



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Report by the Assembly Commissioner for Standards
on Complaints made against
Ms Carál Ní Chuilín MLA

Assembly – Confidential

Summary

1. This report sets out the findings of my investigation as a result of 2 complaints received on 26th November 2025 from Mr Timothy Gaston MLA¹ and Mr Trevor Clarke MLA² against Ms Carál Ní Chuilín MLA. Both complaints substantively alleged a breach of Rule 5 of the MLA Code of Conduct³, which requires a Member to declare any relevant interest in Assembly proceedings, during Committee for the Executive Office meetings on 23rd October 2024 and on the 26th November 2025.
2. Mr Gaston, in addition to Rule 5, alleged a failure to uphold several of the Principles of Public Life namely Openness, Integrity, Accountability and Leadership.
3. Mr Clarke additionally alleged a breach of Rule 1, Rule 13 and Rule 14 of the MLA Code of Conduct in relation to Ms Ní Chuilín's attendance at the meetings.
4. My investigation Commenced on 28th January 2026 and included a review of the Assembly TV video⁴ and official record of the Committee meeting of 23rd October 2024⁵, Assembly TV video⁶ and official record of the Committee meeting of 26th November 2025⁷, written responses from and an interview of Ms Ní Chuilín and a review of all evidence received.
5. On Rule 5, I have found that at the meeting of 23rd October 2024, any mention of the incident at Belfast City Hall was brief and incidental and when raised by a committee member, that Member was reminded by the Chair that questions had to relate to the work of the Executive Office. On that basis I do not consider that Ms Ní Chuilín was required to declare a relevant interest.
6. In relation to the meeting of 26th November 2025, prior notice of an intention to raise the City Hall incident was given by a Member to the Clerk and circulated to all Committee members. The specific requirement in the circumstances to consider the declaration of an interest was discussed at the start of the meeting and the relevant question was permitted by the Chair later in the meeting following which there was a prolonged discussion on the matter. In those circumstances I have found that there was a requirement to declare an

¹ Document 1

² Document 2

³ [the-code-of-conduct-and-the-guide-to-the-rules-relating-to-the-conduct-of-members---march-2021.pdf](#)

⁴ [Committee for The Executive Office Meeting, Wednesday 23 October 2024 - Northern Ireland Assembly TV](#)

⁵ Document 3

⁶ [Committee for The Executive Office Meeting, Wednesday 26 November 2025 - Northern Ireland Assembly TV](#)

⁷ Document 4

interest as it was evident that others might reasonably consider that the interest would influence Ms Ní Chuilín's approach to any discussion on the City Hall incident.

7. I have also found that the failure to declare the interest in these circumstances also constitutes a failure to uphold the principles of Openness and Leadership.

Context

8. Both the below complaints relate to and are contingent on an alleged relevant interest as defined in Chapter 2 of The Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members. The relevant interest arises from the relationship between Ms Ní Chuilín and a person who was linked to and investigated by the Police Service of Northern Ireland regarding damage caused to a portrait at Belfast City Hall on 19th October 2024. Ms Ní Chuilín was understood to be the mother of the person in question due to social media speculation and a statement issued by KRW Law on behalf of the person on 26th November 2025⁸.
9. The incident was raised at meetings of the Committee for the Executive Office on both the 23rd October 2024 and 26th November 2025 at which Ms Ní Chuilín was present.
10. The incident at the City Hall is not the subject of this investigation and the Public Prosecution Service issued a 'No Prosecution' decision⁹ in relation to the person referred to above.

Complaint

11. I received the first complaint from Mr Timothy Gaston MLA on 26th November 2025¹⁰ followed by further information from him received on the 27th November 2025. The complaint alleged that at the Committee meeting of 23rd October 2024, Ms Ní Chuilín obstructed proceedings by repeatedly challenging questioning of the witness relating to the City Hall incident and also failed to declare an interest.
12. The complaint further alleges that at the meeting on 26th November 2025, Ms Ní Chuilín again failed to declare a relevant interest.
13. Further allegations relate to breaches of several of the Principles of Public Life namely Openness, Integrity, Accountability and Leadership and a breach of the Rules on Advocacy.

⁸ Document 5

⁹ Document 6

¹⁰ Document 1

14. The second complaint, also received on 26th November 2025¹¹ was from Mr Trevor Clarke MLA. The complaint alleged that Ms Ní Chuilín failed to declare and resolve a conflict of interest in both meetings and in doing so breached Rules 1, 5 13 and 14 of the Member's Code of Conduct.

Rules of the Code as Alleged

15. The allegations in both complaints relate to the following Rules within the MLA Code of Conduct¹²;

- 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.
- Rule 13: You shall not act in any way which improperly interferes, or is intended or likely to improperly interfere, with the performance by the Assembly of it's 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.

Guide to the Rules

16. Chapter 2: Declaration of Interests, requires the following;

- 3. You are required, subject to the paragraphs below, to declare any interests which might reasonably be thought by others to influence your approach to the matter under consideration, including:
 - g) Any non-financial interests.

Under *Declaration of Interests in Committees*, the Guide requires;

- 15. As a member of a Committee, when considering any matter you must adhere to the following rules:

¹¹Document 2

¹² [the-code-of-conduct-and-the-guide-to-the-rules-relating-to-the-conduct-of-members---march-2021.pdf](#)

c) You should declare interests at the appropriate time during a committee meeting: this might be either at the start of the meeting or when a particular matter arises. In particular, you should ensure you declare interests;

(iv) 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.

Investigation

17. My investigation Commenced on 28th January 2026 and included the following actions;

- Reviewed Assembly TV footage of the meetings of the Committee for the Executive Office on 23rd October 2024¹³ and 26th November 2025¹⁴.
- Reviewed the Hansard official record for the meetings of the 23rd October 2024¹⁵ and 26th November 2025¹⁶.
- Wrote to¹⁷ and received a response from the Clerk to the Committee for the Executive Office, Mr Nick Mitford¹⁸.
- Invited and received a response to the allegations from Ms Ní Chuilín¹⁹.
- Reviewed statement from the Public Prosecution Service regarding a decision on the Belfast City Hall portrait case dated 24th November 2025²⁰.
- Reviewed a statement from KRWLAW on behalf of their client dated 26th November 2025²¹.
- Interviewed Ms Ní Chuilín²².

18. A copy of the complaints and all other documents I have relied on in reaching my decision are included at Appendix A.

¹³ [Committee for The Executive Office Meeting, Wednesday 23 October 2024 - Northern Ireland Assembly TV](#)

¹⁴ [Committee for The Executive Office Meeting, Wednesday 26 November 2025 - Northern Ireland Assembly TV](#)

¹⁵ Document 3

¹⁶ Document 4

¹⁷ Document 7

¹⁸ Document 8

¹⁹ Document 9

²⁰ Document 6

²¹ Document 5

²² Document 10

Evidence

The Committee meeting of 23rd October 2024

19. The Committee meeting of 23rd October 2024 was an evidence session to hear from the First Minister in relation to matters pertaining to the Executive Office. Ms Ní Chuilín was present in the meeting.
20. The first exchange mentioning the City Hall incident involved a question from the Chair to the First Minister;

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): *First Minister, another area of work for the Executive Office that the Committee is interested in is on the three new commissioners for the bodies provided for under the Identity and Language (NI) Act 2022 and on the wider piece about ensuring equality for the protection of minority language rights. Given the actions of one of your then members in Belfast City Hall on Saturday evening, what actions will you take to address the damage to the reputation of the Irish language community in terms of promoting the language on a cross-community basis and depoliticizing it?*

Mrs O'Neill: *I am absolutely committed to promoting the language. That is important. There are so many children now being educated through the medium of Irish, and they should see it everywhere. We should all work to ensure that our society is an inclusive one, including for those who are Gaeilgeoirí [Translation: Irish speakers.] I will not comment on anything that potentially happened on Saturday night in City Hall.*

Ms Ní Chuilín did not comment.

The incident was again raised later in a question by Mr Harvey:

Mr Harvey: *On the Belfast City Hall event on Saturday evening past organised by Glór na Móna and the damage to a former Lord Mayor's portrait, were any other members of your party in the vicinity of that attack on property, and are you aware of anyone having tried to stop it?*

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): *Harry, before we go on, the question has to relate to the work of the Executive Office. You are aware of that. Can you couch your question in relation to that?*

Mr Kingston: *Chair, if I can intervene, I will just point out that junior Minister Reilly was present at that event and gave a statement in the Assembly Chamber on Monday morning about her attendance at it.*

Ms Ní Chuilín: Not as a junior Minister. Not as TEO.

Mr Gaston: She was there as TEO.

Ms Sheerin: She is a Gaeilgeoir [Translation: Irish speaker.]

Ms Ní Chuilín: She is a Gaeilgeoir, Timothy.

Mr Kingston: She was there in her capacity as a junior Minister.

Ms Egan: May I raise a point?

Mrs O'Neill: Chair, this is the point that I raised with you: this is straying into party politicking as opposed to being genuinely about safeguarding. Other members have raised genuine safeguarding questions. I wanted to be here to be open and transparent. Some of this stuff is just straying completely beyond your legal advice, I am quite sure.

Ms Egan: May I raise a point, please, Chair?

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Go ahead, please, Deputy Chair.

Ms Egan: In fairness to you, First Minister, I understand that we did not share the legal advice with you. I have it in front of me. I am happy for either Clerk to correct me if I am wrong, but the legal advice said that witnesses could not be compelled to answer if they felt that a question was not within the vires of the Committee, not that the Chair had to rule it out. Is that correct?

The Clerk Assistant: That is correct.

Ms Egan: So, the onus would be on the witness not to answer.

The Clerk Assistant: I think that that is —

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): It is also on the Committee members to ask questions that are in line with our responsibilities as Committee members.

Mr Gaston: Let members ask them then.

Ms Ní Chuilín: We also discussed the fact that questions need to be related to TEO. You cannot say on one day that that applies but, on another day, say that it does not. It either applies or it does not.

Mr Gaston: *This is a confidence issue.*

Ms Sheerin: *The legal advice was that there was risk in people asking questions.*

Mr Gaston: *Aye, so it is on the member.*

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): *We are eating into Harry's time. Harry, have you any questions for the First Minister that relate to the work of the Executive Office?*

Mr Harvey: *Basically, was there anyone trying to stop the incident? That was my question.*

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): *Do you want to make any comment?*

Mrs O'Neill: *No, Chair. That is not within the remit of the Committee.*

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): *Have you any other questions?*

Mr Harvey: *No. Thank you, First Minister. Thank you, Chair.*

21. During the meeting Ms Ní Chuilín did object to and challenge other questions by Members to the First Minister. These comments were in relation to other issues discussed and not the City Hall incident which was not otherwise raised.

The Committee meeting of 26th November 2025

22. The meeting of 26th November 2025 was an evidence session to hear from Junior Minister Reilly and Junior Minister Bunting in relation to the Mother and Baby Institutions Redress Scheme Bill.
23. Ms Ní Chuilín was present in the meeting.
24. On the morning of and prior to the meeting, Mr Brett had written to the Clerk²³ to inform of his intention to raise the City Hall incident with Junior Minister Reilly. The Clerk had forwarded this notification to all Committee members via email prior to the meeting.
25. At the beginning of the meeting Mr Gaston noted that the City Hall incident would be raised later in the meeting and sought to ascertain whether Ms Ní Chuilín wished to make a declaration of interest as her son had been named on social media as having been involved. He also noted his concern that there had been a failure by Ms Ní Chuilín to declare the interest at the Committee meeting of 23rd October 2024.

²³ Document 8

Ms Ní Chuilín replied the following: *I have nothing to declare, absolutely nothing to declare. I'm here to scrutinize in front of us today draft legislation affecting victims and survivors and that's what I'm here to do today. I have no interest to declare at all on behalf of myself or anyone else....I actually don't think it's in the remit of this Committee at all, so I just want to put that on the record. I think this Committee's business is on the agenda and others have chosen to add this issue on which has got absolutely nothing to do with victims and survivors of institutional abuse through the mother and baby scandal. So I just want to put that on the record.*

26. Mr Brett then reminded the committee of his intention to raise the issue with the Junior Minister and thanked the Chair for indicating that she would come to him later in the meeting.
27. Ms Murphy further made a point that she did not feel that the matter was within the remit of the Committee.
28. The matter was revisited later in the meeting when the Chair reminded Junior Minister Reilly that Mr Brett wanted to raise another issue and invited him to do so at that point.
29. Mr Brett then raised his question regarding the City Hall incident and a significant discussion then ensued during which the Chair stated that she had said that she would give time and space for the conversation and that all should be respectful.
30. After approximately 7 minutes of questions, answers and discussion on the incident, the Chair interjected and stated that as the Junior Minister had then stated that she attended the event in her capacity as an MLA and not as Junior Minister, further questions pertaining to the event were outside the purview of the Committee. Ms Ní Chuilín had not commented on the incident at this point.
31. The witnesses then left the meeting after which Mr Brett was permitted to make a proposal which was to write to The Executive Office to seek copies of all documents held by the Executive Office in relation to the City Hall event to include any invitation and briefing pack.
32. The Chair asked for comment after which **Ms Ní Chuilín stated:** *I have no issue with that request, I think it's reasonable enough. However, what I do have an issue with are Article 2 implications and Article 8 implications for people who may be on that invitation list who once it becomes public then Phillip and maybe others will go to the media with those people's names. I would ask that they get legal advice before they do because people have a right to privacy as well.*

33. The discussion continued on the motion and related issues for a short period after which the Committee agreed the proposal and the matter was brought to a close by the Chair.

Response from the Clerk to the Committee for the Executive Office²⁴

34. On 28th January I wrote to the Clerk for the Committee for the Executive Office seeking confirmation as to whether there was any prior notification to the Chair of an intention to raise matters regarding the City Hall portrait investigation at the 26th November 2025 meeting and whether the incident was on the agenda for either of the relevant meetings.
35. On 9th February 2026, The Clerk responded and supplied a copy of an email from Mr Phillip Brett to the Committee Chair notifying his intention to raise the City Hall incident. He further supplied his forwarding email to the Committee members informing them of this intention. In addition, he confirmed that the City Hall incident was not an agenda item for either of the meetings.

Written Responses²⁵

36. On 16th February I wrote to Ms Ní Chuilín requesting a written response to the complaints in the first instance. The responses were received on 2nd March 2026.
37. Regarding both complaints, Ms Ní Chuilín contended that the relevant Committee meetings were engaged in legislative and/or policy scrutiny in respect of which no relevant interest arose. The incident at the City Hall was not listed as an agenda item for either meeting nor was it the subject of any motion and therefore not business formally before the Committee.
38. Ms Ní Chuilín stated that she had no interest to declare based on her understanding that any declaration would be required in respect of the legislative business before the Committee. She further stated that Members are not required to declare interests based on unverified commentary, particularly where no relevant Committee business arises. Any contribution she made was procedural in nature and directed towards maintaining relevance to the Committee's agenda business.
39. Ms Ní Chuilín refuted the allegation that her interventions constituted advocacy on behalf of a family member. She contended that there was no evidence that she sought to secure any benefit or advantage for any individual neither did she seek to influence any formal Committee decision relating to the City Hall incident.

²⁴ Document 8

²⁵ Document 9

Interview²⁶

40. Having considered the written responses, a number of aspects required further clarification. Ms Ní Chuilín was therefore invited for interview on 26th February 2026.
41. At the commencement of the interview Ms Ní Chuilín was asked if she had any representations to make regarding the Rectification Procedure as detailed in paragraph 9 of the General Procedures Direction. She did not. She was additionally asked if she was familiar with the guidance in Chapter 2 of the Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members specifically as regards to declarations of interest in Committees and confirmed that she was.
42. Ms Ní Chuilín confirmed that the person who was referred to in the complaints as being involved in the incident in the City Hall, was subject to investigation by the PSNI and regarding whom a 'No Prosecution' decision was issued by the Public Prosecution Service, was her son.
43. Ms Ní Chuilín confirmed that she was aware of the City Hall incident and the statement made by the First Minister regarding it before the Committee meeting on 23rd October 2024. When asked whether she considered a declaration of interest was required when the incident was mentioned in the meeting, however incidental that mention might have been, she replied that she did not.
44. Regarding the Committee meeting of 26th November 2025, Ms Ní Chuilín confirmed that she had received an email from the Clerk, prior to the meeting, informing her that Mr Brett intended raising the City Hall incident in the meeting.
45. When asked what her thoughts were on declaring an interest after the early discussion led by Mr Gaston regarding conflicts of interest due to the upcoming discussion regarding the incident, she replied;

"Again, my thoughts were it wasn't relevant, or relevant even to the committee business. There was no charges. Even an investigation which resulted in no case being brought forward I didn't think was relevant to the committee".

The following question was then put to Ms Ní Chuilín:

Okay, so the committee, obviously it's a scrutiny committee, as all the committees are. I had a look at the Assembly guide to the role of committee chairpersons just on this

²⁶ Document 10

point, based on your representations. There's not really a lot relevant, but it does say in that Assembly guide it is for the chair to advise members that they're out of order if the point they raise is not relevant. In this case, the chair stated, and I quote her, 'I said I would give time and space for this conversation.' She did permit the question and discussion, so I can only assume that the chair clearly didn't consider the question to be out of order. In that context, did you object to the question at any point?

Ms Ní Chuilín: *"No, I didn't".*

The following question was then asked;

I knew that one of your colleagues did. I think Áine Murphy objected, but I just wanted to clarify. In those circumstances where, whatever your thoughts on whether or not it was relevant, the chair has permitted the question, did you not consider then that maybe a declaration of interest would have been required? Whether or not you agreed with the [over speaking 0:08:21.0].

Ms Ní Chuilín stated;

"No, so I didn't agree with the Chair permitting it. We were there to discuss legislation regarding Mother and Baby Bill, and I just felt this was politicking, which is supposed to be outside of the Committee. I literally stuck as close to the rules as possible."

46. When challenged that the conversations involving the City Hall incident went on for a significant period of time and that she did make a comment regarding a proposal to write to the Executive Office in relation to the incident, did she not think that she needed to make a declaration, Ms Ní Chuilín stated;

"No, GDPR. It's in relation to GDPR (the proposal), data protection, and again, it was completely outside the remit of what we were there to discuss".

47. When asked whether she would accept that others could reasonably view the circumstances as requiring a declaration of interest, Ms Ní Chuilín stated;

"No, I don't. First of all, if we're all guided by the code of conduct and if they're sticking to the rules, then they wouldn't have raised it, but this is purely political. Now, I understand I'm in a political arena, as is every member of the committee, and politics do inform different people's approaches. In terms of declaring any interests, had there been formal charges, absolutely I would have recused myself from the committee, but this is all around

speculation and what could have, should have, or would have. I just feel in terms of the chair allowing that discussion was wrong. Even in terms of the protracted nature of the discussion I felt was inappropriate. However, I still did not feel I should have declared an interest at all.”

Findings of Fact

48. I have found the following facts established to the required standards of proof:

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.

49. In accordance with paragraph 7.14 of the General Procedures Direction, Ms Ní Chuilín was afforded an opportunity to challenge any of the above findings before I finalised my report. She sought additional clarity to point 3 which was considered appropriate and amended accordingly. Other matters were raised which were not included as they were the subject of consideration in the report²⁷.

Reasoned Decision

50. The Member’s Code of Conduct sets out clear rules regarding ethical standards required of Members when discharging their obligations to the Assembly. 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.

51. 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

²⁷ Document 11

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.*

52. 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.
53. 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.
54. 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.
55. 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.
56. 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*.
57. 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.
58. 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.

59. 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.
60. 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.
61. 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.
62. 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.

Findings on allegations

63. My conclusions in respect of the specific allegations are as follows;

Rule 5

64. 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 and interest.

65. 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.

Rule 1

66. 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.

67. 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.

Rule 13

68. 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.

69. 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.

Rule 14

70. 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.

71. 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.

Principle of Integrity

72. This requires that holders of public office should not place themselves under any obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might influence them in their work. Whilst having a personal interest, there is no evidence that Ms Ní Chuilín was under any obligation or that she sought to gain any material benefit for any person. Any investigation into the City Hall incident was a matter for the PSNI.

Principle of Openness

73. 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.

Principle of Accountability

74. This requires that holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions. There is no evidence that Ms Ní Chuilín has failed to submit herself to scrutiny in respect of this incident or investigation.

Principle of Leadership

75. 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.

Rules on Advocacy

76. 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.

Conclusion

77. I am satisfied on the basis of the evidence, my analysis and reasoning that on the balance of probabilities, Ms Ní Chuilín's conduct in failing to declare an interest at the Committee for the Executive Office meeting of 26th November 2025 breached Rule 5 of the Member's Code of Conduct and failed to uphold the Principles of Openness and Leadership.

Appendix A

Document	Description
1	Complaint by Mr Timothy Gaston MLA
2	Complaint by Mr Trevor Clarke MLA
3	Hansard Committee meeting 23 rd October 2024
4	Hansard Committee meeting 26 th November 2025
5	Statement from KRW Law
6	Public Prosecution Service Statement
7	Letter to Mr Nick Mitford
8	Response from Mr Nick Mitford
9	Written responses from Ms Ní Chuilín
10	Interview transcript Ms Ní Chuilín
11	Response to Findings of Fact



Our Ref: TG01182

26 November 2025

Standards Commissioner
Room 222,
Parliament Buildings
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3XX

Dear Commissioner

Re: Referral concerning the conduct of Ms Carál Ní Chuilín MLA

I am writing under Section 16 of the Northern Ireland Assembly Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules to refer the conduct of Ms Carál Ní Chuilín MLA for investigation. This referral concerns two related matters:

1. Her conduct during the meeting of the Committee for The Executive Office held on 23rd October 2024, where Ms Ní Chuilín intervened repeatedly to challenge, obstruct, or curtail questioning relating to the incident at Belfast City Hall in which a portrait of former Lord Mayor Lord Browne was damaged given that the said incident has now been linked to her son; and

2. Her failure, at the said committee to declare an interest arising from the fact that the individual linked publicly to the incident is her son.

I believe these actions raise serious issues regarding adherence to the Assembly's rules on declaration of interests, openness, accountability, and the proper conduct of Members when participating in Committee proceedings.

1. Failure to Declare an Interest (Category 1: Relevant Interests)

Paragraph 1.7 of the Guide to the Rules states:

“Where a Member has a relevant interest, the Member must declare that interest whenever speaking or voting in the Assembly or in a Committee, or when approaching others in their capacity as a Member.”

Paragraph 1.2 defines a registrable and declarable interest as one which:

“might reasonably be thought by others to influence the Member's actions, speeches, or votes.”

Given that the individual referred to in the Public Prosecution Service's correspondence — and now named publicly — is the son of Ms Ní Chuilín, it is beyond dispute that this is a direct personal interest that would “reasonably be thought by others” to influence her participation in discussions about the incident.

Despite this:

Timothy Gaston MLA, 38 Henry Street, Harryville, Ballymena, Co Antrim BT42 3AH

Tel: 028 25 640250

- At the earlier Committee meeting (23rd October 2024) Ms Ní Chuilín intervened repeatedly to contest the line of questioning regarding the portrait incident.
- At today's (26th November 2025) Committee meeting, when I asked whether she wished to make any declaration of interest in light of the expected discussion of the same matter, she responded: "I have nothing to declare."

In my view, and I believe reasonably in the view of any objective observer, this amounts to a clear failure to declare a relevant and material interest.

2. Participation in Committee Business Where an Undeclared Interest Exists

Paragraph 1.9 of the Guide to the Rules states:

"A Member must not lobby, advocate or initiate any action that seeks to confer a financial or other material benefit on themselves, a family member or a close associate."

Paragraph 1.3 also stresses that Members must act to uphold the principles of openness, selflessness, integrity, accountability, and leadership.

In the earlier meeting, Ms Ní Chuilín:

Asserted repeatedly that questions relating to the portrait incident should not proceed;
Contested interventions from other Members; and
Attempted to direct the Chair toward ruling the line of questioning out of order.

Given that this line of questioning related directly to an incident now understood to involve her son, her active involvement in suppressing scrutiny — while failing to declare that relationship — may constitute:

- Advocacy on behalf of a close family member,
- A breach of the duty to act with integrity and openness, and
- Behaviour "that might reasonably be thought to influence" her actions in Committee.

3. Potential Breaches of the Seven Principles of Public Life

The Code of Conduct incorporates the Nolan Principles. I believe the following principles are engaged:

- Openness – by failing to declare a personal connection highly relevant to the discussion.
- Integrity – by participating in efforts to restrict questioning on a matter involving her son.
- Accountability – by not allowing the Committee to operate on a fully informed basis.
- Leadership – in failing to uphold the standards expected when personal interests intersect with Committee business.

4. Request for Investigation

Given the seriousness of these issues — particularly in relation to declarations of interest and the integrity of Committee proceedings — I request that you investigate whether Ms Ní Chuilín has breached:

- The Rules on Registration and Declaration of Interests,
- The Rules on Advocacy, and
- The general obligations under the Code of Conduct, including the Nolan Principles.

I am available to provide any further detail or evidence required.

Yours sincerely



TIMOTHY GASTON MLA



Our Ref: TG01182-1

27 November 2025

Standards Commissioner

Dear Commissioner

Re: Further information concerning the conduct of Ms Carál Ní Chuilín MLA

I write to provide additional information relevant to the referral I submitted on 26th November 2025 concerning the conduct of Ms Carál Ní Chuilín MLA.

Since sending that referral, a public statement by KRW Law has now confirmed the identity of the individual linked to the Belfast City Hall portrait incident as Ms Ní Chuilín's son. This confirmation is significant both in substance and timing, and I wish to draw its implications to your attention.

At the time of writing the statement was online here <https://krw-law.ie/naoise-o-cuilin/>.

As set out in my original referral, the Code of Conduct requires Members to declare any interest that:

“might reasonably be thought by others to influence the Member's actions, speeches or votes.”

(Guide to the Rules, para. 1.2)

The KRW Law statement now publicly confirms that the incident discussed in Committee on 23rd October 2024 involved Ms Ní Chuilín's son. While I understood this to be the case when submitting my referral, this confirmation removes any remaining ambiguity and demonstrates conclusively that:

- Ms Ní Chuilín did hold a relevant interest within the meaning of the Code;
- the interest was direct and personal; and
- it was highly material to the subject being discussed in Committee.

Therefore, her statement at the Committee meeting on 26 November 2025, when directly asked whether she wished to declare any interest, that she had “nothing to declare”, was unequivocally incorrect.

At the Committee meeting on 23rd October 2024, Ms Ní Chuilín intervened repeatedly to challenge, obstruct, or seek to curtail questions relating to the portrait incident.

With the individual now publicly confirmed to be her son, these interventions cannot be viewed as neutral procedural contributions. Instead, they give rise to a clear risk that Ms Ní Chuilín's actions:

- might reasonably be thought to have been influenced by her personal connection;
- could constitute advocacy on behalf of a close family member, contrary to paragraph 1.9 of the Guide to the Rules; and
- undermined the Committee's ability to scrutinise matters fully and impartially.

The public confirmation now available materially strengthens the concern that the interventions were not compatible with the principles of openness, integrity, and accountability.

The KRW Law statement reinforces that the following principles are deeply engaged:

- Openness – the existence of a material interest was not disclosed.
- Integrity – a Member participated in restricting scrutiny on a matter involving a close family member.
- Accountability – other Committee Members were not informed of the relevant interest when forming their own views on the propriety of questioning.
- Leadership – the requirement to declare relevant interests was not upheld even when directly asked.

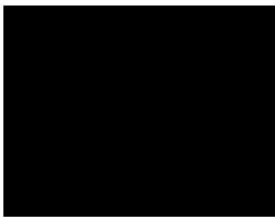
The newly confirmed information increases the seriousness of these concerns.

In light of this public confirmation, I respectfully ask that this information be taken into account as part of your consideration of the referral. It further substantiates:

- that a relevant interest did exist,
- that it should have been declared both in October 2024 and on 26 November 2025, and
- that the Member's actions in Committee may therefore constitute a breach of the Rules on Registration and Declaration of Interests, the Rules on Advocacy, and the general obligations under the Code of Conduct.

I remain available to provide any further detail or to assist the Commissioner in any way required.

Yours sincerely



TIMOTHY GASTON MLA

Trevor Clarke MLA
1 Railway Street
Antrim
BT41 4AE

028 9446 3273

trevor.clarke@mla.niassembly.gov.uk

Assembly Commissioner for Standards,
Room 283,
Parliament Buildings,
Belfast,
BT4 3XX

standardscommissioner@niassembly.gov.uk

26th November 2025

Dear Commissioner

I wish to make a formal complaint against Carál Ní Chuilín in her capacity as North Belfast MLA and member of the Assembly's Executive Office Committee.

This follows recently published allegations that her son was the former Sinn Féin employee who had resigned from membership and employment of that Party after making its Chief Whip aware of his involvement in an incident in which the Mayoral portrait of Lord Wallace Browne was defaced in Belfast City Hall on 19 October 2024.

My complaint directly relates to the conduct of Ms Ní Chuilín during proceedings of the Committee for the Executive Office on 23 October 2024 and 26 November 2024.

Specifically, it is in response to her failure to declare, and resolve, a clear conflict between a personal interest - namely a close family member - and the public interest - primarily the need for openness and accountability about any knowledge Sinn Féin representatives had of events or function that led to the criminal damage aforementioned.

I contend that the Member in question breached the following provisions of the Assembly Members Code of Conduct:

Rule of Conduct 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 of Conduct 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.

Rule of Conduct 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 of Conduct 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 conduct that I believe substantiates a breach of these rules is as follows:

- Ms Ní Chuilín did not recuse herself from the Committee proceedings on 23 October 2024 and 26 November 2025 despite her relationship to the relevant interest, in this case her son's alleged involvement in the incident, being so close that it would not be possible to participate effectively in the proceedings.
- That this personal interest was relevant was also foreseeable on both occasions given that:
 - the scheduled witness on 23 October 2024 was to be the First Minister Michelle O'Neill, a leading Sinn Féin elected representative, who had already faced questions with respect to the Party's handling of issues related to integrity and transparency in respect of separate safeguarding issues.
 - Phillip Brett MLA, a member of the Executive Office Committee, had expressly made the Chair and Committee members aware in advance of the meeting on 26 November 2025 that he intended to raise matters flowing from the PPS determination on the Belfast City Hall portrait investigation, which related to Ms Ní Chuilín's son.
- Even after reference was made during questioning to events in Belfast City Hall, Ms Ní Chuilín did not declare a relevant interest or indeed leave either meeting, as would have been appropriate and required by the rules of conduct stipulated above. On 26 November 2025, Ms Ní Chuilín actually stated in public session that she had no conflict of interest to declare on behalf of herself or anyone else.
- It is, in my contention, beyond doubt that the relevant interest in question, had it been known and acknowledged, would reasonably be thought by others, including members of the Committee and the wider public, to have influenced Ms Ní Chuilín's approach to the matter under consideration.

- There is an official transcript of Ms Ní Chuilín's sustained effort in the meeting on 23 October to equate questioning and commentary that focused on governance issues within Sinn Féin as '*overtly political*,' '*using this Committee as a political football*' and '*doing...a disservice to the Committee*.' These remarks, I believe, can be interpreted as an attempt to dilute, displace and detract from the role of Committee scrutiny on issues around which she had a relevant personal interest.
- By repeatedly interjecting in proceedings in an attempt to set fresh parameters for, and to stymie, lines of questioning by other Committee members, Ms Ní Chuilín not only improperly interfered in the performance of the Committee and individual members, but failed to elevate the public interest, which demands openness, transparency and accountability.
- Specific examples of this include when Ms Ní Chuilín sought to dismiss any connection between Junior Minister Reilly's attendance at the City Hall event on 19 October and the competences of the Executive Office in order to shield the First Minister from questioning on the circumstances surrounding the incident, including whether other Sinn Féin members were present. This had been the subject of Mr Harvey's question immediately prior to Ms Ní Chuilín's interjection, which is significant.

It is my hope that you will treat these matters seriously and give due diligence to investigating this complaint in the coming days.

Best wishes,

Trevor Clarke MLA



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for The Executive Office

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Briefing by Mrs Michelle O'Neill MLA, First
Minister

23 October 2024

Committee for The Executive Office

23 October 2024

have been before the Committee; I have answered many media queries; and I have spoken extensively on the issues about which you wish to speak today. I have been open, I have been transparent, and, absolutely, I am here today representing the Executive Office in my capacity as First Minister.

Chair, I welcome the fact that you have clarified your legal advice on the remit of the Committee. You have your legal advice and your considerations to make on all that. However, I think that it is fair to say that, at my previous appearance on 2 October, the lines between ministerial and party responsibilities were blurred. I am genuinely trying to be as open, transparent and helpful to members as I can, but doing so gives rise to wider concerns that, I know, the Committee has been given legal advice about. I am more than happy to answer as First Minister on any genuine issues, but we all need to be conscious of the clear legal advice that we have. I appreciate that, as you said, the Clerk shared some questions from some members with my officials, but, Chair, I have significant concern that they do not meet the tests set by your legal advice or mine. Where members are constructive, I am here to be helpful and answer questions on the work of my Department. I will be more than happy to answer those questions.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Thank you, First Minister. You mentioned that lines were blurred a bit. I want to put this on the public record: the Committee is responsible for scrutinising the work of the Executive Office. That work includes support for victims and survivors of the Troubles and ending the control of paramilitarism through your Department's Communities in Transition programme and other agendas such as Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC). Given the recent media commentary about whether the so-called IRA army council still has strong influence over Sinn Féin, what reassurances can you give the Committee that that is not the case in determining the priorities and actions of the Executive Office?

Mrs O'Neill: First, Chair, I will speak to your own guidance in terms of the legal advice. You have asked me to come back to clarify the previous Committee appearance, and I am here to do so. Party political issues are not for the Committee.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): It is not a party political issue.

Mrs O'Neill: I think that you just made a party political statement.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): I did not.

Mrs O'Neill: Do you want to repeat it?

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): I am just saying that I feel that, for the public record, it is a question that people may want you to be asked about whether the work that comes out of the Executive Office is purely in line with what is needed by the people and by the Executive as a committee themselves. I am giving you an opportunity to address recent media comment that that is possibly not the case.

Mrs O'Neill: I am not here to speculate on media comment, Chair. What I can say is that the Executive Office takes its responsibility very seriously.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Ridiculous.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): I think that it is a legitimate question.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I do not: I think that it is completely ridiculous.

Mrs O'Neill: What I can say is that the Executive Office discharges all its responsibilities very seriously, particularly when it comes to tackling criminality. No paramilitary groups should exist in this day and age. I think that that is a shared endeavour that we should all ensure. Any engagement with any groups that are active in today's society should be only on the basis of asking those groups to disband.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): I was giving you the opportunity to put that on the record.

First Minister, another area of work for the Executive Office that the Committee is particularly interested in is on the three new commissioners for the bodies provided for under the Identity and Language (NI) Act 2022 and on the wider piece about ensuring equality for the protection of minority language rights. Given the actions of one of your then members in Belfast City Hall on Saturday evening, what actions will you take to address the damage to the reputation of the Irish language community in terms of promoting the language on a cross-community basis and depoliticising it?

Mrs O'Neill: I am absolutely committed to promoting the language. That is important. There are so many children now being educated through the medium of Irish, and they should see it everywhere. We should all work to ensure that our society is an inclusive one, including for those who are Gaeilgeoirí [*Translation: Irish speakers.*] I will not comment on anything that potentially happened on Saturday night in City Hall.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): OK, thank you. That is all from me.

Ms Egan: Thank you, First Minister, for coming to Committee today. Obviously, the Executive Office has a wide range of responsibilities, including ending violence against women and girls, historical institutional abuse and mother-and-baby institutions. A lot of the work, as we know, involves dealing with victims and survivors of all sorts of tragedies in our past. Are you confident that your office is able to carry on that work? Have recent scandals involving your party affected your ability to do that and the confidence of stakeholders in engaging with you?

Mrs O'Neill: No, I am very confident. I assure you that I am very confident that I can continue to lead in this office and that I can continue to do the great work that we have been able to bring forward, even in these early days of the new Executive. I am very proud of our work around ending violence against women and girls. I am very proud of the fact that we have been able to launch our strategy for victims and survivors. I am very proud of the work that we have been able to advance around assisting people who have come through historical institutional abuse. We need to continue in that vein and make sure — we do this in conjunction with you, as a Committee — that that work is as fit for purpose and responsive as it can be for everybody out there.

Ms Egan: My next question is about your role. As First Minister, you lead and chair the Executive. One of the Executive Ministers, the Minister for the Economy, made comments on the disclosure of information regarding child safeguarding. Those comments were later refuted. What work will you and the Executive do to ensure that all organisations and individuals with positions of responsibility are clear on their safeguarding duties?

Mrs O'Neill: I have been very clear that I will not comment on anything that is party political, but I absolutely agree with you about safeguarding. We all have a role to play: as individuals, as political parties, as an Executive, as a Civil Service and as a society. Certainly, I believe that we all need to keep asking ourselves, "Is everything that we have in place fit for purpose?". That is a remit that we all share.

Mr Kingston: First Minister, as others have said, your Department has responsibility for overseeing safeguarding matters. We are concerned about the erosion of public confidence, given recent events.

Regarding Michael McMonagle, I wish to ask again about the event that was held here, at Parliament Buildings, in February 2023. Is it still your position that you did not notice him in attendance at that event?

Mrs O'Neill: Chair, I am here to answer questions as First Minister on behalf of TEO. That is a party political question. I have answered that question over and over in other forums.

Mr Kingston: There were other members of your party at that event: your special adviser, John Loughran, and junior Minister Reilly. Have you asked them, in their capacity as staff working under your authority, whether they had noticed Mr McMonagle in attendance?

Mrs O'Neill: Chair, I assume that you will rule on the vires of the Committee.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): We have agreed that Committee members can ask questions, but they need to frame them in a way that relates to the work of the First Minister.

Mr Kingston: You were styling yourself as the "First Minister-in-waiting" at that stage. It is an important matter, because the fundamental failing of you and your party was not just providing inaccurate references that enabled Mr McMonagle to obtain employment with the British Heart Foundation but your failure to let the foundation know, when you became aware that he was working for that charity —

Ms Ní Chuilín: Chair, on a point of order —

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): OK.

Mr Kingston: — of the charges that he faced.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Sorry, there is a point of order. Go ahead.

Ms Ní Chuilín: There is a transcript of the First Minister's previous appearance, when you asked the same questions. They were answered then in good faith, and now you are going back —

Mr Kingston: I am asking further probing questions.

Ms Ní Chuilín: — in a context that does not relate to TEO and is overtly political. I want to put that on record. I put it on record at the start of the meeting —

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): I know, I know.

Ms Ní Chuilín: — and here we go.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Are there questions in relation to —

Ms Ní Chuilín: All they have to do is throw "safeguarding" in, and that is it sorted.

Mr Kingston: They are matters of public confidence in the oversight of safeguarding.

Mrs O'Neill: Chair, may I make a general point?

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Yes. Go ahead, please.

Mrs O'Neill: I take my roles and responsibilities very seriously. I have endeavoured to answer all questions. I have answered numerous questions on the Assembly Floor. I have answered questions in the media. Indeed, I have previously answered questions at the Committee that strayed into party political matters. My legal advice is clear that that is not where any of us should be.

I am here on behalf of the Executive Office. I answer questions today on behalf of the Executive Office. You should not endure some members taking a party political approach.

Mr Kingston: Let me try further. Since your last appearance three weeks ago, First Minister, you have changed your position on a number of matters relating to these issues, because you have accepted that there was misinformation. Do you accept that your lack of clarity and lack of candour have damaged public confidence in the oversight of safeguarding of children?

Mrs O'Neill: As a mother and a grandmother, I take safeguarding very seriously. It needs to be taken to the nth degree, and we need to ensure that everybody in society plays their part. I have answered these questions in the Committee; I have answered these questions on the Assembly Floor; and I have answered these questions in the media. I do not believe that this is anything other than party politicking from the member.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): You mentioned a lack of candour: is there anything in particular that you want to ask? You have the right, as any member would, to raise concerns around the ministerial code.

Mr Kingston: Will you answer questions regarding Niall Ó Donnghaile and what you were aware of in relation to him?

Ms Ní Chuilín: That has nothing to do with TEO; absolutely not.

Mr Kingston: It is a matter of safeguarding and the actions of you and your party.

Ms Sheerin: Chair, we received legal advice on the vires of the Committee and on what we were allowed to ask questions about.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): OK. One at a time.

The Clerk Assistant: Chair, the Committee was very clear at the beginning of the meeting that it needs to stick within its remit. The substantive point of the question has to be within the remit of the Committee, rather than there being a passing reference to the Executive Office. Members have to be clear about that in order to get the best information that they can from the First Minister today. I would advise that.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): OK. Thank you.

Mr Kingston: May I ask you when you became concerned about the reference that was given to Niall Ó Donnghaile by your party leader, saying that he had served diligently?

Mrs O'Neill: Chair, with all due respect, you have taken legal advice.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): We have taken legal advice.

Mrs O'Neill: May I ask you whether you are confident that you are following your legal advice?

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): We are of the opinion that Committee members have a right to ask questions and that —

Mrs O'Neill: To me as First Minister of the Executive Office, because I represent the whole office.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): I reminded members in private session, and I remind them in public session. The questions were put.

Anyway, five minutes are up. Who is next? Harry, please go ahead.

Mr Harvey: Thank you very much, Chair. First Minister, I would like you to hear my question out before you decide whether you can answer. I think that it is a reasonable question. Is that OK?

Mrs O'Neill: Sure.

Mr Harvey: On the Belfast City Hall event on Saturday evening past organised by Glór na Móna and the damage to a former Lord Mayor's portrait, were any other members of your party in the vicinity of that attack on property, and are you aware of anyone having tried to stop it?

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Harry, before we go on, the question has to relate to the work of the Executive Office. You are aware of that. Can you couch your question in relation to that?

Mr Kingston: Chair, if I can intervene, I will just point out that junior Minister Reilly was present at that event and gave a statement in the Assembly Chamber on Monday morning about her attendance at it.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Not as a junior Minister. Not as TEO.

Mr Gaston: She was there as TEO.

Ms Sheerin: She is a Gaeilgeoir [*Translation: Irish speaker.*]

Ms Ní Chuilín: She is a Gaeilgeoir, Timothy.

Mr Kingston: She was there in her capacity as a junior Minister.

Ms Egan: May I raise a point?

Mrs O'Neill: Chair, this is the point that I raised with you: this is straying into party politicking as opposed to being genuinely about safeguarding. Other members have raised genuine safeguarding questions. I wanted to be here to be open and transparent. Some of this stuff is just straying completely beyond your legal advice, I am quite sure.

Ms Egan: May I raise a point, please, Chair?

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Go ahead, please, Deputy Chair.

Ms Egan: In fairness to you, First Minister, I understand that we did not share the legal advice with you. I have it in front of me. I am happy for either Clerk to correct me if I am wrong, but the legal advice said that witnesses could not be compelled to answer if they felt that a question was not within the vires of the Committee, not that the Chair had to rule it out. Is that correct?

The Clerk Assistant: That is correct.

Ms Egan: So, the onus would be on the witness not to answer.

The Clerk Assistant: I think that that is —

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): It is also on the Committee members to ask questions that are in line with our responsibilities as Committee members.

Mr Gaston: Let members ask them then.

Ms Ní Chuilín: We also discussed the fact that questions need to be related to TEO. You cannot say on one day that that applies but, on another day, say that it does not. It either applies or it does not.

Mr Gaston: This is a confidence issue.

Ms Sheerin: The legal advice was that there was risk in people asking questions.

Mr Gaston: Aye, so it is on the member.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): We are eating into Harry's time. Harry, have you any questions for the First Minister that relate to the work of the Executive Office?

Mr Harvey: Basically, was there anyone trying to stop the incident? That was my question

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Do you want to make any comment?

Mrs O'Neill: No, Chair. That is not within the remit of the Committee.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Have you any other questions?

Mr Harvey: No. Thank you, First Minister. Thank you, Chair.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you, First Minister, for coming along today. I regret that you are here on your own; I would have liked the deputy First Minister to be with you, because it is a joint office. It is very unfortunate that she is speaking to the public through X, telling us what, she thinks, should happen here today in her joint office. You are joint First Ministers of the Northern Ireland Executive, and she has said that it is:

"Right and proper that FM appears again at the request of the Committee to reflect and clarify on her remarks she made as FM. People deserve questions answered. Safeguarding children must be a priority and should always come before party, politics or pride.

It is time for truth."

Your partner — your joint First Minister — has a completely different view of your role in responding to the Committee. That concerns me: does it concern you?

Mrs O'Neill: All I can say, Sinéad, is that the deputy First Minister and I agreed that I would be here today. She had a prior constituency engagement that she needed to take up, which is fine. I agree with you that it is a joint office. As I said to the Chair, it is very important that we protect the integrity of the joint office and that we should all be here today. However, in the interest of trying to be helpful to the Committee, given the request that was received, I have come along and tried to answer questions, as per my Executive Office remit.

I absolutely concur that this is a joint office, but the reason that I am here is the "jointery". We agreed that I would come here today; we agreed that I would seek to talk to the Chair — that letter went to the Chair last night; and we agreed that I would be here to answer those questions.

Ms McLaughlin: Michelle — First Minister — I beg your pardon — she said, three hours ago, again on X:

"I have told the First Minister's Office that correspondence relating to the FM's Committee appearance is entirely a matter between the FM and the Committee. It is right that the FM attends and answers all questions."

Again, I have not got clarity that both you and the deputy First Minister have a clear understanding of what we, as a Committee, are expecting.

First Minister, I was not here when you made your appearance three weeks ago. The reason that you are back here is that there was not clarity and openness and people felt that due governance had not taken place at that appearance. They felt that they had not had an opportunity to engage properly with some of the grey areas. In fact, the very next day, it became apparent that things that you had said at Committee did not happen just as you had said they did: for example, you had spoken directly to Fearghal McKinney etc. Subsequently, other issues have evolved —

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Do you have a question?

Ms McLaughlin: I am trying to get it into the context of the office, because this is really tight.

Other issues regarding safeguarding and children's safeguarding are really important to the Committee. They are really important, and that is the work that you do in your office. It is about mother-and-baby units; historical childhood abuse; victims and survivors; trauma-led response; paramilitaries; coercion; and violence against women and girls. It is all connected to the work that we do here, yet, fundamentally, at the top of the organisation that you lead — you are the leader — there have been serious questions in relation to child safety and safeguarding. It is fair that we, as a Committee, ask you for further clarity.

You have come back here because you have had to revise, you have had to apologise and you have had to clarify issues, even as recently as yesterday on the Floor. There are legitimate questions that we want to ask you about the Michael Monaghan case and the Niall Ó Donnghaile case, based on the role that you play in the Assembly and on the Executive. It is about child safety. Do you not agree that those are fair questions for your credibility and for the credibility of all of us in the work that we do?

Mrs O'Neill: First, I wish you well. I know that you had pneumonia. I am glad to see you back.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you.

Mrs O'Neill: Secondly, I am here with the agreement of the deputy First Minister. I am here to represent our collective office. I am here to take questions from the Committee because of the request

that you sent me, but I am here to answer questions in relation to the work of my ministerial office. Party political questions are not for the Committee. However, I have very much blurred the lines in trying to answer some of those questions in a spirit of openness and transparency. I have tried to be crystal clear.

I, like you, want the safeguarding policies that we have across society here to be absolutely A1, A* and first class. We should never let any child down. That is my commitment. I am very determined to lead from the front, as I have always done. I will continue to do that in the Executive Office.

It is important to state that the powers of the scrutiny Committee relate to the scrutiny of Ministers insofar as they are exercising their ministerial functions. Ask me questions about that. That is what I have always come to Committee for. Questions about Sinn Féin business are not within the remit of the Committee. That is why I came back by myself; I was trying to provide that clarity for you and others.

Ms McLaughlin: Do you not feel that what has happened in Sinn Féin was of your own making? You are not responsible for Michael McMonagle's actions or Niall Ó Donnghaile's actions, but you are responsible for the processes thereafter. That is a crisis of Sinn Féin's making.

Ms Ní Chuilín: That is a party political question.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): OK. Time is up.

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is clearly a party political question.

Mrs O'Neill: Chair, I am not going to respond —

Mr Gaston: On a point of order. Who is chairing the meeting today?

Mrs O'Neill: — to that point, but I will respond to another point that she made.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I am making a point.

Mrs O'Neill: I set out to clarify the record. As soon as I became aware of that, I set out to clarify the record. I think that that should demonstrate that I do not stand over something if I am not able to. If I find that something that I said is incorrect, I will correct the record. I have done that on a number of occasions over the past number of weeks. I hope that that demonstrates that, whenever I find out that something that I have said is not 100%, I will clarify the position. I hope that you feel some comfort in the fact that I have tried to do that at every turn, including yesterday in the Assembly during Members' Statements.

Ms McLaughlin: Chair —

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): No. I need —

Ms McLaughlin: I want it on the record that I have lots of questions that I need to ask. I have lots of questions, as a member of the Committee, that I need to scrutinise the First Minister on, but I feel that I am not able to.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Can I get round the first round?

Ms McLaughlin: OK.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Then we will see if we have time.

Ms Sugden: Thank you, First Minister. I suppose that this whole situation has given rise to questions about safeguarding in the public sphere: in the Assembly, the Executive and arm's-length bodies. Safeguarding is very directly under the remit of the Executive Office. Can you give me any examples of what you have done since this conversation has arisen to address safeguarding more generally and ensure that we provide that A* service in our public bodies, including the Executive Office and the Assembly? For me, it has given rise to questions about safeguarding in some organisations in my

constituency. How do we improve that so that we do not find ourselves in a situation where children and vulnerable adults become victims, essentially?

Mrs O'Neill: That is the conversation that we need to have. I have become acutely aware of it. Like you, I have been contacted by organisations that are concerned about safeguarding. All of this has brought to the fore a concern that people have had, so, clearly, there is work to be done. Not to be too technical about it, but safeguarding sits within the remit of the Department of Health, but we, as the Executive Office, also have a responsibility. A Committee's time is best served by asking, "What are the failings in safeguarding in society right now?". I certainly want us to get to the bottom of that.

Saying that the policy responsibility sits under Health is a statement of fact, but, as I said, we all have a role to play in it. I certainly think that there is a body of work to be done to ensure that our safeguarding policies are fit for today's modern world, which is very complex and in which everything is changing constantly. I certainly want us to focus our attention on that. This is all about dealing with the here and now, but I am not going to let it go. I am going to turn this experience into something that is fruitful and beneficial and improves safeguarding for children and vulnerable adults here.

Ms Sugden: Given that it is, I suppose, a cross-cutting issue in that respect and that, potentially, the Executive Office can lead on it, as we have seen with other areas, will you commit now to reviewing, particularly in the public sector and the public sphere, how we safeguard from a policy perspective, how we implement that, how we consistently review and train and how we ensure that we do not have vulnerable people —. It is about maybe not technically defining but understanding who our vulnerable people are, whether it is those under 18. I know that, in safeguarding law, to an extent, that is defined. It is about being very clear about that.

There are huge gaps here because people have overlooked their responsibilities, and that could be the case in other organisations. We need to be very clear about what our responsibilities are. I am not sure that the safeguarding policy that exists, which is led by the Executive — whether it is Health or of a more cross-cutting nature — is up to the standard that is required, because it has given rise to this whole issue.

Mrs O'Neill: I am fairly certain that it is not, and I will tell you why. It is because of the comment that you just made. Other organisations have been in touch to say that they are concerned, so, clearly, we have work to do as a local Assembly and an Executive. We need to find out what is wrong, and we need to fix it.

Ms Sugden: Will you lead a review of that?

Mrs O'Neill: I absolutely would be up for that, but, obviously, I have to take it back to the "jointery" of the office.

Ms Sugden: I concur with Sinéad: I am disappointed that the deputy First Minister is not here, because I would have liked to hear her views on what I have just said, and that opportunity has not been given to me.

Mrs O'Neill: I will ensure that what you have suggested is reflected back.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Is that you, Claire?

Ms Sugden: Yes.

Mr Gaston: I am drawing from the ministerial code. The ministerial code requires Ministers to:

"(i) observe the highest standards"

— in relation to —

"the stewardship of public funds".

We know that Michael McMonagle was employed by you from March 2020 to May 2020. How many days a week did he work in your constituency office?

Mrs O'Neill: Chair, the vires of the Committee.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Timothy, you know that it has to be under the remit of the Executive Office.

Mr Gaston: This is out of the ministerial code that I am drawing directly from. You are the First Minister: does this code apply to you?

Mrs O'Neill: The ministerial code does apply to me, Chair.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Yes. Thank you.

Mr Gaston: Thank you very much. On that basis, how many days a week did he work in your office?

Mrs O'Neill: Chair, I am not answering questions that are not for this Committee.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): That is an employment contract.

Mr Gaston: Are we setting that aside in the ministerial code and saying that it does not apply to the First Minister? No?

How many days a week —?

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): It does not apply to the Executive Office and the functions and scrutiny.

Mr Gaston: It does, because this is what it all comes down to. This is about confidence in those leading the Government of Northern Ireland. This is the ministerial code that they have signed up to.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Issues —

Mr Gaston: There are questions regarding financial matters, which —

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): — which —.

Mr Gaston: — were signed up to as a Minister and which apply.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Let me speak. The financial matters relate to the business of the Assembly Commission. If you have a complaint in relation to the use of public funds for the employment of staff etc, you should refer that to the Assembly Commission and/or the standards commissioner. Am I correct?

The Clerk Assistant: Yes.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): That is correct. I have just received —.

Ms Sheerin: It does not relate to this Committee.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): It does not relate to this.

Mr Gaston: The seven principles of public life include integrity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership. On that basis, I have asked you a question about what happens in your constituency office, and you are deciding to duck it. You are deciding not to answer it.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Timothy, it is not a question —.

Mr Gaston: You cannot separate the two.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): You can separate the two, because the due diligence in relation to the use of public funds for employment and office costs is done on the fourth floor of this Building, as you know, and it is overseen by independent auditors and accountants.

Mr Gaston: Time and time again, we have heard that Mr McMonagle was a press officer from Sinn Féin. We have the First Minister sitting in front of us here now. The First Minister employed that man from March 2020 to May 2020, and there is a serious question over how those moneys were spent or paid to him for his services. The First Minister is deciding that she does not want to provide any details. How many days a week did he work in your office? Did he do any work for you, or is it a case of Sinn Féin just using money from your budget for the political animal?

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Timothy, have you referred these matters to the Assembly Commission or the standards commissioner?

Mr Gaston: This is TEO, and I have the opportunity, when the First Minister is sitting in front of me, to ask —.

Ms Sheerin: Ask questions about TEO.

Mr Gaston: Who is chairing the meeting? Give Paula her place.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Through the Chair, please. Thank you.

Mr Gaston: Yes, thank you very much.

We will move on, if that is what you want. If you do not want to follow the ministerial code and if you do not want to uphold the seven principles of public life, that is a matter for you.

Ms Ní Chuilín: That is ridiculous.

Mr Gaston: You are talking about confidence —

Mrs O'Neill: I think, Chair, that you are just letting —.

Mr Gaston: — and you are not doing yourself any justice today —

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Sorry, you are badgering a witness.

Mr Gaston: — to give people —.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): We have gone through this before around the code of conduct of Committee members.

First Minister, respond, and then I will let you back in, Timothy. Go ahead.

Mrs O'Neill: All I will say, Chair, is that I take my Pledge of Office very seriously, I take the use of public funds very seriously, and I will stand over my role in all those things.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Thank you.

Mr Gaston: I will go back to the last meeting, and I have Hansard here to keep me right. When you appeared here before, you said, regarding Máiría Cahill, that "Of course" you believe her. This relates to ending violence against women and girls.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Thank you for relating it.

Mr Gaston: This is all about confidence and the credibility to be leading up on that. I will quote from Máiría's book:

"We were in Gerry Adams's office, Breige and I."

It goes on to say:

"What do you want to happen to him?" I knew she was asking me whether I wanted Morris killed."

You agree now that you believe Máiría. What was the IRA doing in a Sinn Féin office?

Mrs O'Neill: Chair, I am here to answer questions as the Executive Office, and that is completely out of order.

Mr Gaston: Do you not find that odd?

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Sorry, excuse me, Timothy.

The Clerk Assistant: I just want to re-emphasise the requirement for members to try to keep within the remit of the Committee as it relates to the Executive Office.

Mr Gaston: To give credibility to your document, do you want to take this opportunity to apologise to Máiría for all the times in the past when you —?

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): That is a political question.

Mr Gaston: No, it is not; this is about confidence in ending violence against —.

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is political.

Mr Gaston: No, it is not.

Mrs O'Neill: Chair, I will make a general comment about ending violence against women and girls, if that is helpful. We have launched our strategy. It has been co-designed with all our partners out there. It is an excellent piece of work. I think that it will make a real difference.

We all have to tackle the scourge of misogyny that exists out there in our society. We have work to do as a society. We only have to look at the recent death of Mary Ward, which came hot on the heels of the deaths of so many other women who have been tragically murdered by men in our society. We need to focus our efforts on making sure that we change that picture. We have to do the preventative work, and we have to lead from the front on our strategy. I am determined to lead from the front on that issue.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): OK. Thank you.

Mr Gaston: So —.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Your five minutes are up, Timothy. Thank you. They are.

Ms Egan: Timothy, you started that a minute and a half after the Clerk started his.

Mr Gaston: Just like the other members, I want to put on record that I do not think that five minutes was enough time. You said in your opening remarks that you would not be interfering with questions: it is quite obvious that you were. We talked at the start of the Committee about how members would have five minutes to ask questions and should not be impeded, and that is exactly what you did.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): I also said at the start of the meeting that the questions had to relate to the office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and the work of the Department that they lead.

Mr Gaston: I feel that all my questions did.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Excuse me, I am moving on.

Would either of you ladies like to ask some questions?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Yes, I have my hand up, Chair. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Sorry, I did not know that. Carál, go ahead.

Ms Ní Chuilín: It is OK. You have been quite busy today.

First Minister, first of all, in my five minutes, I just want to say that I thought that this was going to happen. There are people who are genuinely concerned about safeguarding and genuinely concerned about the Department but are using this Committee as a political football. It is really obvious, and I just want to say that. On the ongoing issue of people having questions but not being able to get answers, I also want to say that they can put questions into TEO. If they relate to TEO, they will be answered. If they do not, they will not be. That is the way it goes.

I am not sure whether you or anyone else in the Department, in relation to Claire's question about safeguarding, is looking at this: there were concerns raised in this case — the McMonagle case — about AccessNI and other fora that are used being fit for purpose. It is not just about safeguarding but about best practice. Is that something that your Department could look at in conjunction with Health, because Health runs that? That is my first question.

The second thing is a point. We have raised it continually. We were meant to have Foras na Gaeilge and the Ulster-Scots Agency in. We got briefings from the two yesterday — two substantial bits — and we still have not received a briefing from the officials. That is happening time and time again. Could you take that back and have a look at it? When we get the briefings, they are fairly substantial. We are all on other Committees in the Assembly, and we are rushing through it. We cannot get to the bottom of some of the things that we need to do.

I will finish on this. I wish that we could get back to scrutinising the Department. I honestly feel that some of the commentary inside and outside the Committee is doing more of a disservice to the Committee than any allegations. I think that it is disgraceful; I have to say that. I think that it is quite disgraceful. That is me done.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Do you want to respond?

Mrs O'Neill: If the briefings are untimely, I will take that up with the Department again to ensure that they are timely.

On the issue of safeguarding, which I have discussed with Claire, I can endeavour to take that back to the Executive and raise it at our next meeting. I have been giving thought to how best to find a cross-party approach to safeguarding and ensuring that it is proper, A* and services the needs of children and vulnerable adults. I can definitely commit to the Committee that I will bring that back to the Executive Office. I commend the approach of bringing it to the Executive for discussion and working out the best structure: review what is in place, identify where it falls short and plan how to change it. We have a short part of the mandate left, but this is an area of work that we seriously need to focus on. If the past three or four weeks have taught me anything, it is that this is an area where there is room for improvement.

Ms Sheerin: Thank you for coming, Michelle. I do not have any questions about what we have been discussing throughout the meeting, other than to clearly disassociate myself from the party politicking, and I do not feel that it is helpful. I feel that it discredits the Committee and the work that we do.

It is important to say that, in a conversation and line of questioning about ending violence against women and girls — I know that you are personally invested in it, I am invested in it, and we all want to work together to deliver it — it is very unhelpful that, at the beginning of the meeting, we had a female Chair being told by another member to "Breathe". We know that the attitudes, the language, the othering, the criticism of women and treating them as if they are hysterical just because they are exercising their function are what lead to violence against women and girls. I feel that it is important to put that on the record.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I agree with you.

Mrs O'Neill: Thank you for that.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): First Minister, with your indulgence, I will let Sinéad back in, because she was not here for the first one.

Ms McLaughlin: It is just a small area. It is about ending violence against women and girls as well. Part of the consultation and review looked at the judicial aspect. It was about the detrimental effect of a request for a good character reference from people who are or appear to be upstanding members of society, particularly in cases of rape or other serious issues. Someone can give a good character reference that is about, for example, someone being great at their job. What do you think about that? Do you think that there is a place in society for good references, particularly in the judicial system? Do you agree that they can be harmful to the victim?

Mrs O'Neill: I do not agree that they are a good thing in society. They should not be allowed. They should not be tolerated.

Ms McLaughlin: OK.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Brian, you had indicated. What is your question, so that I can see whether to put it to the First Minister?

Mr Kingston: I want to make a comment. Examples of the questions and lines of questioning were provided in the letter to you, First Minister, so I do not think that you can be surprised that we wanted to ask questions relating to Michael McMonagle and Niall Ó Donnghaile. We also have to think of the reputation of the Committee in its scrutiny role, and it needs to be able to ask the questions. You and other members of your party — you as First Minister — have changed your position as the weeks have gone on. You have gone from saying that, essentially, Sinn Féin, apart from two other press officers, did nothing wrong to acknowledging —.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Brian, I think that the First Minister has addressed that.

Mr Kingston: No. It is relevant. Just let me finish.

You then acknowledged where poor practice had been exercised and mistakes made. It is important for the public to hear acknowledgement of where mistakes were made. Standards are ever increasing, and people want to know that there is acknowledgement that things should have been done differently and that mistakes were made but lessons have been learned, so that we can all speak to and promote best practice.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): The last line to you.

Mrs O'Neill: I will make a more general point, Chair. There is not a day goes by in life when we all do not learn a lesson, but it is important that we reflect. I have been open and transparent. I have set the record straight where anything was incorrect. I hope that that provides the clarity that is required.

I accepted the invitation to come today because I wanted to be helpful to the Committee, but our most fruitful conversation today has been that the issue of safeguarding needs to be looked at and reviewed. Let us work together on that area, because it is important that we have the right systems, practices and policies in place across society so that we do not fail children or vulnerable adults.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Thank you, First Minister.

Ms Ní Chuilín: May I just make a very small point?

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): OK, very small, please. I do not want to open it up again.

Ms Ní Chuilín: I find that your point within the context is your point, but I think it is mealy-mouthed, coming from a political party whose Ministers sit down with loyalist paramilitaries talking about deprivation and underprivilege.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Sorry —.

Ms Ní Chuilín: That is ridiculous. It is ridiculous.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): OK. Thank you. We have a lot of other important —.

Mr Kingston: Are you seriously making that comment?

Ms Ní Chuilín: I really am.

Mr Kingston: Well, I think it is an extraordinary point for you to make, Carál.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Sorry, excuse me. Thank you, First Minister. Thank you.



Committee for The Executive Office

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Inquiry (Mother and Baby Institutions, Magdalene
Laundries and Workhouses) and Redress
Scheme Bill: Ms Joanne Bunting MLA, Junior
Minister; Ms Aisling Reilly MLA, Junior Minister

26 November 2025

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Committee for The Executive Office

Inquiry (Mother and Baby Institutions, Magdalene Laundries and Workhouses) and Redress Scheme Bill: Ms Joanne Bunting MLA, Junior Minister; Ms Aisling Reilly MLA, Junior Minister

26 November 2025

Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Paula Bradshaw (Chairperson)
Mr Stewart Dickson (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Phillip Brett
Mrs Pam Cameron
Mr Timothy Gaston
Ms Sinéad McLaughlin
Miss Áine Murphy
Ms Carál Ní Chuilín

Witnesses:

Ms Bunting	junior Minister
Ms Reilly	junior Minister
Ms Elaine Allen	The Executive Office
Mr Martin Carey	The Executive Office

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): I welcome Joanne Bunting, junior Minister; Aisling Reilly, junior Minister; Martin Carey, truth recovery programme director; and Elaine Allen, head of the redress team in TEO.

Ms Ní Chuilín: You are packing the place out. Is there anybody you have not brought with you?
[Laughter.]

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): You are all very welcome, especially Joanne. This is your first session before the Committee.

Ms Bunting (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): Thank you; be nice. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): I hope that you are settling well into your new role.

Are you wanting to give an overview?

Ms Bunting: Yes, please, we will, Madam Chairman, if that is OK with you.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Yes, go ahead.

Ms Reilly (Junior Minister, The Executive Office): Thank you, Chair. I thank the Committee for the opportunity to attend. Joanne and I have been asked to take forward this important and complex piece of legislation on behalf of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, and we are privileged to do so. I thank Pam for her work up to this point. I am sure that Joanne will echo that in her remarks.

This historical ill-treatment of and discrimination against women and girls should be a source of shame. There are many lessons to be learned about attitudes, behaviours, values and systems that can help to shape how we respond to matters today. This issue affects many people, and it is important that we work together to make the Bill as meaningful as possible. It is also important to acknowledge that many elements have been taken forward outside the Bill, such as providing the opportunity for victims and survivors to provide oral testimony, for psychological and emotional support services, and the preservation of and support for access to records. Notable, too, as part of the five core recommendations made by the truth recovery design panel and developed with victims and survivors is that other redress and reparation measures will follow but with a focus on non-financial redress, including memorialisation and a form of apology.

The introduction of the Bill in June represented a major milestone, with the Executive providing £80 million for the inquiry and redress. It will provide a full and independent inquiry with sufficient resources to investigate what happened, why it happened and who was responsible. We are pleased to bring forward a financial redress scheme, and we are acutely aware that no state redress scheme can ever properly atone for what happened to those most affected. However, the standardised payment that the legislation will deliver aims to be a start, and more will follow in the individually assessed payment scheme. I thank the Committee for its work and the opportunity that it has provided to victims, survivors and others to make their views on the Bill known in a supported way.

Ministers have been in listening mode throughout the Committee Stage, which has been valuable and helped us to identify key areas where we can work constructively with the Committee on potential amendments. We have paid close attention, especially to the voices of those affected. We have considered ideas or areas that the Committee suggested could improve the Bill and identified areas that could be amended to bring further clarity or assurance. We are considering potential amendments that, subject to Executive agreement, Ministers may table at Consideration Stage. Of course, there are other issues that the Committee may wish to raise or discuss today. We will write formally to the Committee about those matters, but we wanted to outline the latest position in person today.

We have grouped the potential amendments into three items, which we heard come through during the evidence sessions: amendments to increase support for victims and survivors; amendments to provide additional assurance; and amendments to increase timely access to justice and trust.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Can you slow down a wee bit? We are trying to take down some notes.

Ms Reilly: I will go through them clause by clause.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): All right; that is OK.

Ms Reilly: I have you covered there, Chair.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Thank you.

Ms Reilly: I will cover the first two, and Joanne will cover the last, before adding some of the final reflections.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): That is OK. Thank you.

Ms Reilly: I will deal with the potential amendments to increase support for victims and survivors.

In relation to clause 5, we heard the Committee's strong view that a multidisciplinary panel for the inquiry would greatly support the inquiry chair in their role and provide wider expertise on that complex and sensitive area of investigation. As you know, the Bill, as it stands, suggests the possibility of a single chair with the potential to have a larger inquiry panel. In light of the views expressed by the

Committee and others, we are minded to table an amendment to ensure that the inquiry panel will comprise a chair and at least one other panel member.

Next, I come to clause 15. We heard evidence provided at Committee Stage that raised concern about how restrictions may inhibit access to the inquiry for those most directly affected. With that in mind, we propose an amendment to ensure that, should a person not have prior access to information related to them, there would be an obligation on the chair to balance that when making their decision on a restriction order.

In relation to clause 38, we have heard the concerns of both the Committee and the Human Rights Commission on the 30-day window for redress appeals being too short. We understand that argument and are content to table an amendment to extend that period to 90 days, which goes beyond other schemes.

In respect of clause 39, we feel that that provision should make it clear that the Executive Office, not the redress service, is responsible for facilitating access to advice and assistance. That makes clear the balance of responsibilities, with the aim of providing high-quality guidance and support.

With regard to schedule 1, we agree with the Committee's view that the redress scheme should be promoted widely. With that in mind, Ministers are minded to table an amendment to the Bill that will make it explicit that the redress service will have responsibility for the promotion of the scheme with the agreed associated funding coming from the Executive Office.

Are you happy for me to continue?

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Yes, please. Thank you.

Ms Reilly: The second group of amendments that I will cover are amendments that will provide assurance or clarity.

In respect of clause 4, we have noted the concerns raised by the Committee with regard to those who may have become pregnant while under the care of an institution. We acknowledge that that experience may not be fully reflected in the Bill, and Ministers are content to table an amendment that strengthens the Bill further by making sure that that is explicitly captured. We have asked officials to liaise with the drafters on the wording of that clause.

In so far as clause 31 goes, we intend to clarify the eligibility for redress at subsection (4) so that it relates specifically to the children of the women admitted to a mother-and-baby institution for shelter and maintenance and not those whose mothers were admitted for the primary purpose of receiving medical care. That balances with the eligibility of subsection (2) and removes a potential area of unfairness.

In relation to clause 33, we are actively considering and seeking drafting advice on whether some applications can be dealt with administratively rather than requiring all to have judicial determinations. That would mean that more straightforward applications can be processed in a more timely way.

Finally, I will speak to clause 2, which relates to the inquiry's terms of reference. We have listened carefully and are aware that cross-jurisdictional movement of women and children has been raised a number of times at your sessions. We reassure you that that is already covered in the Bill under "departure", but we are actively considering how to provide more prominence, given its obvious importance. Today, as a minimum, we will commit to that forming part of the external terms of reference.

I will now pass over to Joanne, who will set out the remainder of the amendments that Ministers are mindful to consider, subject to Executive agreement.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Thank you. Go ahead, please.

Ms Bunting: Thank you very much, Madam Chairman; thank you, Aisling; and thank you for your warm welcome. I appreciate and would also like to put on record my thanks to Pam, my predecessor in this role. She put a considerable amount of work into the Bill, and I know that it is a subject that is close to her heart. I thank you very much for your work, Pam.

I, too, would like to keep our focus on potential areas for amendment, so I will turn immediately to that, before making some closing remarks. As Aisling outlined, the final group of potential amendments is to increase timely access to justice and trust.

I will start with clause 18. We have heard and agree that a modular evidence and reporting approach for the inquiry could be beneficial, so we will consult with the chair of the inquiry on that. We propose to strengthen clause 18 by tabling an amendment that will ensure that the inquiry panel will have the ability to provide a number of interim reports periodically throughout the inquiry, should it so choose.

We noted the points that were made about the requirement for the negative resolution Assembly procedure to extend the redress scheme, as provided for in clause 32(3), and we are minded to table an amendment to convert the Assembly control from negative resolution to draft affirmative procedures. We hope that that gives you and the Examiner some assurance.

I move now to clause 40. Naturally, we must expect the highest levels of confidentiality and standards. It is a very sensitive area of work. In order to balance Part 2 of the Bill with Part 1, we wish to amend the Bill to specify that contravening a restriction order made by the redress service president will have the same penalty as one made by the inquiry chair. Therefore, it would be an offence to break a restriction order, and it would broadly look like clause 23.

That outlines some of our other potential amendments that we are content to share with the Committee as soon as the draft becomes available. More broadly, I will take a few minutes to conclude on some elements that have not been covered to date and to make some final reflections.

In relation to clause 26, we know that the Committee heard concerns about the Bill's 14-day limit for a judicial review (JR). That mirrors provision within the Inquiries Act 2005. We recognise that access to justice measures are a key part of the inquiry process. There is already discretion in the court to extend that period, if necessary. That said, we will continue to look at it, but we need to be careful not to cause long periods of delay in the process and in the overall duration of the inquiry with JRs. Timeliness is a key factor for victims and survivors, so we need to strike a balance that ensures a timely inquiry for victims and survivors, particularly given the age of many of them.

We are also aware of concerns that were raised at Committee in relation to clause 27, due to the fact that, as drafted, the rules in support of the Bill are subject to the negative resolution procedure. Since that is largely for administrative rules, we consider that the negative resolution procedure remains appropriate, similar to rules created under the Inquiries Act 2005. Of course, important safeguards remain in place that a debate and vote can be taken if the delegated legislation is prayed on. Therefore, that avenue is still available to the Committee and Assembly.

We know that there are concerns that the Bill is too specific and prescriptive when it comes to the institutions, bodies, agencies and individuals. However, we take this opportunity to ease those concerns, particularly those of the victims and survivors, by reaffirming that the Bill has been designed to allow the inquiry chairperson the flexibility, discretion and agency to complete a full but timely investigation. By that I mean that we consider that there is scope within clause 1 to follow the pathways and follow where the evidence takes the inquiry. For example, clauses 1 and 18 provide that discretion and flexibility to the chair, as I have outlined, and clauses 13 to 17 provide meaningful provisions to protect and support witnesses to provide information. Clause 10 provides for active participation for victims and survivors via an advisory panel.

I move now to redress, which is an important issue for everybody. We have benchmarked against other schemes and processes. The standardised payment scheme compares favourably in terms of approach, inclusivity, eligibility and the support model. It is important to note that the date that we have set goes back 10 years further than that of the Republic of Ireland. That will afford more people the opportunity to be included.

Building on the ministerial commitments following the truth recovery design panel recommendations, the redress focuses on the system of institutions established for women and girls who were so unfairly stigmatised by society. It is an admission-only-based scheme, so there is no requirement for applicants to provide a potentially re-traumatising statement of experience, and payments will be made before formal investigation. That is an atypical approach in itself, and it demonstrates our collective commitment to reparations. Other benefits are that the scheme will not take any other payments into account, that it will not impact on a claimant's social security payments, and that it does not require the signing of a waiver, which was a key factor in some learning from other jurisdictions.

The scheme seeks to address the historical discrimination suffered by women and girls who were sent to mother-and-baby institutions and Magdalene laundries, but it also takes an inclusive approach, in that all those admitted for "shelter or maintenance" and all children now adults linked to that admission are eligible for redress, regardless of experience or time spent. We strongly believe that the standardised payment scheme stands on its own merits. No other jurisdiction in the UK has provided redress in that area, and the Irish Government's mother-and-baby institution payment scheme has faced challenges. Nor must we forget that, in addition, a harm-based individually assessed payment will follow, with a focus on individual experiences. That, again, will be another scheme.

The Committee has heard evidence on the need for amendments to clause 31, namely that the posthumous date and level of amount should be backdated and increased respectively. It is important to note that financial redress is only one form of acknowledgement. We remain committed to delivering a comprehensive programme of non-financial redress, including a formal apology and memorialisation. The Committee will understand that Ministers must balance a large number of factors and pressing priorities. We appreciate that there is a shared desire to do more. However, the scheme that is on the table is a package that the Executive as a whole believe is deliverable. Deliverability is key in the circumstances.

We have a duty to be realistic about what can be delivered now. As elected Members, we hear every day about the pressures in Health, Justice and Education, and we need to consider how best to meet the wide range of needs right across society. It is important that we put on record that what we all would like to do and what we are necessarily able to do are not the same things. We appreciate that that is a difficult message, and we appreciate the trauma that people have been through. We remain in listening mode. All state redress schemes have to consider how best to target scarce public moneys. That is brought into sharp focus in this context, where the Secretary of State to date has shown no willingness to contribute to the costs of the Bill. For the avoidance of any doubt, the assumption at the moment has to be that the £80 million earmarked for the Bill will have to be funded from the current block grant. I am sure that the Committee will agree that that is not a good position or a fair position, but, unfortunately, that is where we are at.

We are mindful of the limited success that other jurisdictions have had in seeking contributions from institutions. I have no doubt that they have experienced some of the same legal obstacles that exist here, and there is no easy solution for satisfactorily taking that forward. We assure the Committee, however, that we will do whatever we can to ensure that those responsible pay their share of contributions towards redress. We are acutely aware of how important that is to many victims and survivors and, I think, to the public at large. We are also committed to ensuring that there is a fair and impartial investigation, with a human rights-based approach as its cornerstone, which will be fundamental to securing contributions at the appropriate time, with the appropriate evidence in place.

We are actively considering whether any other measures can be included in the Bill, but, to be crystal clear, we are not going to bring forward any amendment that affects, or even potentially risks, the legislative competence of the Bill and our ability to take the inquiry and redress forward. That would not be the fair thing or right thing to do for the victims and survivors.

In summation, although the amendments that we have outlined today are not necessarily a definitive list of the ones that Ministers are considering or inclined to table, we reiterate that the list and any further potential amendments come with the caveat that ministerial amendments containing any substantive policy change would need to be subject to Executive agreement.

We know that the process and its outworkings cannot undo the past for people, but we are determined to do the best that we can with what we know that we can deliver at this time. I thank all the victims and survivors who have helped us to get to this point. I also place on record our thanks to the Committee for its support on this most serious of issues.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Thank you. Do any of the officials want to say anything at this point? No. OK.

Thank you for outlining the potential amendments that you are thinking of bringing forward at Consideration Stage. I want to pick up on some of the language that you just used, junior Minister, about the posthumous date, the eligibility for redress etc. I am somebody who has been involved in this process for many years, including the historical institutional abuse (HIA) inquiry. You say that the Executive Office remains committed to non-formal ways of redress. The HIA inquiry report came out in January 2017, and the victims still have not got their memorial plaque nearly nine years on. How can anybody take the Executive Office seriously in that space when it takes you nine years to put up a

plaque on a wall in this Building? That may not mean a lot to people here who are salaried, but it does to the birth mothers and their adult children who have suffered a lifetime of pain off the back of it. Junior Minister, you talked today about the pressures on Health. It was proven that the people who experienced that trauma will have greater ill health in later years, so we have to acknowledge the impact that it had on them then and that it is having throughout their life.

Whilst I welcome a lot of the proposed amendments, I think that you have fallen well short in listening in the same mode that we as a Committee have listened to the victims and survivors who brought evidence to us about the sheer pain that they felt when they saw the posthumous date in the draft Bill. It caused so much upset. Then there is this statement about how generous the scheme is compared with those in other jurisdictions. I am not a representative for other jurisdictions. I do not care what they do. We have to do what is right for the people who suffered in our institutions here. If it is an acknowledgement payment, we have to acknowledge all the birth mothers and all the adult adoptees who went through those horrendous institutions. I do not buy what you have said there. I think that the date is arbitrary. It is linked to HIA. It should never have featured in the Bill. I take your commentary, but I do not accept it.

We also heard evidence that a lot of the birth mothers are of an age where they do not want to wait for an inquiry, then the recommendations, then the Ministers to accept those and then a second, individually assessed redress scheme. That could take up to 10 years. A lot of those women have said, "We will not be here, and, in our latter years, we do not want to have to go through the trauma of then having to demonstrate the level of abuse that we have suffered". They would like a decent redress acknowledgement payment now that would satisfy them that the stigma, the abuse and the pain that they experienced have been acknowledged by the state, and they would then probably not go for an individually assessed scheme. On that basis, I think that it would be prudent — the Committee may not agree with me — for us to make the first stage as inclusive as possible, because I imagine that the second, follow-up redress scheme will not have the same number of applicants.

That is all that I have to say. I do not expect you to respond to that, but you can if you would like to. I think that you have made your comments clear for the record.

Ms Bunting: There is a lot in there, and it covers many of the key issues. Let us start with the posthumous date, and then we can work towards the standardised payment and so on.

A posthumous date is a standard feature of redress schemes that allow claims to be made on behalf of the deceased, which not all do. The date is usually linked to a state acknowledgement or an announcement. The victims' payment scheme uses the date that the Stormont Agreement had. The Scottish redress scheme uses the date on which the First Minister apologised for institutional abuse.

It is estimated that the standardised payment will provide redress for over 6,000 people, and approximately 2,000 of those will be on behalf of the deceased. It is important to note that the standardised payment scheme is already intergenerational and that the mother and child, who is now an adult, are included. You raised the issue of encompassing everybody. The standardised payment is already more inclusive than that in any comparable scheme. I understand what you said, Madam Chairman, with regard to your not being a representative for those other areas. However, there are precedents and issues of fairness. The standardised payment has to ensure that public funds are directed to those who are most directly affected by the institutions, and, to cover some of the issues that you raised about —.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Before you go on, you are saying that 6,000 people will apply and then 2,500 children will apply. Is that *[Inaudible]*?

Mr Martin Carey (The Executive Office): Sorry, if you do not mind, Ministers. There were 4,500 people who were either in an institution or were a child, now an adult, born to a birth mother in an institution, and there are claims on behalf of 2,000 deceased persons.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): OK. We have spent years and well over £1 million of public money doing research and taking oral testimonies. How many people have come forward to give oral testimonies? The number is in the hundreds. You are talking about thousands here. You could knock a nought off those thousands; the figure will be in the hundreds.

Mr Carey: We have looked at the volumes who gave oral testimony during HIA processes and how those converted into applications for a harm-based scheme. We have also looked at actuarial reports

to establish the number of people who were in the institutions and at lots of different metrics on propensity.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): They were children. We are talking about the mothers. We are a generation past them. I am just saying that I think that it will be nowhere near the figures that you are working off. Of course, we are all very aware of the pressures that are on public finances at the minute, but I am not here to guilt-trip anybody who feels that they should receive an acknowledgement payment through the redress scheme for the harm that they experienced in one of those institutions. I will move on.

The other issue that has come through very strongly relates to clause 4. Junior Minister Bunting, you referenced the prescribed institutions. We have heard loud and clear from many that, even though that captures the likes of private hospitals or private nursing homes, in order to acknowledge the pain that they have gone through, those people would like to see those institutions written into the Bill. I appreciate that you said that there is flexibility in that, but the people who have suffered want that to feature.

Ms Reilly: Research is ongoing with the independent panel, which is looking at private nursing homes. That will be a really important scope for the public inquiry. As you mentioned, Chair, the Bill will be flexible so that, once the independent panel has done the research, other institutions can be included after consulting the panel chair and getting approval from the Assembly, so there is scope in the inquiry to amend that.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): I appreciate that, but it should be in the Bill. On a more positive note, I am genuinely so pleased that there will be an amendment to cover those mothers who became pregnant while in an institution. I have heard some horrendous stories, and I know that there will be people watching who will be so pleased that their mother's experience will be reflected in the Bill, so thank you for that.

Ms Reilly: We think that it is also extremely important to make sure that we capture as many women who have gone through the institutions as possible and how they ended up there, as well as the harm and trauma that they must have experienced. It is extremely important for us to make sure that that is included.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Thank you.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, junior Ministers, for coming today. Some of what you have said has very much been in the Committee's thoughts during all its deliberations. One key area that you made some reference to is holding the institutions to account through financial contributions. I appreciate the difficulties that that there are with that, given experience elsewhere and because of the United Kingdom's legal framework, but, as a Committee, we are very keen to ensure that we stress-test the ability to make sure that we can garner as many funds as possible from those who caused the harm in the first instance. That is not saying, "We think you are guilty today", but it says that, once the public inquiry has reported, inevitably, there will be institutions that will be found guilty in those circumstances and, therefore, we need to be in a position to ensure that they make a contribution. Have any negotiations been undertaken? Maybe you do not want to expose that to us in detail but, at least in principle, can you tell us whether there have been negotiations with institutions? Has there been the prospect of mediation if they have said, "We do not have any money" and somebody has responded, "Yes, you do, because you have this or that building", or "These assets are here, there or wherever"? What investigation has been done to look at the resources that might be available? As I said, the key element for the Committee is still how that might be enforced.

The final area is negotiations with the Secretary of State and the Government. To what extent have they been pushed? How is it being negotiated? Is it just a case of saying, "They have said that they are not going to give us anything, and we have accepted that"? How are we going to push this forward? What levers do you have to press the Secretary of State? After all, many of the institutions, if not most of them, were, in some shape or form, funded or underwritten by the state.

Ms Bunting: Absolutely. I will take the first couple of points, and junior Minister Reilly will take the others. There is learning from and frameworks in the other schemes. Before we engage in negotiations, it is important that key principles are established. From our point of view, there is no question that contributions should be sought, and there is a moral obligation for there to be contributions. That needs to happen at the key time and at the right stage in the process to ensure that

we are able to maximise them. Part of it is that we need to have that evidence base, as you say, Stewart, so that we can go to these institutions and say, "This is what relates to you. This is the harm that has been done through your institution". To do that in advance potentially causes detriment to our ability to garner contributions.

Enforcement is difficult. Other jurisdictions have had some problems in that area, even when it was legislated for. There needs to be a think about that, and conversations are under way with other redress schemes at official level and even at ministerial level. In the Republic and Scotland, there is particular learning about how we can secure and maximise contributions, because we know that that has sometimes been ignored. Scotland has a kind of name-and-shame provision, but that still does not bring forward the contributions. We will try to have conversations to ask, "What is the learning? What would you do differently? What would you give consideration to? What did you include?" so that we can try to maximise the opportunity, because it is only right and proper that these people, as you say, are given a contribution. The state needs to be involved. There will be negotiations, and we press the Secretary of State at every opportunity, because with the best will in the world, yes, these institutions were state-run and state-inspected. Therefore, there is a state element in this, and I do not think that it is acceptable for the Secretary of State to say, "Well, no, it is not our problem. Take it out of the block grant". It is a much bigger problem than that, and it is a much bigger problem across the entirety of the UK.

Aisling, I think that you going to take the other issue about the negotiations.

Ms Reilly: I will touch on the conversations with the Secretary of State. That matter has been raised on a number of occasions. It is one of the things that the Finance Minister continually raises, and the First Minister and deputy First Minister have raised it with the Secretary of State. I echo what Joanne said about how washing their hands of this and saying, "You will just have to finance it yourself", is not the right approach. We should also acknowledge the state's role in the issue. Going back, a lot of this happened during direct rule, so the UK Government also have a contribution to make.

Therefore, there is continued engagement on that through the Finance Minister and the deputy First Minister and First Minister. As Joanne also said, there are those other points to consider. We are trying to get conversations with Ministers in the South and in Scotland about how we can learn from their experience. We know what did not work for them, and we are in a space in which we could learn from that. I think that we all agree that seeking contributions from those institutions is absolutely paramount, and we will do everything that we can at the right time to ensure that we get some contributions from those institutions.

Mr Dickson: I have a final point. In the consideration of this, there is one legal methodology that might be explored. I do not know whether you have considered this, and it is the stage when the inquiry determines that the harm has been caused by a particular institution, but you have not been able to work out what the quantum of that might be. While I appreciate that, on the one hand, that might be a chill factor in the process, it also should act as a very serious warning that the tribunal has the power to seek a garnishee award against the institution. In other words, its property will be seized against any compensation that may be payable. That would substantially restrict the institution's ability to sell, move, transfer or do anything that means that it could avoid or dodge payment. Is that under active consideration?

Mr Carey: Stewart, all those options, I think, are under consideration. We have a very clear direction from Ministers, from the Committee and from victims and survivors. We have been trying to look at the very practical things, such as, as Joanne outlined, reporting duties in Scotland and what has incentivised individuals in those jurisdictions to contribute or not to contribute, so there is that carrot-and-stick approach. The Ministers can outline some of the issues that we have come across on assets. You would think that asset recovery is very straightforward, but it is very complicated. In lots of cases, assets could be liabilities, so there is a balance for the state to strike in taking on some of those powers. It is really for Ministers to reach a final view on that, but there are options that we are looking at. As junior Minister Reilly outlined, at the North/South Ministerial Council (NSMC) in particular, engagement on contributions has taken place with Norma Foley. There is also the work with Sheila Nunan, who is an independent negotiator who looked at asset bases. We are trying to learn all those lessons at this point.

Ms Bunting: It is important to come in on that point about assets and liabilities. On the face of it, it seems that, yes, an asset should be seized. However, the other side of it is that it should be borne in mind that some of those places might be asset-rich and cash-poor. We do not know the potential state

of some of their assets, and you could end up doing them a favour by seizing an asset. We do not want to be in that space. I think that everything is on the table to see how we can maximise contributions, but we need to be sensible about it and make sure that it is worthwhile.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): I am conscious that I need to bring other members in.

Mrs Cameron: Thank you, Ministers, for your attendance. I do not envy you the task that is in front of you. I know that it is huge. It is a hugely important but highly sensitive piece of legislation, and I am glad that it is before us today and that it is being dealt with, because it is long overdue, as we all know.

I had a number of questions in my head, but they have kind of gone by the wayside, as they have been answered in a lot of your remarks, which have been very useful and very positive. This is a sensible scheme, and it seems fair. Clearly, we want to make it better if we can. I am very conscious that redress is not just about monetary value. Although the admission base is not talking about the harm in this case, you cannot pay for the harm that has been caused. That is not possible, and it would not be appropriate. Has any thought been given to what wider reparation, redress and memorialisation look like? We all want to see people get a fair amount of money from this in the form of redress. We need to see fairness, but we also need to see institutions being held responsible for their actions and the state being held responsible for its actions.

There is no argument about any of that. We know the challenges in that, and you have just spoken about them. However, is any thought being given to what we, as a society, can do to make reparation? I am very cognisant of the fact that we talk about the state and institutions, but we do not talk about the harms that we, as society, put upon those girls and women. We, as people and as families, put children and young people into those institutions, often willingly, and that was clearly very wrong. Is any thought being given to including something that could encompass that part of it? It is OK to blame somebody else. It is easy to blame somebody else and to have a hate figure who will pay, but what do we do about ourselves and the fact that society let that happen and willingly indulged in all those processes?

Ms Bunting: The apology is key, as is the memorialisation, with, potentially, a programme of memorialisation. In all that, the public record, particularly the testimonies that were given to the independent panel, will be massively important, because it will be the historical record of people's lived experiences. People will not have been cross-examined, so it will perhaps not have been as re-traumatising for people to give that evidence. All that is forming a historical document. It will all be on the record, and people's testimonies have been taken into account to ensure that something like this is never again allowed to happen.

The acknowledgements are key. The trauma that people were put through and the harm that was done to them needs to be acknowledged. As you said, no amount of payment will ever make up for that. However, the issue here is that, as a collective body and as a society, it is about making sure that the damage that was done remains in our memory, is memorialised and is never forgotten and that the records are there for all to see for future generations to learn from and understand.

Ms Reilly: We need to make sure that the other aspects of redress and support that we can provide to victims and survivors is trauma-informed and that we provide advocacy support for their health and well-being. Joanne touched on how it is also about memorialisation, telling the stories and making sure that we capture all of them, as well as about awareness and taking away the stigma of what those women and girls went through.

With regard to the entire process, the inquiry was able to get those testimonies and tell those stories. On the point about fairness, there is no fairness here because it should never have happened. However, it is about that whole wrap-around service and support that we can provide for victims and survivors not just going into the process or for today but for the years after the inquiry concludes and following the individually assessed payments. It is about what we can provide to victims and survivors following the process and making sure that nothing like this ever happens again.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Welcome to the Committee. I have been in your chair, so I know what it is like. I am going to say this, and it is not in any way meant to be offensive, but I think that we need to drop the term "harm-based" and replace it with something else. I know that no one is deliberately setting out to be insensitive, but some victims and survivors have fed back to us that they feel that that term's constantly being referred to is insensitive. To be fair to them, they know that it is not being done with malice. I just want to respectfully ask for it to be changed.

Schedule 2 to the Bill looks at the list of groups. There are 11. You have all acknowledged, and the Committee found from its call for evidence, that people came forward who did not come forward as part of the consultative process or any other process. I think that is a good thing. They have come forward and told us that, at the minute, there are nine additional groups. Some of those people were very young girls. Nobody ever questioned the pathway for their being there, which is worrying. I know that you know that, but it needs to be mentioned. I am not asking you to give me an answer now. I am asking respectfully that you look at that. After people coming to us and finding that that is not reflected in the Bill or anywhere else, they just feel that they are being left out, so I am asking respectfully that you do that.

We on the Committee are interested in every issue. In fairness, though, we agree to take certain sections so that it will be easier for you. Have there been discussions with the Minister of Health about access to information? This all happened pre-devolution. This is the old state's responsibility. A number of records are held in different health and social care trusts. I declare an interest as a former keeper of records at PRONI. The people at PRONI are expert curators. They have training on article 2, 1923, GDPR and data protection. They have every training available, and they can train people how to do this work. They are also sympathetic and have the physical conditions to keep those records. For the life of me, I cannot understand why those records would not be passed to PRONI in advance of the inquiry. I am not asking you for an answer today, but if you could take that away, it would be useful.

I understand why clause 17, headed "Privileged information, etc", is in the Bill. I do not like it. I understand that it is a direct lift from the Inquiries Act 2005. Could some thought be given to amending what that clause says regarding closed material proceedings (CMPs)? If clause 17 cannot be amended, clause 16 could be. That was in the HIA, and I know that it was not used, because I checked. However, some victims and survivors have brought it up as an issue. Could we look at an amendment on closed material proceedings that the chair or panel could consider? Again, I am asking you not for any definitive answers now, just a commitment to have a good look at that matter.

Ms Reilly: Thanks, Carál. We appreciate that there has been difficulty accessing records and that it has caused deep distress and frustration for victims and survivors.

Ms Ní Chuilín: It has.

Ms Reilly: You asked about correspondence with the Minister of Health. Accessing records is key, and we will commit to having conversations with him. In any way, shape or form that we can streamline the process or make it as easy as possible for victims and survivors, we will commit to doing that. We will commit to speaking to the Minister of Health about accessing those records.

You spoke about replacing the term "harm-based". We can absolutely look at that language, because that concern is coming directly from victims and survivors.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Minister, referring to the individualised payment —

Ms Reilly: Harm-based payment.

Ms Ní Chuilín: — as "harm-based" is jarring with people. They know that it has not come from a place of malice. It is just something that we could maybe look at.

Ms Reilly: I will pass over to Joanne on the CMPs.

Ms Bunting: With regard to public interest immunity (PII), we are aware that these are particularly sensitive issues in Northern Ireland. A lot of damage has been done. I was involved with the Kingsmill's people and how they were treated over PII. We are aware of the situation around Noah Donohoe and so on and the impact that that has on public confidence, never mind on the people who are involved in those inquiries. That is under consideration, and we are seeing what we can do, because we are eager that, in all this, everybody who is involved has confidence in the process and is able to put their faith in it. That issue is under consideration to see whether there is some way to ensure that there is a degree of protection for all concerned.

The aim in all this is disclosure and getting to the truth. The purpose here is not for people to be able to hide or for issues to be hidden. The aim is always disclosure, but circumstances may arise, and

where they do, we need to ensure that there is some way in which they can be addressed, rather than the inquiry having nowhere to go with them.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Joanne, it would not be a big policy change. In my opinion, it would be a small amendment to clause 16 or clause 17. I am just putting the case on behalf of the Committee.

Ms Bunting: I assure the Committee that that is under active consideration.

Ms Ní Chuilín: Thank you.

Mr Brett: Thank you, both, for your presentation and for all your work on this issue. Clearly, you are very much across the detail and have taken considerable time to look at what the Committee discussed and, more importantly, what survivors and victims discussed. Thank you for that.

Context is important. The Bill as introduced was agreed unanimously by all Executive parties, is that not correct?

Ms Bunting: Yes.

Mr Brett: OK. Any changes or amendments that come forward from the First Minister and deputy First Minister will be subject to the Executive's approval as well.

Ms Bunting: Yes.

Mr Brett: OK. Perfect. That context is important.

I want to flag a couple of things. Unfortunately, as a Committee, we have not quite got through the entire Bill in our informal deliberations, so you may be here a bit prematurely, but we can get you back again.

Ms Bunting: Do not say that.

Mr Brett: I was not at the event in the Europa Hotel, but Carál spoke to a couple of victims who were there. Subsection (4) of clause 1 states:

"The inquiry is to cover the period from 1922 to 1995".

We raised that with Martin last week. The Committee had been alerted to the fact that a number of the institutions may have continued to operate until 1998. Have Ministers thought, if not to keep the inquiry open-ended, to change the end date from 1995 to 1998?

Mr Carey: Minister, if it will help you, maybe I can —.

Ms Bunting: I can have a stab at it. Members will appreciate that I am trying to read myself into the Bill. You guys have probably been more at it than I have. You will note that subsection (5) states:

"Nothing in subsection (4) prevents the inquiry from considering the effect on any person after 1995 of anything that occurred during the period referred to in subsection (4)".

Obviously, if things have occurred outside that period and if the inquiry is following a line of enquiry, we all anticipate that that line of enquiry will be followed. Those impacts will be beyond the dates prescribed. Those people are living with those impacts today. We envisage that there is scope in there.

Martin, is that a fair enough assessment?

Mr Carey: Yes, that is absolutely fair. Clause 1 provides flexibility for effects after 1995. That came up during the consultation. People were concerned that harms, impacts and article 8 issues, particularly around access to records that were recovered, would not be considered as part of the inquiry, but those are absolutely key to the inquiry.

Clause 18 also provides the inquiry with flexibility if it deems something to be relevant to its terms of reference. A good example is probably that of an individual who has come forward. I have looked at that individual case, and I am happy to come back formally on it. We are confident that the last institution closed in 1990 or 1991, but that experience may have been across the border in Donegal.

Mr Brett: Perhaps you can come back formally on that.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Sorry, members, page 7 of your pack sets out the information on the institution in County Donegal, which closed in 1999. There is a wee bit of context there.

Mr Brett: Is that in tabled papers for today or yesterday?

Ms Ní Chuilín: Today.

The Committee Clerk: It was in yesterday's papers for today's meeting.

Mr Gaston: Just on that point, while we have brought it up, nobody has spoken to that person directly. It is inferred that that is what the person meant.

Ms Ní Chuilín: She spoke in public, Timothy.

Mr Gaston: I do not think that anybody in the Department has spoken to her.

Mr Carey: If you are happy, we will maybe deal with that offline and contact the individual separately.

Mr Brett: Yes, that would be useful.

Joanne raised the issue of unintended consequences of possible amendments, and I suppose that is important on two fronts. First, amendments could be introduced that could undermine the legal competency of the Bill, which would risk the whole thing. Secondly, amendments that are well-intentioned but, ultimately, increase the overall cost of the scheme may then make the entirety of the scheme unviable. Has any consideration been given to what is proposed in the Bill, the impact on the Executive's Budget if any changes were made to either the amount of funding in this round for posthumous payments or the date, and what impact that would have?

Ms Reilly: Obviously, at this time, the Bill is costed at £80 million. Getting into the nitty-gritty about costs makes me uncomfortable because, again, as we have said, no amount of money is too much for those people. On the impact on the Executive, if, for instance, we reverted back to 1922, it would cost at least an additional £27 million. That would just be to move it back to that date, and it would not cover administrative costs. Then, if you are talking about posthumous claims, you are talking about it jumping potentially to an additional £70 million. The costs are extreme with regard to where we are financially, but any decisions like that would need to come back to the Executive because they are policy changes. As it stands, the Bill is estimated to cost around £80 million, and that is what we hope to budget for. Obviously, every other decision that is taken about finance will have to go back to the Executive to be agreed.

Mr Brett: That is useful.

Ms Bunting: Chair, if I may, the broader that this becomes, the more that the focus is diluted. The key to it is that it is about women who were stigmatised and institutionalised, and how they were treated. It is very gender-based, and the more that we broaden it out, there is a danger that the focus on what happened to those women is lost. We just need to be conscious of that as well.

Mr Brett: OK. Finally, both of you articulated a number of amendments under consideration. My pen skills were not quite as quick as you were reading it into the record. Will that be followed up in writing?

Ms Reilly: Yes, we will follow up in writing to the Committee.

Mr Gaston: Thank you for coming along today. I have a slight concern, and I understand that £80 million out of the block grant is a large amount of money, but the more that I hear about the scheme, the more that I feel that the Executive would rather look after the Budget than pay the compensation in

recognition of the harm that has been caused. The Bill is narrow in scope. We have had a number of people at the Committee giving witness statements, and, yes, we all agreed on the things that we would like to do. However, when we started looking into it, and the legislation appeared, we were somewhat limited in what we could deliver for people who had come to the Committee and given evidence. I am concerned that a lot of people will be left out of it, and I think that that is because the focus of the legislation has been to look at the location of the harm rather than its cause or the type of harm and the type of crime that has been committed. On that basis, I understand that there is not an endless amount of money, but people will be excluded because of the focus and direction that the First Minister and the deputy First Minister have taken.

One of the things that I want to pick up on today is something that has been talked about quite widely in the Committee about the regulations. Concerns have been raised that the regulations will really only appear and come forward afterwards.

Ms Bunting: Sorry, Timothy, I missed that about the regulations.

Mr Gaston: Writing the regulations. Once the Bill passes the Final Stage, the regulations will be produced. On that basis, that is where a lot of the nitty-gritty and the detail is. We had raised concerns before, and had encouraged officials to work with us in the drafting of those regulations so that the Committee is kept up to date, understands and has a bit of input. I am looking for an assurance, and want to raise that with you as the leads to bring the legislation forward that that will be the case.

The biggest disappointment when we get into the legislation will be that we will not be able to hold the institutions properly accountable. That is the biggest feeling coming out of the Committee. We have £80 million set as a budget, and, to be honest, not one penny of that in this first stage will come from the institutions. You mentioned Scotland. According to RalSe papers, Scotland has, to date, £122 million in voluntary contributions, and that is just to date, so Scotland will be going back to get more money from its institutions. The South intends to seek contributions, and let us face it, some of the institutions that are paying into the Scottish scheme will have connections here, or maybe be the same institutions that we will be chasing here. More needs to be done on that on the basis that £80 million is simply not enough for the scheme, and there is an onus on us to go to the institutions to ensure that we have a properly funded scheme and that we are not falling short on that basis.

Joanne, you talked about "securing contributions at the appropriate time".

Ms Bunting: Yes.

Mr Gaston: Scotland has shown that it has been able to get those up front without having run through the process in an inquiry.

Ms Bunting: Scotland's scheme is different. The issue for us is that our standard payment is an admission-based scheme, so the only evidence required at that point is whether somebody was admitted and had gone through the institution. Therefore, it is difficult to demand reparations or demand contributions from the institutions when there is no evidence base to present to them to say, "This is where you were culpable". That is why the timing is key, Timothy. It is so important that we can go to them and say, "This is the evidence. This is what has been found by an independent inquiry. This is what has been found by an independent panel. This is where you are liable". Also, on the contribution amounts, when we have worked through the application process, that will be the point at which we will be much clearer on the numbers involved and will be saying to them, "Contribute".

I appreciate what you are saying about the £80 million and its coming out of that. On the policy issues and your thinking that we are more focused on budget than on the issues at hand, I want to give you some reassurance. We are scheduled to have conversations with the Finance Minister. A decision was taken not to have a conversation with the Finance Minister around the budgets for all those things until such time as the policies are in place, because we do not want the monetary aspects to impinge upon the policy decisions. That demonstrates that we would rather focus on making sure that the right thing is done.

You can understand the difficulties that we face. Even when Scotland had it in its legislation, it was not getting massive amounts back. For us, the key is to have the leverage and the evidence and go and take the learning from Scotland to ensure that we can maximise where possible. I do not know whether Aisling or Martin want to come in.

Mr Carey: Just to add to what junior Minister Bunting said about the Scotland redress scheme. Of the £120 million that it has received in contributions, £100 million was basically from a local authority or a council-type organisation, so the actual contributions from institutions were quite a small proportion of that, and the overall amount will be significantly higher. The Scottish redress scheme will probably get about 10% from institutions. The other thing on that is that that was tied to waivers. The difference between the scheme that Ministers are introducing or the £60 million in redress is that an individual does not need to sign a waiver, so they can still access the civil courts if they like. However, in the Scottish redress model, that is one of the incentives for an institution to pay into the scheme.

Ms Bunting: To address your other issue, Timothy, on the next stage, the amounts that people will get and giving them fair payment, the first stage is admission based; the second stage is where people's lived experiences and the damage that was done to them is taken into account, and there is no cap on that thus far. That is where it will be individually assessed.

Ms Reilly: The other point is about the regulations. Whether the Committee can have sight of the regulations is something that we can bring back and discuss.

Mr Gaston: I move on to the records. I know that Carál has covered it. We have written to all the trusts and only one of them has digitised records. The rest are still in hard form. One of the witnesses mentioned that they had concerns about how the trust's records were being kept because they were exposed to the elements and vermin, mainly. Therefore, for the scheme to be successful, there is a pivotal piece for the Executive Office to work with the Department of Health so that all those records are pulled together and kept in as good a condition as possible. We should push that one.

Solicitors' firms will be acting on behalf of people. I have concerns that certain solicitors' firms will have a monopoly. What are your views?

Ms Bunting: I hold the same views as you do. This is not about solicitors' firms. I declare an interest in that my husband is a solicitor. I have concerns about that. As far as I recall, my husband is not involved in any of those cases. If he were to be, I do not know. It is important that that is on the record.

I share the same view. We have asked questions of officials about this, and we are still working through some of it in the process. My fear, particularly around the core participant issue, is that I really do not want to see a hierarchy or tiers of people in the inquiry. We are all conscious of that, and we want to be sure that everybody is treated fairly, with a trauma-informed approach. That is on our radar, too, and we are looking at it. I am concerned about that. This is not about the solicitors' firms, people being able to make money or an industry. This is about the people who have been through those institutions and who were taken from their birth mothers and adopted. It is about those people. The focus needs to stay there. To my mind, the bulk of that money, whatever money there is, should go to victims and survivors and not to solicitors' firms. All of us are agreed on that.

Mr Gaston: I have some final points.

Ms Bunting: Obviously, people who are engaged in work should be paid. Solicitors deserve to be paid for their work.

Mr Gaston: On advertising, you mentioned that it would be up to the Committee Chair, but the budget would come from the Executive Office, is that right? Is that included in the £80 million or will it be funded from outside that?

Mr Carey: There are elements, Timothy. There is a promotion cost included in the £80 million. Ministers can provide a view on this, but we have looked at other schemes, such as the HIA and victims' payments, about what promotion schemes have worked and were most effective. It has been interesting. There has been a bit of a mix. Leaflet drops were very effective in the HIA, but less so in victims' payments. There is a promotion budget within the £80 million.

Ms Reilly: We must get this to as many people as possible, not even just within the North, South and Scotland but even further afield. We must promote this and make sure that people reach out and engage with the process. That is extremely important. As Martin said, different things can work in different areas. Discussions are going on about the promotion.

Mr Gaston: I am just seeking assurance that, if there needs to be more money put into the budget, it will happen.

Ms Reilly: There is an assurance from us on the full promotion of the scheme. We will absolutely make sure that we reach as far and to as many people as we can, to ensure that as many people as possible engage with the process.

Ms Bunting: We cannot get more money for the budget, Timothy. That would take an Executive decision, from all the Executive parties, because the Executive, as a collective body, agreed the entire package.

Ms Murphy: Thank you, Joanne and Aisling, for providing us with an extensive briefing. I welcome the amendments that you have highlighted. Junior Minister Riley, you set out at the start that TEO should take a trauma-informed response to victims and survivors, and offer wraparound support even after the inquiry. You have outlined your amendments. How will victims and survivors be engaged with? How will they be informed of the proposed amendments?

Ms Reilly: There is constant engagement between officials and the victims' and survivors' groups. That engagement is probably on a monthly basis, but the sharing of information is more frequent than that. I have met some of the victims and survivors. Joanne has not yet had the chance to but will aim to do so. It is always about making sure that this is victim-centred and that, first and foremost, support is available for the victims and survivors. It is about having a complete wrap-around service for their needs. Engagement with victims and survivors is fairly constant at official level, and, as I said, it will continue to be with Joanne and myself, as we move through the process and take things forward.

Ms Murphy: You highlighted, again, that it has to be victim-centred. A lot of victims have come forward, especially during the Committee's call for evidence. Given the amendments, and the amount of them, it is vital that TEO continues that engagement and that, ultimately, the voices of the victims are being heard and listened to. Thank you for that.

When will an inquiry chair be appointed? How will that process take place?

Mr Carey: We went through a process in the springtime or early summer in which we asked for nominations from the Victims and Survivors Forum. We got 29 nominations. After some desk-based research, another 30 names were added to the list. Those names have gone through a sifting and shortlisting process. The plan is very much for the Bill to become an Act. An individual cannot formally be made the inquiry chair until the Bill becomes an Act, which we would like to think will be before next summer. However, a chair designate can be put in place. We are working through the list to try to select an inquiry chair.

Ms Reilly: We are doing as much as we possibly on our side so that, when the Bill becomes an Act, we will be ready to go and there will be no delays in the appointments and the relevant administration. On this side, we are doing as much of that work as we possibly can.

Ms Murphy: That is reassuring, because the process that you have outlined seems to be well under way.

My final question is on cross-border engagement, especially with the Irish Government. Week after week, we have heard evidence about babies and women being, essentially, trafficked by institutions, North and South. Will you give us an idea of the level of engagement that you have had with your counterparts in the Irish Government? Is that engagement intensifying in the lead-up to, hopefully, finishing off the Bill?

Ms Reilly: The reports from Queen's University and Ulster University state that that was happening, but not just one way: it was back and forth. That will likely be a key interest of the independent panel and the inquiry. There has been good engagement, particularly at official level. It has been raised at the North/South Ministerial Council, and we are still getting ministerial engagement, but that does not dilute the fact that that official engagement is ongoing. At some point, we hope to have the like of a memorandum of understanding (MOU) or some type of agreement between both jurisdictions. We are working towards that. There has been that engagement.

Ms Bunting: We are trying to get an MOU on the records.

Ms Murphy: To play devil's advocate, is there a timeline for that?

Mr Carey: There is a draft MOU in place. PRONI has been able to access a couple of things around private records — records that are held by institutions. We have digitised records in relation to Fahan in County Donegal. We are particularly interested in records that are held in Stamullen in County Meath, so we are trying to put arrangements in place to get those. The records in Fahan are from a private collection, and the collection in Stamullen is held by an institution — either Tusla or the Adoption Authority of Ireland. We are working through MOUs. I do not have a particular deadline, but, hopefully, between now and Christmas, there will be positive talks at official level. Some ministerial engagement on that may be required in the new year as well.

Ms McLaughlin: Thank you, Ministers, for coming along today. My Committee colleagues have covered a lot of ground. I agree with quite a bit of what has been said regarding posthumous claims, contributions from religious orders and the moral obligation to pay.

The redress Bill is multifaceted, as you have acknowledged, because it is about the apology, memorialisation and the stories, testimonies and evidence being put on record. It is not always about monetary redress, although that is really important. It is really about trying to get to the bottom and underneath the skin of a lot of that stuff.

Áine asked about the cross-border element, and how we address that, because, essentially, we are talking about crimes. What took place was child trafficking. We need to get to the bottom of that and understand it. You mentioned a draft memorandum of understanding. Will you share that with the Committee so that we can look at it?

It would be remiss of me not to mention that it is really unfortunate that no papers were sent in advance of your coming to the Committee. It would have been really helpful to have your presentation in written format in advance so that we, as the Committee that is dealing with these really sensitive issues, could get a handle on that and be able to question you on the detail. There was a lot of content there, but we did not have it in advance. That is really not good enough.

The final point that I want you to comment on, on which there has been no comment so far, is that, in the past, concerns have been raised about the progress of the inquiry and the redress scheme. What would happen if no Executive were in place? We have had experience of that in the past. Do you agree that the lack of reform and the instability of this place make it more difficult for victims and survivors to have confidence in the process when that instability is hanging over them? Can you address those issues?

Ms Reilly: If you do not mind, I will start, Joanne. I will bring Martin in on the draft MOU.

We apologise massively for your not having sight of the papers. As late as yesterday, we were working on the draft and having conversations with the First Minister and deputy First Minister about it. We apologise that we were unable to get that to you and that you did not have early sight of it.

Ms McLaughlin: Can I just interrupt you for one second, Aisling? This happens all the time.

Ms Reilly: With regard to the amendments —.

Ms McLaughlin: We just do not get papers. It is disrespectful. Respect works both ways.

Ms Reilly: I appreciate that, Sinéad. I apologise for that. As we go forward, we will endeavour to ensure that you have papers as early as possible.

As I said, our commitment today, and every day that we turn up here, is to ensure that we do the best for the people whom we represent. Of course, that includes victims and survivors and others who are affected. We turn up every single day, as you do, to ensure that we not only work for them but deliver. That is really important when it comes to the draft legislation and everything else that we deal with day to day. Our commitment is to turn up every day to work for the people whom we serve and represent.

Martin will respond on the Committee getting sight of the draft MOU.

Mr Carey: I am happy to share that, subject to the views of Ministers. I was going to say that it is a kind of boring document. It outlines data sharing agreements (DSAs) between Departments and with individuals. I am happy to share that. I do not think that there is any issue with doing so.

Ms McLaughlin: It is really important, because one of the institutions was in Fahan. That is nine miles from Derry, so for a lot of my constituents who are affected by this, that was the institution to which their babies were taken. Therefore, it is really important that we have an understanding of how that cross-border element works and what understanding there is North/South, as well as the interstate connections.

Ms Bunting: Absolutely. We cannot compel the preservation of records. The power to compel is only applicable in Northern Ireland, but we appreciate that there is a cross-border and cross-jurisdictional dimension, so it is important that the records are preserved and that we can get access to them. That is key for us too, Sinéad.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): There are a couple more matters before we let you go, junior Ministers. I asked you a question earlier in the week about historical clerical child abuse, junior Minister Reilly, and you mentioned that you were engaging with victims and survivors already. I have had some correspondence off the back of that, and there are members of the reference group who feel that you could go a lot further. In February or March, we will receive some evidence from a panel of survivors. I would really appreciate it if you could engage with them before that. I am talking about not just the chair of the interdepartmental working group but the actual victims and survivors of that form of abuse.

Ms Reilly: I have met some, but not all, of the members of the reference group, and I have met other individuals outside that group. I also know that some members of the reference group have written to the First Minister and deputy First Minister as well. That is the only way that we can go forward in engaging with victims and survivors. I know that that correspondence is with the First Minister and deputy First Minister to arrange that engagement with the reference group.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): I just wanted to put that on record, because I received some correspondence off the back of asking that question.

Junior Minister Reilly, you will be aware of a separate issue. I am not sure whether you were listening outside, but Phillip Brett has indicated that he wants to raise another issue with you, so I invite him to do that now.

Mr Brett: Thanks, Chair. It is disappointing that I have to raise this issue. The statement by the Public Prosecution Service (PPS) on Monday stinks to high heaven of a political cover-up. Junior Minister, it is my understanding that you were invited and received an invitation to attend the event on 19 October 2024 in your capacity as junior Minister. Is that correct?

Ms Reilly: Chair, with all due respect, I have come here as junior Minister to talk about the mother-and-baby institutions and the legislation, which is extremely important. I feel that, to end on this, is extremely crass. I came here in good faith as junior Minister to talk about the legislation.

Mr Brett: Chair, I gave advance notice to you that I would raise this issue. Junior Minister, your party colleagues gave you advance notice that I was going to raise it. I did not raise it during the deliberations on the Bill because this is such an important issue, but you have a responsibility to answer to this Committee, junior Minister. You received an invitation as junior Minister to attend that event. Is that correct?

Ms Reilly: I can confirm that I attended the event as a Gaeilgeoir and as a West Belfast MLA.

Mr Brett: Can you answer the question? Did you receive an invitation to attend as junior Minister?

Ms Reilly: Chair, the badgering —. I attended the event as a Gaeilgeoir and as a West Belfast MLA.

Mr Brett: The record will reflect that the junior Minister —.

Ms Reilly: I did not attend the event as junior Minister.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Sorry, just let —. I said that I would give time and space for this conversation, so we will be respectful.

Mr Brett: The record will reflect that, when the junior Minister was asked on three separate occasions at the Committee whether she received an invitation to the event in her role as junior Minister, she refused to answer. I believe that that is deliberately deceptive. The reason that I am doing that, Chair, is because of comments made by the PPS in its statement on Monday that —.

Ms Murphy: Chair, sorry, this is —.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Let me just let Phillip —.

Mr Brett: Sorry, you are not the Chair of this Committee, Áine, so I get to speak and you do not.

Ms Murphy: Hold on.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Please, we are trying to keep this as respectful as possible. Please finish, and then I will bring you in, Áine.

Mr Brett: There is an attempt by Sinn Féin to try to shut this down, Chair, but I will continue —.
[Interruption.] Sorry?

Ms Murphy: Go ahead.

Mr Brett: Thank you. Chair, the statement made by the PPS on Monday said:

"Attempts to obtain a list of attendees from the external group responsible for hosting the event were unsuccessful."

When a Minister receives an invitation to attend an event, advice is provided by officials. Some of that advice also includes a list of attendees and other people who have been invited to the event. One of the reasons that a prosecution for the criminal damage was not secured was because we did not have a list of attendees. I believe, Chair, that that might be in the possession of the Executive Office having been received by the junior Minister, and I want clarity on whether that was provided to the police during the police investigation.

I further understand that the invitation that was sent to the junior Minister, which she refuses to deny receiving, included an offer of four free tickets for Sinn Féin to the event. I want to know whether the junior Minister issued one of those tickets to the person responsible for attacking the portrait. I want to put those questions on the record. It is the responsibility of the junior Minister to answer those questions to the Committee. If she refuses to do so, the public will be very clear on why she is trying to cover up the issue.

Ms Reilly: I did not attend the event as junior Minister; I attended as a Gaeilgeoir and a West Belfast MLA. I came to the Committee today as junior Minister to talk about a really important piece of legislation connected to the truth recovery programme, and I did so in good faith. That is my purpose today. That is what I am focused on. I did not attend the event as junior Minister; I attended as a West Belfast MLA.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Thank you. I will bring in Áine.

Ms Murphy: The Minister has responded. I noted this at the start of the meeting — I do not want to go over old ground — but the Minister was there in her capacity as an MLA and as a Gaeilgeoir. I do not know whether there will be further questions on that, but it is pretty clear that it does not fall within the remit of the Committee. If there are any other questions, members are free to contact TEO directly.

Mr Brett: There will be a proposal coming to the Committee.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Through the Chair, please.

Timothy, you have indicated that you want in.

Mr Gaston: As I raised during declarations of interest at the start of the meeting, this goes to the heart of the procedural integrity of the Committee. You were at the event in question, junior Minister. My understanding is that the staffer that resigned from Sinn Féin worked to you. Can you confirm that that is correct?

Ms Reilly: Chair, I did not attend the event as junior Minister; I attended as a Gaeilgeoir and a West Belfast MLA. This is continued badgering. I came here, as junior Minister, to talk about this important piece of legislation and the truth recovery programme. I came here in good faith, and that is my focus for today.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): OK. Thank you.

Mr Gaston: I have a number —.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): You can have one follow-up question, and then I am going to —.

Mr Gaston: On that basis, junior Minister, you are refusing to answer the questions. It is, essentially, in the public domain that Naoise Cullen worked to you as a translator. Naoise was at the event. He then came forward —

Ms Murphy: Chair, those questions are not relevant to the Committee.

Mr Gaston: — and said, of his involvement —.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Wait one wee second, Timothy. Let me make this clear: the Committee has received legal advice in the past that members can ask questions and that it is up to those who are present how they wish to respond. Finish your point, and then I will make my comments.

Mr Gaston: My understanding is that your staffer was at the event. Your staffer then —.

Ms Reilly: Are these questions to me as a junior Minister, since that would relate to this Committee?

Mr Gaston: It would be helpful if you answered the questions and provided some clarity on that, because that is my understanding. It is your Pledge of Office from when you took up the role of junior Minister that is in question. Confidence is being trashed because it is alleged that a member of your staff was involved. A member of your staff subsequently resigned from the party, and I want to know on what basis he resigned. On what basis was he at the event? Was he one of the people who got a free ticket? Did you see Mr Cullen at the event? You know him, obviously. We have had that excuse here before when the First Minister stepped in and stopped you having to answer questions on the McMonagle paedophile scandal, when you were seen quite clearly in a picture with him. There is a trait here —

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Excuse me, sorry, Timothy.

Mr Gaston: — of you not wanting to —.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): You are going too far.

Mr Gaston: There is a —.

Ms Reilly: I reiterate that I did not attend the event as junior Minister; I attended the event as a West Belfast MLA.

Mr Gaston: You were at the event. You could clear those questions up quite easily.

Ms Reilly: I attended the event as a West Belfast MLA. I do not know how much clearer I can make that. I have answered the question.

Mr Gaston: You refuse to answer the question.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Timothy, please.

Ms Reilly: Thank you, Chair.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Timothy, please, I have been given advice by the Clerk of the Committee. The junior Minister has noted that she was not there in her Executive Office capacity, so questions pertaining to the event are outside the purview of the Committee. I appreciate that it is a matter that some members wish to pursue, but there are more appropriate channels within the Assembly by which to seek information —.

Mr Brett: Sorry, Chair, I disagree with that ruling because —

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): I have not finished. Let me just finish.

Mr Brett: — as I have made clear, she was invited as a junior Minister, and she has refused to rule out the fact that she was invited as junior Minister, so it is within the scope of the Committee. You can read from your scripted remarks, and the Minister can read from her scripted remarks, but, clearly, this is a matter for the Committee.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): Phillip, I have been respectful throughout.

Mr Brett: So have I, Chair.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): I am trying to be as careful as I can, as Chair of the Committee. I appreciate how emotive the issue is for people. I recognise that it is an issue of public interest. I represent South Belfast, which is part of the Belfast City Council area, so I recognise the importance of the matter. However, I spoke to the Committee Clerk this morning, and we went through it. I am mindful of my responsibilities and the Committee's responsibilities, and I think that we should return to the agenda, unless the junior Minister wishes to respond.

Ms Reilly: I have made my comments very clear. Unless there are any further questions about the legislation, thank you.

Mr Gaston: Can I put on record that I am deeply disappointed that the junior Minister has failed to take the opportunity to clear up what involvement her staff had in the destruction of the portrait in Belfast City Hall, which speaks volumes to the Committee? When the junior Minister took up office, she signed a Pledge of Office. What is the point of having a Pledge of Office or declarations of interest, if people just cherry-pick what bits matter to them and what bits do not? The procedural integrity of this Committee is in tatters because of it.

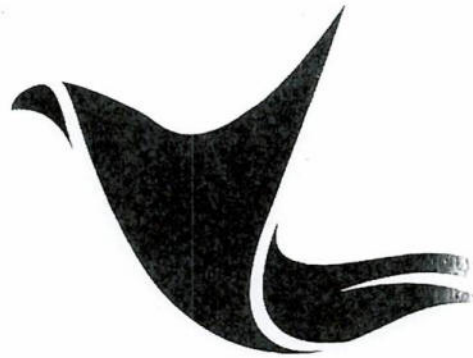
The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): What procedure have we not —?

Mr Gaston: I am not saying anything about you. I believe that you have chaired the Committee well. I am saying that members of the Committee who refuse to declare an interest bring the integrity of the Committee into question.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): OK. I repeat for the record that, where you need advice or guidance, I refer you to the Commissioner for Standards. Áine, did you want to come back in?

Ms Murphy: No, Chair. I have nothing further to add.

The Chairperson (Ms Bradshaw): OK. We will move on. Thank you.



KRW LAW

Human Rights Lawyers, Solicitor Advocates | Belfast

26 Nov Statement of behalf of our client Naoise Ó Cuilin

Posted at 18:51h in Media Archive by admin

We issue this statement in response to the false, erroneous and irresponsible information circulated in recent days.

It has been alleged – particularly on social media – that our client was “involved in the damage” to the portrait of DUP peer Lord Wallace Browne at Belfast City Hall.

This allegation is entirely false, baseless, and malicious.

For absolute clarity, and on our client’s behalf, I state unequivocally that our client did not cause any damage whatsoever to the portrait of Lord Wallace Browne. Any suggestion to the contrary is wholly unfounded.

Our client responded positively to a request by police to attend voluntarily for police interview and was prepared to give an account. However, the paucity of evidence against our client was such that I advised him that there was nothing requiring an account, and that he should therefore exercise his lawful right to silence. This statutory protection exists for all citizens.

It is deeply improper that certain parties are now attempting to misrepresent the exercise of this legal right as implying guilt. Such insinuations are entirely rejected.

Our client is a university graduate, has been in continuous employment since graduation, has no criminal record, and has never previously been accused of any criminal offence. The attempts to malign our client's character in the absence of any evidence are wholly unjustified.

Our client has worked continuously in the youth and community sector, on multiple projects which focus on addressing division, hate and sectarianism.

Our client is appalled by the false commentary directed at him, particularly given the clear position arising from the investigation.

Our client continues to take legal advice and reserves all rights in respect of the false claims and commentary published to date.

It is wholly inappropriate for any individual, organisation, commentator, or public figure to identify someone as a "suspect" in circumstances where the Public Prosecution Service has determined that there is insufficient evidence to bring any criminal charge.

Such conduct:

1. Undermines the presumption of innocence

The PPS decision means that my client is to be regarded as innocent in law. Persisting in identifying them as a suspect is fundamentally contrary to this principle.

2. Creates a significant risk of defamation

As the PPS found that the very modest evidential test was not met, any suggestion or implication of wrongdoing is legally reckless and potentially defamatory.

3. Threatens the proper administration of justice

Public figures and commentators have a responsibility to support, rather than subvert, the justice system. Imputing guilt after the prosecuting authority has ruled out charges risks fostering a trial by media—a practice that is unfair, unethical, and corrosive to the integrity of the courts.

4. Sets a dangerous precedent

~~From original document~~
Misrepresenting an uncharged person as a suspect creates an irresponsible public narrative and models poor standards in civic discourse.

We shall continue to monitor public discourse and will advise our client accordingly.

Niall Murphy

[PPS issues decision on Belfast City Hall portrait case | Public Prosecution Service for Northern Ireland](#)

PPS issues decision on Belfast City Hall portrait case

Publication date: 24 November 2025

The Public Prosecution Service (PPS) has taken a decision not to prosecute an individual investigated in connection with allegations of criminal damage to a portrait at Belfast City Hall in October 2024.

After careful consideration of a file submitted by the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), it was concluded by prosecutors that there was no reasonable prospect of conviction for any criminal offence on the evidence available.

The damage to the portrait was discovered after an event hosted by an external organisation at Belfast City Hall on Saturday 19th October 2024.

On 21st October 2024, First Minister Michelle O'Neill informed the Northern Ireland Assembly that a Sinn Féin employee made the party Chief Whip aware of their involvement in an incident regarding a portrait and that they had been suspended and then resigned.

The PPS and PSNI worked closely to establish what admissible evidence could be obtained regarding the alleged involvement of the reported individual and whether this could support a prosecution.

Despite significant efforts to develop a clear evidential picture, key gaps remained. These included:

- There was no CCTV coverage of the area around the portrait, as the relevant camera had been out of service for some time.
- Attempts to obtain a list of attendees from the external group responsible for hosting the event were unsuccessful.
- Police were unable to identify any individual who had witnessed the relevant events.
- An email sent by the individual to the Chief Whip tendering his resignation contained no admission.
- The email from the Chief Whip advising PSNI of the resignation stated that it had been tendered "as a result of" the incident.
- A witness statement subsequently made in February 2025 by the Chief Whip recorded that he had made no admission and denied knowledge of the damage.
- When interviewed by police, the individual exercised the right not to answer questions.

After a thorough consideration by senior prosecutors of the above evidential issues, it was concluded that there was no reasonable prospect of conviction for the following reasons:

There was no evidence of when, or in what circumstances, the portrait was damaged.

The witness evidence available did not incriminate the suspect.

A PPS spokesperson said prosecutions can only be brought where the available evidence provides a reasonable prospect of proving, beyond reasonable doubt, a breach of the criminal law.

The PPS emphasised that despite the high-profile nature of the incident, evidential shortcomings meant that the threshold for prosecution was not met.

ENDS



Commissioner for Standards

222 Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3XX

email: standardscommissioner@niassembly.gov.uk

Assembly Confidential

Mr Nick Mitford
Committee Clerk
Room 247, Parliament Buildings,
Ballymiscaw, Stormont,
Belfast, BT4 3XX

Emailed to: Nick.Mitford@niassembly.gov.uk

28th January 2026

Dear Nick

Ref Case Nos 202500119, 202500120

I am conducting investigations into complaints regarding a failure to declare an interest by Ms Caral Ni Chuilin MLA at meetings of the Committee for the Executive Office on 23rd October 2024 and 26th November 2025.

In furtherance of these investigations I would seek your assistance in obtaining the following:

1. Confirmation as to whether there was any prior notification to the Chair or Committee members of an intention by anyone to raise matters regarding a PPS determination on the Belfast City Hall portrait investigation at the meeting on 26th November 2025.
2. Confirmation as to whether any item relating to the Belfast City Hall portrait incident was on the agenda or notified to Committee members for discussion at either meeting.

Please feel free to contact me if you wish to discuss this request.

Yours sincerely

Stephen

STEPHEN WRIGHT
Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards

[REDACTED]

From: Mitford, Nick
Sent: 09 February 2026 17:17
To: Wright, Stephen
Cc: [REDACTED]
Subject: RE: Previous correspondence
Attachments: FW: Toady ; FW: TEO; 202501126 Chair's Brief (final).docx

Document 8

Good afternoon Stephen – response below:

1. *Confirmation as to whether there was any prior notification to the Chair or Committee members of an intention by anyone to raise matters regarding a PPS determination on the Belfast City Hall portrait investigation at the meeting on 26th November 2025.*

Please find attached an email from Phillip (Cttee member) to Paula Bradshaw (Cttee chair) – via myself – stating that he intends to raise this matter at the Committee Meeting on 26 November 2025 in relation to this matter. Please also find attached an email from Aine Murphy (Cttee member) in response to Phillips earlier email.

Please also find attached a copy of the Chair's Brief for the meeting that day which provides the interests already declared for that meeting

2. *Confirmation as to whether any item relating to the Belfast City Hall portrait incident was on the agenda or notified to Committee members for discussion at either meeting*

You will see from the email above that I notified all Committee members before that afternoon's meeting by distributing the email from Phillip to the chair to. I can confirm that the matter was not on the agreed agenda for either meeting.

If you need anything else, please do not hesitate to contact me

Many thanks
Nick

From: Wright, Stephen <Stephen.Wright@niassembly.gov.uk>
Sent: 09 February 2026 13:05
To: Mitford, Nick <Nick.Mitford@niassembly.gov.uk>
Subject: RE: Previous correspondence

Nick

No, the letter would have come via email from [REDACTED]

I've attached a copy for convenience.

Any issues with the request, come back to me

Thanks

Stephen

From: Mitford, Nick <Nick.Mitford@niassembly.gov.uk>
Sent: 09 February 2026 13:01
To: Wright, Stephen <Stephen.Wright@niassembly.gov.uk>
Subject: RE: Previous correspondence

Hi there Stephen

Did you send them hard copy? I haven't had an email from you?

Thanks
Nick

From: Wright, Stephen <Stephen.Wright@niassembly.gov.uk>
Sent: 09 February 2026 13:00
To: Mitford, Nick <Nick.Mitford@niassembly.gov.uk>
Subject: Previous correspondence

Hi Nick

Can you confirm you received my correspondence of 28th January re complaints 202500119 and 202500120?

Thanks

Stephen



STEPHEN WRIGHT
Commissioner for Standards

email: stephen.wright@niassembly.gov.uk
phone: 028 90 525930

Room 222
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3XX

From: Mitford, Nick
Sent: 26 November 2025 11:58
To: Bradshaw, Paula; Dickson, Stewart; Brett, Phillip; Cameron, Pam; Gaston, Timothy; McLaughlin, Sinead; Murphy, Aine; niChuilin, Caral; Sugden, Claire
Subject: FW: Toady

Good morning Members

Please see below an email to the Chair of the Committee, sent earlier this morning

Many thanks
Nick

From: Brett, Phillip <phillip.brett@mla.niassembly.gov.uk>
Sent: 26 November 2025 10:17
To: Mitford, Nick <Nick.Mitford@niassembly.gov.uk>
Subject: Toady

Dear Chair

I am writing to inform you of my intention to raise with Junior Minister Reilly, her attendance at the event of 19th October 2024 at Belfast City Hall, at which the portrait of Lord Browne was subjected to criminal damage.

I wish to seek her knowledge if any of the incident and what contact, if any, she had with the police during the investigation

It is my understanding she received an invite to attend this event as Junior Minister and thus is a matter for the committee to look at.

I am giving you notice that I will be raising this at the end of the evidence session in order not to distract from the important work of the committee on this issue of the Bill.

But given the public interest in this issue and in the event any member of the committee wishes to remove themselves or object to this discussion, I am given advance notice of my intention to you.

Best wishes

P

Sent from [Outlook for iOS](#)

[REDACTED]

From: [REDACTED]
Sent: 27 November 2025 10:53
To: +Comm Executive Public Email
Subject: FW: TEO

From: Murphy, Aine <aine.murphy@mla.niassembly.gov.uk>
Sent: 26 November 2025 13:31
To: Bradshaw, Paula <paula.bradshaw@mla.niassembly.gov.uk>
Cc: Mitford, Nick <Nick.Mitford@niassembly.gov.uk>
Subject: TEO

Hi Paula,

In response to Philip Brett's email to you this morning, I have spoken to my colleague Aisling Reilly, as my understanding is that she attended the event in the City Hall on October 19, 2024 as a constituency MLA and as a Gaeilgeoir.

Ms Reilly has confirmed this and that she attended the event as a constituency MLA and a Gaeilgeoir.

Her attendance is not, therefore, relevant to the work or remit of this committee. If Mr Brett wishes to pursue this, the committee would first need to check with TEO if Ms Reilly attended in her role as Junior Minister.

In the absence of such confirmation, Ms Reilly's attendance is not the business of this committee.

Mise le meas,

Áine Murphy MLA

From: Nick Mitford
Committee Clerk

To: Paula Bradshaw
Committee Chairperson

CC: Stewart Dickson
Deputy Chairperson

Date: Wednesday 26 November 2025

**Chairperson's Brief for Committee Meeting on Wednesday
26 November 2025 at 2:00pm in Room 21**

Note to Chairperson

For convenience, all action points are in **bold**.

**Check we have a quorum (5 Members including the
Chairperson)**

[For info - cannot take decisions without a quorum of 5]

CHECK Members appearing remotely can hear and be heard.

[For information, we are expecting Pam and Sinead to attend remotely.]

PROVIDE A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE DAY'S BUSINESS.

"The Committee will have three items of business today. The first item of business will be the final consideration of the End of Session Report for February 2024 to July 2025. The second item will be an oral briefing with the junior Ministers on the Inquiry (Mother and Baby Institutions, Magdalene Laundries and Workhouses) and Redress Scheme Bill. The third and last item of business will be the Deliberation of the Bill on clauses 18-29 which will be held in closed session"

ADVISE MEMBERS that the meeting will now move into public session.

*****CONFIRM WITH STAFF THAT MEETING IS NOW IN PUBLIC SESSION BEFORE PROCEEDING*****

REMIND MEMBERS the meeting will be broadcast online and throughout Parliament Buildings.

WELCOME members of the public in the public gallery or watching online.

STATE that mobile phones must be muted and that no recording or photography of the meeting is allowed.

If Members are content, **proceed through the agenda** as follows.

1. Apologies

TELL MEMBERS – Claire Sugden

[Ask if Members are aware of any other apologies]

2. Declarations of Interest

ASK if Members have any interests to declare in relation to this meeting.

(As a reminder, Aine Murphy has an ongoing declaration in relation to sessions relating to the Bill – this will be noted automatically every week therefore Aine does not need to re-declare)

(As a reminder, Pam Cameron has an ongoing declaration as having worked previously in TEO as a junior Minister from February 2024 until September 2025 - this will be noted automatically every week therefore Pam does not need to re-declare).

(As a reminder, Pam Cameron has an second ongoing declaration on the Bill as it stands, she has a family member

who may be entitled to a redress payment as part of the second part of this legislation).

3 Chairpersons Business

REFER MEMBERS to pages 6 - 7 of the meeting pack.

INFORM MEMBERS that you will be attending the 'Making a Difference 2025' Conference organised by the Community Relations Council on Tuesday 2 December at Black Mountain Shared Space in Belfast.

ADVISE MEMBERS that any Member who wishes to attend can do so by responding to the email in the correspondence.

SEEK MEMBERS agreement to note this item.

4. Draft Minutes

INFORM MEMBERS that draft minutes of the meeting held on the 19 November 2025 are on **pages 9 to 17 of the pack**.

ASK MEMBERS if they are content that the minutes are a true reflection of the proceedings of the meeting held on 19 November 2025.

If so, indicate that you will sign the minutes.

[If there are suggested, and agreed, amendments to the minutes seek the permission of the Committee for you to sign the minutes once amended.]

5. Matters Arising

5.1 – 5.3 PSNI geographical spread and Committee's Call for Evidence

REMIND MEMBERS that at last week's meeting the Committee agreed to look at the geographical spread of countries where reports were received as part of the PSNI's investigation into Mother and Baby Institutions, Magdalane Laundries and Workhouses, 1922 –1990 compared to the Committee's Call for Evidence publications in relation to the Bill.

REFER MEMBERS to pages 19 – 20 of the pack for a Clerk's brief which shows a table outlining this information. The only two countries where three reports were received in relation to the PSNI investigation, compared against the countries where the Committee's Call for Evidence was not publicised, are Greece and Spain. The International and the Northern Ireland, ROI and UK Media Lists of where the Committee's Call for Evidence was publicised can be found at pages 21 – 43 the pack.

SEEK MEMBERS agreement to note these items.

5.4 Rosetta Trust - Wording of HIA Memorial

REMIND MEMBERS that at last week's meeting the Committee agreed to write to the Department in relation to the final wording of the HIA Memorial following a conversation you had with the Rosetta Trust on the matter.

ADVISE MEMBERS that an email from Rosetta Trust outlining the discussion can be found at **pages 44 – 45 of the meeting pack.**

SEEK MEMBERS agreement to note this item.

5.5: Support Services for Survivors of Mother and Baby Institutions, Magdalene Laundries and Workhouses

REMIND MEMBERS that at last week's meeting the Committee agreed for Committee staff to contact WAVE Trauma Centre to seek clarification on whether there will be any changes to the support services provided as a result of the Mother and Baby Institutions, Magdalene Laundries and Workhouses Inquiry and the Redress Scheme Bill.

ADVISE MEMBERS that correspondence from VSS can be found on **pages 3 – 5 of the tabled pack** clarifying that the individual had accessed support from WAVE, and had been engaged with the Independent Panel to provide testimony.

It is VSS's understanding that the testimony provided ultimately may not be taken forward, as the experience within the specific institution fell outside of the date range as laid out in the draft

legislation. The indication that VSS services would not be accessible arose out of a misunderstanding and miscommunication on their part and they are reflecting on how the parameters within draft legislation relating to the Inquiry and Redress will interact with eligibility for support and services.

In the interim VSS continue to apply the broad parameters which have been in place since 2022 and will ensure that the client who raised this matter is reassured that services remain available.

SEEK MEMBERS agreement to note this item.

5.6: Equality Commission

ADVISE MEMBERS that during discussions last week, a suggestion was made that the Committee asked the Equality Commission to include its view on the recent Supreme Court ruling over religious education in schools in Northern Ireland when it briefs the Committee early next year.

ADVISE MEMBERS that it might be prudent for the Committee to receive its own legal advice on this matter, to assist in its Inquiry.

SEEK AGREEMENT for the Committee to request legal Advice on this issue.

6. End of Session Report:

REFER MEMBERS to:

- **Pages 50 - 65 for the End of Session Report for February 2024 to July 2025**

ADVISE MEMBERS that the Committee needs to consider its End of Session Report for the period February 2024 to July 2025 which outlines the activities the Committee has undertaken during this period. The costs the Committee has incurred during this time are also outlined in the report.

REMIND MEMBERS that at last week's meeting the Committee agreed for the Clerk to provide a breakdown of expenditure for the period 3 February 2024 – 31 August 2025, specifically Committee travel and also to update the wording in relation to the status of the Inquiry into Gaps into Equality Legislation.

ASK THE CLERK to speak on the changes made.

ASK MEMBERS if they have any further views or comments on the updated report?

[IF there are any actions, at end ASK the Clerk to recap for the record. If Member's are agreed:

ADVISE MEMBERS that you will now go through the Report section by section for Member's agreement.

ASK MEMBERS "Is the Committee content with the Title Page, Contents Page, Remit, Powers and Membership section as drafted?"

ASK MEMBERS "Is the Committee content with the Introduction and Key Activities section as drafted?"

ASK MEMBERS "Is the Committee content with the Likely priorities for the next session and Expenditure section as drafted?"

ASK MEMBERS are they content to agree that the Committee for the Executive Office End of Session Report 2024-25 be the first report of the Committee and published on the Committee webpage.

7. Oral Briefing: Junior Ministers - Inquiry (Mother and Baby Institutions, Magdalene Laundries and Workhouses) and Redress Scheme Bill

SEEK MEMBER'S AGREEMENT FOR HANSARD TO RECORD THIS SESSION

REFER MEMBERS to:

- **Pages 67 – 69 of the pack for a Clerk's Brief**

Welcome to the Meeting:

- Joanne Bunting, Junior Minister, TEO
- Aisling Reilly, Junior Minister, TEO
- Martin Carey, Truth Recovery Programme Director, TEO
- Elaine Allen, Head of Redress Team, TEO

REMIND MEMBERS to be succinct with their questions and officials to be brief and to the point with their answers.

INVITE the witnesses to brief Members.

INVITE Members to ask questions.

You will wish to thank the witnesses for attending the meeting.

DISCUSS WITH MEMBERS any potential actions.

[IF actions are agreed, at end **ASK the Clerk** to recap for the record]

SEEK MEMBERS' AGREEMENT Members, if you are content we will take a short comfort break now for 5 minutes.

If Members are content, **TELL MEMBERS** the Meeting is suspended, and will resume in 5 minutes.

*****CONFIRM WITH STAFF THAT MEETING NOT BROADCASTING *****

*****AFTER 5 MINUTE COMFORT BREAK*****

ADVISE MEMBERS we are now back in **CLOSED** session

8. Deliberation: Inquiry (Mother and Baby Institutions, Magdalene Laundries and Workhouses) and Redress Scheme Bill

SEEK MEMBERS AGREEMENT FOR THE BILL CLERK TO ATTEND THE SESSION

REFER MEMBERS to:

- **Pages 71 – 87 of the pack** for a Clerk's Brief
- **Pages 88 – 96 of the pack** for a summary of the oral evidence received
- **Pages 168 – 227 of the pack** for a summary of the written evidence received
- **Pages 6 – 10 of the tabled pack** for a response from the Department to Clause 1(2)
- **Pages 6 – 12 of the tabled pack** for a Blog Post on the Bill by RalSe

ADVISE MEMBERS that as part of the Committees' deliberation on the Bill the Committee's next step is to review the evidence received regarding the provisions of the Bill and to form an initial position on each clause. Today we will consider the **clauses 18 – 29** of the Inquiry section of the Bill.

ADVISE MEMBERS that officials from the Department are available to answer any specific queries. I suggest we have a discussion on these clauses first, and then invite officials in if required.

ASK THE CLERK to speak the on the Informal Deliberations of the Bill in relation to clauses 18 to 29.

DISCUSS WITH MEMBERS any potential actions.

[IF actions are agreed, at end **ASK the Clerk** to recap for the record]

ONCE IN OPEN SESSION, ask the Clerk to recap any decisions made for agreement from the last session.

SEEK AGREEMENT from Members for the Bill clerk to draft amendments. Wording as follows:

‘ Following deliberations, the Committee has considered the possibility of amendments to a number of clauses in Part 1 of the Bill. I propose that we instruct the Bill Clerk to draft amendments as discussed to Clauses.....

Paula - I will provide a list of clauses before we go back into open session

9. Correspondence

REFER MEMBERS to pages 677 – 683 of the pack for a Summary of Committee Correspondence.

ADVISE MEMBERS you will draw their attention to a number of items.

9.7: Civic Initiative - Overview of Organisation and Request to Brief Committee

REFER MEMBERS to page 759 of the pack

ADVISE MEMBERS that the Committee has received correspondence from the Civic Initiative requesting an opportunity to provide evidence to the Committee.

REMIND MEMBERS that the Clerk was supposed to meet representatives of Civic Initiative previously but this meeting was cancelled due to illness.

SEEK MEMBERS AGREEMENT to note this item and for the Clerk to arrange an informal meeting with the Chair and deputy Chair in the first instance.

9.8 – 9.9: Individuals - Redevelopment of Marianvale Site

REFER MEMBERS to pages 613 – 616 of the pack

ADVISE MEMBERS that the Committee has received response to its correspondence sent to on 14 November requesting information on the redevelopment of the Marianvale site from [REDACTED] and [REDACTED].

ADVISE MEMBERS that the both individuals have outlined that no planning application should be passed for the redevelopment of the Marianvale site until the true location of any unmarked burials is found via an in-depth investigation of all the land and records available.

REMIND MEMBERS that the Committee wrote to Newry, Mourne and Down council on the 31 October to ask whether it has received any briefings on the site and whether the council have conducted any surveys on the site. The Committee is yet to receive a response.

SEEK MEMBERS AGREEMENT to note these items of correspondence and agree to forward the correspondence to both the Department and also to Newry, Mourne and Down council.

9.11: Amnesty International - Clerical Child Abuse Report
Recommendations & 9.12: Individual - Follow-up to
Recommendations on Clerical Sexual Abuse

REFER MEMBERS to page 790 of the pack

ADVISE MEMBERS that the Committee has been copied into correspondence sent from Amnesty International to the First Minister and deputy First Minister regarding clerical child abuse report recommendations.

ADVISE MEMBERS that Amnesty International are calling on the First Minister and deputy First Minister to implement all of the recommendations in the research report without delay, to meet with members of the Inter-Departmental HCCA Reference Group, including victims, survivors and Amnesty International to agree a process for implementation of the recommendations.

REFER MEMBERS to pages 791 – 793 of the pack for further correspondence sent to the Committee from an individual on behalf of a cross-denominational network of survivors of clerical sexual abuse, regarding a follow-up to the recommendations on clerical sexual abuse.

ADVISE MEMBERS that included in this correspondence is a copy of a letter sent from the individual to the First Minister and

deputy First Minister in relation to moving forward with recommendations to address child sexual abuse by clergy.

ADVISE MEMBERS that during Question Time on Monday Junior Minister Reilly indicated they had engaged with victims and survivors and that work has been completed on three separate pieces of research: one of which examined records held by faith organisations and statutory agencies; one recorded experiences and expectations of victims and survivors; and one examined the safeguarding policies and practices of faith groups.

On 10 November, the First Minister and deputy First Minister met the independent chair of the interdepartmental working group (IDWG), to discuss the reports and the IDWG recommendations. Officials continue to engage with victims and survivors and their deliberations on the reports continue. No decisions on next steps have been made.

ADVISE MEMBERS that they may wish to consider holding an oral evidence session with representatives of the cross-denominational network of survivors on the issue.

ASK MEMBERS for their views? If agreement, then;

SEEK MEMBERS AGREEMENT to note these items of correspondence and agree for the Committee team to arrange a

this oral evidence session as part of the January – April 2026 session.

9.16: TEO Response - Water Sustainable Drainage and Flood Management Bill

REFER MEMBERS to page 812 – 813 of the pack

ADVISE MEMBERS that the Committee has received a response from the Department to its correspondence of 13 November regarding the Water, Sustainable Drainage and Flood Management Bill. TEO have confirmed there will be no implications for TEO due to this Bill.

SEEK MEMBERS AGREEMENT to note this item of correspondence and agree to write to the Committee for Infrastructure to inform them of TEO's response and a nil return for the Committee.

ADVISE MEMBERS you wish to note the following items of correspondence [please read the list below for the record or ask Clerk to read into record]:

9.2: Hansard Report - Retention and Disposal Schedule - Historical Institutional Abuse (HIA) Redress Board - 12 November 2025.

9.3: Hansard Report - Race and Ethnicity Action Plan: PSNI - 12 November 2025.

9.4: Hansard Report - Race Relations, Draft Refugee Integration Strategy and Delivery Framework: Executive Office Update - 12 November 2025.

9.5: TEO - Partnership Agreement between TEO and the NI Community Relations Council - 5 November 2025. This document is presented to the Assembly and does not have a statutory provision to be laid.

9.6: TEO News Release - Lay Magistrate Commissioner appointed to the Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission.

9.10: Welsh Parliament - Cancellation of the Interparliamentary Forum. The Chairperson advised Members at last week's meeting that this had been cancelled.

9.11: TEO response to correspondence of 31 October in relation to the Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy and domestic abuse in family courts.

9.14: Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse – Copy of briefing paper originally planned for 19 November, the rescheduled briefing will now take place on 4 March 2026.

9.15: TEO response to correspondence of 12 September regarding information on the £20million allocation for Lough Neagh.

9.17: An Invitation 'The Katie Trust' to an event on Wednesday 3 December from 9:00am– 1:00pm, in the Long Gallery. Any Member wishing to attend should RSVP using the email within the correspondence.

9.18: Committee for Finance – Correspondence providing further clarification to a number of points regarding the Administrative and Financial Provisions Bill. Members are advised that the Committee team has chased a response with the DALO in relation clauses Clause 6,8, 9 and 14.

9.19: Written Ministerial Statement from the First Minister and deputy First Minister following the publication of the Covid-19 Module 2 Report. The Statement was emailed to Members on 21 November.

ASK MEMBERS if there is any correspondence they wish to discuss.

[IF actions are agreed, at end ASK the Clerk to recap for the record]

10. Draft Forward Work Programme

REFER MEMBERS to pages 831 – 833 of the pack for an updated Forward Work Programme.

ADVISE MEMBERS that the Assistant Clerk will talk through the changes on the Forward Work Programme.

Once this has been done ASK "Are Members content to proceed with the remaining briefings as set out in the work programme?"

11. Any Other Business

ASK MEMBERS if they have any other business.

13. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

INFORM MEMBERS that the next meeting of the Committee will take place on Wednesday 3 December 2025 at 2.00pm in Room 21.

ADJOURN MEETING

ADVISE MEMBERS THAT THE MEETING IS NOW

ADJOURNED

Dear Commissioner,

Re: Complaint by Mr

Timothy Gaston MLA – Case ID 202500119

I acknowledge receipt of your correspondence confirming the commencement of an investigation into the complaint made by Mr Gaston MLA. I welcome the opportunity to respond and to assist you in clarifying the circumstances surrounding the Committee meetings of 23 October 2024 and 26 November 2025.

This response addresses the complaint strictly by reference to the Northern Ireland Assembly Code of Conduct and the applicable rules concerning declaration of interests and advocacy.

1. Committee Business – 26 November 2025

On 26 November 2025, the Committee for The Executive Office was convened for the purpose of legislative scrutiny of the Mother and Baby Institutions and Redress Bill. The published agenda concerned that Bill exclusively. Witnesses were present to give evidence in relation to that legislation.

The issue concerning damage to a portrait at Belfast City Hall was not listed as an agenda item, was not the subject of any motion, and was not business formally before the Committee.

The matter was introduced during the declarations segment by another Member. No decision, evidential process, resolution or formal consideration relating to that incident was before the Committee.

The Committee's function on that date was legislative scrutiny. It was not acting as an investigative body, nor was it considering or determining any matter relating to the portrait incident.

My participation throughout the meeting was confined to scrutiny of the Bill.

2. Declaration of Interests – Proper Application of the Code

The Code requires Members to declare any interest that might reasonably be thought by others to influence the Member's actions, speeches or votes in relation to business before the Assembly or a Committee. The obligation is contextual. It arises only where an interest is relevant to the business under consideration.

The correct question is therefore:

Would a reasonable and informed observer conclude that my participation in legislative scrutiny of the Mother and Baby Institutions and Redress Bill could be influenced by a separate matter which was not before the Committee and upon which the Committee was taking no decision?

In my respectful submission, the answer is plainly no.

When invited to declare interests on 26 November 2025, I stated that I had no interest to declare. That response reflected my understanding that no relevant interest arose in respect of the legislative business before the Committee. References made during the meeting concerned commentary circulating online.

At that stage, there had been no formal public confirmation of any alleged connection. In any event, Members are not required to declare interests based upon unverified commentary, particularly where no relevant Committee business arises.

3. Meeting of 23 October 2024

On 23 October 2024, the Committee was likewise engaged in legislative and policy scrutiny. Any reference to the portrait matter arose incidentally during proceedings. The Committee was not conducting an inquiry into that incident, nor was it considering any motion or decision relating to it.

No resolution was proposed or taken. No determination was made. No vote occurred. Any contribution I made was procedural in nature and directed toward maintaining relevance to the Committee's agenda business.

In circumstances where the Committee was not seized of the portrait matter as business, no obligation to declare an interest arose under the Code.

4. Advocacy

The complaint suggests that my interventions may have constituted advocacy on behalf of a family member. The advocacy rule is engaged where a Member promotes or opposes a matter in return for payment, benefit, or in misuse of their position to secure advantage.

There is no evidence that:

- I sought to secure any benefit or advantage for any individual;
- I attempted to influence any formal Committee decision relating to the portrait matter;
- Any financial or material interest arose;
- The Committee was asked to determine any issue relating to that incident.

Participation in procedural discussion about the scope of Committee business does not constitute advocacy within the meaning of the Code.

5. Reasonable Observer

The reasonable observer test must be applied to the actual business before the Committee. An informed observer would recognise that:

- The Committee was engaged in legislative scrutiny;
- The portrait issue was not an agenda item;
- No decision or determination was required;
- My participation concerned only the Bill under scrutiny.

It would not be reasonable to conclude that legislative scrutiny of institutional redress legislation could be influenced by an unrelated matter not before the Committee.

6. Conclusion

The portrait incident was not business before the Committee on either date in question. No relevant interest arose in respect of the legislative scrutiny being conducted.

No advocacy occurred and my conduct was consistent with the Code of Conduct and with the proper discharge of my duties as a Member of the Committee.

I therefore respectfully submit that no breach of the Code arises, and I remain available to provide any further clarification that may assist.

Is mise le meas

Carál Ní Chuilín

Dear Commissioner,

Re: Complaint by Mr

Trevor Clarke – Case ID 202500120

I acknowledge receipt of your correspondence confirming the commencement of an investigation into the complaint made by Mr Trevor Clarke MLA. I welcome the opportunity to respond and to assist you in clarifying the circumstances surrounding the Committee meetings of 23 October 2024 and 26 November 2025.

This response addresses the complaint strictly by reference to the Northern Ireland Assembly Code of Conduct and the applicable rules concerning declaration of interests and advocacy.

1. Committee Business – 26 November 2025

On 26 November 2025, the Committee for The Executive Office was convened for the purpose of legislative scrutiny of the Mother and Baby Institutions and Redress Bill. The published agenda concerned that Bill exclusively. Witnesses were present to give evidence in relation to that legislation.

The issue concerning damage to a portrait at Belfast City Hall was not listed as an agenda item, was not the subject of any motion, and was not business formally before the Committee.

The matter was introduced during the declarations segment by another Member. No decision, evidential process, resolution or formal consideration relating to that incident was before the Committee.

The Committee's function on that date was legislative scrutiny. It was not acting as an investigative body, nor was it considering or determining any matter relating to the portrait incident.

My participation throughout the meeting was confined to scrutiny of the Bill.

2. Declaration of Interests – Proper Application of the Code

The Code requires Members to declare any interest that might reasonably be thought by others to influence the Member's actions, speeches or votes in relation to business before the Assembly or a Committee. The obligation is contextual. It arises only where an interest is relevant to the business under consideration.

The correct question is therefore:

Would a reasonable and informed observer conclude that my participation in legislative scrutiny of the Mother and Baby Institutions and Redress Bill could be influenced by a separate matter which was not before the Committee and upon which the Committee was taking no decision?

In my respectful submission, the answer is plainly no.

When invited to declare interests on 26 November 2025, I stated that I had no interest to declare. That response reflected my understanding that no relevant interest arose in respect of the legislative business before the Committee. References made during the meeting concerned commentary circulating online.

At that stage, there had been no formal public confirmation of any alleged connection. In any event, Members are not required to declare interests based upon unverified commentary, particularly where no relevant Committee business arises.

3. Meeting of 23 October 2024

On 23 October 2024, the Committee was likewise engaged in legislative and policy scrutiny. Any reference to the portrait matter arose incidentally during proceedings. The Committee was not conducting an inquiry into that incident, nor was it considering any motion or decision relating to it.

No resolution was proposed or taken. No determination was made. No vote occurred. Any contribution I made was procedural in nature and directed toward maintaining relevance to the Committee's agenda business.

In circumstances where the Committee was not seized of the portrait matter as business, no obligation to declare an interest arose under the Code.

4. Advocacy

The complaint suggests that my interventions may have constituted advocacy on behalf of a family member. The advocacy rule is engaged where a Member promotes or opposes a matter in return for payment, benefit, or in misuse of their position to secure advantage.

There is no evidence that:

- I sought to secure any benefit or advantage for any individual;
- I attempted to influence any formal Committee decision relating to the portrait matter;
- Any financial or material interest arose;
- The Committee was asked to determine any issue relating to that incident.

Participation in procedural discussion about the scope of Committee business does not constitute advocacy within the meaning of the Code.

5. Reasonable Observer

The reasonable observer test must be applied to the actual business before the Committee. An informed observer would recognise that:

- The Committee was engaged in legislative scrutiny;
- The portrait issue was not an agenda item;
- No decision or determination was required;
- My participation concerned only the Bill under scrutiny.

It would not be reasonable to conclude that legislative scrutiny of institutional redress legislation could be influenced by an unrelated matter not before the Committee.

6. Conclusion

The portrait incident was not business before the Committee on either date in question. No relevant interest arose in respect of the legislative scrutiny being conducted.

No advocacy occurred and my conduct was consistent with the Code of Conduct and with the proper discharge of my duties as a Member of the Committee.

I therefore respectfully submit that no breach of the Code arises, and I remain available to provide any further clarification that may assist.

Is mise le meas

Carál Ní Chuilín

This interview is being recorded. I'm Stephen Wright, commissioner for standards. The day is Wednesday 15th of April 2026, and the time is 11 am. I'm interviewing, if you could please state your name for the tape.

Carál Ní Chuilín.

And there's no one accompanying you, and you're content to proceed that there's no one here?

Yes.

Okay. How would you like me to refer to you throughout?

Carál.

Okay, and I'm Stephen. I want to ask you to formally take the oath, or the affirmation. They're both in front of you, whatever way you want to do it, please.

I do solemnly, sincerely, and truly declare and affirm that the evidence I shall give shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

Thank you very much. I just want to remind you as well this is a confidential interview, and nothing spoken in this interview should be discussed with anyone. Additionally, the transcript of the interview will be appended to my investigation if I rely on it to return recommendations, which I likely will. I'll almost certainly refer to it in some respect or other, so it will be in the investigation report. In my invitation, you would also have got a note outlining the procedure for both the investigation and the interview. Are you happy enough that you've got all of that?

Yes.

The interview will just be me asking you a few questions on some of the areas outlined in the complaints, and I have read your written response, so I'm aware of what you've said in there. At the end of the interview, I'll make sure that you have an opportunity to reflect

on, clarify anything else, if you want to say or add to anything that we have previously discussed. As I've said, I'll also send you a transcript of the interview quite quickly. It'll probably only be a week or so after the interview when I get it back.

Appreciate that.

You can make any suggestions, any revisions or anything that you want to. Before I actually start the questions, is there anything you want to ask me?

No.

Brilliant, okay. The complaints, and there are two of them, one from Timothy Gaston and one from Trevor Clarke dated 26th November, which you have.

Yes.

Okay, essentially focused on a failure to declare an interest in the committee for the Executive Office meetings of 23rd October 2024 and 26th November 2025, in respect of discussions about an incident essentially in Belfast City Hall on 19th October 2024, where reported it was damaged. The complaints also allege a breach of some of the principles of public life, and also a breach of rules 1, 3 and 14, but they're substantively about rule 5, so that's where most of the focus will be. Before asking you any questions about that, I just want to refer you to paragraph nine of the general procedures direction, where I'm required to seek to resolve any complaint regarding a failure to declare an interest under the rectification procedure, which is outlined in that document. I've made you aware of it. Is there any representations you want to make at this stage in relation to that?

No.

If after the interview there's anything you want to make representations about regarding that procedure, you're free to do that, so we can carry on then. Can I also just ask that - I have it open in front of me - are you familiar with the guidance in chapter two of the

Members Code of Conduct in relation to members and committees when considering declarations of interest?

Yes, I am.

You're aware of that. Okay, excellent, thank you. Can I just clarify that this interview is not about the events in City Hall or who was not responsible for it. I'm not interested in that. It is to establish whether there's any evidence to support or refute the allegations that have been made, but I do need to confirm whether or not there's anything which could be considered an interest. On that basis, my first question is really about on the 21st October, the First Minister told the Assembly that a party employee was suspended in relation to the City Hall incident, and that party member then resigned. PSNI were notified and an investigation ensued which involved an interview of that person, and then on 24th November the PPS issued a no prosecution decision in relation to that. I do need to ask, what is your relationship to the person in question there?

It's my son.

Okay, thank you. That's as much interest in that as I have, because it's none of my business, quite frankly, what went on or didn't go on there. I'll just move on then to the two meetings in question. The first committee meeting was on 23rd October. What was your knowledge of the City Hall incident on the date of that meeting on the 23rd? I don't need you to say what you knew about it. Were you aware of the incident and the statement made by the First Minister at that point?

I was.

You were, okay. Now, I'm not aware that the City Hall incident was on the agenda for that meeting, nor was there...

It wasn't.

Excellent. Nor was there, as far as I can see, any notice from anyone that they intended to raise it.

No, there wasn't.

Okay. The matter was, however, raised firstly by the chairperson very briefly near the start of the meeting, and then again briefly by Mr Harvey. The mentions were very limited, and you made a very limited comment in relation to Junior Minister Reilly's attendance at the event. Not as junior minister is all you said, so I think you put it in your written response it was incidental, and I would agree your mention of that was incidental entirely in that meeting. My question is just, incidental or otherwise, it was raised. Do you think that a declaration of interest would have been required in those circumstances, because it was an issue of significant public interest?

I don't.

Right, okay. Feel free to elaborate at any point if you want to.

Yes. No, I don't.

If you want to just wait until the end, then that's absolutely fine.

Yes.

If we move on then to the committee meeting of 26th November. Now, in relation to that meeting, Phillip Brett did send an email to the clerk, Nick Mitford, that morning, who then circulated an email to all committee members at 11:58. Phillip Brett was indicating his intention to raise an issue with Junior Minister Reilly about her attendance at that event. Did you get that?

I did.

Before the meeting, so you were aware of it? Okay, that's no problem. A discussion took place at the beginning of the meeting led by Timothy Gaston, that the incident would be raised, and whether, I don't know if he said you or not, but he did say whether anyone

has an interest to declare. Clearly there was going to be a discussion on it at some point or other. What were your thoughts on declaring an interest then at that point?

Again, my thoughts were it wasn't relevant, or relevant even to the committee business. There was no charges. Even an investigation which resulted in no case being brought forward I didn't think was relevant to the committee.

Okay, so the committee, obviously it's a scrutiny committee, as all the committees are. I had a look at the Assembly guide to the role of committee chairpersons just on this point, based on your representations. There's not really a lot relevant, but it does say in that Assembly guide it is for the chair to advise members that they're out of order if the point they raise is not relevant. In this case, the chair stated, and I quote her, 'I said I would give time and space for this conversation.' She did permit the question and discussion, so I can only assume that the chair clearly didn't consider the question to be out of order. In that context, did you object to the question at any point?

No, I didn't.

I knew that one of your colleagues did. I think Áine Murphy objected, but I just wanted to clarify. In those circumstances where, whatever your thoughts on whether or not it was relevant, the chair has permitted the question, did you not consider then that maybe a declaration of interest would have been required? Whether or not you agreed with the [over speaking 0:08:21.0].

No, so I didn't agree with the chair permitting it. We were there to discuss legislation regarding Mother and Baby Bill, and I just felt this was politicking, which is supposed to be outside of the committee. I literally stuck as close to the rules as possible.

Sure, but I mean, I'm just...

Yes, I know you're obliged to ask.

Yes. The conversation went on for some time. There was eight minutes of conversation. I've looked at all this a number of times. It actually went on for 19 minutes in total, but

there was a break in the middle of that where the witnesses left, but a total of 19 minutes this was being debated. I suppose the point I'm driving at through all of this is, whether or not you agree that it's relevant, this took a considerable chunk of the committee time, and the chairperson permitted that to happen. The only comment you did make was in relation to a proposal to write to the TEO to ask for a copy of any invitation that was received to the event, and any brief that was provided. Your point, I didn't write down the exact quote, but it was in relation to members having regard to article two and article eight rights and implications for people who may have been invited to that event. Again, you didn't think you needed to make that declaration?

No, GDPR. It's in relation to GDPR, data protection, and again, it was completely outside the remit of what we were there to discuss.

Okay, there's not much more here. Just on rule five, rule five isn't about your view, it's others' views as to whether or not your interest could influence your approach. I can guess the answer this. Do you accept that others could reasonably view the circumstances as requiring a declaration of interest by you in those specific circumstances?

No, I don't. First of all, if we're all guided by the code of conduct and if they're sticking to the rules, then they wouldn't have raised it, but this is purely political. Now, I understand I'm in a political arena, as is every member of the committee, and politics do inform different people's approaches. In terms of declaring any interests, had there been formal charges, absolutely I would have recused myself from the committee, but this is all around speculation and what could have, should have, or would have. I just feel in terms of the chair allowing that discussion was wrong. Even in terms of the protracted nature of the discussion I felt was inappropriate. However, I still did not feel I should have declared an interest at all.

Right, can I just, and this is just to be crystal clear. If the PPS decision hadn't been issued by the point of that second meeting, so I think it came out on the 24th, two days before the meeting. If the PPS hadn't issued their decision at that point, would you still have considered that there was no need to require an interest?

Yes.

You would have, right. I just want to be clear, I don't want to represent you in any way.

No, I was consistently taking that approach.

Okay, no problem. I do just want to ask you very briefly about Trevor Clarke, and his complaint alleges a breach of rule 1 and rule 13. Well, he alleges 14 as well, but you addressed that in your responses. One is about your conduct under consideration of public interest, and 13 is about acting in a way which improperly interferes with the Assembly or any of its functions. Just specifically in relation to those two, because you didn't directly speak to them in your response to me, is there anything you want to say in relation to that?

I just completely disagree.

Just for clarity, he's talking about, as far as I understand it, that first meeting on 23rd October where the First Minister was present. Anything you want to say just about that?

No. I mean, this was investigated before.

Was it?

Yes.

Which aspect?

There was a complaint made about my conduct at that meeting before, and it was investigated by the previous commissioner.

Was it?

Yes, it was.

Right. Well, if that's been addressed before, all of this will be excluded then from any...

I was interviewed under oath by the commissioner.

Were you?

Yes, I was.

Well, I wasn't aware. I'll check all that. If that's all been previously dealt with, you have my apologies, and this will be excluded from any investigation around this.

I deliberately didn't put it in my correspondence because I wasn't - I'm 90 per cent sure that I was, but as you appreciate, given the politics of what happened, there were several complaints.

All I can say then is I'll look into that. Believe it or not, I don't have access to previous complaints.

No, I do believe it.

So I was unaware, and it certainly wasn't told to me. If even aspects of this have been looked at before, they'll be excluded from my complaint. I'm not going over and re-investigating or taking a different decision in relation to something that's been done before.

That's fine. I just wanted to take this opportunity to point out that.

I'm glad you did, because that would be entirely inappropriate for me to have another look at that. I'll check all that out, and I may contact you just to clarify...

That's fine.

...your understanding of what's been done before, based on whatever I can find. Thank you for raising that. The final thing really I want to just say is Timothy Gaston also references some of the principles in public life: openness, accountability, leadership, and integrity. Anything specifically you want to say in relation to that, in terms of both of those meetings and your failure to, in terms of the allegation, declare an interest?

No. I'm very familiar with the Nolan Principles. I believe not only did I act with integrity, I didn't respond to the behaviour of some of the members of my committee, which I found very difficult, so I do not believe I breached any of the Nolan Principles at all.

Okay. I have no more questions. Is there anything else you want to reflect on or add or anything like that?

No.

Okay, brilliant.

Thank you.

Then I will stop the tape.

[END OF TRANSCRIPT]

[REDACTED]

From: Wright, Stephen
Sent: 18 May 2026 11:22
To: [REDACTED]
Subject: FW: Response to correspondence

From: Caral Ni chuilin <[REDACTED]>
Sent: 13 May 2026 18:15
To: Wright, Stephen <Stephen.Wright@niassembly.gov.uk>
Subject: Re: Response to correspondence

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13/5/2026

Commissioner A Chara

Thank you for your clarification regarding the status and purpose of the Findings of Fact issued pursuant to paragraph 7.14 of the General Procedures Direction.

Having considered the findings as presently drafted, I do not seek to challenge findings 1, 2, 4, 5 or 6.

In relation to finding 3, while it is accepted that the Sinn Féin employee was publicly confirmed to be my son, I submit that the finding would benefit from greater precision as to timing, given that public confirmation only arose following the KRW Law statement issued on 26 November 2025.

Further, it is respectfully submitted that the findings as presently drafted omit a number of material contextual facts relevant to the circumstances in which the issues arose before the Committee for The Executive Office.

In particular, it is requested that consideration be given to including findings to the effect that:

1. The meetings of 23 October 2024 and 26 November 2025 concerned Executive Office business and legislative scrutiny;
2. The Belfast City Hall incident was not an agenda item before the Committee on either date;
3. No motion, vote, determination or formal Committee consideration relating to the incident took place at either meeting;
4. The Committee was not conducting any investigative or adjudicative function in relation to the incident.

It is respectfully submitted that these are objective factual matters which form part of the relevant context surrounding the issues raised during proceedings.

Is mise le meas

Carál Ní Chuilín

On Wed, 13 May 2026 at 09:18, Wright, Stephen <Stephen.Wright@niassembly.gov.uk> wrote:

Ms Ní Chuilín MLA

The Findings of Fact are simply those matters which are demonstrably factual and do not constitute any reasoned decision or finding on the allegations.

In this case as you point out, the findings of fact are limited chronological findings and it is only on those limited matters which I am offering you the opportunity to challenge as required under paragraph 7.14 of the General Procedures Direction.

My full report including a reasoned decision on the allegations will be submitted pending receipt of your view on those limited findings of fact.

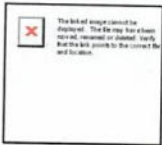
Once submitted to the Clerk, the full report will be sent to you by the Clerk with the opportunity to respond and also offering you the opportunity to appear before the Committee to respond to the report.

I hope this clarifies the position and look forward to your response.

Best Regards

Stephen

STEPHEN WRIGHT



Commissioner for Standards

email: stephen.wright@niassembly.gov.uk

phone: 028 90 525930

Room 222

Parliament Buildings

[Ballymiscaw](#)

[Stormont](#)

[Belfast](#)

[BT4 3XX](#)

From: Caral Ni chuilin <[REDACTED]>
Sent: 12 May 2026 14:35
To: Wright, Stephen <Stephen.Wright@niassembly.gov.uk>
Subject: Response to correspondence

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12/Case ID: 202500119 / 202500120

Commissioner A Chara

I refer to your correspondence of 11 May 2026 enclosing what are described as “findings of fact” arising from your investigation into the above complaints.

Having carefully considered the correspondence and enclosed findings, I must respectfully express significant concern regarding both the form and substance of what has been provided.

Your correspondence invites me to “challenge” findings within 14 days pursuant to paragraph 7.14 of the General Procedures Direction. However, the correspondence does not identify whether you have determined that either complaint is upheld, whether you consider that any provision of the Code of Conduct has been breached, which specific rule or rules are said to arise, the basis upon which any such alleged breach is said to occur, the relevance or materiality of the findings identified, or the reasoning process by which those findings are said to engage the Code.

The enclosed findings are, in substance, limited chronology findings, most of which are either uncontroversial or incapable of meaningful challenge in isolation. Crucially absent is any indication as to the conclusion you propose to draw from those findings.

In those circumstances, I am left in the impossible position of being asked to “challenge” findings without being informed of:

- (a) the alleged misconduct said to arise from them;
- (b) the legal or procedural basis upon which any breach is asserted;
- or
- (c) the reasoning said to connect the findings to any alleged contravention of the Code.

For example, while finding 6 records that no declaration of interest was made, your correspondence does not explain whether you consider that a declaration was in fact required, why any such obligation is said to arise, whether the alleged issue is said to engage the rules concerning declaration, advocacy, integrity, openness or any other provision of the Code, nor how the contextual circumstances of the Committee proceedings are said to engage the Code at all.

Equally absent from the findings are a number of plainly material contextual matters including:

- that the Committee meetings in question concerned legislative scrutiny and Executive Office business;
- that the Belfast City Hall incident was not an agenda item before the Committee;
- that no motion, vote, determination or formal Committee consideration regarding that incident took place;
- and that the Committee was not conducting any investigative or adjudicative function in relation to that matter.

Those matters are plainly central to any proper assessment under the objective test contained within the Code.

Without sight of the conclusions proposed by you, the rules allegedly engaged, or the reasoning said to underpin any adverse finding, I cannot meaningfully exercise the right contemplated under paragraph 7.14.

In the circumstances, my position is expressly reserved pending clarification of:

1. Whether you propose to uphold either complaint;
2. The specific provisions of the Code alleged to arise;
3. The reasoning said to connect the identified findings to any alleged breach;
4. The basis upon which any declaration obligation is said to have arisen;
5. Whether any findings beyond those enclosed are proposed to be relied upon.

For the avoidance of doubt, it is not accepted that the 14-day period contemplated by paragraph 7.14 has commenced in circumstances where the information necessary to permit meaningful engagement with the proposed findings and their alleged significance has not been provided.

I would therefore ask that the above matters be clarified, following which my position will be substantively addressed.5/2026