



Northern Ireland
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Feargal McGuinness
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By email:

5 June 2026

Dear Feargal,

RE: SL1 The Salaries (Public Services Ombudsman) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission proposes to make a Statutory Rule under powers conferred by Schedule 1, Section 6 of the Public Services Ombudsman Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 (the 2016 Act). The Statutory Rule is subject to the negative resolution procedure and is enclosed.

Purpose of the Statutory Rule

The Statutory Rule relates to the salary payable to the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (hereafter, the Ombudsman is used for the individual office, NIPSO is used for the organisation) and is being brought forward in compliance with the 2016 Act.

Schedule 1, Section 6 of the 2016 Act requires that “the Assembly Commission must by order determine the salary payable to the Ombudsman”. As the statutory body responsible for supporting the work of the Assembly, and as the body with a corporate personality which the Assembly itself or Assembly committees do not have, it is normal that the Assembly Commission undertakes certain functions in relation to officers of the Assembly such as recruitment or determination of salary. However, the Assembly Commission does not have responsibility for overseeing the performance or operational activities of NIPSO. The Audit Committee undertakes the scrutiny of the budget of NIPSO.

The Deputy Ombudsman wrote to the Speaker, as Chair of the Assembly Commission, on 9 April 2025 requesting that a review be undertaken of the salary of the Ombudsman and outlining the rationale for that request. The Deputy Ombudsman advised that the Audit Committee had approved a budget for NIPSO to

undertake a pay and grading review for all other NIPSO staff; that the review had been undertaken; and that it was NIPSO's intention to introduce the new pay and grading arrangements from 1 May 2025, or as soon as possible thereafter following the conclusion of consultation with the recognised trade union.

The Deputy Ombudsman also stated that it was his understanding that the Audit Committee was undertaking a review of the remuneration arrangements for the Comptroller and Auditor General; that the Ombudsman's powers and jurisdiction had increased from 1 April 2018 with the commencement of own initiative powers; that the complexity of issues reviewed by the office had increased significantly over the 10-year period since the office was established; that the remuneration of the Ombudsman was no longer in line with other relevant roles; and suggested that it may be an appropriate time to review the remuneration of the Ombudsman.

On 18 June 2025, the Assembly Commission agreed to undertake a review of the salary of the Ombudsman. The Assembly Commission appointed HeadsTogether Consultancy Ltd to undertake an independent evaluation and salary benchmarking exercise and produce a report.

The report's methodology was based on a review of background material provided by the Assembly Commission, identification of comparator ombudsman roles across the UK, and assessment of a range of financial and non-financial indicators including complaint volumes, expenditure and staffing. The report emphasised that there is no perfect comparator for this office and that benchmarking is therefore not a simple exercise of matching one post to another or applying a formula. The report explained that an informed professional judgement was therefore required, taking account of differences in remit, statutory powers, organisational scale and the specific context of the Northern Ireland role.

In relation to regional pay levels, the report noted evidence from NISRA showing only modest differences in median public sector pay across Northern Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales, with Northern Ireland tending to sit slightly below other UK jurisdictions, particularly at more senior levels, but not markedly so. The report also noted that comparisons with the Republic of Ireland were less direct because of different grading structures, although wider economic research indicated materially higher average hourly earnings there.

Overall, the report used this evidence to provide context rather than to determine salary mechanically, recognising that regional variation is only one factor in assessing an appropriate rate for the Ombudsman role.

HeadsTogether Consultancy Ltd benchmarked the Ombudsman role against a range of ombudsman offices across the UK and in Northern Ireland. The report made clear that, although these roles share a broadly similar core purpose, there are important differences in remit and scale between jurisdictions. In particular, in England the wider public services ombudsman function is split across separate offices, while the Northern Ireland role carries additional responsibilities in relation to judicial appointments and local government standards.

The table below sets out the benchmark data considered in the report, including complaint volumes, operating expenditure, staffing and current salary levels.

Organisation	Description	Volume of new complaints investigated (2023/24)	Annual operating expenditure (£m)	Staff team average full time equivalent	Current or most recent salary (£)
NI Public Services Ombudsman	Investigates complaints against most devolved public services in Northern Ireland and Local Government Standards complaints	1,173	5.2	62	115,252
Welsh Public Services Ombudsman	Investigates complaints against most devolved public services in Wales	3,233	5.7	70	150,000-155,000
Scottish Public Services Ombudsman	Investigates complaints against most devolved public services in Scotland	4,686	7.3	73	142,661-156,346
Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman	Investigates complaints against Local Councils and Adult Care providers and some other public services	4,165	13.1	178	149,459
Parliamentary and Health Services Ombudsman	Investigates complaints against the UK Government, other public organisations and the NHS	7,580	42.0	550	171,500-189,900
Police Ombudsman for NI	Investigates complaints against Police Officers in NI	3,353	11.3	150	145,000-150,000
Prisoner Ombudsman for Northern Ireland	Provides second line complaint procedure for prisoners, visitors and death in service custody cases	525	0.9		84,070

At the time of the report, the salary of the Ombudsman was £115,252. However, the Ombudsman's salary is revalorised each year in line with the annual increase awarded to Assembly Commission staff and this subsequently increased the Ombudsman's salary to £119,862.

On foot of the benchmarking evidence, the report concluded that the existing salary for the Ombudsman was comparatively low, even after allowing for the smaller size and scale of the office relative to some comparator organisations, and recommended a salary of £130,000 as being more appropriately aligned to the current scope of the role. This represents an increase of £10,138 (8.5%).

The report also recommended that the Ombudsman continues to receive revalorisation in line with Assembly Commission staff and that a further salary benchmarking exercise be conducted in three to five years.

The Assembly Commission considered the report at its meetings on 10 September 2025 and 19 November 2025, and also noted that the previous Audit Committee had conducted a “Review of the Governance and Accountability Arrangements for the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman”.

At its meeting on 19 November 2025, the Assembly Commission agreed that it would commence the process of drafting a Statutory Rule to implement the salary recommendation contained within the report, effective from the date of that meeting.

This is the first Statutory Rule the Assembly Commission has undertaken since the new procedures for delegated legislation were introduced and it has sought to ensure that the Committee has sufficient detail to conduct scrutiny of the Statutory Rule. However, the Assembly Commission will respond to any requests from the Committee if there is any further information which is helpful.

Previous Engagement with the Committee

There has been no previous engagement with the Committee on this issue. The legislative responsibility to determine the salary of the Ombudsman, by order, falls to the Assembly Commission under the 2016 Act.

While the Audit Committee scrutinises the wider budget of NIPSO, and the Assembly Commission engages with it as required on relevant matters, Standing Order 43 makes clear that every Statutory Rule is referred to a statutory committee of the Assembly for scrutiny. As a standing committee, the Audit Committee cannot therefore undertake the scrutiny of the Statutory Rule.

Since the 2016 Act was developed and introduced by the predecessor of the Committee for the Executive Office (the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister) as a Committee Bill, the Assembly Commission is submitting the Statutory Rule to the Committee for scrutiny.

Financial Implications

The Statutory Rule will increase the annual salary payable to the Ombudsman from £119,862 to £130,000. Under the 2016 Act, the salary payable to the Ombudsman must be charged on, and issued out of, the Consolidated Fund. It does not come from the Assembly Commission’s budget. The Audit Committee is responsible for scrutinising the wider budget of NIPSO.

Consultation

The Statutory Rule relates solely to the salary of the Ombudsman as an individual officeholder and the 2016 Act gives the Assembly Commission sole responsibility for determining the salary payable to the ombudsman.

In determining the salary, the Assembly Commission followed normal HR good practice and had an independent evaluation and benchmarking exercise conducted. The Statutory Rule implements the outcome of that independent exercise. It would not be normal or good practise to conduct public consultation on the salary of an officeholder.

Compliance with Section 24 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998

The Statutory Rule deals with limited matters relating to the salary of an individual officeholder, regardless of who holds that office. The Assembly Commission is therefore content that the Statutory Rule is compliant with section 24 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Equality Impact

The Statutory Rule deals with limited matters relating to the salary of an individual officeholder, regardless of who holds that office. Therefore, no equality impacts have been identified.

Regulatory Impact

The Statutory Rule deals with limited matters relating to the salary of an individual officeholder. There are no wider cost or administrative impacts on other bodies or sectors arising from the Statutory Rule. Therefore, no Regulatory Impact Assessment has been conducted.

Rural Needs Impact

The Statutory Rule deals with limited matters relating to the salary of an individual officeholder and does not have an impact on the social or economic needs of persons living in rural areas. Therefore, no Rural Needs Impact Assessment has been conducted.

Data Protection Impact

While the Statutory Rule relates to the salary of an individual officeholder, the nature of the Ombudsman's role as an officer of the Assembly, and the requirement for the Assembly Commission to determine the salary of the office by order, means that the salary is a matter of public record. Therefore no Data Protection Impact Assessment is required.

Child Rights Impact

The Statutory Rule deals with limited matters relating to the salary of an individual officeholder and does not have an impact on the rights of children. Therefore, no Child Rights Impact Assessment has been conducted.

Position in Great Britain

While the 2016 Act relates only to Northern Ireland, the independent evaluation and salary benchmarking exercise took account of the salaries payable to similar offices within the United Kingdom, including the other devolved administrations.

Any Other Information

Assembly Commission officials are happy to attend the Committee to provide further briefing on the Statutory Rule and the independent evaluation and salary benchmarking exercise if required. However, given the Assembly Commission's limited responsibilities towards NIPSO, if the Committee has wider queries it may want to engage with the Audit Committee, if relevant to scrutiny of NIPSO's budget, or with NIPSO directly, if relevant to operational issues.

Assembly Commission officials have been engaging with the Deputy Ombudsman on this issue.

Proposed Timing of Consideration of the SL1

The SL1 has been submitted to the Committee allowing for more than the minimum four week period for the Committee to conduct its scrutiny. It is proposed that the Committee would complete its scrutiny by its meeting on Wednesday 1 July 2026.

Proposed Operational Date

If the Committee is content once it has scrutinised the draft proposal by Wednesday 1 July 2026, it is proposed that the Statutory Rule would be laid at the earliest opportunity in order to come into operation on 27 July 2026.

When the Rule together with the Explanatory Memorandum has been laid at the Assembly Business Office, the Business Office will submit copies to the Committee.

I would be grateful if you would bring this matter to the attention of the Committee for the Executive Office.

Yours sincerely



LESLEY HOGG
Clerk to the Assembly/Chief Executive

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