

Clerk Assistant's Directorate

FUNCTION

The Clerk Assistant's directorate provides support to the Northern Ireland Assembly to enable it to fulfil its duties under the Belfast Agreement. The directorate is organised into four offices: the Bill Office, the Business Office, Committee Office and the Overseas Office, each of which provides particular services to Members.

KEY CHALLENGES DURING THE PERIOD 1 APRIL 2002 TO 31 MARCH 2003

- To continue to meet the needs of Members and committees when carrying out Assembly business;
- To establish a team of competent, trained and highly motivated staff and maintain a programme of continuous staff training and development; and
- To maximise resources within its budget.

The directorate met these challenges by continuing to develop the policies and procedures necessary to ensure best practice in addressing the specific needs of the Northern Ireland Assembly. It also embarked on a comprehensive training programme for every member of staff in the directorate and carefully monitored expenditure against budget across the directorate.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR 2003-04

- To promote and support the work of the Northern Ireland Assembly in holding the Executive to account;
- To provide the support necessary for Members and committees during the transition to the new mandate prior to and following restoration; and
- To continue to provide a quality service to Members and committees while managing the recruitment and induction of new staff to replace the Assembly Clerks whose period of secondment expires in December 2003.

Bill Office

FUNCTION

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.

ACTIVITIES DURING THE PERIOD 1 APRIL 2002 TO 31 MARCH 2003

The Bill Office carefully monitored progress on all the legislation proceeding through the Assembly to ensure that all Bills received Royal Assent before the anticipated date of dissolution 21 March 2003. Where Bills appeared to be at risk, advice was provided to the Speaker, the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and relevant committees to ensure all parties were aware of potential difficulties.

As 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 etc.) Bill, which was not laid in Westminster within the period of this report. In some instances two or more Assembly Bills were consolidated into a single Order and, as a consequence, a total of 19 Orders were laid in Westminster and made by 31 March 2003 (including a Budget Order that had not been introduced in the Assembly as a Bill before suspension).

Prior to suspension, the Bill Office ensured that all legislative documents (Bills, explanatory and financial memorandums, notices and Marshalled Lists of amendments) were printed and distributed to Members within 24 hours of production and posted promptly on the Assembly web site. The office met its target of a two-day turnaround for reprinting all Bills that were amended at Consideration/Further Consideration Stages. On a weekly basis, the office also provided a table for the Assembly web site, setting out the progress of each Bill through the Assembly. Following suspension, the Bill Office monitored the progress of all Assembly legislation taken through the Order in Council process and produced regular status reports for senior Assembly staff.

Presentations on the legislative process were given to Statutory Committees and to Government Department Bill teams, prior to the suspension of the Assembly. In addition, a major seminar, hosted by the Speaker, was delivered to senior departmental staff from across the public service. During the suspended period, the Bill Office played a key role in delivering seminars to Assembly Secretariat staff on all aspects of the Assembly's procedures.

Following approval by the Speaker and the Business Committee, a new procedure for

assisting Members and committees to develop and introduce non-Executive Bills was established in April 2002. This included the establishment of a legislative drafting resource. Further work on a step-by-step guide for Member's Bills was also completed and made ready for circulation once the Assembly is restored. During the period of this report, one Committee Bill and four private Member's Bills were drafted using these new arrangements.

Work on developing proposals for new private Bill procedures has been taken forward during the period of suspension. These papers are now complete and ready for consideration by the Committee on Procedures on restoration.

A review was undertaken of the extent of legislative information appropriate for posting on the Assembly web site. Subsequently, a Bill Office home page was introduced on the Assembly intranet (AsslSt), which enabled access to the full range of live Bills in the Assembly, the text of each Bill and its accompanying explanatory and financial memorandum and any amendments to the Bill that had been tabled. Each Bill is updated immediately amendments are made by the Assembly. The Bill Office home page also provides links to all Acts passed by the Assembly since its inception, including the full text of each Act.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR 2003-04

- Effective management of the primary legislation process;
- Developing the co-ordination arrangements for handling the Executive legislation programme for the new Assembly mandate;
- Developing new and improved procedures and guidance for non-Executive Bills; and
- Ensuring that the public have access to accurate and up-to-date Assembly legislative documents on the web site.

Committee Office

FUNCTION

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.

Committee staff deliver these objectives by:

- Making appropriate arrangements for meetings of Statutory, Standing and Ad Hoc Committees;
- Providing administrative support before and after committee meetings;
- Arranging public evidence sessions, including arranging the attendance of witnesses at committee meetings;
- Liaising with Government Departments, other public sector bodies and organisations, the private sector, the community and voluntary sectors and individuals to ensure that committees are provided with the information and evidence they require;
- Providing the public with information on the work of Assembly Committees;
- Co-ordinating research activities and facilities for committees;
- Co-ordinating the arrangements for committee visits; and
- Providing procedural advice to committees.

ACTIVITIES DURING THE PERIOD

1 APRIL 2002 TO 31 MARCH 2003

The Committee Office provided support to ten 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.

In the final year of the Assembly's mandate, committee staff were required to manage the scrutiny of the large number of pieces of primary legislation being introduced by the Executive. 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. Due to the suspension of the Assembly in October 2002, a number of the Bills, that were either under consideration by committees or had already been scrutinised by committees were taken forward through the Order in Council procedure at Westminster.

Committee staff were also involved in supporting the introduction of the first Committee Bill, the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland (Assembly Standards) Bill. In addition, committee staff provided analysis and advice in relation to the 120 Statutory Rules referred to committees during this period.

Committee staff assisted in the production of 33 committee reports during the year. In addition, the secretariat for 15 committees produced end-of-mandate reports, summarising the work that the committees had carried out during the five-year Assembly mandate.

During the suspension period committee staff undertook a series of effectiveness reviews, and new systems, procedures, guidance and training for staff are being developed, with the aim of improving the efficiency and effectiveness of committee operations. Committee staff also contributed to the development of advice and guidance for Assembly Members and their staff in relation to the dissolution of the Assembly and the forthcoming elections.

Guidelines on the commissioning of research have been prepared and implemented. Further work has to be undertaken in relation to the engagement of specialist advisers.

A review was completed of the public information provided by committees, and a strategy to improve the accessibility, quality and timeliness of information on the operation of committees has been prepared for consideration by the Chairpersons' Liaison Group following the restoration of devolution.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR 2003-04

- To implement a strategy for improving external committee communications;
- To agree procedures to cover the working relationship between committees and Government Departments, including the provision of information and evidence to committees; and
- To agree and implement procedures for the engagement of specialist advisers.

Business Office

FUNCTION

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.

The Business Office has two discrete sections that deliver these functions:

The plenary section provides service and support to the Business Committee and Assembly plenary sittings. It produces all the Assembly's working papers for each plenary sitting, including

the Order Paper. The section prepares the Speaker's brief (through which it provides advice in relation to points of order and other procedural matters) and prepares the Minutes of Proceedings of the Assembly, which are the legal record of the Assembly's decisions and constitute the Journal of Proceedings of the Assembly.

The table section administers questions for oral and written answer, provides advice and assistance to Members about questions, produces the Written Answer booklets and provides guidance to Government Departments on the arrangements for Assembly questions. It also deals with Executive Committee/Private Members'/Assembly Committee motions, and amendments to these motions, together with the list of topics for Adjournment debate as tabled by Members. The section facilitates the laying of documents, Statutory Rules and other publications before the Assembly.

Through a member of staff located in the Business Office, the Printed Paper Office provides Members and staff of the Assembly with all the publications they need to carry out their Assembly duties.

ACTIVITIES DURING THE PERIOD

1 APRIL 2002 TO 31 MARCH 2003

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 oral and 2,729 written Assembly questions and supported 21 Business Committee meetings. Some 611 Statutory Rules and 258 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 124 Statutory Rules and 54 documents were laid, with a further 35 documents delivered to the Assembly.

The Business Office enhanced its systems, procedures and controls to enable it to improve the quality of its service to Members. Staff participated in an inquiry into Assembly questions, conducted by the Committee on Procedures, through written submission and provision of oral evidence on 2 October 2002. Following suspension, the Business Office played an integral role in the delivery of training to staff throughout the Clerk Assistant's directorate, and to other staff in the Secretariat, and, in so doing, built on the communication networks necessary to facilitate the efficient conduct of business within the directorate.

During the period of this report, Business Office staff addressed a number of other key challenges, including provision of updated guidance for Clerks at Table (that is, those Clerks supporting the Speaker during plenary sittings). Staff also made preparations for the publication of a bound Journal of the Proceedings (covering the entire mandate), as well as providing the draft contents of the planned 'Assembly Companion' publication which incorporated significant input relating to rulings made by the Speaker. Staff were also heavily involved in planning for the forthcoming election and for possible restoration of the Assembly after suspension, while suspension itself provided an unexpected opportunity to critically examine all the Business Office procedures and processes.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR 2003-04

- To ensure that statutory requirements arising from the Assembly elections are met;
- To provide appropriate guidance and induction for the new Speaker, Deputy Speakers and Members to enable them to participate fully in the business of the Assembly; and
- To adopt an appropriate management response to the need to retain and motivate staff within the Business Office, and to continually improve the office's procedures and processes, in order to ensure delivery of the highest quality service to the Assembly.

Overseas Office

FUNCTION

The Overseas Office provides the operational and administrative infrastructure necessary to maintain and develop relationships with other Parliaments, legislatures and other bodies on behalf of the Speaker, Assembly Members and Officers of the Assembly.

The key objectives of the office are:

- To enable Assembly Members and Officers to interact with and to observe and follow best practice in other parliaments and legislatures.
- To ensure the Northern Ireland Assembly Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association operates effectively and within the rules of the Branch Constitution.
- To facilitate the active participation of Assembly Members in meetings of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body.

ACTIVITY DURING THE PERIOD

1 APRIL TO 31 MARCH 2003

During the period 1 April 2002 to 31 March 2003 the Overseas Office organised/facilitated 16 inward and 13 outward visits together with 11 meetings of the Northern Ireland Assembly Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. The following are some examples of visits/events organised by the office:

Inward Visits

- House of Lords Select Committee on the Constitution.
- Conference for Speakers, Presiding Officers and Clerks.
- Visit from representatives of Alberta Assembly.
- Visit by Bosnia Officials.
- Visit by Lord Goldsmith, Attorney General.

Outward Visits

- Commonwealth Parliamentary Association 33rd Conference of British Isles and Mediterranean Region in Wales.

- British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, Nordic Council, Reykjavik.
- Visit to Boston by the Committee of the Centre.
- Professional Development Seminar 2002, Toronto/Huntsville, Ontario.
- Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Seminar, Hyderabad, India.
- Nordic Council Meeting, Helsinki.

Due to the suspension of the Assembly, the membership of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body have been held in abeyance.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR 2003/2004

- To provide clerking and support services to the Northern Ireland Assembly Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.
- To provide full administrative support to Members attending meetings of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body.
- To identify suitable Parliaments, legislatures and other organisations for Assembly Members and Senior Officers to visit.
- To organise programmes for visits to the Northern Ireland Assembly from representatives of other Parliaments, legislatures, organisations and other bodies.