

Section 5: Staffing

Introduction

5.1 When the Commission was first established in September 1998 the Assembly was almost exclusively staffed by Civil Servants who had been brought in on short-term secondments to make preparations for the early meetings of the Shadow Assembly. Prior to devolution the Commission had no legal authority to employ staff and, therefore, continued to secure secondments primarily from the Northern Ireland Civil Service but also from local councils, the universities and other public sector employers.

5.2 An immediate priority for the Commission was to identify the numbers of staff and the skills mix required to support the Assembly when fully functioning. The current staffing complement is around 300 and it is planned that it should increase to 460. On 2 March 1999 the Commission took the decision to advertise publicly all Assembly posts and to actively encourage applications from all sections of the community in Northern Ireland. At the time the Commission also realised the need to provide a continuity of service in the early years after devolution and resolved as a transitional arrangement to offer three year fixed-term secondments to the Civil Servants who had worked so diligently to put in place the Assembly's structures and procedures.

Recruitment Programme

5.3 The Commission, in taking forward this very substantial recruitment programme, has adopted the Northern Ireland Civil Service's recruitment procedures, which are based on the merit principle and are delivered through competence-based

assessment. All positions within the Assembly are advertised in the Belfast Telegraph, Irish News and the News Letter and for the more senior appointments advertisements are also placed in the Irish Times, the London Times and relevant specialist publications.

5.4 To date 28 separate recruitment competitions have been organised covering a wide range of posts including the Clerk and Chief Executive, Deputy Clerk, Deputy Chief Executive, Clerk Assistant, Editor and Deputy Editor of Debates, Transcribers, Researchers, Librarians, Principal Door Keeper/Door Keepers, Assembly Clerks, Assistant Assembly Clerks, Head of Legal Services and Head of Procurement.

5.5 Over 3,500 applications have been received, with 211 appointments being made. Analysis shows that of the 211 people appointed by the Commission, 50% are drawn from the NICS, with 50% coming from a range of employment backgrounds, including the community, voluntary and private sectors. Further analysis indicates that 86 appointments are from the Catholic community, 111 from the Protestant community and 14 appointments are classed as "not determined". The gender breakdown of people appointed to the Assembly is 118 male, 93 female.

The Commission's Responsibility as an Employer

5.6 The Commission has made every effort to ensure that Assembly staff have access to appropriate trade union representation and, at an early stage, had discussions with the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) to explore

how management/employee negotiations could best be managed. The Commission has determined that there will not be a single union agreement in the Assembly and is willing to meet with any trade union which represents staff employed by the Assembly. A local Trade Union Whitley Committee has now been established and a Whitley Constitution has been agreed, which provides the basis for future consultation between management and staff side.

5.7 An Equal Opportunities Policy is being developed, which includes an explicit commitment to promote equality of opportunity in all of the Assembly's employment arrangements. The Equal Opportunities Policy sets out how equality of opportunity will be promoted through affirmative action, monitoring and reviewing procedures. A protection from harassment policy is being developed, to provide a complaints framework for employees who believe that they have suffered any form of discrimination, harassment or victimisation, or who believe that the Commission is not adequately promoting equality of opportunity.

5.8 A key priority for the Commission has been to ensure that all staff have the necessary knowledge and skills to support the work of the Assembly. An ongoing programme of initial training and continuous professional development has been developed, which comprises on-the-job training and placements with other legislatures. The Assembly has recently established an exchange programme

with the Canadian Parliament, and four staff have spent two-week on placement in Ottawa to learn about the procedures and structures of the Canadian House of Commons and the Senate.

We have not only received help but are also giving assistance to others. Two Principal Clerks and the Speaker will visit Bosnia to assist the Parliament there and the Deputy Clerk has been seconded as Acting Deputy Clerk of the Kosova Parliament under an arrangement with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Terms and Conditions of Service

5.9 The Assembly Commission currently operates using the NICS Terms and Conditions of Service but wishes to put in place a bespoke set of terms and conditions which more accurately reflect the Assembly's unique working environment. In September 2001 consultants were contracted to advise on the terms, conditions, pay and grading for staff employed by the Assembly Commission. The review, which has involved extensive consultation with staff and the trade unions, will be completed by May 2002. The Commission will then put in place a plan to implement the recommendations of the review by the end of the current mandate in 2003.