



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS AND PRIVILEGES

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

**WEDNESDAY, 4 NOVEMBER 2020
ROOM 29, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS**

Present: Mr William Irwin MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Stewart Dickson MLA
Mr Seán Lynch MLA
Dr Steve Aiken MLA
Mrs Pam Cameron MLA (via StarLeaf)
Mr Declan McAleer MLA (via StarLeaf)
Mr Patsy McGlone MLA (via StarLeaf)
Mr George Robinson MLA (via StarLeaf)

Apologies: Ms Sinéad Ennis MLA (Chairperson)

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

The meeting commenced at 12:45pm in open session with the Deputy Chairperson assuming the role of Chairperson

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Declaration of Members' Interests

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

Steve Aiken declared an interest in relation to a complaint which he has raised against a Member.

Stewart Dickson declared an interest in relation to being a member of the proposed All-Party Group (APG) on Further and Higher Education.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 30 September 2020.

4. Matters Arising

4.1 Decisions made under Standing Order 115(9)

Members noted that an amended starting time of 12:30pm for Committee meetings was previously agreed under the provisions of Standing Order 115(9).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to a further revised starting time of 12:40pm for Committee meetings.

4.2 Update regarding a meeting with the Speaker on the progression of an Unacceptable Behaviours Policy.

Members noted that a meeting between the Chairperson and the Speaker took place on 22 October 2020 to discuss a joint working group with the Assembly Commission on an Unacceptable Behaviours Policy and potential implications for reviewing the Code of Conduct. Further correspondence on this matter was discussed at agenda item 10.2

4.3 Broadcasting a fourth stream.

Members noted that they were still awaiting a formal response on this matter from the Committee and Members' Support Office but that the Committee's decision to move to a 12:40pm start time had facilitated the use of the StarLeaf platform on one of the existing three broadcasting streams.

4.4 Software upgrade to the AIMS Register of Interests Database.

Members noted that correspondence had been issued to the Assembly's Information Systems Office on this matter and that a meeting will take place with the Committee secretariat in due course with a view to prioritising software development work to upgrade the database.

5. All-Party Groups Update

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

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

- An APG on Further and Higher Education; and
- An APG on Modern Slavery

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it is content to approve the application for an APG on Further and Higher Education

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it is content to approve the application for an APG on Modern Slavery, subject to the submission of the correct registration form which indicates the applicable designations of the members.

The meeting moved into closed session at 12:52pm

6. Review of the Assembly's Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules relating to the Conduct of Members

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

Members also received a briefing from the Commissioner for Standards, Dr Melissa McCullough, on her submission in relation to this agenda item.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that comparative research will be undertaken to inform its consideration of the position in relation to declaration of interests during occasions other than in Assembly proceedings, including during meetings of APGs.

Agreed: The Committee agreed in principle to recommend to the Assembly that the various registration thresholds referenced in the Guide to the Rules be set as rounded cash sums.

Agreed: The Committee agreed in principle to recommend to the Assembly that categories 3 and 4 of the Guide to the Rules be amended to require Members to register the value or estimated value of gifts/benefits/hospitality and visits.

Members noted that a draft Committee report to the Assembly, setting out the recommended amendments to the Code of Conduct and the Guide to the Rules will be prepared for the Committee's consideration and formal agreement at an upcoming meeting.

7. Referral of a complaint to the Committee for further consideration

Members noted the Committee protocol on the handling of protectively marked documents.

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

Members also received a briefing from the Commissioner for Standards, Dr Melissa McCullough, on her correspondence dated 5 October 2020 in relation to this agenda item.

The Committee considered the complainant's request, under sub-paragraphs 3.13 and 3.14 of the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 (General Procedures) Direction 2016 ('the General Procedures Direction'), that it further considers the decision by the previous Commissioner that the complaint was inadmissible.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that, in accordance with sub-paragraph 3.14 of the General Procedures Direction, it considered the complaint to be inadmissible as per the previous Commissioner's decision.

8. Discontinuation of complaints

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

Members also received a briefing from the Commissioner for Standards, Dr Melissa McCullough, on her correspondence dated 23 October 2020 in relation to this agenda item.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that, in accordance with sub-paragraphs 4.2 and 4.3 of the General Procedures Direction, it was content that the Commissioner for Standards discontinues consideration of the eight separate complaints cases discussed.

9. Draft strategic plan

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue correspondence to The Executive Office requesting an update on the implementation plan in respect of applicable commitments in the *New Decade, New Approach* deal (specifically the provision for three independent lay members on the Committee on Standards and Privileges and the prohibition on the use of the Petition of Concern for standards motions).

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the draft strategic plan be approved.

10. Correspondence

10.1 Members noted correspondence from the Chairperson of House of Commons Committee on Standards, regarding its call for evidence on the inquiry into the Code of Conduct for Members of Parliament.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that a factual response to the call for evidence will be issued, as outlined by the Clerk.

10.2 Members considered two items of correspondence from the Speaker, as Chairperson of the Assembly Commission, in respect of a proposed joint working group to develop an Unacceptable Behaviours Policy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to the Speaker to confirm its consent to progressing this work as proposed.

11. Any Other Business

. There were no items of business.

12. Time, date and place of next meeting

The details of the next meeting of the Committee will be confirmed at a later date.

The Deputy Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 13:47pm

Ms Sinéad Ennis MLA

Chairperson, Committee on Standards and Privileges