



**Committee on Standards**

# **Report on complaints against Ms Carál Ní Chuilín MLA**

Ordered by the Committee on Standards to be published on 14 October 2026

This report is embargoed until noon on Friday 16 October 2026

Report: NIA 172/22-27 Committee on Standards

# Contents

|                                                                                         |    |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| Powers and Membership .....                                                             | 3  |
| Membership .....                                                                        | 3  |
| List of Abbreviations and Acronyms used in this Report .....                            | 5  |
| Introduction .....                                                                      | 6  |
| Role of the Committee .....                                                             | 6  |
| Background.....                                                                         | 7  |
| The relevant rules in the Members' Code of Conduct.....                                 | 9  |
| The relevant Principles of Conduct .....                                                | 10 |
| The Commissioner's reasoned decision and findings on allegations .....                  | 10 |
| The Committee's deliberations .....                                                     | 17 |
| Committee's conclusions and recommendations .....                                       | 21 |
| Links to Appendices.....                                                                | 24 |
| Appendix 1: The Commissioner for Standards' investigation report .....                  | 24 |
| Appendix 2: Minutes of Proceedings .....                                                | 24 |
| Appendix 3: Written response from the respondent.....                                   | 24 |
| Appendix 4: Written response from the Commissioner to the respondent's<br>response..... | 24 |
| Appendix 5: Letter of apology from the respondent .....                                 | 24 |

# Powers and Membership

## Powers

The Committee on Standards 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 Orders 51 and 57. Further provisions on the Committee's functions are also included in Standing Orders 69, 69A, 69B and 69C.

The Committee has the power:

- 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 of declaring of interests referred to it;
- To consider any matter relating to the conduct of members; and
- To recommend any modification 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 the power to send for persons papers and records that are relevant to its inquiries.

## Membership

The Committee has 9 members, including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, and a quorum of five members. The membership of the Committee is as follows:

- Cathy Mason MLA (Chairperson)<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> From 3 February 2025 Cathy Mason replaced Carál Ní Chuilín as Chairperson.

- Connie Egan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)<sup>2</sup>
- Keith Buchanan MLA<sup>3</sup>
- Trevor Clarke MLA<sup>4</sup>
- Stewart Dickson MLA
- Mark Durkan MLA<sup>5</sup>
- Paul Frew MLA
- Declan McAleer MLA<sup>6</sup>
- Emma Sheerin MLA<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> From 8 November 2024 Connie Egan replaced Stewart Dickson as Deputy Chairperson.

<sup>3</sup> From 3 March 2026 Keith Buchanan replaced Harry Harvey as a member of the Committee.

<sup>4</sup> From 3 March 2026 Trevor Clarke replaced Brian Kingston as a member of the Committee.

<sup>5</sup> From 8 September 2025 Mark Durkan replaced Colin McGrath as a member of the Committee.

<sup>6</sup> From 10 February 2025 Declan McAleer replaced Carál Ní Chuilín as a member of the Committee.

<sup>7</sup> From 24 November 2025 Emma Sheerin replaced Jemma Dolan as a member of the Committee.

# List of Abbreviations and Acronyms used in this Report

|                   |                                     |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------|
| CTEO:             | Committee for the Executive Office  |
| MLA:              | Member of the Legislative Assembly  |
| TEO:              | The Executive Office                |
| The Assembly:     | Northern Ireland Assembly           |
| The Code:         | The Members' Code of Conduct        |
| The Commissioner: | Assembly Commissioner for Standards |
| The Committee:    | Committee on Standards              |

# Introduction

1. The Committee on Standards ('the Committee') has considered a report from the Assembly Commissioner for Standards ('the Commissioner'), Mr Stephen Wright, on his investigation into two complaints against Ms Carál Ní Chuilín MLA ('the respondent') of an alleged breach of the Assembly Members' Code of Conduct ('the Code').<sup>8</sup>
2. A link to the Commissioner's investigation report, which includes a copy of the complaint correspondence, together with the evidence gathered during the investigation, is included at **Appendix 1** (a limited amount of information has been redacted from the Commissioner's report to accord with legal obligations). The link to the applicable minutes of proceedings of the Committee is included at **Appendix 2**.

## Role of the Committee

3. The arrangements for regulating the standards of conduct of MLAs include: the role of the independent Commissioner in investigating complaints of alleged breaches of the Code; the role of the Committee in considering the Commissioner's investigation reports and adjudicating in light of the Commissioner's findings and any other evidence or information obtained; and the role of the Assembly in plenary in deciding upon sanctions recommended by the Committee, where applicable.
4. It is the Committee which ultimately decides on whether any breach of the Code is established, on the basis of the evidence, the facts and the legal position in respect of each allegation. If it decides that a breach has occurred, the Committee may: decide that a sanction is not merited; seek to resolve the

---

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/your-mlas/code-of-conduct/the-code-of-conduct-and-the-guide-to-the-rules-as-amended-on-23-march-2021/>

matter and then report the resolution to the Assembly; or recommend to the Assembly that a sanction be imposed under Standing Order 69B.<sup>9</sup>

## Background

5. On 26 November 2025, the Commissioner received two separate complaints: one from Mr Timothy Gaston MLA and one from Mr Trevor Clarke MLA ('the complainants') alleging that the respondent had breached Rule 5 of the MLA Code of Conduct, which requires a Member to declare any relevant interest in Assembly proceedings, during the Committee for the Executive Office (CTEO) meetings on 23 October 2024 and on 26 November 2025.
6. The allegations were that the respondent had failed to declare a relevant interest when an incident regarding damage caused to a portrait at Belfast City Hall on 19 October 2024 was raised at the aforementioned CTEO meetings; and it was understood the respondent's son had been linked to and investigated by the police regarding the incident (but subsequently not prosecuted).
7. Mr Gaston also alleged that Ms Ní Chuilín had breached the Rules on Advocacy (Rules 7 and 8) and had failed to uphold several of the Principles of Public Life, namely Openness, Integrity, Accountability and Leadership.
8. Mr Clarke additionally alleged a breach of Rules 1, 13 and 14 of the Code in relation to the respondent's attendance at the meetings of the CTEO. (It should be noted that, while he is a member of the Committee, Mr Clarke recused himself from all of its considerations relating to this complaint.)
9. The Commissioner considered the complaint and decided it was admissible, before then commencing his investigation on 28<sup>th</sup> January 2026. On 21 May

---

<sup>9</sup> A range of sanctions are provided for in Standing Order 69B  
<https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/standing-orders/sos-at-1-july-2025.pdf>

2026, the Commissioner forwarded his investigation report to the Committee for consideration.

10. Prior to the Committee commencing its adjudication, and in accordance with its established disclosure procedure, the Committee Clerk sent the Commissioner's full investigation report to the respondent for written comment in respect of any matter raised within the report. Where applicable, any written comments received from the respondents in such complaint cases are provided to the Committee at the same time as it receives the Commissioner's investigation report. The respondent was also offered the opportunity to appear before the Committee to make any comments in person and to answer any questions that members may have.
11. The respondent advised the Committee Clerk that she would be making a written response to the investigation report and indicated that she also wished to avail of an oral hearing. In her written response (**Appendix 3**), the respondent raised a number of concerns and criticisms in relation to the Commissioner's findings.
12. On 10 June 2026, the Committee received a briefing from the Commissioner on his investigation report, which was followed by an oral hearing with the respondent before the Committee commenced its deliberation on the complaint case.
13. The Committee agreed to offer the Commissioner the opportunity to make a written reply to the respondent's criticism of the investigation report in accordance with normal practice. The Commissioner's subsequent response to the written submission from the respondent can be found at **Appendix 4**.
14. Following initial deliberation on 10 June 2026, the Committee undertook further deliberation on the complaint case on 1 July 2026, as outlined below.

# The relevant rules in the Members' Code of Conduct

15. The relevant rules considered by the Commissioner in the complaints against the respondent are as follows:

**Rule 1:** You shall base your conduct on a consideration of the public interest, avoid conflict between personal interest and the public interest and resolve any conflict between the two, at once, and in favour of the public interest.

**Rule 5:** You shall declare, whether in Assembly proceedings or in any approach to a Minister, public representative, public body or public official, any relevant interest which might reasonably be thought by others to influence your approach to the matter under consideration. A relevant interest means an interest to which Chapter 2 of the Guide to the Rules applies, and may include a registrable interest.

**Rules 7:** You shall not, in return for payment or benefit, advocate or initiate any cause or matter on behalf of any outside body or individual. Nor shall you, in return for benefit or payment, urge any other Member to do so.

**Rule 8:** You shall not seek to confer benefit exclusively upon a body (or individual), from which you have received, or have received, or expect to receive a financial or material benefit, or upon any client of such a body (or individual).

**Rule 13:** You shall not act in any way which improperly interferes, or is intended or is likely to improperly interfere, with the performance by the Assembly of its functions, or the performance by a Member, officer or staff of the Assembly of their duties.

**Rule 14:** You shall not use, or attempt to use, your position as a Member to improperly confer an advantage or preferential treatment for either yourself or any other person; or to avoid disadvantage or create disadvantage for someone else.

## The relevant Principles of Conduct

16. The relevant Principles of Conduct cited in Mr Gaston's complaint are as follows:

**Openness:** Members should act and take decisions in an open and transparent manner. Information should not be withheld from the public unless there are clear and lawful reasons for so doing.

**Integrity:** Members must avoid placing themselves under any obligation to people or organisations that might try inappropriately to influence them in their work. They should not act or take decisions in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends. They must declare and resolve any interests or relationships.

**Accountability:** Members are accountable to the public for their decisions and actions and must submit themselves to the scrutiny necessary to ensure this.

**Leadership:** Members should exhibit these principles in their own behaviour. They should actively promote and robustly support the principles and be willing to challenge poor behaviour wherever it occurs.

17. It should be noted that, while the Committee will take into account the Principles of Conduct when determining any potential breaches of the rules of conduct, the principles are not themselves enforceable.

## The Commissioner's reasoned decision and findings on allegations

18. In his investigation report (Appendix 1), the Commissioner has detailed his approach to the investigation, his findings of fact, reasoned decisions and his conclusion on the allegations contained in the complaints.
19. The Commissioner made the following findings of fact:

1. *On 19th October 2024, a portrait on display at Belfast City Hall was damaged after an event hosted by an external organisation.*
  2. *A Sinn Féin employee was suspended from the party, subsequently resigned and was investigated by the Police Service of Northern Ireland regarding the damage caused.*
  3. *The Sinn Féin employee was confirmed to be the son of Ms Ní Chuilín after a statement was issued by KRW Law on 26th November 2025.*
  4. *The City Hall incident was raised at the Committee for the Executive Office meeting on 23rd October 2024 at which Ms Ní Chuilín was present.*
  5. *The City Hall incident was again raised at the Committee for the Executive Office meeting of 26th November 2025 at which Ms Ní Chuilín was present.*
  6. *No Declaration of Interest was made by Ms Ní Chuilín at or in relation to either meeting.*
20. As a result of his investigation, the Commissioner concluded that, on the balance of probabilities, the respondent's conduct in failing to declare an interest at the CTEO meeting of 26th November 2025 breached Rule 5 of the Code and failed to uphold the principles of Openness and Leadership.
  21. In addition, the Commissioner concluded that the respondent did not breach Rules 1, 13 or 14 as alleged, at the meetings of the CTEO on 23 October 2024 and 26 November 2025.
  22. Furthermore, the Commissioner explained that Rules 7 and 8, which relate to paid advocacy, were not relevant in his investigation.
  23. The following extracts from the investigation report outline the substance of the Commissioner's reasoning in relation to the decisions he reached on each of the allegations:

#### **Allegation 1: Rule 5**

*'Included at Rule 5 is a specific requirement to declare any relevant interest which might reasonably be thought by others to influence your approach to the*

*matter under consideration. The Rule ensures that Members, the public and others are made aware at the appropriate time, in the proceedings of the Assembly and on other occasions, of any relevant interest.*

*This requirement is supported by additional guidance contained in Chapter 2 of The Guide to the Rules which clarify that interests include non-financial interests. The guidance requires adherence to rules for Members of Committees when considering any matter. The guidance does not further specify or place restrictions on matters under consideration such as a requirement to be an agenda item. It does however require that declarations are made at sessions of evidence, and in any hearings involving witnesses to whom the interest is particularly relevant and before any questions which might reasonably be thought by others relevant to that interest.*

*Crucially, the test as clarified in both Rule 5 and the guidance is to whether others may think the interest is relevant to the matter under consideration, not the Member themselves.*

*On this basis I am content that, on the balance of probabilities, the fact that Ms Ní Chuilín was related to the person linked to the City Hall incident would constitute a relevant interest where that incident was a matter under consideration in Assembly proceedings which evidently includes Committee proceedings.*

*The fact that the Public Prosecution Service concluded that there was no reasonable prospect of conviction for any criminal offence on the evidence available does not render the interest irrelevant, nor did Ms Ní Chuilín rely on this decision as justification for her failure to declare the interest.*

*Ms Ní Chuilín's position in both her written responses and in interview was that a requirement to declare an interest only arises where the interest is relevant to the business under consideration by the Committee. She contends that at neither meeting was the City Hall incident business being considered by the Committee nor was the Committee taking any decisions relating to it.*

*As indicated above, I have found no Assembly definition or guidance as to what constitutes a matter under consideration by a Committee. Consequently, I do not find a requirement for any matter to be included on a meeting agenda or to be specifically linked to legislative or policy matters before the Committee, before any matter can be determined as under consideration.*

*In relation to the meeting on 23rd October 2024, I have found that the reference to the City Hall incident by the Chair was incidental and when raised again by Mr Harvey, he was challenged by the Chair to ensure that his question was relevant to the work of the Executive office and hence the Committee. The Chair further intervened to clarify that questions must be in line with the responsibilities of Committee Members and finally with Mr Harvey that he had no questions for the First Minister which related to the work of the Executive Office.*

*On this basis, it is evident that the Chair did not accept that the question relating to the City Hall incident was a matter relevant to the Committee. Consequently, I do not find that this was a matter under consideration by the Committee and therefore no declaration of interest was required by Ms Ní Chuilín.*

*Regarding the meeting of the 26th November 2025, Committee members had been informed by the Clerk prior to the meeting that Mr Brett intended to raise the City Hall incident with the witness. The Chair specifically raised the matter at a point in the meeting and stated that she intended to give time and space for the question by Mr Brett. A discussion continued for some 7 minutes before the Chair indicated that due to answers given by the witness, further questions pertaining to the City Hall incident were not relevant to the Committee. Ms Ní Chuilín had not commented up to that point.*

*The matter was nevertheless revisited a short time later when the Chair invited Mr Brett to raise a proposal to write to the Executive Office regarding the incident. The Chair invited comment to which Ms Ní Chuilín responded and the proposal was agreed by the Committee.*

*In this context, I do find that the City Hall incident was a matter under consideration by the Committee and that Ms Ní Chuilín was therefore required by Rule 5 to declare an interest particularly as she had participated in the discussion regarding the proposal. Whether or not she agreed with the Chair's decision to permit the question, the requirement remained.*

*I do find that the interest was minor in the context that it was not related to the policy and legislative matters under scrutiny by the Committee nor had Ms Ní Chuilín participated in the substantive discussions with the witness. The failure to declare was not however inadvertent and no representations were received from Ms Ní Chuilín to indicate that she acknowledged the failure to declare the interest or that she undertook to apologise for it. I did not therefore seek to resolve the complaints in accordance with the Rectification Procedure as detailed in paragraph 9 of the General Procedures Direction.'*

The Commissioner explained his findings, in terms of the contrasting circumstances between the CTEO meeting on 23 October 2024 and the meeting on 26 November 2025, in the following terms:

*'In respect of the meeting of 23rd October 2024, the City Hall incident was not on the agenda, there was no prior notification that the incident was to be raised and the reference to the incident by the Chair was incidental. Furthermore, when the incident was raised as a question to the witness, the Chair reminded Mr Harvey that questions had to relate to the work of the Executive Office and therefore, by implication, his question was out of order. On that basis I have found that the matter was not under consideration and there was therefore no requirement by Ms Ní Chuilín to declare an[d] interest.*

*Regarding the meeting of 26th November 2025, notice was given that the incident would be raised as a question to the witness during the meeting. The Chair invited the question and by implication did not consider that it was out of order. A significant discussion ensued in respect of the incident and a proposal regarding the matter was discussed in which Ms Ní Chuilín participated. I have*

*therefore found that there was a requirement to declare an interest and hence there has been a breach of Rule 5.'*

### **Allegation 2: Rule 1**

*'This rule requires that conduct should be based on a consideration of the public interest. While Ms Ní Chuilín clearly had a personal interest regarding the City Hall incident, her comments in the 23rd October 2024 meeting were procedural in nature. Her participation in the meeting of the 26th November could not be interpreted as any attempt to frustrate the public interest in circumstances where she did not object to the proposal to write to the Executive Office.*

*I have therefore found no breach of Rule 1 and any such finding would have been duplicitous as the personal interest aspect is specifically addressed under Rule 5'.*

### **Allegation 3: Rule 13**

*'This rule requires acts which improperly interfere or are intended to interfere with the performance of Assembly functions. At the meeting of 26th November 2025, whilst Ms Ní Chuilín did challenge the relevance of certain questions, she did not otherwise interfere or attempt to interfere in the proceedings and did respect the authority of the Chair.*

*Any allegation that she sought to improperly interfere with the performance of the Committee at the meeting on 23rd October 2024 would be inadmissible as such a complaint would be out of time under paragraph 3.3(i) of the General Procedures Direction'.*

### **Allegation 4: Rule 14**

*'There is no evidence that Ms Ní Chuilín's participation in either meeting could be construed as improperly conferring an advantage any person. The investigation into the City Hall incident was a matter for the police.*

*Any allegation that she sought to confer an advantage on the witness at the meeting on 23rd October 2024 by challenging the relevance of certain questions would be inadmissible as such a complaint would be out of time under paragraph 3.3(i) of the General Procedures Direction.'*

#### **Allegation 5: Rules 7 and 8 (Rules on Advocacy)**

24. As alluded to above, the Commissioner has explained that:

*'The Rules on Advocacy as contained in Chapter 3 of the Guide to the Rules relates to paid advocacy and are therefore not relevant in the circumstances of this investigation.'*

#### **Allegation 6: Principles of Conduct**

25. The Commissioner explained his reasoning for finding that the respondent had failed to uphold the Openness Principle as follows:

*'This requires that holders of public office are as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. The failure to declare an interest in relation to any discussion regarding the City Hall at the meeting of 26th November 2025 therefore represents a failure to uphold this principle.'*

26. The Commissioner explained his reasoning for finding that the respondent had failed to uphold the Leadership Principle as follows:

*'This requires that holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example. Ms Ní Chuilín's failure to declare an interest in circumstances where the potential for others to reasonably consider there may be a conflict was obvious, represents a failure to uphold this principle.'*

# The Committee's deliberations

27. As alluded to above, the Committee understood its deliberations on the case on 10 June 2026 and 1 July 2026, which took account of: the Commissioner's investigation report (Appendix 1) and oral briefing; the respondent's written submission (Appendix 3) and oral hearing in response to the investigation report; and the Commissioner's follow-up response to the respondent's written submission (Appendix 4).
28. The Committee noted that, in her written response to the Commissioner's complaint report, the respondent highlighted a number of concerns, namely that the Commissioner's finding of a breach of Rule 5 is flawed because it relies on an overly broad and unsupported interpretation of what constitutes a 'matter under consideration'.
29. The respondent maintained that the issue in question was not part of the CTEO's formal business, was not on the agenda, and was only briefly discussed, meaning there was no requirement to declare an interest as it was not a 'matter under consideration'.
30. The respondent also contended that there were inconsistencies in the Commissioner's reasoning, a lack of any clear definition or guidance underpinning the interpretation used, an absence of evidence that her conduct was influenced by any personal interest, and that she did not engage substantively on the issue.
31. Furthermore, the respondent stated that the related findings on the Principles of Conduct (Openness and Leadership) depend entirely on the alleged breach of Rule 5, and therefore cannot stand if that breach is not upheld.
32. At its meeting on 1 July 2026, the Committee considered the response from the Commissioner to the respondent's written submission, in which he maintained that the Belfast City Hall incident became a 'matter under consideration' during the CTEO meeting on 26 November 2025.

33. The Commissioner accepted that a 'matter under consideration' would require "more than just an incidental or tangential comment on a matter". However, he contended that the nature and duration of the discussion of the incident at the CTEO meeting on 26 November 2025 meant that it was a 'matter under consideration' because of the following reasons:
- a) the CTEO Chairperson specifically permitted the question to be put to the witness (Junior Minister, Ashling Reilly - at the end of an evidence session on a separate matter);
  - b) further questions were ruled inadmissible by the CTEO Chairperson only after the witness had provided such responses as to satisfy the Chairperson that the initial question had been addressed;
  - c) a substantial conversation had by then taken place, extending to over 7 minutes, after which a discussion occurred regarding a proposal on the matter, which was agreed by the CTEO; and
  - d) the respondent participated in the discussion relating to the proposal.
34. The Commissioner highlighted that the Guide to the Rules makes clear that the obligation to declare an interest exists 'when considering any matter'. As such he contended that, in the absence of further guidance, this (and, by consequence, Rule 5) must be interpreted in a broad sense.
35. The Commissioner also contended that there is no inconsistency in his assessments of the two CTEO meetings, on 23 October 2024 and on 26 November 2025. In that regard, he pointed out that there were different witnesses before the CTEO on each occasion and therefore "it is reasonable that what may not have been appropriate for discussion at the first meeting may have been relevant to the witness in the second".
36. The Commissioner took the view that a reasonable, objective observer would conclude that the Belfast City Hall Incident was a matter under consideration by

CTEO on 26 November 2026 and therefore a requirement to declare any relevant interest would arise.

37. Arising from its deliberation on the facts and the evidence in the case, the Committee considered the following issues in particular:

- a) Whether Rule 5 needs to be interpreted broadly so that it covers, for example:
  - matters considered under non-substantive agenda items including, for example, 'Any Other Business' and 'Correspondence';
  - matters considered which are outside the scope of the committee's functions; and/or
  - matters permitted by the committee chairperson to be considered by the committee.
- b) How the interpretation and application of Rule 5 can be informed by reference to the applicable underlying Principles of Conduct (e.g. Openness) and by examining the wording and scope of the rule itself.
- c) Whether (instead) a narrower interpretation of Rule 5 is correct, so that it applies in a more limited way to, for example, matters considered under formal Committee business or substantive agenda items or which are clearly matters within the scope of the committee's functions.
- d) Whether there was continuity between the discussion of the Belfast City Hall incident across the separate CTEO meetings on 23 October 2024 (when the Chairperson did not accept that the question relating to the incident was a matter relevant to the Committee) and on 26 November 2025 (when the CTEO Chairperson did permit questioning of the witness on the matter) and what, if any, bearing this has on the case.

- e) Whether any inconsistency in approach towards discussion or consideration of the Belfast City Hall incident between the meetings on 23 October 2024 and 26 November 2025 has a bearing on the case.
  - f) Whether the fact that the CTEO was notified (by Phillip Brett MLA) in advance that the Belfast City Hall issue would be raised at the meeting on 26 November 2025 has a bearing on the case, in terms whether the issue became a 'matter under consideration'.
  - g) Whether the particular aspect of the Belfast City Hall incident which Mr Brett raised at the meeting on 26 November 2025 (as distinct from the aspect of the incident raised earlier in the meeting by Mr Timothy Gaston MLA) was significant in terms of whether or not the respondent had a declarable interest.
  - h) Whether the way in which the Belfast City Hall issue was handled at the CTEO meeting on 26 November 2025, in terms of not being a substantive agenda item or raised under AOB (instead being raised at the end of an evidence session on a separate issue) has a bearing on the case.
  - i) Whether there was an inconsistency in the Commissioner's conclusions that there was no requirement on the respondent to declare an interest at the CTEO meeting on 23 October 2024, but there was a requirement to declare an interest at the meeting on 26 November 2025.
  - j) Whether further guidance on the application of Rule 5 requires to be included in the Code and what, if any, bearing this has on the case.
38. In addition, the Committee considered whether each of the above issues, as applicable, were determining or mitigating factors in relation to any breach of Rule 5.

## Committee's conclusions and recommendations

39. In reaching a decision on **Allegation 1**, in terms of whether or not Rule 5 has been breached, the Committee reflected on whether each of the applicable elements or points to prove contained within Rule 5, as cited above, were met in terms of the specific circumstances of the case. These included:
- Whether the Belfast City Hall incident was a 'matter under consideration' by CTEO at its meeting on 26 November 2025; and, if so
  - Whether the respondent had a 'relevant interest' in relation to the matter under consideration; and
  - Whether the relevant interest 'might reasonably be thought by others' to influence the respondent's approach to the matter under consideration.
40. Members also noted that the Guide to the Rules, which forms part of the Code, makes it clear that the obligation to declare an interest exists 'when considering any matter'.
41. As regards whether the Belfast City Hall incident was a 'matter under consideration', the Committee noted, in particular, the Commissioner's findings that: the CTEO meeting on 26 November 2025 included a conversation on the matter which was permitted by the Chairperson and lasted over 7 minutes; that this was followed by a discussion regarding a proposal to write to the Executive Office on the matter, which was agreed by the CTEO; and that the respondent participated in the discussion relating to the proposal. The Committee considers that these circumstances meet the threshold for determining that the incident was a 'matter under consideration'. It was also the case that the respondent chose to participate in the proceedings in relation to this 'matter under consideration' by expressing her concern about the privacy implications for those who may have been named on the invitation list for the City Hall event.

42. The Committee also concurs with the Commissioner's reasoning regarding the respondent having a 'relevant interest' because she had a family member linked to the City Hall incident; and that the interest was not rendered irrelevant by the fact the family member was not prosecuted in relation to the incident. It follows that, due to the nature of the relevant interest, it 'might reasonably be thought by others' to influence the respondent's approach to the discussion of the City Hall incident. On the latter point, however, the Committee noted that the respondent did not object to the proposal to write to the Executive Office in relation to the incident.
43. Arising from its deliberations, the Committee agreed with the Commissioner's conclusion and associated reasoning that there has been a breach of Rule 5 of the Code.
44. The Committee, however, noted mitigating factors arising from the circumstances of this case, including in particular:
- The Commissioner's finding that the interest was minor, in terms of it not being related to the policy and legislative matters under scrutiny by the CTEO; and that the respondent had not participated in the substantive discussions with the witness during the evidence session on 26 November 2025; and
  - The case for further guidance on the interpretation and application of Rule 5 to be included in the Code and Guide to the Rules.
45. Having considered the specific circumstances of the case, the Committee agreed that, rather than recommending to the Assembly that a sanction be imposed, it would seek to resolve the matter by requesting that the respondent make a formal apology in writing to the Committee to enable it to report to the Assembly that the complaint has been resolved.
46. The respondent subsequently provide the necessary formal letter of apology (**Appendix 5**), which the Committee noted at its meeting on 23 September 2026.

47. In terms of **Allegations 2, 3 and 4**, on whether or not Rules 1, 13 and 14 have been breached, the Committee concurred with the Commissioner's conclusions that there were no breaches of these rules. Allegations 2, 3 and 4 are therefore not upheld.
48. The Committee also concurred with the Commissioner's conclusion in relation to **Allegation 5**, that Rules 7 and 8, which concern paid advocacy, and are not relevant in the circumstances of the case. Allegation 5 is therefore not upheld.
49. In addition, the Committee concurred with the Commissioner's reasoning in relation to **Allegation 6**, that the respondent failed to uphold the Principles of Openness and Leadership as a result of breaching Rule 5. As such, Allegation 6 is upheld.
50. In summary, **the complaints alleging a failure by Ms Ní Chuilín to declare a relevant interest are upheld and the Committee has concluded that Ms Ní Chuilin breached Rule 5 of the Code and, in so doing, failed to uphold the Principles of Openness and Leadership. However, following receipt of the written apology from Ms Ní Chuilín, the Committee is content to report to the Assembly that the matter is now resolved.**
51. Given the procedural and compliance issues arising from this case, the Committee believes that **more detailed guidance should be included in the Code and the Guide to the Rules regarding the interpretation and application of Rule 5, including to ensure consistency of approach and understanding amongst all Members in relation to what constitutes a 'matter under consideration'. The Committee will wish to recommend that this is addressed when the Code and the Guide to the Rules is next being updated by the Assembly.**
52. In the meantime, **the Committee reminds all MLAs to be vigilant of the Rule 5 requirement to 'declare, whether in Assembly proceedings or in any approach to a Minister, public representative, public body or public**

official, any relevant interest which might reasonably be thought by others to influence your approach to the matter under consideration.'

## **Links to Appendices**

### **Appendix 1: The Commissioner for Standards' investigation report**

[View the Commissioner for Standards report on complaints against a member](#)

### **Appendix 2: Minutes of Proceedings**

[View Minutes of Proceedings of Committee meetings related to the report](#)

### **Appendix 3: Written response from the respondent**

[View the written response from the respondent](#)

### **Appendix 4: Written response from the Commissioner to the respondent's response**

[View the written response from the Commissioner to the respondent's response](#)

### **Appendix 5: Letter of apology from the respondent**

[View the letter of apology from the respondent](#)

You may re-use this publication (not including images or logos) free of charge in any format or medium, under the terms of the Open Northern Ireland Assembly Licence.

[Find out more about the Open Northern Ireland Assembly Licence.](#)

This Report can be made available in a range of formats including large print, Braille etc. For more information please contact:

Committee on Standards  
Shane McAteer, Committee Clerk  
Northern Ireland Assembly  
Parliament Buildings  
Ballymiscaw  
Stormont  
Belfast BT4 3XX

Telephone: 028 90 521843

Email: [committee.standards@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:committee.standards@niassembly.gov.uk)