

The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Meeting Venue: Parliament Buildings, Room 106

Meeting date: Tuesday, 6 May 2025

Meeting Time: 3.30 pm



Assembly Commission Members:

Edwin Poots MLA, Speaker (Chairperson)
Sinéad Ennis MLA
Trevor Clarke MLA
Nuala McAllister MLA
Andy Allen MBE MLA
Colin McGrath MLA

Officials present:

Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive
Tara Caul, Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services
Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services
Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support
Janet Hughes, Clerical Supervisor

Others in attendance:

David Murphy, Chairperson of the Assembly Commission Audit and Risk Committee (ACARC)
Paula McClintock, Head of Finance (Items 10, 11 and 12)
Sinéad McDonnell, Head of HR (Item 14)
Jonathan McMillen, Head of Legal Services (Item 24.3)

The meeting commenced at 3.34 pm.

1. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

The Speaker declared an interest on behalf of all Members in relation to agenda item 12.

3. CHAIRPERSON'S BUSINESS

The Speaker noted that the Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill was scheduled for debate on 13 May 2025 and that a short meeting would be required in advance of the debate once the amendments to the Bill selected for debate were known, in order to obtain an agreed Assembly Commission position.

Action: Assembly officials to set up a meeting in advance of the debate.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Minutes from the Assembly Commission meetings on 15 and 27 January 2025 were approved for publication.

The minute of the closed session on 27 January 2025 was also approved.

5. MATTERS ARISING

There were no matters arising.

6. ASSEMBLY COMMISSION ACTIONS

Members noted the status of actions.

7. CORRESPONDENCE

Members noted the following items of correspondence:

Two letters from the Assembly Commission to the Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill, in relation to Delegated Powers and Amendments on Temporary Appointments.

A letter from the Speaker to the Chairperson of the Chairpersons' Liaison Group in relation to the standards of dress by MLAs in committee meetings.

A letter from the Northern Ireland Public Services Deputy Ombudsman in relation to the Public Services Ombudsman Act (NI) 2016.

A letter from the Clerk of the Assembly and Executive Review Committee in relation to the Review into Assembly and Executive Reform call for evidence. The Speaker asked Members if they would like a response to issue on behalf of the Assembly Commission or if the preference was for parties to respond individually. Members agreed that there were no pressing issues within the Assembly Commission's responsibilities to raise and that parties would respond individually if they wished to do so.

8. CLERK/CHIEF EXECUTIVE UPDATE

Lesley Hogg noted that her report provided Members with an update on the key issues which had arisen since the 15 January 2025 Assembly Commission meeting, and highlighted the salient points.

Corporate Risk Register

Members noted the Corporate Risk Register as at March 2025.

Annual Litigation Update

Members noted the ongoing litigation matters.

Annual Insurance Update

Mrs Hogg advised that one new claim had been made during the insurance year.

Delegation of Functions

Mrs Hogg advised that a paper addressing Delegation of Functions would be presented at the next Assembly Commission meeting.

Mrs Hogg advised that the next two items within her report would be discussed in closed session.

The meeting went into closed session at 3.40 pm until 3.42 pm.

Trevor Clarke joined the meeting at 3.41 pm.

9. DEFECTS IN THE ROOF OF PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

Mrs Hogg presented a paper updating Members on the remedial works to address all of the defects to the roof of parliament Buildings. The Speaker recorded that he had met with officials in relation to the need for work to start as quickly as possible.

Members noted the proposed position with regard to the carrying out of the remedial repairs and the full repairs.

Paula McClintock joined the meeting at 3.45 pm for agenda items 10, 11 and 12.

10. REVIEW OF THE FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR PARTIES WITH INCREASED EMPLOYERS' NATIONAL INSURANCE CONTRIBUTIONS EFFECTIVE FROM 1 APRIL 2025

The Speaker noted that the paper being presented by Paula McClintock on

the financial implications for parties with increased employers' National Insurance contributions had previously been considered at the Assembly Commission meeting on 15 January 2025, at which point Members requested more time to consider the proposed options.

Mrs McClintock highlighted the main points of the review, outlining three potential options, two of which she advised would require changes to the 2024 Financial Assistance for Political Parties Scheme.

Sinéad Ennis left the meeting at 3.57 pm.

Following discussion and consideration of the options, Members agreed, that as the estimated financial impact for 2025-26 was inconsequential, no action was required at this time and that the matter could be revisited later in the year if circumstances changed.

Nuala McAllister left the meeting at 4.02 pm.

11. REVIEW OF THE USE OF CERTAIN MEMBERS' ALLOWANCES – IMPLEMENTATION OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Mrs McClintock presented a paper which set out proposals on how to address a number of recommendations made following the review of the use of certain allowances under the Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2016.

Members noted the new administrative processes relating to payments under the Assembly Members' (Office and Staffing Costs and Allowances) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2025, which seek to give effect to the recommendations.

Mrs McClintock also referred to the recommendation in relation to job descriptions for MLA support staff, noting the current templates that were in use.

Following consideration, Members were content with the proposed new administrative processes, subject to an amendment to the Support Staff Declaration Form, and agreed that the job description templates for the three MLA support staff roles be reviewed, with a view to streamlining where possible.

Action: Mrs McClintock to arrange for the job description templates for the three MLA support staff roles to be reviewed.

12. THE NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY MEMBERS' PENSION SCHEME (2106) ANNUAL REPORT AND ACCOUNTS AND TRIENNIAL ACTUARIAL VALUATION REPORT

Mrs McClintock presented the Northern Ireland Assembly Members' Pension Scheme (2016) Annual Report and Accounts for 2022-23 and 2023-24 and the 2023 Triennial Valuation Report.

Mrs McClintock advised that the 2022-23 and 2023-24 Annual Report and Accounts had been laid at the Assembly on 9 May 2024 and 31 January 2025 respectively, and that the 2023 Triennial Valuation Report would now be laid at the Assembly.

Members noted the reports.

Sinéad Ennis re-joined the meeting at 4.21 pm.

Paula McClintock left the meeting at 4.22 pm.

13. ANNUAL PLAN 2024-2025 STATUS AT 31 DECEMBER 2024

Mrs Hogg provided a status update on progress against the Annual Plan 2024-2025 actions/milestones as at 31 December 2024, and advised that preparation of the Year-End Report was nearing completion.

Members noted the progress against actions/milestones.

Sinéad McDonnell joined the meeting at 4.24 pm for agenda item 14.

14. TEMPORARY AGENCY WORKER CONTRACT – PROPOSED INCREASE TO CONTRACT VALUE

Sinéad McDonnell presented a paper, which sought Assembly Commission approval for an increase in the contract value of the Temporary Agency Worker Contract.

Mrs McDonnell highlighted that the request was not for an increase in budget, as the cost of agency workers was already included in the overall staffing budget, and that agency staff were being utilised to fill vacancies whilst working to fill posts on a permanent basis as quickly as possible. Mrs McDonnell advised that the proposed increase in contract value could be properly managed within procurement regulations.

Members approved the proposed increase in the contract value.

Sinéad McDonnell left the meeting at 4.35 pm.

15. **APPOINTMENT OF A NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSIONER FOR STANDARDS**

Mrs Hogg presented a paper which sought approval to commence a recruitment competition for a Commissioner for Standards, as the tenure of the current Commissioner ends in September 2025.

Members approved the commencement of a recruitment competition and that the Selection Panel would have the authority to identify a person suitable for appointment as a Commissioner for Standards on behalf of the Assembly Commission.

Mrs Hogg subsequently outlined and sought approval of the proposed composition of the Selection Panel for the recruitment competition, to include the Speaker and the Chairperson of the Committee on Standards and Privileges.

The meeting suspended at 4.39 pm until 4.53 pm. Sinéad Ennis, Andy Allen and Colin McGrath re-joined the meeting.

Members agreed the proposed composition of the Selection Panel.

Members also agreed that the remuneration and terms and conditions of appointment would remain unchanged.

16. **COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL FOR NORTHERN IRELAND SALARY ARRANGEMENTS**

Mrs Hogg advised that she had received correspondence from the Chairperson of the Audit Committee, stating that the committee was undertaking a review of the salary arrangements of the Comptroller and Auditor General and, as part of the review, was seeking the Assembly Commission's view on the current salary arrangements and how the salary may be determined and managed in the future.

In light of the committee's request, Mrs Hogg presented a paper with background information on the salary arrangements for the position of Comptroller and Auditor General along with a proposed draft response to the Audit Committee for Members consideration.

Members noted the information provided and agreed the draft response to the Chairperson of the Audit Committee.

Action: Mrs Hogg to respond to the Chairperson of the Audit Committee as agreed by the Assembly Commission.

Trevor Clarke re-joined the meeting at 4.59 pm.

17. **AMENDMENTS TO THE ASSEMBLY COMMISSION HANDBOOK – CLOSED SESSIONS**

Robin Ramsey presented a paper outlining proposed amendments to the Assembly Commission Handbook, to address points raised in the Internal Audit of Corporate Governance Arrangements, in relation to the definition of the Assembly Commission meeting in closed sessions and how they are recorded.

Mr Ramsey noted that the Assembly Commission had already agreed in practice how to deal with the points raised and that closed sessions were rare. He stated that the proposed amendment therefore formalised the process by updating the Assembly Commission Handbook to reflect the position already agreed.

Members agreed that the Assembly Commission Handbook should be updated in line with the proposed amendments.

Action: Mr Ramsey to arrange for the Assembly Commission Handbook to be updated as agreed.

18. **CORRESPONDENCE FROM THE EXECUTIVE OFFICE ON A MEMORIAL TO VICTIMS OF HISTORICAL INSTITUTIONAL ABUSE (HIA)**

The Speaker noted that he had previously updated Members on meetings he had had with the First Minister and deputy First Minister on potential alternatives for a memorial in Parliament Buildings, and that he had committed to update Members further when agreement on a proposal had been received from all victims' groups.

Mr Ramsey subsequently updated Members on correspondence that had been received from the Executive Office indicating that there was now agreement across all victims' groups on a proposal for a memorial plaque to be displayed in the main entrance area of Parliament Buildings.

Mr Ramsey sought Members approval of the proposal for a plaque and also on a proposed display location within the main entrance area to the Great Hall. Members were content with both proposals subject to having sight of the design of the plaque before it is installed.

Mr Ramsey advised that the Executive Office would be informed of the Assembly Commission's agreement with the proposal and stated that the Speaker would continue to engage with the First and deputy First Minister on the details of the plaque and any unveiling event.

Action: Speaker to inform the Executive Office of the Assembly Commission's agreement with the proposal for a memorial plaque to be displayed in the main entrance area of Parliament Buildings.

19. RELOCATION OF OFFICIAL PORTRAITS

Mr Ramsey presented a paper which included a number of options to address the limited display space for future official portraits within the Great Hall.

Mr Ramsey informed Members that the first floor galleries around the Great Hall were an appropriate space but that it then had to be decided how portraits would be located.

Mr Ramsey sought Members views on a recommendation to retain the portraits of Lord Trimble, Seamus Mallon, Lord Bannside and Martin McGuinness in the Great Hall as “anchor portraits”, recognising their place as the First Ministers and deputy First Ministers at key stages of the foundation of the Assembly, and that remaining portraits be relocated to the first floor, moving those longest in position as required to make way for a new portrait.

Members were content to proceed on the basis of the recommendation as outlined.

20. REQUEST FOR THE ASSEMBLY COMMISSION TO DISPLAY A PORTRAIT OF HIS MAJESTY THE KING

The Speaker noted that the paper being presented had last been considered at the Assembly Commission meeting on 15 January 2025, at which point Members were unable to confirm party positions and it was agreed that Mr Ramsey would engage with Members requesting that they provide him with their party’s position.

Mr Ramsey advised that he had yet to receive all party views and referred Members again to potential approaches to the request to display a portrait of His Majesty The King.

Trevor Clarke and Andy Allen indicated that they were content to obtain and display a portrait of the King. Nuala McAllister informed Members before leaving that she was also content. Colin McGrath and Sinéad Ennis were concerned about whether it would be possible to identify an appropriate location for a portrait to be displayed. It was agreed that Mr Ramsey would engage with Mrs Ennis and Mr C McGrath.

21. ASSEMBLY COMMISSION PAPERS CLEARED VIA CORRESPONDENCE

Renewal of the Microsoft Strategic Partnership Agreement (previously the Microsoft Enterprise Agreement).

Assembly Arrangements to Mark the 80th Anniversary of VE Day.

Change to agenda running order.

23. DECISIONS MADE VIA CORRESPONDENCE

Members noted the following decisions made via correspondence since the last meeting:

Lighting Requests:

World Haemophilia Day – **Not accepted.**

3rd Anniversary of the Ukraine War – **Not accepted.**

World Downs Syndrome Day – **Accepted.**

International ME Awareness Day – **Accepted.**

Shine a Light on NF – World NF Awareness Day – **Accepted.**

24. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

24.1 Weeds at Front of Parliament Buildings

The Speaker referred that during recent visits and events, weeds at the front of Parliament Buildings were noticeable.

Action: Mrs Hogg to liaise with Building Services and arrange for the weeds to be removed from the front of the building.

24.2 Allocation of Spaces in the Upper Car Parks

Mrs Ennis referred to the allocation of spaces for party staff within the upper car parks, noting that this had not been reviewed to reflect the change in party size following the results of the last election.

Action: Mrs Hogg to review the position in relation to the allocation of spaces for party staff in the upper car parks.

24.3 Implications of the Supreme Court Judgment in For Women Scotland Ltd v The Scottish Ministers

Mrs Hogg presented a paper outlining the Assembly Commission's current Transgender Policy and Guidance on Assisting and Supporting Visitors and Other Users of Parliament Buildings.

Mrs Hogg advised that in light of the recent Supreme Court judgment legal advice had been commissioned from the Assembly's Legal Services Office.

Jonathan McMillen joined the meeting at 5.18 pm for agenda item 24.3.

Mrs Hogg outlined that there would be options for the Assembly Commission to consider but Members agreed that the Assembly Commission would meet again when the legal advice was received.

Colin McGrath and Jonathan McMillen left the meeting at 5.28 pm.

22. ITEMS ISSUED VIA CORRESPONDENCE

The Speaker noted that the minutes of the ACARC meeting of 20 November 2024 had been issued to Members for information on 24 February 2025.

David Murphy updated Members on the items of business considered at the ACARC meeting on 19 February 2025 and advised that the Assembly Commission Annual Report and Accounts was one of the main items on the agenda for the May meeting.

25. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Speaker noted that the next full meeting was scheduled for 18 June 2025, but that a short meeting may be required on 12 May 2025 to consider the amendments to the Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill and the Assembly Commission's Transgender Policy.

The meeting ended at 5.31 pm.