



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee on Standards and Privileges

Minutes of Proceedings

2 July 2025

Meeting Location: Room 106, Parliament Buildings

Present:

Cathy Mason MLA (Chairperson)

Jemma Dolan MLA

Paul Frew MLA

Harry Harvey MLA

Brian Kingston MLA

Declan McAleer MLA

Apologies:

Connie Egan (Deputy Chairperson)

Stewart Dickson MLA

Colin McGrath MLA

In Attendance:

Shane McAteer, Committee Clerk

Ashleigh Mitford, Senior Assistant Clerk

Elaine Farrell, Assistant Clerk

Alison Ferguson, Clerical Supervisor

Laura Gourley, Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 11.45 a.m. in closed session.

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Declaration of interests

The Chairperson advised Members of the ongoing requirement to declare relevant financial or other interests as and when they arise and before taking part in any Assembly proceedings, including Committee proceedings, relating to that matter.

3. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 18 June 2025.

4. Matters Arising

The Committee noted the emailed correspondence from the Chairperson of the All-Party Group (APG) on Construction confirming that, following the previous request to change the name of the Group to the APG on Built Environment, the purpose of the APG will remain the same.

Paul Frew declared an interest that he is a member of the APG on Construction, that has requested to change its name to the APG on Built Environment.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content to approve the change in the name of the Group to the APG on Built Environment.

Noted: The Committee noted the correspondence from a Member providing an apology to the Committee in respect of a complaint case and that the letter of apology will be included in the Committee's report on the complaint case to be considered at a future meeting.

5. Draft Unacceptable Behaviours Policy – next steps

The Committee Clerk briefed the Committee on the next steps to progressing the draft Unacceptable Behaviours Policy.

The Assembly Commissioner for Standards, Dr Melissa McCullough, joined the meeting at 12.07 p.m.

The Commissioner briefed the Committee on her response to a number of policy and procedural issues relating to the draft Unacceptable Behaviours Policy. This was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked the Commissioner for her briefing.

The Commissioner left the meeting at 12.19 p.m.

The Committee considered a range of residual policy issues to be decided, including matters relating to the importance of maintaining confidentiality during the complaints process in order to safeguard the fairness and integrity of the process.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Commissioner, rather than the Assembly Commission, should administer the proposed confidentiality agreement in respect of complaint cases.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that Assembly Members, as complainants or as respondents, would not be required to sign the confidentiality agreement, but instead they would continue to be bound by Rule 12 and 17 of the Code of Conduct as a deterrent against unauthorised disclosure of confidential information by Members.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Commissioner to request that she considers measures to highlight the confidentiality of the complaints process when

acknowledging receipt of complaints, including reminding MLA-complainants that, while they are not subject to the confidentiality agreement, they are bound by the applicable rules of the Code of Conduct.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the confidentiality obligations should begin at the time a complaint is submitted and continue until either the complaint is deemed inadmissible or the investigation report is published by the Committee as part of its adjudication report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider a future review of the Rules of Conduct relating to the confidentiality of complaints, to determine whether they should also aim to deter Members from making public expressions of intent to submit a complaint to the Commissioner for Standards.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the confidentiality agreement should be sent to the complainant upon receipt of their complaint, with a secure digital link for remote signing where possible, and the process should not proceed until the agreement is signed.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that, subject to legal advice, the confidentiality requirements should permit a Member, as the complainant or as the respondent, to disclose the fact of a complaint where appropriate, including when it is a declarable interest.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that, subject to legal advice, the MLA Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules and/or other related guidance should explicitly state the confidentiality requirements on Members, including when they apply during the complaints process.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that, subject to legal advice, the confidentiality agreement should be applied to all complaints under the Code of Conduct (made by non-Member complainants) and not limited to those made under the Unacceptable Behaviours Policy.

Noted: The Committee noted amendments made to the draft Unacceptability Behaviours Policy to reflect decisions made by the Committee to date, and that further consequential amendments will be made to reflect the applicable aforementioned decisions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to commission legal advice in order to amend the confidentiality agreement, as necessary, to take account of the Committee's decisions and to finalise draft amendments to the Code, together with the proposed amendments to Standing Order 69C and the General Procedures Direction.

6. Complaint against a Member – briefing from the Commissioner for Standards

The Committee Clerk briefed the Committee on the background to the complaint case against a Member, including the procedural steps in the adjudication process.

Noted: The Committee noted that, when deliberating on the case, its focus will be on considering the facts of the case in relation to the points to prove within the applicable rules of conduct.

Brian Kingston declared an interest that he is a member of the Assembly Committee referred to in the complaint case.

Harry Harvey declared an interest that he is a member of the Assembly Committee referred to in the complaint case.

The Commissioner for Standards joined the meeting at 12.35 p.m.

The Commissioner briefed the Committee on the complaint case report against a Member. This was followed by a question and answer session.

Declan McAleer left the meeting at 12.37 p.m. and returned to the meeting at 12.39 p.m.

The Chairperson thanked the Commissioner for her briefing.

The Commissioner left the meeting at 1.13 p.m.

Agreed: The Committee considered a written response which the respondent had made to the Commissioners' investigation report, in which they dispute some of the findings contained in the report. The Committee agreed to forward the respondent's written response to the Commissioner for a response as applicable.

Agreed: The Committee noted that the respondent in the complaint case has indicated that they would be content to attend an oral hearing with the Committee to

present their response in person. The Committee agreed to schedule an oral hearing with the respondent subject to them confirming that they still wish to take up the offer of a hearing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to commission legal advice in respect of issues arising from the complaint case, which will inform the Committee's deliberations on the case.

7. Correspondence

Agreed: The Committee noted the correspondence dated 27 June 2025 from the Public Accounts Committee on the Northern Ireland Audit Office report on Health and Social Care Imaging Services in Northern Ireland.

8. Any other business

Agreed: The Committee agreed to delegate authority to the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson to submit views on the releasing or withholding of information on any non-routine or contentious Freedom of Information requests received by the Committee during the summer recess period.

9. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting of the Committee is scheduled to take place on Wednesday 24 September 2025 in Room 106.

The meeting was adjourned at 1.15 p.m.

Cathy Mason MLA

Chairperson, Committee on Standards and Privileges

10 September 2025