



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee on Procedures

Minutes of Proceedings

28 February 2024

Room 21, Parliament Buildings

Present:

Kellie Armstrong MLA (Chairperson)

Trevor Clarke MLA

Danny Donnelly MLA

Órlaithí Flynn MLA

Maolíosa McHugh MLA

Matthew O'Toole MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Sinéad Ennis MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Apologies:

John Stewart MLA

Gary Middleton MLA

In Attendance:

Christine Darrah, Assembly Clerk

Stella McArdle, Assembly Clerk

Michael Best, Assistant Assembly Clerk

Kevin Marks, Clerical Officer

Paul Gill, Clerk Assistant (Agenda item 10)

The Chairperson welcomed the Members to the first meeting of the Committee on Procedures.

The Committee agreed to start the meeting in closed session to discuss a number of protocols and procedures.

The meeting commenced at 10.05 in closed session.

1. Apologies

Apologies as above.

Matthew O'Toole joined the meeting at 10.07am.

2. Staff Contact Details

The Committee noted the staff contact details for the Committee on Procedures.

3. Arrangements for Committee Meetings

The Chairperson advised Members about the proposed schedule of committee meetings, the arrangements for meetings agreed by the previous committee in relation to open/closed meetings and recording of closed sessions, other arrangements for committee meetings including simultaneous interpretation, and the protocol on conduct and courtesy at committee meetings.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the proposed schedule of committee meetings until summer recess, subject to review once the Committee has agreed its work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to adopt the arrangements agreed by the previous Committee in relation to open/closed meetings and recording of closed sessions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to adopt the protocol on conduct and courtesy at committee meetings.

The Committee noted the other arrangements in relation to committee meetings, including the arrangement for simultaneous interpretation.

4. Committee Induction Plan

The Chairperson advised Members of the draft Induction Plan.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Induction Plan.

5. Committee approach to meeting preparation and witness questions

The Committee noted the paper titled “Committee approach to meeting preparation and questioning”.

6. Committee approach to dealing with correspondence and requests for meetings

The Committee noted the approach that will be implemented in relation to correspondence and requests for meetings.

The Committee moved into open session at 10.19am

7. Committee Membership

The Committee noted the current membership.

8. Committee Procedures

The Committee considered and noted the “Guide to Powers and Operation of Standing Committees”, “Guide to the Role of Committee Chairpersons”, and “Guide for Members to the Role and Functions of the Committee Secretariat” documents.

The Chairperson advised Members that under section 50 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, for the purposes of the law of defamation, absolute privilege applies equally to the making of a statement in proceedings of the Assembly, the publication of a statement under the Assembly’s authority, and that this privilege also extends to meetings of the Committee, but does not extend to press conferences or statements made to the press.

Members were advised by the Chairperson that they should be aware of the potential problems associated with discussing a matter that is sub judice – that is a matter which is being, or is about to be, considered by a court. The sub judice rule is contained in Standing Order 73. It provides that any matters in respect of which legal proceedings are “active” should not be referred to in Committee proceedings (except to the extent permitted by the Committee Chairperson). In such cases, the matter awaiting adjudication should not be prejudiced by comment in a public session of a committee meeting.

Matthew O’Toole left the meeting at 10.21am

9. Declaration of Members’ Interests

The Chairperson advised the Committee that all Assembly Members are required to register relevant financial and other interests in the Register of Members’ Interests. The Chairperson informed Members of the requirement in Standing Order 69(5) that:

“A member who has

(a) a financial interest in any matter; or

(b) a relevant interest in any matter,

must declare that interest before taking part in any proceedings of the Assembly

relating to that matter.”

The Chairperson advised that, in particular, there is a requirement to declare any interests that might reasonably be thought by others to influence the Members’ approach to the matter under consideration.

The Chairperson advised that “proceedings of the Assembly” included meetings of the Committee on Procedures and that, as this was the first meeting of the Committee, Members should ensure that any financial or other interests that relate to the remit of the Committee, or that are likely to be relevant to a substantial part of its work, are drawn to the attention of the Committee.

The Chairperson advised Members that failure to register and/or declare an interest may be an offence under section 43 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998.

Danny Donnelly, Maolíosa McHugh and Trevor Clarke outlined their entries in the Register of Members’ Interests.

10. Role and Remit of the Committee on Procedures – Introductory Briefing

The Chairperson welcomed Mr Paul Gill, Clerk Assistant, Parliamentary Services Directorate, NI Assembly to the meeting.

Mr Gill briefed Members on the role and remit of the Committee on Procedures.

The Chairperson advised Members that the issues highlighted by Mr Gill will be included in a list of potential issues that the Committee will consider when identifying its priority work items.

11. Committee on Procedures Legacy Report 2017-2022

The Committee noted the Committee on Procedures Legacy Report 2017-2022.

12. Committee Forward Work Programme

The Chairperson informed Members that the outputs from the strategic planning session, due to take place on 10 April 2024, will form the basis for the Committee Forward Work Programme.

The Chairperson advised Members that the issues to be discussed at the strategic planning session will be informed by the previous Committee's Legacy Report and a research paper, on the procedural issues being considered in other legislatures, that will be presented to the Committee at the next meeting. The Chairperson proposed that the Committee write to key stakeholders seeking views and suggestions for possible priority areas of work to inform the Committee's Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed a list of stakeholders and the wording of a letter to be sent to stakeholders seeking their views on work they felt the Committee should prioritise.

13. Correspondence

There was no correspondence.

14. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson advised Members that she, and the Deputy Chairperson would request an early meeting with the Speaker to discuss his priorities for the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that a letter be sent to the Speaker requesting a meeting with the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson.

The meeting was adjourned at 10.57am.

Kellie Armstrong MLA

Chairperson, Committee on Procedures

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