

The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Meeting Venue: Meeting via Microsoft Teams

Meeting date: Wednesday 20 October 2021

Meeting Time: 5.00 pm



Assembly Commission Members:

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

Officials present:

Mrs Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive
Dr Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services
Mr Richard Stewart, Director of Corporate 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
Dr Eamon Phoenix, Consultant to the Display of Artefacts Project (Item 3)
Ms Frances Leneghan, Private Secretary to the Speaker (Item 3)

The meeting commenced at 5.04 pm.

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Trevor Clarke MLA, who advised he would be unavailable for the start of the meeting.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

The Speaker welcomed Eamon Phoenix and Frances Leneghan to the meeting for agenda item 3.

3. WORKING GROUP REPORT ON THE REVIEW OF THE DISPLAY OF ARTEFACTS IN PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

Robin Ramsey presented a report on the work that had been undertaken by the Working Group, in relation to the review of the display of artefacts in Parliament Buildings.

Mr Ramsey advised that the report included a number of recommendations along with a framework of proposals for the display of images and items in Parliament Buildings. He further stated that officials had developed some narrative panels and identified images to give a more tangible sense of the display and that work was continuing on that.

Dr Phoenix provided an overview on the Working Group's framework of proposals in relation to the items and images that might be displayed.

Ms Leneghan provided an update on the work being undertaken to secure images and she advised that the Working Group hoped to have a catalogue of images for Members at the next Assembly Commission meeting.

Mr Ramsey outlined that if agreement was reached there would be significant work to install the revised display and that officials would bring back a more detailed estimate of costs.

The Speaker and Members stated their appreciation of the significant work that had been undertaken by the Working Group and thanked all those involved for their efforts thus far.

Overall, Members were generally supportive of the proposals in relation to the display of artefacts and were content for work to continue on the basis outlined. Mr Ramsey said he was very happy to engage with Members individually if that was helpful.

It was agreed that a further update would be provided and considered at the next Assembly Commission meeting.

Action: Mr Ramsey to provide an update on the review of the display of artefacts in Parliament Buildings, for consideration at the next Assembly Commission meeting.

Dr Phoenix and Ms Leneghan left the meeting at 5.36 pm.

4. CHAIRPERSON'S BUSINESS

The Speaker advised Members that the Assembly Commission had to provide a briefing to the Audit Committee on its budget by 3 November 2021. It was

noted that officials were currently working on a draft briefing, which once finalised, would be issued to Members for approval by written procedure in advance of the Audit committee meeting.

5. DRAFT MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

Minutes from the Assembly Commission meetings on 8 July 2021 and 9 September 2021 were approved for publication.

6. MATTERS ARISING

There were no matters arising.

7. COMMISSION ACTIONS

Members noted the status of actions.

8. CORRESPONDENCE

Members noted the following items of correspondence.

A letter dated 7 April 2021 from David Burns, Chief Executive of Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council, regarding the Northern Ireland Centenary and the Speaker's response dated 15 April 2021.

A letter dated 9 July from Kieran Donnelly, Comptroller and Auditor General of the Northern Ireland Audit Office, informing of his intention to retire. It was noted that a paper on the matter of the appointment of a replacement Comptroller and Auditor General would be considered later in the meeting at agenda item 11.

A letter dated 20 July 2021 from Roger Wilson, Chief Executive of Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council, regarding the Northern Ireland Centenary and the Speaker's response dated 3 August 2021.

A letter dated 10 September 2021 from the Speaker to the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance, regarding consideration of the Financial Reporting (Departments and Public Bodies) Bill.

A letter dated 29 September 2021 from the Speaker to the Chairperson of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee regarding the Review of Opposition Entitlements.

Finally, four letters dated 29 September 2021 from the Chairperson of the Audit Committee, which the Speaker noted he was in the process of replying to, in relation to:

- the Assembly Commission's Annual Report and Accounts 2020-2021;
- consideration of Threshold for In-Year Monitoring for the Assembly Commission;
- the Assembly Commission's budget 2021-2022; and
- the codification of the Audit Committee's function in relation to agreeing the Assembly Commission's budget.

9. SECURITY ISSUES

The Speaker noted the concern of Members following the recent killing of Sir David Amess MP.

Mr Clarke MLA joined the meeting at 5.39 pm.

The Speaker advised that Assembly Commission officials had been in contact with the PSNI and he noted that the Assembly Commission had previously taken action in relation to provisions for security measures via the Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) (Amendment) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2020 published by the Assembly Commission in August 2020.

Richard Stewart provided an overview of the security measures currently in place and updated Members on recent contact with the PSNI and additional actions that had been undertaken within recent days.

Members raised concerns in relation to the security of their staff, particularly regarding lone working in constituency offices. It was agreed that Mr Stewart would produce a short guide to security matters for MLAs on this issue and that training previously offered to MLAs' staff in relation to lone working and dealing with constituents would be refreshed and re-run.

Action: Mr Stewart to produce a short guide to security matters for MLAs and their staff in relation to lone working and personal security in constituency offices.

Action: Officials to refresh and re-run training previously offered to MLAs' staff in relation to lone working and dealing with constituents.

10. CLERK/CHIEF EXECUTIVE UPDATE

Lesley Hogg noted that her report provided Members with an update on the key issues, which had arisen since the last Assembly Commission meeting, and that in view of the heavy agenda, she would only highlight two key points.

Management Accounts – September 2021

Mrs Hogg advised that the October Monitoring Round had recently been completed and it was noted that the forecast for the year and revised budget

position for Resource DEL was £1.231m lower than expected at the start of the year, mainly due to the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on staffing and recruitment and some ancillary costs.

Mrs Hogg also highlighted a significant reduction in the forecast for the year for Capital DEL. She confirmed that this was due to a number of larger projects being delayed, with the expenditure now taking place in 2022-23.

Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY)

Mrs Hogg informed Members of a letter she had received from the Permanent Secretary of the Department for Communities, requesting that NICCY be made an institution of the Assembly. It was noted that Mrs Hogg had issued a response to said letter.

11. MATTERS RELATING TO THE APPOINTMENT OF A COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL FOR NORTHERN IRELAND

Mrs Hogg noted the earlier reference to correspondence received from the Comptroller and Auditor General for Northern Ireland, informing of his intention to retire.

Mrs Hogg subsequently provided an overview of the matters relating to the appointment of a successor Comptroller and Auditor General and sought Members agreement to progress the recruitment process.

Mrs Hogg informed Members that there was no legislative provision for the appointment of an Acting Comptroller and Auditor General and that time was therefore of the essence to appoint a successor Comptroller and Auditor General, as there were a number of procedural processes to be followed in relation to the recruitment process.

The composition of the recruitment selection panel as set out in the paper was approved by Members.

Members also considered and approved proposed improvements in the governance arrangements of the appointment of the Comptroller and Auditor General. It was noted that legislation would be required to implement some of the potential improvements, however, Members agreed to adopt the interim arrangements proposed, due to the timescale required for any legislative change.

Mrs Hogg advised that the Audit Committee was also undertaking a review of the governance and accountability arrangements of the Northern Ireland Audit Office and that it was possible that legislative change would also be required to implement any proposed recommendations. It was therefore agreed that officials would work with the Audit Committee to take forward draft legislative changes and that details of any draft legislation would be presented to Members for consideration at a future Assembly Commission meeting.

Action: Officials to work with the Audit Committee to take forward draft legislative changes and details of any draft legislation be presented to Members for consideration at a future Assembly Commission meeting.

Members agreed proceed with the recruitment process as proposed.

Robbie Butler MLA left the meeting at 6.19 pm.

12. ADMINISTRATION OF ILL HEALTH RETIREMENT FOR MEMBERS

Mr Stewart noted that currently the Assembly Commission approved ill-health retirement payment to MLAs, but that this ran contrary to the Assembly Commission's generally held position of not being involved in the administration of payments to MLAs. He stated that, in addition, the approval of such payments fell within the matters that are delegated to the Clerk/Chief Executive by the Assembly Commission and he therefore sought agreement to amend the process to enable the approval of ill-health retirement payments to MLAs to be made under the delegation to the Clerk/Chief Executive.

Members agreed the change in procedure as proposed.

13. POSTPONEMENT OF THE PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS OPEN DAY

Mr Ramsey presented this paper on behalf of Dr McGrath. He noted that the Assembly Commission had previously agreed at its meeting on 17 February 2021, a programme of activities and events, one of which being a Parliament Buildings Open Day on 13 November 2021.

Mr Ramsey stated, however, that although restrictions in relation to COVID-19 were starting to ease, officials were of the opinion that the remaining restrictions would not allow for maximum engagement with the public at this time. Mr Ramsey therefore sought approval from Members to postpone the Open Day until 19 February 2022.

Members agreed to postpone the Open Day until 19 February 2022.

14. PAY CLAIM 2021

Richard Stewart presented a paper informing Members of the 2021 pay claim received from the Northern Ireland Public Sector Alliance (NIPSA).

Mr Stewart sought initial feedback from Members on each element of the pay claim.

Members' initial views were noted and it was agreed that more detailed consideration of the pay claim would take place at the next Assembly

Commission meeting. An indication of pay settlements by other public sector bodies was requested for the next meeting.

Action: Mr Stewart to update the 2021 pay claim paper to include details of pay settlements by other public sector bodies, for consideration at the next Assembly Commission meeting.

15. DECISIONS MADE VIA CORRESPONDENCE

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

Lighting Requests:

Groundwork Northern Ireland, 30th Anniversary – **Approved.**

Public Health Agency, Organ Donation Week – **Declined.**

Claire Sugden MLA, Diwali – **Declined.**

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Recycle Week – **Declined.**

Mary's Meals, 2 million children fed a daily meal in 19 countries – **Approved.**

Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network, 15th Anniversary – **Approved.**

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee, COP26 – **Approved.**

Northern Ireland Office, Centenary Programme – **Declined.**

North West Migrants Forum, Black History Month – **Approved.**

16. AOB

There was no other business.

17. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Speaker proposed scheduling the next Assembly Commission meeting for after the Halloween recess.

The meeting ended at 6.33 pm.