



**Committee on Standards and Privileges**

# **Report on complaints against Minister Gordon Lyons MLA**

Ordered by the Committee on Standards and Privileges to be published 21 January  
2026

This report is **embargoed** until noon on Friday 23 January 2026

Report: NIA 123/22-27 Committee on Standards and Privileges

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# **Powers and Membership**

## **Powers**

The Committee on Standards and Privileges is a Standing Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly established in accordance with paragraph 10 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement and under Assembly Standing Orders 51 and 57. Further provisions on the Committee's functions are also included in Standing Orders 69, 69A, 69B, 69C and 70.

The Committee has power:

- To consider specific matters relating to privilege referred to it by the Assembly;
- To oversee the work of the Assembly Clerk of Standards;
- To examine the arrangements for the compilation, maintenance and accessibility of the Register of Members' Interests and any other register of interests established by the Assembly, and to review from time to time the form and content of those registers;
- To consider any specific complaints made in relation to the registering of declaring of interests referred to it;
- To consider any matter relating to the conduct of Members; and
- To recommend any modifications to any Assembly code of conduct as may from time to time appear to be necessary.

The Committee is appointed at the start of every Assembly, and has power to send for persons, papers and records that are relevant to its inquiries.

# Membership

The Committee has 9 members, including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, and a quorum of five members. The membership of the Committee is as follows:

- Cathy Mason MLA (Chairperson)<sup>1</sup>
- Connie Egan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)<sup>2</sup>
- Stewart Dickson MLA
- Emma Sheerin MLA<sup>3</sup>
- Mark Durkan MLA<sup>4</sup>
- Brian Kingston MLA<sup>5</sup>
- Paul Frew MLA
- Harry Harvey MLA
- Declan McAleer MLA<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From 3 February 2025 Mrs Cathy Mason replaced Ms Carál Ní Chuilín as Chairperson.

<sup>2</sup> From 8 November 2024 Ms Connie Egan replaced Mr Stewart Dickson as Deputy Chairperson.

<sup>3</sup> From 24 November 2025 Ms Emma Sheerin replace Miss Jemma Dolan as a member of the Committee.

<sup>4</sup> From 8 September 2025 Mr Mark Durkan replaced Mr Colin McGrath as a member of the Committee.

<sup>5</sup> From 8 April 2024 Mr Brian Kingston replaced Mr Stephen Dunne as a member of the Committee.

<sup>6</sup> From 10 February 2025 Mr Declan McAleer replaced Ms Carál Ní Chuilín as a member of the Committee.

# **List of Abbreviations and Acronyms used in this Report**

DUP : Democratic Unionist Party

LLC: Larne Leisure Centre

MLA : Member of the Legislative Assembly

MP: Member of Parliament

NIHE: Northern Ireland Housing Executive

PSNI: Police Service of Northern Ireland

The Assembly: Northern Ireland Assembly

The Code: Ministerial Code of Conduct

The Commissioner: The (former) Commissioner for Standards

The Committee: Committee on Standards and Privileges

UUP: Ulster Unionist Party

# Introduction

1. The Committee on Standards and Privileges ('the Committee') has considered a report from the (former) Assembly Commissioner for Standards ('the Commissioner'), Dr Melissa McCullough, on her investigation into complaints against the Minister for Communities, Mr Gordon Lyons MLA ('the respondent') of alleged breaches of the Ministerial Code of Conduct ('the Code'). A link to the Commissioner's investigation report, which includes a copy of the complaints correspondence, together with the evidence gathered during the investigation, is included at **Appendix 1** (a limited amount of information has been redacted from the Commissioner's report to accord with legal obligations).
2. A link to the applicable minutes of proceedings of the Committee is included at **Appendix 2**.

## Role of the Committee

3. The arrangements for regulating the standards of conduct of Ministers include: the role of the independent Commissioner in investigation complaints of alleged breaches of the Code; the role of the Committee in considering and publishing the Commissioner's investigation reports; and the role of the Assembly in plenary in deciding whether any sanction/s should be imposed, if the Assembly, in considering the findings of the Commissioner's report, believes there has been a breach of the Code.
4. These arrangements have come about, in part, due to section 5 of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2021, which extended the powers of the Commissioner to include the investigation and reporting on complaints against Ministers on any alleged breaches of the Code. The Commissioner's new functions came into effect on 22 March 2021.

5. In light of the Commissioner's new powers, the Committee had sought legal advice on its role in relation to the consideration of investigation reports from the Commissioner on complaints against Ministers. The Committee noted from the legal advice that, in contrast to complaints against MLAs of alleged breaches of the Assembly Code of Conduct, it does not have an adjudication role in relation to complaints against Ministers on alleged breaches of the Ministerial Code of Conduct. However, the Committee has a duty, under Standing Order 69A, to consider *any* investigation report by the Commissioner, including reports on ministerial complaints, and to publish such reports (on behalf of the Assembly).

## Background

6. The Commissioner received 64 complaints from members of the public and one from Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA between 11-16 June 2025, alleging that Minister Lyons breached the Code, the Seven Principles of Public Life ('Nolan Principles') and the Pledge of Office<sup>7</sup> when he posted on social media on 11 June 2025 about a planned protest at Larne Leisure Centre (LLC).<sup>8</sup>
7. Complaints were received alleging that Minister Lyons was in breach of the Code in relation to rules (i), (ii), (iv), (v), (vi) and (vii). The Commissioner states in her report that she does not believe that rules (i), (ii) or (v) were relevant in the context of the complaints she received. As a result, her investigation focused on whether there was a breach of rules (iv), (vi) and (vii) of the Code.
8. The Code, including the Seven Principles of Public Life, can be accessed at the following link:

<https://www.northernireland.gov.uk/topics/your-executive/ministerial-code>

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<sup>7</sup> Note that the Pledge of Office is not part of the Code and any allegations relating to it were not therefore considered by the Commissioner.

<sup>8</sup> See Annex A, Document 1, page 13 of Commissioner's report at Appendix 1

9. The Commissioner considered the complaints and decided they were admissible before commencing her investigation on 20 June 2025. On 11 August 2025 the Commissioner forwarded her report on the investigation to the Committee for consideration.
10. Prior to the Committee commencing its consideration and in accordance with its established disclosure process, on 5 September 2025, the Committee Clerk sent the Commissioner's full investigation report to the respondent, for written comment in respect of any matter raised within the report (where applicable, any written comments received from the respondent in such complaint cases are provided to the Committee at the same time it receives the Commissioner's investigation report).
11. The respondent subsequently made a written submission to the Committee, outlining a number of concerns he had in relation to the Commissioner's report (he did not take up an offer to also attend an oral hearing with the Committee). The submission from the respondent can be found at **Appendix 3** and the Commissioner's subsequent response can be found at **Appendix 4**.

## **The Commissioner's findings of fact and reasoning**

12. A timeline of events, which the Commissioner collated as part of her evidence, can be found at page 4 of her report.
13. As a result of her investigation, the Commissioner made various findings of fact (page 6 of her report) which are outlined below:
  - 1) The office of Steve Aiken MLA, Ulster Unionist Party (UUP), sent an email to Mr Lyons' office at 13:21 on 11 June 2025 asking for advice in relation to a post from 'Larne Anti-immigration Protest' which was promoting a protest at Larne Leisure Centre (LLC) that evening at 7pm when there would be over 100 swimmers, including children, using the facilities.

- 2) The PSNI contacted a DUP Councillor at 13:51 on 11 June 2025 to ask them to get the word out that there were no people sheltering in LLC and that the people had been moved out of Larne.
  - 3) At the time of his first Facebook post at 15:50 on 11 June 2025, Minister Lyons was aware of the unrest over the previous days and was aware of the volatility within communities.
  - 4) Minister Lyons posted on Facebook again at 21:06 on 11 June 2025 condemning the damage inflicted on LLC.
14. In the Analysis and Reasoning section of her report (page 7), the Commissioner explains that, during her interview with Minister Lyons, he said that “the intention of his message on Facebook was to clarify the situation and help calm tensions surrounding the planned protest at LLC”<sup>9</sup>.
15. Minister Lyons further advised that he “had been acting at the request of the PSNI, conveyed through a local DUP councillor, and that his aim was to reassure (presumably his 8,000 Facebook followers) that those who had taken refuge at the centre the night before were no longer there”<sup>10</sup>.
16. The Commissioner said that ‘in my view and on the balance of probabilities, the post likely had the opposite effect. Rather than defusing the situation, it may have heightened tensions and contributed to further unrest’<sup>11</sup>.
17. The Commissioner explains that ‘Ministers are senior public figures whose words carry significant weight. What they say and how they say it can shape public reaction, especially during sensitive and tense situations. Even small misjudgements can lead to serious consequences. That is why ministers must take extra care when speaking publicly. In this case, I believe there was a clear

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<sup>9</sup> Paragraph 14, Appendix 1

<sup>10</sup> Paragraph 14, Appendix 1

<sup>11</sup> Paragraph 14, Appendix 1

need for more thoughtful communication, better coordination with authorities, and a stronger sense of responsibility for how the message might be received by the wider public’<sup>12</sup>.

18. Minister Lyons also advised the Commissioner that, while the Facebook post was drafted by his office, he took full responsibility for it and that he had personally reviewed the post and had chosen to remove a reference to the number of people who had stayed at LLC. On considering this information provided by Minister Lyons, the Commissioner’s view is that ‘this shows the post was not made in haste, rather it was deliberate and considered, which makes it all the more important to assess’.<sup>13</sup>
19. The Commissioner adds, ‘It is clear to most readers of his message that it included no expression of empathy for those who had been harmed or forced to flee their homes. This was an omission that, whether intentional or not, carries real weight. Ministers are expected to lead with compassion, particularly in times of crisis. Demonstrating empathy is not a courtesy; it is a fundamental part of responsible leadership. In moments of distress, the public looks to those in authority for reassurance and humanity. That was missing here, and it matters’.<sup>14</sup>
20. In referring to the timeline within the report (page 4) the Commissioner highlights that Minister Lyons was aware, or should have been aware of several important things prior to posting his message on Facebook:
  - From the email sent to him by the UUP, that at the time of the intended 7pm protest at LLC, ‘Larne Swimming Club will have over 100+ swimmers from age 3-80 visiting the centre for lessons starting at 6 p.m.  
– none of whom need/want this hassle’.

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<sup>12</sup> Paragraph 15, Appendix 1

<sup>13</sup> Paragraph 16, Appendix 1

<sup>14</sup> Paragraph 17, Appendix 1

- From the email sent to him by the UUP, that 'police resources are limited'.
  - From the call to the DUP Office directly from the PSNI 30 minutes after the UUP email, that the PSNI resources were stretched and they had concerns about the protest; they directly requested it be made clear by the DUP that the people affected were no longer in LLC.
21. In referring to the post on Facebook by Minister Lyons, the Commissioner notes the following in her report:

*'The first sentence of his message confirms 'It has been brought to my attention that a number of individuals were temporarily moved to Larne Leisure Centre in the early hours of the morning following the disturbances in Ballymena'. By confirming that vulnerable individuals had stayed at LLC, the post revealed a specific location linked to a group already at risk. In my view, this increased the likelihood of further attention or unrest, regardless of whether that group of people had already moved on. Although Minister Lyons was not the first to share this information and he had been asked to get the word out, he is the Minister for Communities and his messages carry greater weight than those of other individuals not in a similar position of power.'*

*In the second sentence 'As a local MLA for the area, neither I nor my DUP Council colleagues were made aware or consulted with on this decision until late this afternoon', Minister Lyons appears to criticise the fact that DUP representatives were not consulted by the PSNI or the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE). There would be no reason for the DUP to be consulted on decisions by the NIHE. As the Minister responsible for the Department for Communities, which funds and has power to direct NIHE, he may be accountable to the Assembly for certain matters pertaining to the NIHE but would not be involved in decisions to implement previously agreed protocols (as occurred in this case).*

*A person reading the second sentence, and aware of the views of many of Minister Lyons' constituents, could reasonably conclude Minister Lyons and his DUP Council colleagues would have expressed disapproval of the decision had they been consulted. This could inadvertently sow mistrust in public institutions and shift the focus from a humanitarian response to a political grievance. At a time when unity and public confidence were critical, this approach risked deepening division rather than supporting community cohesion.*

*The third sentence of his post 'It has now been confirmed to us by the PSNI and Council that all these individuals are in the care of the Housing Executive and have been moved out of Larne' affirms that the individuals were in the care of the NIHE. This was unwise of Minister Lyons to include, because it was operationally revealing, politically sensitive, and lacked humanitarian focus. It risked escalating tensions, undermining trust, and sending the wrong message in a moment that required empathy and discretion. Additionally, the PSNI confirmed to me that this was never something they had expected or requested be known or said when they asked the DUP to 'get the word out'.*

*The fourth sentence, 'Protesting is of course a legitimate right, but violence is not and I would encourage everyone to remain peaceful', is problematic. Protest is a legitimate form of political expression, but not at all times and all places. A person reading this, aware that there was a protest scheduled for 7pm at LLC, might reasonably conclude that Minister Lyons did not disapprove of the protest occurring at LLC, provided it did not turn violent. In the circumstances, the reference to non-violent protest was wholly unrealistic because Minister Lyons was aware that there had already been two nights of violent protests. It was entirely foreseeable that violence would occur in the event of more protests, particularly when his office was asked by the PSNI to make clear that the people affected were no longer in LLC, presumably due to PSNI concern about disorder. He also knew there would be over 100 people,*

*including children, swimming there yet was content to encourage protests he could easily have foreseen would become violent (as they did)<sup>15</sup>.*

22. The Commissioner adds, '*In failing to mention or include anything in his post about the over 100 swimmers, including children and elderly people, who were expected at the Larne Swimming Club at the time of the protest, which he knew approximately three hours prior to posting his message, gives the impression that public safety was not fully considered by Minister Lyons. Whether this omission was intentional or not, it could have made an already tense situation more dangerous*'.<sup>16</sup>
23. The Commissioner 's view is that '*By speaking as a Minister, a local MLA, and a party representative all at once, the post blurred the line between public duty and party politics. This can make public statements appear politically motivated rather than focused on community welfare. In situations involving public safety and vulnerable people, it is vital that government communication puts people first, clearly and without ambiguity. Given the serious and sensitive nature of the situation, Minister Lyons would have been wise to seek a second and perhaps third opinion on the wording of the post prior to posting*'.<sup>17</sup>
24. The Commissioner also adds that she does not agree with Minister Lyons' view that the comments made by his Assembly colleagues constituted a 'political pile-on' but that '*the post invited criticism as it lacked empathy and failed to prioritise public safety and community cohesion in a time of crisis. I note that the Northern Ireland Secretary of State, the Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP, remarked that "we all have a responsibility to act in a sensible way in these circumstances" and suggested that Minister Lyons should "watch his words"*

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<sup>15</sup> Paragraphs 19-23, Appendix 1

<sup>16</sup> Paragraph 24, Appendix 1

<sup>17</sup> Paragraphs 25 and 26, Appendix 1

*and “reflect on what he said.” I consider this to be a fair and reasonable observation from the Secretary of State’.<sup>18</sup>*

## **The Commissioner’s findings on allegations**

25. In terms of **Allegation 1** that Minister Lyons has breached **Rule (iv): Follow the Seven Principles of Public Life**, the Commissioner sets out at paragraphs 28-32 of her report why she upholds the allegation of a breach of the Code. The Commissioner explains that by failing to ensure that the Facebook message posted by Minister Lyons upheld public trust, reflected empathy and the prioritisation of public safety, Minister Lyons fell short of the standards expected of him.
26. The Commissioner takes the view that, in failing to prioritise public safety, by omitting critical details about the vulnerable swimmers who were using the LLC at the time, Minister Lyons did not act solely in the public interest.
27. Furthermore, the Commissioner adds that through the blending of his personal, political and official roles, questions are raised about the integrity of the actions of Minister Lyons on the night of 11 June 2025.
28. The Commissioner considers that Minister Lyons’ post on Facebook was shaped by personal or political considerations rather than a fully objective assessment of the situation at the time, and that the situation called for leadership, reassurance, and compassion.
29. The Commissioner adds that through his actions, even if unintentional, Minister Lyons failed to demonstrate leadership in managing a sensitive and potentially volatile situation.

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<sup>18</sup> Paragraph 27, Appendix 1

30. The Commissioner therefore found, on the balance of probabilities, that Minister Lyons breached Rule (iv) because he failed to follow the Seven Principles of Public Life, including accountability and leadership.
31. In terms of **Allegation 2** that Minister Lyons has breached **Rule (vi): Operate in a way conducive to promoting good community relations and equality of treatment**, the Commissioner sets out in paragraph 33 why she upholds the allegation of a breach of the Code. The Commissioner explains that she considers that Minister Lyons did not exercise due care in his Facebook communication and that greater consideration should have been given to both the context and the wording of his message.
32. The Commissioner adds that Minister Lyons should not have endorsed a protest where there was, at very least, a reasonably foreseeable risk of violence.
33. The Commissioner therefore found, on the balance of probabilities, that Minister Lyons breached Rule (vi) because the manner and content of the post showed a lack of due care, which was not conducive to fostering positive community relations or equal treatment.
34. In terms of **Allegation 3** that Minister Lyons has breached **Rule (vii): Not use information gained in the course of their service for personal gain**, the Commissioner advises in paragraph 34 that she does not believe that there has been a breach of the Rule (vii).
35. In concluding, the Commissioner explains that the role of a Minister is one of significant influence and responsibility and that it plays a critical role in maintaining public trust in government. The Commissioner adds that the words Ministers use can often influence public behaviour and can serve to either calm community tensions or exacerbate them.
36. The Commissioner notes with disappointment that Minister Lyons still maintains that there was nothing wrong in the message he posted. She adds that, while

mistakes in judgement can happen even at the highest level, leadership requires the humility to acknowledge mistakes.

37. In finishing, the Commissioner remarks that the outcome of the complaint case is not about punishing human error but instead concerns accountability, leadership and the importance of learning; and that there is public expectation that those in positions of authority ensure they reflect, take responsibility and uphold the values of leadership in public life. She adds that when this does not happen, then it is right that it be acknowledged and addressed.

## The Committee's consideration and conclusions

38. At its meeting on 15 October 2025, the Committee considered the Commissioner's investigation report, in addition to the respondent's written submission in response to the Commissioner's investigation report (**Appendix 3**). In terms of the latter, the respondent makes various criticisms of the Commissioner's investigation report and, in particular, argues that the complaint should have been inadmissible as he was acting as a constituency MLA and not in a ministerial capacity. The Committee, therefore, agreed to forward the respondent's written submission to the former Commissioner to afford her the opportunity to respond to the criticisms of her report.
39. The response from the former Commissioner can be found at **Appendix 4** and was considered by the Committee at its meeting on 3 December 2025. In her response, the former Commissioner sets out her rebuttal of the criticism of her report. On the issue of whether the respondent was acting in a ministerial capacity, she takes the view that the social media post could reasonably be understood as coming from the Minister and that: 'A failure to treat the post as Ministerial would, in fact, have been inconsistent with the Code's requirement that Ministers observe the Seven Principles of Public Life *at all times*'.

40. The Committee discussed the current procedural arrangements for complaints against Ministers, which are different to those for complaints against MLAs. The Committee noted that it is required to consider the Commissioner's reports under Standing Order 69A(3)(a). However, as alluded to above, under the current procedural arrangements, the Committee has no adjudication role in relation to such complaints – in terms of deciding on whether there has been a breach of the Code (consequently that role rests with the Commissioner) – and the Committee cannot recommend the imposition of sanction/s on Ministers to the Assembly in cases, such as this, where the Commissioner's report has concluded that the Code has been breached.
41. The Committee agreed at its meeting on 3 December 2025 to publish a report to include: the Commissioner's investigation report, the written response from the respondent to the investigation report; the subsequent written response from the Commissioner to the issues raised by the respondent ; and an explanation of how it is the role of the Assembly in plenary in deciding whether any sanction/s should be imposed, if the Assembly, in considering the findings of the Commissioner's report, believes there has been a breach of the Code.
42. In addition, arising from its consideration of the Commissioner's report and the subsequent submissions from the respondent and the Commissioner, the Committee agreed to write to the First Minister and deputy First Minister to suggest that they: consider the need for clarification on when the Ministerial Code of Conduct applies to Ministers; and consider whether the wider Ministerial Code needs to be updated to reflect amendments to the Ministerial Code of Conduct arising from the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Act 2022. A copy of the correspondence issued can be found at **Appendix 5**.
43. To conclude, the Committee therefore notes the Commissioner's investigation report and publishes it by way of this report. This fulfils the Committee's

function in relation to considering and publishing all investigation reports submitted by the Commissioner.

# Links to Appendices

## **Appendix 1: The Commissioner for Standards Report on complaints against Minister Gordon Lyons MLA**

[View the Commissioner for Standards report on complaints against Minister Gordon Lyons MLA](#)

## **Appendix 2: Minutes of Proceedings**

[View Minutes of Proceedings of Committee meetings related to the report](#)

## **Appendix 3: Written submission from the respondent in response to the Commissioner for Standard's investigation report**

[View written submission from the respondent to the Commissioner for Standard's investigation report](#)

## **Appendix 4: Written response from the Commissioner for Standards on the submission received from the respondent**

[View the written response from the Commissioner for Standards on the submission received from the respondent](#)

## **Appendix 5: Correspondence issued by the Committee to the First Minister and deputy First Minister**

[View the correspondence issued by the Committee to the First Minister and deputy First Minister](#)

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