

# Section 4

# Services

## Procedural Offices

There are four key procedural offices. These are the Business Office, the Bill Office, the Committee Office and the Office of the Official Report (Hansard).

### **BUSINESS OFFICE**

The functions of the Business Office are to:

- Support plenary sittings of the Assembly;
- Provide procedural advice to the Speaker and Deputy Speakers, and to Members;
- Operate effective tabling processes for motions, amendments and petitions and to administer the procedures for questions for oral and written answer; and
- Provide facilities for the laying of documents and Statutory Rules before the Assembly.

During the period of the report, the Business Office met its key service-provision challenge by supporting the effective delivery of 34 plenary sittings of the Assembly prior to its suspension. By that time, staff had also processed 902 questions for oral answer and 2,729 questions for written answer, and supported 21 Business Committee meetings. Some 114 Statutory Rules and 78 documents were laid, and 79 papers were presented to the Assembly (and listed in the Journal of Proceedings) when the Assembly was suspended.

Suspension did not, however, remove the requirement for Departments to lay documents, and some Statutory Rules, before the Assembly. From 15 October 2002 to 31 March 2003 a further 200 Statutory Rules and 54 documents were laid, with a further 35 documents delivered to the Assembly.

### **BILL OFFICE**

The Bill Office supports the work of the Assembly in considering primary legislation. Its key functions include:

- The preparation and publication of primary legislation documents;
- The provision of procedural and technical advice on Bills to the Speaker, the Clerk to the Assembly, Statutory Committees, and Members;
- The provision of procedural advice to committees and Members on the drafting and tabling of amendments to Bills;
- The provision of regular information to Members;
- Liaison with committees, Government Departments, and the Office of the Legislative Counsel; and
- Assisting the Speaker and Deputy Speakers at the Table during plenary sittings when Bills are being debated.

At 1 April 2002, there were five Bills in the Assembly. During the period of this report a further 29 Bills were introduced in the Assembly. Of these, 27 were Executive Bills, one was a Committee Bill and one was a private Member's Bill. When suspension interrupted normal business on 14 October 2002, nine Bills had received Royal Assent. In all, 22 Bills had not completed their passage through the Assembly. These were subsequently taken through the Order in Council process at Westminster, with the exception of the Family Law (Divorce) Bill, which has not been laid in Westminster within the period of this report.

### COMMITTEE OFFICE

The function of the Committee Office is to service and support the Committees of the Assembly.

The key objectives of the office are to:

- Assist the Assembly in its work as a legislature by supporting committees in their consideration of primary and subordinate legislation;
- Assist Assembly Committees effectively to deliver their role in policy development and in scrutinising the work of Ministers and Departments; and
- Assist the Assembly in the consideration of departmental budgets and annual plans.

During the period 1 April 2002 to 31 March 2003 the Committee Office provided support to 10 Statutory Committees, five Standing Committees and three Ad Hoc Committees. Committee Office staff also serviced and supported 300 committee meetings, including 13 meetings outside Parliament Buildings, and have organised and supported 22 committee visits.

The Committee Office supported Assembly Committees in carrying out a detailed scrutiny of 26 Bills. Three Bills were also considered by committees before being granted accelerated passage by the Assembly. Committee staff assisted in the production of 33 committee reports during the period of this report. In addition, committee staff provided analysis and advice in relation to 120 Statutory Rules referred to committees.

### OFFICE OF THE OFFICIAL REPORT

The Office of the Official Report (Hansard) produces the Official Report of all sittings of the Northern Ireland Assembly, including details of debates, resolutions, questions and divisions. Hansard also records some committee sessions.

The main performance indicators show that during the year Hansard:

- Always met its target of publishing the first eight hours of debate in the Assembly by 8.30 am the following day;
- Reported on 184 hours of debate in 34 sittings, covering 2,825 columns;
- Produced reports for 261 committee meetings;
- Produced four bound volumes of reports, covering over 5,500 columns; and
- Received a monthly average of 39,000 hits on its web site pages (40% from overseas).

### Research Services

The Commission continues to have as a key priority the development of a high-quality and responsive Research Service for Members, committees and the Assembly Secretariat. The overall service level statistics provided by the Research and Library Service are provided under the main report from Research Services. (pages 44-46)

### Members' Services

On 25 June 2002, the Commission moved a motion in the Chamber of Parliament Buildings implementing a number of recommendations made in the Report of the Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB). These recommendations included:

- Increase to the Members' office cost allowance;
- Setting of Members' winding-up allowance;
- Increasing the level of IT provision in constituency offices; and
- Central funding for the provision of disabled access to constituency offices.

The motion was approved by the Assembly as a whole.



Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly Business Trust, with the Speaker, Clerk and Chief Executive

## Northern Ireland Assembly and Business Trust

The Northern Ireland Assembly and Business Trust (NIABT) has been established as an independent, neutral and self-financing educational charity that will organise programmes for Assembly Members and business representatives to include exchanges, seminars, visits and placements.

The main aim of the NIABT is to provide Assembly Members with a better insight into how the local business sector operates, thereby facilitating them in making more informed judgements on policy and legislation relating to the local economy. The NIABT also hopes to improve the business community's understanding of how the Assembly and devolution work and how policy and legislation is initiated and developed.

A number of pilot education programmes have successfully taken place, including a seminar for the business sector on the policy and legislative process, a workshop for Members' staff on dealing with constituents, and for parliamentarians, a day exploring the future directions in public transportation.

## Procurement Developments

Following the completion of the review of procurement, a number of strategic issues have been resolved. There has also been significant progress in the development of an electronic purchase order system, which is seen as a significant benefit in the achievement of both financial and procurement objectives.

The introduction of a contracts database has considerably improved the management of the Assembly's contracts. Another major achievement has been the development of a suite of contract documents that reflect the requirements of the Assembly.

Procurement systems have also enhanced the cross functionality of work between directorates. During suspension the Procurement Unit has also been instrumental in maintaining the contracts to reflect operational and value-for-money requirements.

