS IN IRISH AND ULSTER SCOTS

Gareth McGrath noted that at its meeting on 11 June 2021, the Assembly Commission had considered a paper in relation to the forthcoming plenary debate on a motion, tabled by the Committee on Procedures, directing the Assembly Commission to provide simultaneous interpretation of Assembly business in Irish and Ulster Scots.

Dr McGrath advised that following the debate on 15 June 2021, officials were working to take forward the implementation of the requirements of the motion by the beginning of the next mandate, in line with the intention of the Committee on Procedures. Dr McGrath then sought confirmation from Members on the interpretation of “appropriate demand”, to enable officials to implement the motion agreed by the Assembly.

Following discussion, Members agreed that a survey of MLAs should be undertaken, to assess the level of demand required for translation services in Irish and Ulster Scots.

Action: MLAs to be surveyed to assess the level of demand required for translation services in Irish and Ulster Scots.

Action: Officials to collate the survey responses and present to the Assembly Commission at a future meeting, along with information on the resources and any other issues involved with the implementation of the translation service.

Kevin Pelan joined the meeting at 4.32pm for agenda item 19.

19. ENHANCING ACCESSIBILITY OF ASSEMBLY PROCEEDINGS TO THE DEAF AND HARD OF HEARING COMMUNITIES

Kevin Pelan presented a paper outlining the issues relating to the provision of services by the Assembly to the deaf and hard of hearing communities.

Dr Pelan noted that an internal working group had been reviewing the service provision and had proposed a pilot for the provision of Sign language interpretation and manual subtitling of Question Time to the Executive Office to the end of the mandate.

Dr Pelan advised Members that officials were also investigating the use of Artificial Intelligence-based Automated Speech Recognition (AI-ASR) for the automated subtitling of Assembly business.

Following consideration, Members approved the proposed pilot as outlined.

Kevin Pelan left the meeting at 4.41 pm.

Susie Brown and Tracey Wilson joined the meeting at 4.42 pm for agenda item 20.

20. APPROVAL OF THE OUTLINE BUSINESS CASE TO UPGRADE THE AUDIO AND VIDEO SYSTEMS IN THE ASSEMBLY CHAMBER

Susie Brown presented and sought Assembly Commission approval of an outline business case, to upgrade the audio and video systems in the Assembly Chamber and informed Members of the initial requirements and estimated cost.

John Blair MLA left the meeting at 4.44 pm.

Ms Brown advised of the potential risks associated with the upgrade project and the subsequent measures that would be put in place to mitigate against these.

Trevor Clarke MLA left the meeting at 4.47 pm.

Mrs Hogg advised Members that the specification for the project would include the hardware infrastructure to facilitate electronic voting.

Following consideration, Members approved the upgrade of audio and video systems in the Assembly Chamber.

Susie Brown and Tracey Wilson left the meeting at 4.50 pm.

21. THE DISABILITY ACTION PLAN 2016-2021 CLOSURE REPORT AND FINAL SIX-MONTHLY MONITORING RETURN

Members noted the Disability Action Plan 2016-21 Closure Report and final Six-Monthly Monitoring Return.

Action: Equality and Good Relations Unit to arrange for the Closure Report and Monitoring Return to be published on the Assembly's website.

Members noted feedback from an MLA who had been temporarily in a wheelchair and Mrs Hogg agreed that officials would engage with him directly in relation to his experience.

22. PAPERS ISSUED VIA CORRESPONDENCE

Audit Committee Briefing paper.

23. DECISIONS MADE VIA CORRESPONDENCE

Members noted the following decisions made via correspondence since the last meeting:

Lighting Requests:

Positive Life, 40th Anniversary of support in the fight against HIV – **Approved.**

Disability Action NI, International Day of Disabled People – **Declined.**

24. AOB

The Speaker noted that the term of office of Jim Brooks and Derek Martin as Chairperson and Independent Member of the Secretariat Audit and Risk Committee would cease on 30 November 2021, and thanked them for their service and the assistance they had given to the Assembly Commission over the last five years.

Dolores Kelly noted that in light of the COP 26 Climate Change conference, it would be useful for the Assembly Commission to discuss how it was playing its part in reducing the carbon footprint of the Assembly. Mrs Kelly indicated she would write to the Speaker on this matter.

25. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting was proposed for January 2022.

The meeting ended at 4.54 pm.