

Committee on Standards and Privileges

END OF SESSION REPORT

This is the end of session report of the Committee on Standards and Privileges (CSP) of the Northern Ireland Assembly from 3 February 2024 to 31 August 2025.

Remit:

The Committee on Standards and Privileges is a Standing Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly, established in accordance with paragraph 10 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement and under Assembly Standing Order Nos. 51 and 57. Further provisions on the Committee's functions are also included in Standing Orders 69, 69A, 69B, 69C and 70.

Powers:

The Committee has the power:

- To consider specific matters relating to privilege referred to it by the Assembly;
- To oversee the work of the Assembly Clerk of Standards;
- To examine the arrangements for the compilation, maintenance and accessibility of the Register of Members' Interests and any other register of interests established by the Assembly; and to review from time to time the form and content of those registers;
- To consider any specific complaints made in relation to the registering or declaring of interests referred to it;
- To consider any matter relating to the conduct of Members; and
- To recommend any modifications to any Assembly Code of Conduct as may from time to time appear to be necessary.

The Committee is appointed at the start of every Assembly, and has power to send for persons, papers and records that are relevant to its inquiries.

Membership:

The Committee membership at 31 August 2025 was as follows:

Cathy Mason MLA (Chairperson)¹

Connie Egan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)²

Stewart Dickson MLA

Jemma Dolan MLA

Brian Kingston MLA³

Paul Frew MLA

¹ From 3 February 2025 Cathy Mason replace Carál Ní Chuilín as Chairperson

² From 8 November 2024 Connie Egan replaced Stewart Dickson as Deputy Chairperson

³ From 8 April 2024 Brian Kingston replaced Stephen Dunne as a member of the Committee

Harry Harvey MLA
Declan McAleer MLA⁴
Colin McGrath MLA

Key Activities, Outputs and Achievements

The Register of Members' Interests

1. The Committee on Standards and Privileges has responsibility for examining the arrangements for compilation, maintenance and accessibility of the Register of Members' Interests and any other register of interests established by the Assembly, and to review from time to time the form and content of those registers. Two updated versions of the Register of Members' Interests (in PDF format) were published on the Assembly website during this session, in addition to the maintenance of a live version of the Register which is continually updated as changes are notified by Members.

All-Party Groups

2. During this session, 18 new All-Party Groups (APGs) were approved by the Committee, with five APGs removed from the register due to non-compliance with the rules.

Complaints against Members

3. During this session, the independent Commissioner for Standards, Dr Melissa McCullough, considered complaints against MLAs and Ministers and reported to the Committee where applicable.
4. The Committee published a total of 3 [reports](#) on its adjudication of complaints against Members (which included the related Commissioner investigation reports, as well as a report on a referral to the Commissioner by the Committee on an alleged leak of information on a live complaint case).
5. The Committee gave further consideration to decisions of the Commissioner in which she had deemed 24 complaints against Members to be inadmissible (the Committee agreed with the Commissioner's decision in each case); and considered four cases in which the Commissioner sought permission to discontinue consideration of the complaints (the Committee granted approval for discontinuation in each case).

Legacy Report recommendations by the previous Committee

⁴ From 10 February 2025 Declan McAleer replaced Carál Ní Chuilín as a member of the Committee

6. The previous Committee recommended in its Legacy Report that the successor Committee takes forward a number of strategic policy/procedural issues which, if agreed by the current Committee, could potentially require amendments to Standing Orders and to the Assembly Members' Code of Conduct. The issues arising from the Legacy Report which the current Committee has considered during the session are outlined below.

Complaints against Ministers

7. The Committee agreed, in principle, that it should have a role in adjudicating on complaints against Ministers of alleged breaches of the Ministerial Code of Conduct and agreed to consult with Assembly parties and independent Members on the matter. Following consideration of the responses, however, the Committee agreed to refer the issue to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) for its consideration, given the role it has to review matters relating to the functioning of the Assembly, including Assembly Committees. The Committee will require to further consider the matter having received a response from the AERC.
8. In the meantime, the Committee has a duty, under Standing Order 69A, to consider any investigation report by the Commissioner, including reports on ministerial complaints and to publish such reports on behalf of the Assembly. During the period of this report, the Commissioner carried out investigations on three complaints against Ministers which were considered by the Committee and reported on.

Unacceptable Behaviours Policy

9. When considering the draft policy on Unacceptable Behaviours, the Committee decided that there was not a case for the appointment of lay members to the Committee and agreed to amend the draft Policy accordingly.
10. The Committee agreed that it would recommend to the Assembly that the MLA Code of Conduct should be amended to make it clear that the Behaviour Code is a Principle of Conduct, and that Rule of Conduct 10 should be amended to include a specific reference to the Policy in order to highlight the importance of the Policy.
11. The Committee has sought legal advice on draft amendments to Standing Orders, the General Procedures Direction and the Code of Conduct which are required for implementing the Policy. The Committee has also sought legal advice on how to exclude the Policy from applying to the context of Assembly proceedings or political speech, given the freedom of expression protections afforded by Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights.

Repeal of Standing Order 70

12. Following a Review of Standing Order 70 and having received legal advice, the Committee agreed to seek the repeal of Standing Order 70 and to various consequential amendments to Standing Orders, including removing reference to “Privileges” in the Committee title. The Committee agreed to ask the Committee on Procedures to undertake the work necessary to bring the proposed amendments to Standing Orders to the Assembly for approval.

Digitisation of the process for registering members interests

13. The previous Committee agreed proposals to develop an interface to enable Members to register and update their interests online. Preparatory work was consequently undertaken, including process mapping and the development of initial specifications, ahead of the establishment of the new CSP.
14. The Committee subsequently agreed that the project should be progressed by the Assembly IS Office.

Safeguarding the confidentiality of complaints

15. Following the referral to the Commissioner for investigation of an alleged leak of confidential information, and the subsequent report, the Committee agreed a number of follow-up actions aimed at strengthening its procedures for safeguarding the confidentiality of live complaint cases. This included: the development of a protocol for remote attendance at Committee meetings, which requires all remote attendees to have their camera on for the duration of the meeting; restricted documents no longer being shared on screen for remote attendees; the reading room facility for viewing restricted papers to be limited to in-person attendance only, with a hard copy of the restricted pack made available during the reading room viewing; and the option for members to take time immediately before a Committee meeting commences to view restricted documents again if the meeting pack is substantial.
16. During its consideration of the draft Unacceptable Behaviours Policy, and given the potential sensitivity of complaints under the Policy, the Committee began considering a proposed confidentiality agreement which complainants and respondents would be required to sign for any complaint made under the Policy. The Committee also agreed to request that the Commissioner considers appropriate measures to highlight the confidentiality of the complaints process when acknowledging receipt of complaints.

Review of the procedural practices for the operation of the Committee's adjudication role

17. Following legal advice, the Committee gave consideration to a number of options for recording closed-session briefings by the Commissioner on investigation reports and oral hearings from respondents.
18. The Committee agreed that the practice going forward would involve an informal note of the briefing/hearing being made by the Committee Secretariat, which would be used to inform the drafting of the Committee's report on the case and the minutes of proceedings.
19. The Committee further agreed that the option of the respondent in complaint cases appearing before the Committee for an oral hearing should only be granted if a written submission has been provided by the respondent in the first instance.

Member Development Programme

20. The Committee commissioned a two-day Member Development Programme, provided by Bond Solon, which covered a number of areas relating to the CSP's adjudication role, including: understanding the legal framework within which the Committee and the Commissioner operate; distinguishing between facts, assumptions and opinions; understanding the roles and responsibilities of the Chairperson and Members at oral hearings; and making fair, well-reasoned and justified decisions based on the available evidence.

Committee meetings

21. The Committee held 23 formal meetings during the period covered by this report, all of which were held entirely in closed session due to the confidential nature of the Committee's work.

Committee expenditure

22. The Committee expenditure for the period covered by this report is included as an Appendix.

Appendix

Committee on Standards and Privileges

Expenditure for the period 3 February 2024 – 31 August 2025

Budget area	Details	Expenditure
Committee Travel - committee members and staff travel and subsistence in relation to visits and meetings outside Parliament Buildings	Includes the cost of committee visits to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• [location] - to meet [name of key organisation/person] to discuss [issue]• [location] to consider [issue] and x number of meetings held outside Parliament Buildings	£0
Printing of committee reports	Includes the cost of committee reports on: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inquiry into [name of inquiry]• [name of] Bill	£0
Advertising – the cost of public notices relating to committee inquiries, the committee stage of Bills and meetings held outside Parliament Buildings	Includes the cost of public notices in relation to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Inquiry into [name of inquiry]• [name of] Bill	£0
Specialist Advice - the cost of specialist advisers appointed by the committee and commissioned research, also the cost of drafting Standing Orders	Specialist adviser to the Committee on [issue/inquiry to which the advice related]	£0
Refreshments & Hospitality	Includes the cost of all refreshments and hospitality provided by the committee; to include meetings, working lunches, seminars and any other such expenditure.	£2823.38
General expenses	Includes the cost of seminars (excluding refreshments and hospitality); room hire; witness expenses; gifts provided by the committee during visits; and conference fees for members, including Member Development costs	£3915.33
Total Expenditure		£6738.71