



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee on Standards and Privileges

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 13 March 2024

Meeting Location: Room 106, Parliament Buildings

Present: Carál Ní Chuilín MLA (Chairperson)
Stewart Dickson MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Connie Egan MLA
Paul Frew MLA
Harry Harvey MLA

Present by video or teleconference:
Jemma Dolan MLA
Colin McGrath MLA

Apologies: Stephen Dunne MLA
Cathy Mason MLA

In Attendance: Shane McAteer, Committee Clerk
Nick Mitford, Senior Assistant Clerk
Elaine Farrell, Assistant Clerk



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Ciara Dorrian, Clerical Officer

In attendance by video or teleconference:

Alison Ferguson, Clerical Supervisor

Agreed: The Committee agreed to hold the meeting in closed session.

The meeting commenced at 10.04 a.m. in closed session.

1. Apologies

The Committee noted that apologies had been received from Stephen Dunne MLA and Cathy Mason MLA.

2. Declaration of Interests

The Chairperson advised Members of the ongoing requirement to declare relevant financial or other interests as and when they arise and before taking part in any Assembly proceedings, including Committee proceedings, relating to that matter.

No interests were declared.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the draft minutes of the meeting held on 28 February 2024.



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4. Matters arising

Noted: The Committee noted the schedule of Committee meetings up to summer recess.

Agreed: The Committee approved the draft letters to the Speaker and the Committee on Procedures in respect of paternal leave for MLAs and agreed that they should issue.

5. Complaint against a Member – Briefing by the Commissioner for Standards on Investigation Report: Case ID 202300001

Members discussed the procedure, which the predecessor Committee had trialled, whereby Hansard reports are made of the closed-session briefings by the Commissioner for Standards (“the Commissioner”) on her investigation reports and of related oral hearings with respondents, with the Hansard reports being published subsequently when the Committee reports on the complaint cases. In this regard, Members noted the risk of unnecessary disclosure of sensitive and other personal data if there is no provision for the Hansard reports to be redacted where appropriate and how this might become a barrier to complaints in the future.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek procedural and legal advice on the options in relation to recording closed-session briefings by the Commissioner on investigation reports and of related oral hearings with respondents, given the need to avoid the unnecessary disclosure of sensitive and other personal data. The Committee **further agreed** that Hansard reports of such briefings and hearings would not be made until the procedure has been reviewed by the Committee as part of its Forward Work Programme.

The Committee Clerk briefed the Committee on the adjudication process and the role of the Committee when considering investigation reports by the Commissioner.

The Commissioner for Standards, Dr Melissa McCullough, joined the meeting at 10.24 a.m.



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The Commissioner briefed the Committee on her investigation report on a complaint against a Member. This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Frew left the meeting at 11.07 a.m.

Mr Frew rejoined the meeting at 11.09 a.m.

The Commissioner for Standards left the meeting at 11.29 a.m.

The meeting suspended at 11.29 a.m.

The meeting resumed at 11.37 a.m.

Mr McGrath declared an interest in that he has had contact with the educational establishment referred to in the complaint case, which is within his constituency, but that that has not been in relation to the specific case in question.

Noted: The Committee noted a written response which the respondent had made to the Commissioner's investigation report and that the respondent had indicated that they wished to take up the offer of an oral hearing in that regard.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to defer any further deliberations on the complaint case until after the oral hearing with the respondent.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Powerpoint slides used in the meeting by the Commissioner to the respondent for information ahead of their upcoming oral hearing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the respondent's written response to the Commissioner's report to the Commissioner for response as applicable.

The Commissioner for Standards rejoined the meeting at 11.49 a.m.

The Chairperson advised the Commissioner of the agreed approach taken by the Committee in respect of its deliberation on her investigation report.



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6. Complaint against a Member – Briefing by the Commissioner for Standards on Investigation Report: Case ID 202200061

The Chairperson advised the Committee that the respondent in this case did not provide a written response to the Commissioner's investigation report nor indicate that they wished to appear before the Committee.

The Commissioner briefed the Committee on her investigation report on a complaint against a Member. This was followed by a question and answer session.

The Commissioner for Standards left the meeting at 11.53 p.m.

The Committee deliberated on the complaint case, as presented in the Commissioner's investigation report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that no further information was required from the Commissioner to enable it to decide on the complaint case.

Agreed: The Committee agreed with the Commissioner's findings that the respondent has breached Rules 17 and 12 of the Code of Conduct.

The Committee discussed the range of available options, in terms of next steps, in light of the findings that the respondent had breached Rules 17 and 12 of the Code of Conduct. In that regard, the Committee noted that the respondent had acknowledged the importance of confidentiality and that the Commissioner had found them to be cooperative, honest and open throughout the investigation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Committee Clerk will contact the respondent to advise them that the Committee agrees with the Commissioner's conclusion that there has been a breach of Rules 17 and 12 of the Code of Conduct and to request that the respondent provides an appropriate apology in writing to the Committee to enable it to report to the Assembly that the matter has been resolved.

7. Proposed Committee Member Development Programme

The Senior Assistant Clerk briefed the Committee on the progress made to date on the proposed Committee Member Development Programme.



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Noted: The Committee noted the update on progress towards providing a development programme on the Committee's adjudication function, which is tailored to the Committee's specific needs.

8. Correspondence

Noted: The Committee noted the correspondence from Legal Services on follow-up issues arising from the briefing by Legal Services at the meeting on 21 February 2024 on procedural fairness.

9. AOB

None.

10. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting of the Committee on Standards and Privileges will take place on Wednesday 10 April 2024 at 10.00 a.m. in Room 21.

The meeting was adjourned at 12.02 p.m.

Carál Ní Chuílin MLA
Chairperson, Committee on Standards and Privileges

10 April 2024