

Section 4: Services

4.1 At an early stage the Commission realised the enormity of the task of putting in place all of the services required to support the work of the Assembly and agreed the priority services which needed to be progressed as a matter of urgency.

Parliamentary Services – Procedural Offices

4.2 During the period of the Shadow Assembly the three Procedural Offices of the Assembly and the Office of the Official Report were established, and systems and procedures continue to be developed in the light of the experience of supporting sittings of the Assembly and meetings of Assembly Committees.

THE BUSINESS OFFICE

4.3 The Business Office has four distinct functions. It:

- supports plenary meetings of the Assembly;
- provides procedural advice to the Speaker and Members;
- administers oral and written questions; and
- arranges the printing and publication of all Assembly publications.

4.4 During the period of this report the Business Office supported 125 plenary meetings of the Assembly, processed 3,147 oral and 8,477 written Assembly questions and supported 83 Business Committee meetings and 48 meetings of the Committee on Procedures. Some 505 Statutory Rules and 180 documents were laid and 555 papers presented to the Assembly.



Plenary Session of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

THE BILL OFFICE

4.5 The function of the Bill Office is to assist the Assembly in considering primary legislation. During the period of this report 34 Bills were introduced, of which 30 were Executive Bills, 3 were Assembly Commission Bills and 1 was a Private Members' Bill. Of these, 27 received Royal Assent and became Acts.

4.6 On 1 April 2002 the Bill Office established a panel of parliamentary draftsmen to provide specialist legal drafting services to support Private Members' Bills and legislation initiated by Committees.

THE COMMITTEE OFFICE

4.7 The function of the Committee Office is to service and support Committees of the Assembly. During the period of this report the Committee Office supported 1,037 committee meetings and 78 visits by committees, of which 28 were held outside Northern Ireland. Assembly Committees considered 25 Bills and produced 71 reports.



Hansard staff at work.

Hansard has:

- Continuously met its target of publishing the first eight hours of debate in the Assembly by 08:30 hrs the following day;
- Reported on 700 hours of debate in over 125 Assembly sittings;
- Produced reports for over 715 Committee sessions; and
- Published six Bound Volumes of reports.

Research Services

4.9 One of the key priorities for the Commission has been the development of a high quality and responsive research service. The Commission secured the secondment of a senior researcher from the Northern Ireland Statistical and Research Agency (NISRA), who conducted a study of research facilities in other legislative bodies. The outworking of that study has been the establishment of a professional research service which provides expertise in the sourcing, analysing and presentation of data and information for individual Members and the Assembly Committees. The Assembly's Research Service responded to 1,307 queries from Committees and 485 queries from Assembly Members during the period of this report.



Public meeting of the Committee for the Environment.

OFFICE OF THE OFFICIAL REPORT (HANSARD)

4.8 Hansard produces the Official Report of all sittings of the Northern Ireland Assembly and reports on a range of public meetings of Assembly Committees. During the period of this report

Members' Services

4.10 The Commission is responsible for the payment of salaries and allowances to Assembly Members, and over the past two years it has brought forward the legislation necessary to provide the legal basis for the remuneration of Members. The Commission is mindful of the public reaction to any increase to Members' salaries which can be interpreted as politicians voting themselves a pay rise. It is for this reason that the Commission has applied the recommendations of the Senior Salaries Review Body (SSRB), which, in 1998, at the request of the Prime Minister, set the salary levels for elected Members in Westminster, Scotland, Wales and the Northern Ireland Assembly. In October 2001, the Commission invited the SSRB back to review Assembly Members' salaries and allowances, and the Review Body is due to report in April 2002.

4.11 In May 2001 the Commission established the Assembly Members' Pension Scheme, which, under the direction of five Member Trustees, is administered by the Assembly's Personnel Office. The Pension Trustees recently appointed a pension consultant to ensure that the operation of the scheme fully complies with current pension legislation, and they also appointed a specialist provider to advise members of the scheme on the purchase of additional voluntary contributions. The Assembly's Finance Office delivers a comprehensive service to Members on a wide range of financial matters, which includes a centralised payment facility for all of the Assembly Members' major expenditure. A financial management system has been introduced which provides Members with a monthly budget profile.

4.12 In line with the recommendations of the SSRB, the Commission has provided IT facilities for Assembly Members and their staff in both their Assembly Offices in Parliament Buildings and their constituency offices located throughout Northern Ireland. This involved the development of a virtual private network, which allows Members remote access to the Assembly's network while maintaining the highest standards of security. A comprehensive programme of IT-related training has

also been made available to Members, Assembly and party staff. Other IT developments include the establishment of the Assembly's web site and intranet as well as the current electronic voting system.



Mrs Eileen Bell, Assembly Commissioner in the Members Library.

Service Contracts

4.13 The process of putting in place all of the services required to support the work of the Assembly is both complex and time consuming. The Commission's first priority has been to put out to tender the highest value contracts – namely broadcasting, catering and printing – which are essential to the effective functioning of the Assembly. In the absence of in-house purchasing expertise, the Commission established the following guiding principles for all of its procurement arrangements:

- All contracts are advertised and in the case of high value contracts adverts are placed in the European Journals and relevant specialist publications;
- All tender competitions are run in accordance with government purchasing guidance;
- Successful bidders need to demonstrate fail-safe contingency plans; and
- In the case of specialised contracts the Commission is advised by an independent expert.

4.14 Prior to devolution the Commission did not have the authority to let contracts and therefore was dependent on framework contracts secured by the Government Purchasing Agency on behalf of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS). The Commission agreed to continue to “piggy back” on the NICS arrangements in the early years after devolution to allow time to establish in-house

procurement expertise. The Commission is particularly grateful to the Head of Procurement in the Scottish Parliament, who completed a study of the Assembly’s purchasing requirements and recommended the appointment of a Head of Procurement. The Commission has now appointed its own Head of Procurement, who has oversight of all of the Assembly’s contracting arrangements.