



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee on Standards and Privileges

## Minutes of Proceedings

**26 February 2025**

Meeting Location: Room 106, Parliament Buildings

**Present:**

Cathy Mason MLA (Chairperson)

Connie Egan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Jemma Dolan MLA

Harry Harvey MLA

Brian Kingston MLA

**Present by video or teleconference:**

Stewart Dickson MLA

Declan McAleer MLA

Colin McGrath MLA

**Apologies:**

Paul Frew MLA

**In Attendance:**

Shane McAteer, Committee Clerk

Nick Mitford, Senior Assistant Clerk

Elaine Farrell, Assistant Clerk

Laura Gourley, Clerical Supervisor

Alison Ferguson, Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 10.03 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.

The Chairperson declared an interest in relation to the correspondence to be considered under agenda item 7 that she is the Deputy Chairperson of the Ad Hoc Committee on Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill.

Mr McGrath declared an interest in relation to the correspondence to be considered under agenda item 7 that he is a member of the Assembly Commission.

Ms Dolan declared an interest in relation to the complaint case to be considered under agenda item 5 that she had employed one of the witnesses mentioned in the complaint case.

Mr Harvey declared an interest in relation to the complaint case to be considered under agenda item 5, in being a member of the Assembly Committee referred to in the complaint.

Ms Egan declared an interest in relation to the complaint case to be considered under agenda item 5, in being a member of the Assembly Committee referred to in the complaint.

Mr Kingston declared an interest in relation to the complaint case to be considered under agenda item 5, in being a member of the Assembly Committee referred to in the complaint.

Mr McAleer declared an interest in relation to the complaint case to be considered under agenda item 5 that he had employed one of the witnesses mentioned in the complaint case.

### **3. Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 12 February 2025.

### **4. Matters Arising**

None.

### **5. Complaints against a Minister – briefing by the Commissioner for Standards on investigation report**

The Committee Clerk introduced this agenda item and briefed the Committee on how the procedural arrangements for determining complaints against Ministers differ from those for complaints against MLAs, given that the Committee does not currently have an adjudication role in relation to complaints of alleged breaches of the Ministerial Code of Conduct.

The Commissioner for Standards, Dr Melissa McCullough, joined the meeting at 10.04 a.m.

The Commissioner briefed the Committee on the investigation report. This was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked the Commissioner for her attendance at the meeting.

The Commissioner left the meeting at 10.15 a.m.

The Committee considered the complaint investigation report as presented by the Commissioner.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that, in respect of the Commissioner's complaint investigation report, it will follow the approach taken with previous ministerial complaint cases, whereby it will agree and publish a short covering report which explains the current procedural arrangements for such cases and attaches the Commissioner's investigation report.

Members were advised that a draft Committee report on the complaint case will be brought to the Committee meeting on 26 March 2025 for consideration.

## **6. Draft Unacceptable Behaviours Policy**

The Committee Clerk briefed the Committee on the background to the draft Unacceptable Behaviours Policy and the outcome of the Committee's consultation on the matter.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it will not seek to progress the issue of the appointment of lay members to the Committee and, as such, the draft Policy will need to be amended accordingly to remove all reference to the role of lay members in adjudicating on complaints under the Policy.

**Noted:** The Committee noted the Mr McGrath did not concur with the Committee decision not to appoint lay members to the Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to commission legal advice on various issues relating to the procedural and other changes needed to implement the Policy.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that, subject to receiving the necessary legal advice and to the finalisation of the draft Policy, the Committee will recommend to the Assembly: that the MLA Code of Conduct should be amended to make clear that the Behaviour Code is a Principle of Conduct; and that Rule of Conduct 10 be amended to include a specific reference to the Policy, in order to highlight in the Code of Conduct the importance of the Policy.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to consider recommendations 4-6, as contained in the report by the Working Group which had developed the draft Policy, at a later date and after the Policy has been finalised and adopted.

Mr McGrath recused himself from the next agenda item and left the meeting at 10.51 a.m.

## **7. Correspondence**

The Committee noted the correspondence dated 25 February 2025, from the Clerk to the Ad Hoc Committee on the Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill, seeking the views of the Committee on the Bill.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the Clerk will respond on behalf of the Committee in relation to Clause 4 of the Bill, to point to the procedural mechanism for appointing an Acting Commissioner for Standards via resolution of the Assembly.

## **8. AOB.**

None.

## **9. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting**

The Chairperson reminded members that the second part of the adjudication training for the Committee will take place on Wednesday 19 March 2025 at 10.00 a.m. in Room 106, in place of the regular meeting scheduled for that date.

The next regular meeting of the Committee is scheduled to take place on Wednesday 26 March 2025 at 10.00 a.m. in the Senate Chamber.

The meeting was adjourned at 10.57 a.m.

**Cathy Mason MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee on Standards and Privileges**

**26 March 2025**