



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee on Standards and Privileges

Minutes of Proceedings

24 April 2024

Meeting Location: Room 21, Parliament Buildings

Present:

Carál Ní Chuilín MLA (Chairperson)

Stewart Dickson MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Paul Frew MLA

Connie Egan MLA

Harry Harvey MLA

Brian Kingston MLA

Cathy Mason MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Colin McGrath MLA

Apologies:

Jemma Dolan MLA

In Attendance:

Shane McAteer, Committee Clerk

Nick Mitford, Senior Assistant Clerk

Elaine Farrell, Assistant Clerk

Alison Ferguson, Clerical Supervisor

Ciara Dorrian, Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 10.02 a.m. in closed session

1. Apologies

Jemma Dolan MLA

2. Declaration of interests

The Chairperson advised that Mr Frew had declared an interest in relation to the complaint case to be considered under agenda item 4 and advised that he would recuse himself from consideration of the case and associated business.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 10 April 2024.

4. Matters Arising

The Senior Assistant Clerk briefed the Committee on a proposed draft motion that recommends to the Assembly that it impose a sanction against a Member for breaching the Assembly Members' Code of Conduct, which followed up on the Committee decision at its meeting on 10 April 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed with the wording of the proposed draft motion and that it should be tabled in the Business Office for scheduling in Plenary for debate.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the draft circular regarding the Committee motion, which will issue to all MLAs once the Order Paper containing the motion has been published.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the draft press release on the Committee motion, which will issue once the Order Paper containing the motion has been published.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Communications Office will issue a factual tweet on behalf of the Committee to signpost the press release.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the draft lines to take in the event of any media queries in respect of the Committee motion.

Agreed: The Committee agreed its preferred timings for the plenary debate on the Committee motion, which will be conveyed to the Business Committee for scheduling purposes.

There were no additional matters arising.

Mr Frew joined the meeting at 10.20 a.m.

5. Complaint against a Member – Oral hearing from the Member

Cathy Mason declared an interest that she has had contact with the educational establishment referred to in the complaint case, but that has not been in relation to the specific case in question.

Colin McGrath declared an interest that he has had contact with the educational establishment referred to in the complaint case, but that has not been in relation to the specific case in question.

Noted: The Committee noted that, in light of their resignation as an MLA, the respondent in the case would no longer take up the opportunity of an oral hearing in response to the investigation report by the Commissioner for Standards. The Committee also noted that, in any event, it had received a written submission from the respondent in this regard.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request legal advice to inform both its deliberations on aspects of the complaint case and its consideration of options regarding the adjudication process.

6. Complaint against a Member – Follow-up briefing by the Commissioner for Standards

Agreed: The Committee agreed that in light of the discussion at agenda item 5, this agenda item would not proceed.

Noted: The Committee noted that, in any event, it had received a written response from the Commissioner for Standards to the submission received from the respondent in the case.

7. Further consideration of a complaint against a Members – Briefing by the Commissioner for Standards

The Assistant Clerk briefed the Committee on this agenda item.

The Commissioner for Standards joined the meeting at 10.41 a.m.

Mr Kingston declared an interest in that he knows the complainant in the case through previous community work that he has been involved in.

The Commissioner briefed the Committee on the complaint, which she deemed inadmissible but was for further consideration by the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it concurs with the Commissioner's decision that the complaint is inadmissible.

8. Complaint against a Member – Consideration of draft Committee Report

Members considered a draft Committee report on a complaint against a Member, which has been developed to reflect and explain the Committee's decisions on the complaint case taken at the meeting on 13 March 2024.

Members undertook formal consideration of the draft report as follows:

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Title Page, Table of Contents, Power and Membership and List of Abbreviations stand part of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the 'Introduction' section, at paragraphs 1 to 2, stands part of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the 'Role of the Committee' section, at paragraphs 3 to 4, stands part of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the 'Background' section, at paragraphs 5 to 9, stands part of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the 'Relevant Rules in the Members' Code of Conduct' section, at paragraphs 10 to 13, stands part of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the 'Commissioner's Reasoned Decision' section, at paragraph 14, stands part of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the 'Committee's consideration and conclusions' section, at paragraphs 15 to 21, stands part of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Annex, at page 13, stands part of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the 'Links to Appendices', at page 14, stand part of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that any necessary redactions identified by Legal Services, for the purposes of complying with data protection obligations, are made to the report prior to publication.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that this report be the first report of the Committee on Standards and Privileges in the 2022-2027 Mandate.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chairperson will agree an extract of the minutes from the meeting today regarding agreement of the report so that it may be included in the Minutes of Proceedings appendix to the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the report will be published online on the Assembly website at noon on 26 April 2024 and will remain embargoed until then.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to provide the complainant and the respondent with a copy of the embargoed report in advance of publication in line with normal practice.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that, in line with agreed protocols, a copy of the report will be laid in the Business Office within 24 hours (the Committee noted that the report will be made available for viewing by members once the embargo has expired and that a link to the report will be emailed to all MLAs following publication).

Agreed: The Committee agreed the draft press release and that it should issue from the Communications Office following publication of the report on the Assembly website.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the wording of a tweet that the Communications Office will post to signpost the press release.

9. Correspondence

Noted: The Committee noted the correspondence from a member of the public regarding UK universities.

Agreed: The Committee considered the correspondence from a member of the public regarding the work of the Commissioner for Standards and agreed that the draft response should issue.

10. Any Other Business

Noted: The Committee noted that, having concluded its consideration of two complaint cases, it was evident that the subject of the report agreed under agenda item 8 had conducted themselves in an appropriate manner during the complaint investigation by cooperating at all times with the Commissioner for Standards.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the plenary debate on the Committee motion, which was agreed under agenda item 4, will provide the opportunity for the Committee to highlight to all MLAs the importance of maintaining confidentiality in

relation to live complaints and of co-operating fully with investigations by the Commissioner for Standards.

11. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting of the Committee on Standards and Privileges will take place on Wednesday 1 May 2024 at 10.00 a.m. in Room 106.

The meeting was adjourned at 10.54 a.m.

Stewart Dickson MLA

Deputy Chairperson, Committee on Standards and Privileges

1 May 2024