



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS AND PRIVILEGES

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

**WEDNESDAY, 30 SEPTEMBER 2020
ROOM 21, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS**

Present: Ms Sinéad Ennis MLA (Chairperson)
Mr William Irwin MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mrs Pam Cameron MLA (via teleconference)
Mr Colm Gildernew MLA (via teleconference)
Mr Declan McAleer MLA (via teleconference)
Mr George Robinson MLA (via teleconference)

Apologies: Mr Stewart Dickson MLA
Mr Patsy McGlone MLA
Mr John Stewart MLA

In Attendance: Mr Shane McAteer (Assembly Clerk)
Ms Aoibheann Baker (Assistant Clerk)

The meeting commenced at 10:34am in open session.

1. Apologies

As above.

Colm Gildernew left the meeting at 10:34am

2. Declaration of Members' Interests

Colm Gildernew rejoined the meeting at 10:35am

Members were advised of the ongoing requirement to declare relevant financial or other interests as and when they arise on the Committee.

Pam Cameron declared an interest in relation to being a member of the proposed All-Party Group (APG) on Terminal Illness and Chairperson of the proposed APG on Lung Health being considered at agenda item 5.

Colm Gildernew declared interests in relation to: being a member of the proposed APG on Lung Health and of the proposed APG on Terminal Illness, both of which were being considered at agenda item 5; and being a member of a proposed APG on Women's Health.

Colm Gildernew left the meeting at 10:36am

3. Draft Minutes

The minutes of the meeting on 1 July 2020 were agreed under the provisions of temporary Standing Order 115(9) on 20 July 2020.

4. Matters Arising

Members noted a Committee Secretariat paper setting out the decisions made by the Committee under temporary Standing Order 115(9) since the last formal meeting on 1 July 2020. The decisions included:

- Approval of the APG on Fair Banking and Finance;
- Approval of the APG on Early Education and Childcare; and
- Approval of the Minutes of Proceedings of the meeting on 1 July 2020.

Members received an update in relation to matters arising from the meeting on 1 July 2020 including:

- Meeting with The Speaker - the Chairperson informed the Committee that a meeting with The Speaker to discuss joint work by the Assembly Commission and the Committee on an unacceptable behaviours policy and related review of the Code of Conduct has been arranged for 22 October 2020 and a further update will be provided at the next meeting of the Committee;
- Proposed fact-finding meetings with counterparts in other legislatures;

George Robinson left the meeting at 10:37am

Colm Gildernew rejoined the meeting at 10:38am

George Robinson rejoined the meeting at 10:38am

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Committee Secretariat will proceed with organising informal virtual meetings with counterparts in other legislatures on the fringes of future Committee meetings.

- Limitations of broadcasting three meetings virtually using StarLeaf - Members discussed issues in regards to connectivity when using teleconferencing and the StarLeaf video conferencing platform.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content to await a formal response from the Clerking and Member Support (CAMS) office on the possibility of a fourth broadcasting stream.

5. All-Party Group Update

Members noted a briefing paper from the Committee Secretariat on APGs.

Pam Cameron declared an interest as a member of the proposed APG on Addiction and Dual Diagnosis.

Members considered applications for three new APGs, which had been submitted to the Committee for approval, namely:

- APG on Terminal Illness;
- APG on Lung Health; and
- APG on Addiction and Dual Diagnosis.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it is content to approve the application for an APG on Terminal Illness subject to the re-submission of the updated registration form, which includes the applicable designation of members.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it is content to approve the application for an APG on Lung Health

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it is content to approve the application for an APG on Addiction and Dual Diagnosis.

Members considered correspondence from the Chairperson of the APG on Visual Impairment

Agreed: The Committee agreed to the request from the Chairperson of the APG on Visual Impairment that the group be afforded a short extension until 5 October 2020 to hold its AGM.

Meeting was suspended at 10:54am

Meeting recommenced at 10:59am

6. Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 (Code of Conduct and Requirement to Register Interests) Direction 2012

Members received a background briefing from the Committee Secretariat on this agenda item.

Members noted the Register of Interests of the recently appointed Commissioner for Standards, Dr Melissa McCullough, which would be published on the Committee's webpage.

7. Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 (Code of Conduct and Requirement to Register Interests) Direction 2012 – Briefing from Assembly Research

Members received a briefing from the Assembly Research & Information Service (RaISe) on this agenda item. The briefing included comparative research in relation to requirements on standards commissioners and equivalents in other jurisdictions to comply with codes of conduct and to register interests.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek the views of the Commissioner for Standards on any potential improvements to the 2012 Direction.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to give further consideration to undertaking a review of the 2012 Direction, including in light of any follow up views from the Commissioner for Standards and having regard to the strategic priorities which the Committee has agreed for the remainder of the mandate.

8. Review of the Assembly’s Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members – Stage 1

Members received a briefing from the Committee Secretariat on this agenda item.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek advice from the Commissioner for Standards on potential amendments to the Code and Guide.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider this matter further at its next meeting.

The meeting moved into closed session at 11:29am

9. Introduction to the newly appointed Commissioner for Standards, Dr Melissa McCullough

The Committee welcomed Dr McCullough and congratulated her on being appointed as the Commissioner for Standards. Dr McCullough outlined the approach which she will be taking to addressing the backlog of complaints received by her office since 2017.

10. Correspondence

10.1 Members noted correspondence from The Speaker in regards to the establishment of a Youth Assembly.

10.2 Members noted correspondence from the House of Commons Committee on Standards, on its Report on Sanctions in Respect of the Conduct of Members.

10.3 Members noted correspondence from the Committee on Procedures regarding a review of temporary Standing Orders 110 - 116.

11. Any Other Business

11.1 Conduct of Members in Committee proceedings

Members considered an issue raised by Paul Givan MLA in the Assembly on 7 September 2020 regarding the Commissioner's remit to investigate complaints of alleged misconduct by Members during Assembly committee proceedings, particularly complaints arising from the questioning of witnesses.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Clerk will write to Paul Givan MLA to explain the background to the current position and to indicate that the interaction between Members and witnesses in committees is an issue which could be considered further as part of the second stage of the Committee's ongoing review of the Assembly's *Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members*.

11.2 Software upgrade to the AIMS Register of Interests Database

Members considered a briefing paper from the Committee Secretariat on the need for a software upgrade to the 'AIMS' database for the Assembly's Register of Interests.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that a request will be made to the Assembly's Information Systems Office to prioritise the upgrade of the AIMS Register of Interests Database in order that necessary improvements are made as a matter of urgency.

11.3 Scheduling Issues

Members noted that the Committee's normal meeting time on a Wednesday AM presents scheduling issues for some Committee members as it clashes with their attendance at statutory committee meetings also taking place at that time. The Committee noted a potential solution in this regard, which would involve moving its meetings to between 12:30pm and 2pm on a Wednesday in one of the other committee rooms. This change in the meeting times would also enable members to participate via the StarLeaf video conferencing facility or in person.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to give further consideration to this matter.

12. Time, date and place of next meeting

The next meeting of the Committee will take place on Wednesday 4 November 2020 in Room 21 (start time to be confirmed).

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 11:50am

Mr William Irwin MLA

Deputy Chairperson, Committee on Standards and Privileges