



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee on Standards and Privileges

## Minutes of Proceedings

**26 March 2025**

**Meeting Location:** The Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings

**Present:**

Cathy Mason MLA (Chairperson)

Connie Egan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Paul Frew MLA

Harry Harvey MLA

Brian Kingston MLA

**Present by video or teleconference:**

Jemma Dolan MLA

Stewart Dickson MLA

Declan McAleer MLA

**Apologies:**

Colin McGrath MLA

**In Attendance:**

Shane McAteer, Committee Clerk

Nick Mitford, Senior Assistant Clerk

Elaine Farrell, Assistant Clerk

Laura Gourley, Clerical Supervisor

Alison Ferguson, Clerical Officer

Rebecca Ellis, Legal Advisor (agenda item 5 & 6)

The meeting commenced at 10.02 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.

Mr Harvey declared an interest in relation to the complaint case to be considered under agenda item 5 and 6, 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 and 6, in being a member of the Assembly Committee referred to in the complaint and advised that she would recuse herself from the relevant agenda items.

Mr Kingston declared an interest in relation to the complaint case to be considered under agenda item 5 and 6, in being a member of the Assembly Committee referred to in the complaint and advised that he would recuse himself from the relevant agenda items.

### **3. Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 26 February 2025.

### **4. Matters Arising**

None.

Ms Egan recused herself from the next two agenda items and left the meeting at 10.04 a.m.

Mr Kingston recused himself from the next two agenda items and left the meeting at 10.04 a.m.

### **5. Legal advice on complaint against a Member – briefing by Legal Services**

The Committee Clerk introduced this agenda item and explained the background to the Committee's request for legal advice to inform its consideration of a complaint against a Member.

The Legal Advisor, Rebecca Ellis, joined the meeting at 10.10 a.m.

The Legal Advisor briefed the Committee on the legal advice and this was followed by a question and answer session.

### **6. Committee deliberations on complaint against a Member**

The Committee deliberated on a complaint case against a Member ("the respondent"), which included allegations of breaches of Rules 13 and 15 of the Assembly Members' Code of Conduct.

The Committee considered each of the allegations which had been made against the respondent, together with the evidence, findings of fact and reasoned decisions of the Commissioner for Standards, as set out in her investigation report, alongside the legal advice received.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that, in relation to allegation 1, which pertained to Rule 13 of the Assembly Code of Conduct, it could not find, as a matter of fact, that the respondent's conduct was in breach of Rule of Conduct 13.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that, in relation to allegation 2, which pertained to Rule 15 of the Assembly Code of Conduct, it could not find, as a matter of fact, that the respondent's conduct was in breach of Rule of Conduct 15.

The allegations were therefore not upheld and the Committee concluded that the respondent had not breached the Assembly Code of Conduct.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the draft Committee report will comment on how the complaint case highlights the importance of all Members observing the Principles of Conduct contained in the Assembly Code of Conduct, including showing 'respect and consideration for others at all time', while the Committee recognises that the principles are not themselves enforceable.

**Noted:** The Committee noted that the secretariat will prepare a draft Committee report on the complaint case, which will be considered at a future meeting.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to support the recommendation in the Commissioner for Standards report on the complaint case, which called for the freedom of expression protections afforded to Members to be made clear in the information sent to witnesses prior to their attendance at Assembly committees.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that any proposed revision of the existing guidance to witnesses will be considered at a future meeting before being taken forward at the appropriate level.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the correspondence dated 14 February 2025 received from a named Member in response to queries raised by the respondent in the complaint case and agreed that the correspondence will be included in the appendices to the Committee's report.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the correspondence dated 10 March 2025 from the respondent, which included a number of enquiries, and agreed the draft Committee response for issue.

Ms Egan rejoined the meeting at 10.45 a.m.

Mr Kingston rejoined the meeting at 10.45 a.m.

The Committee agreed to consider agenda item 9 next.

## **7. Complaints against a Minister – consideration of draft Committee report**

The Chairperson reminded the Committee that the draft report was developed in line with the Committee's decisions on the complaint case, which were taken at the meeting on 26 February 2025.

The Committee undertook formal consideration of the draft report as follows:

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

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

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that 'Role of the Committee' section, at paragraphs 3-5 of the report, stands part of the report.

Mr McAleer left the meeting at 10.48 a.m.

Mr Dickson joined the meeting at 10.50 a.m.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the 'Background' section, at paragraphs 6-13 of the report, stands part of the report.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the 'Commissioner's findings of fact and reasoned decisions' section, at paragraphs 14-18 of the report, stands part of the report.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the 'Committee's consideration and conclusions' section, at paragraphs 19-21 of the report, stands part of the report.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the 'Links to Appendices', at page 12 of the report, stand part of the report.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed further redactions to the appended Commissioner's investigation report, which were necessary for the purposes of complying with data protection obligations.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed an additional redaction to a photograph contained in the appendices to the Commissioner's investigation report, subject to confirmation from Legal Services.

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

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the Chairperson will agree the minutes of today's meeting so that they 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 28 March 2025 and will remain embargoed until then.

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

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that a copy of the report will be laid in the Assembly Business Office, which will be available for viewing by all MLAs once the embargo has expired.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that a link to the report will be emailed to all MLAs following publication on the Assembly website.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the draft press release for issue following publication of the report on the Assembly website.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the Communications Office will issue a short, factual tweet to signpost the press release.

## **8. Further consideration of decision on inadmissible complaint**

The Assistant Clerk briefed the Committee on the procedures in relation to the next two agenda items.

Mr Frew left the meeting at 11.01 a.m.

The Commissioner for Standards, Dr Melissa McCullough, joined the meeting at 11.01 a.m.

The Commissioner for Standards briefed the Committee on the further consideration of her decision that the complaint was inadmissible. This was followed by a question and answer session.

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

## **9. Further consideration of decision on inadmissible complaint**

The Commissioner for Standards briefed the Committee on the further consideration of her decision that the complaint was inadmissible. This was followed by a question and answer session.

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

## **10. APG issues – proposed APG**

The Assistant Clerk briefed the Committee on a proposal for an All-Party Group (APG) on the Food to go industry.

Mr Harvey declared an interest that he is the Vice Chairperson of the proposed APG.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it was content to approve the establishment of an APG on the Food to go industry.

## **11. Correspondence**

None.

## **12. AOB.**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to send a letter to the adjudication trainer from Bond Solon to extend its good wishes following her illness.

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

The next meeting of the Committee is scheduled to take place on Wednesday 2 April 2025 at 10.00 a.m. in room 106.

The meeting was adjourned at 11.07 a.m.

**Cathy Mason MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee on Standards and Privileges**

**2 April 2025**