



Committee on Standards and Privileges

Report on a complaint against Mr Timothy Gaston MLA

Ordered by the Committee on Standards and Privileges to be published on 10 September 2025.

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Report: NIA 102/22-27 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 the 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)¹
- Connie Egan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)²
- Stewart Dickson MLA
- Jemma Dolan MLA
- Mark Durkan MLA³
- Brian Kingston MLA⁴
- Paul Frew MLA
- Harry Harvey MLA
- Declan McAleer MLA⁵

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

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

³ From 8 September 2025 Mr Mark Durkan replaced Mr Colin McGrath as a member of the Committee.

⁴ From 8 April 2024 Mr Brian Kingston replaced Mr Stephen Dunne as a member of the Committee.

⁵ 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

MLA:	Member of the Legislative Assembly
The Assembly:	Northern Ireland Assembly
The Code:	The Members' Code of Conduct
The Commissioner:	Assembly Commissioner for Standards
The Committee:	Committee on Standards and Privileges
TUV:	Traditional Unionist Voice

Introduction

1. The Committee on Standards and Privileges (“the Committee”) has considered a report from the Assembly Commissioner for Standards (“the Commissioner”) on her investigation into a complaint against Mr Timothy Gaston MLA (“the respondent”) of an alleged breach of the Assembly Members’ Code of Conduct (“the Code”).
2. A link to the Commissioner’s investigation report, which includes a copy of the complaint correspondence, together with the evidence gathered during the investigation, is included at **Appendix A** (a limited amount of information has been redacted from the Commissioner’s report to accord with legal obligations). The 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 MLAs include: the role of the independent Commissioner in investigating complaints of alleged breaches of the Code; the role of the Committee in considering the Commissioner’s investigation reports and adjudicating in light of the Commissioner’s findings and any other evidence or information obtained; and the role of the Assembly in plenary in deciding upon sanctions recommended by the Committee, where applicable.
4. It is the Committee which ultimately decides on whether any breach of the Code is established, on the basis of the evidence, the facts and the legal position in respect of each allegation.

Background

5. On 25 March 2025, the Commissioner received a complaint from Mrs Sinéad Ennis MLA (“the complainant”) alleging that the respondent had breached rule 12 of the Code when he issued a press statement disclosing that he had submitted a formal complaint to the Commissioner regarding the First Minister,

Michelle O'Neill MLA. The complainant provided a copy of the press statement issued by the TUV on 3 October 2024 as evidence.

6. The Commissioner considered the complaint and decided it was admissible, before commencing her investigation on 7 May 2025. On 23 May 2025, the Commissioner forwarded her investigation report to the Committee for consideration.
7. Prior to the Committee commencing its adjudication, and in accordance with its established disclosure procedure, 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 as it receives the Commissioner's investigation report. Mr Gaston was also offered the opportunity to appear before the Committee to make his comments in person and to answer any questions that members may have.
8. Mr Gaston did not take up the opportunity to make a written response nor did he indicate that he wished to avail of an oral hearing.

The relevant rule in the Members' Code of Conduct

9. The relevant rule of conduct cited in the complaint against Mr Gaston is as follows:

Rule 12: You shall disclose confidential or protectively marked information only when you are authorised to do so.

The Commissioner's reasoned decision

10. The following extracts from the investigation report outline the Commissioner's reasoning in relation to why she upheld the allegation made by Mrs Ennis in regard to the breach of Rule 12:

“9. Confidentiality is a cornerstone of the work of the Office of the Commissioner for Standards and is essential to preserving the integrity of the complaints process. It serves to protect all parties involved—both the complainant and the subject of the allegation. For this reason, the MLA Code of Conduct includes two distinct provisions requiring Members to uphold confidentiality throughout the process.

10. In his response, Mr Gaston acknowledged that he had informed the press of his complaint submission. However, he contended that merely disclosing the fact that a complaint had been lodged should not constitute a breach of the Code.

11. It is my view that Mr Gaston knew, or ought reasonably to have known, that issuing a public press release concerning an active and confidential complaint submitted to this Office was inappropriate and in breach of Rule 12 of the MLA Code of Conduct.”

11. The Commissioner also made the following observation in her report:

12. “Confidentiality is of paramount importance to the work of the Office of the Commissioner for Standards. In my view, treating breaches of confidentiality with the seriousness they warrant is essential to safeguarding the integrity of the complaints process and to preventing potential misuse or harm arising from such breaches.”

The Committee’s consideration and conclusion

12. At its meeting on 18 June 2025, the Committee received an oral briefing from the Commissioner on her investigation report. Following the Commissioner’s oral briefing the Committee deliberated and considered the allegation, together with the evidence, findings of facts and reasoned decision of the Commissioner, as set out in her investigation report. In undertaking its adjudication function, the Committee remains mindful that Members will only be found to have breached the Code when they have breached one of the rules of conduct.

13. Having considered the evidence provided within the Commissioner's investigation report, the Committee agreed no further information was required from the Commissioner to enable it to decide on the complaint.
14. Arising from its deliberations, the Committee decided that it agreed with the Commissioner's conclusion that there had been a breach of Rule 12 of the Code. The Committee noted that this was not a case of the respondent being required to disclose the fact of having made the complaint due to him having a declarable interest. Moreover, the respondent disclosed more than the fact of having made the complaint, as the press release included a statement and a photograph relating to his allegations against the First Minister (allegations which were ultimately not upheld following investigation by the Commissioner).
15. That said, having considered the specific circumstances of the case, the Committee agreed that, rather than recommending to the Assembly that a sanction be imposed, it would seek to resolve the matter by requesting that Mr Gaston make a formal apology in writing to the Committee to enable it to report to the Assembly that the complaint has been resolved. Mr Gaston subsequently provided the necessary formal letter of apology, which is included as an Annex to this report.
16. Therefore, **the complaint is upheld and the Committee has concluded that Mr Gaston breached Rule 12 of the Code. However, following receipt of a written apology from Mr Gaston, the Committee is content to report to the Assembly that the matter has now been resolved.**
17. While deciding, in this case, that the matter could be resolved by a written apology, rather than recommending to the Assembly that a sanction be imposed on the Member, the Committee noted the point highlighted in the Commissioner's investigation report regarding the vital importance of confidentiality for all of those involved in the complaints process, in order to safeguard the integrity of the complaints process and to prevent potential misuse or harm arising from such breaches.
18. In that regard, the Committee takes a further opportunity in this report to remind all MLAs of the importance of maintaining confidentiality during the complaints process. This safeguards the fairness and integrity of the process and avoids

any unnecessary reputational damage to any of the parties involved. Therefore, Members must maintain the confidentiality of complaints from the time the complaint is submitted until consideration and, where applicable, the investigation and adjudication of the complaint has concluded.

Annex – Apology from Mr Gaston MLA to the Committee



Emailed to: committee.standards&privileges@niassembly.gov.uk

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25 June 2025

Shane McAteer
Clerk to the Committee on Standards and Privileges
Room 276
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3XX

Dear Mr McAteer,

I write to offer my apologies for the breach of Rule 12 of the Assembly Members' Code of Conduct.

I acknowledge the importance of confidentiality when a case is being investigated and can assure the Committee that such an error will not occur again.

I trust all other MLAs will be held to this standard.

Yours sincerely,

Timothy Gaston MLA

Links to Appendices

Appendix 1: The Commissioner for Standards' report on a complaint case against Mr Timothy Gaston MLA

- [Read the Commissioner for Standards' report on a complaint case against Mr Timothy Gaston MLA](#)

Appendix 2: Minutes of Proceedings

- [Committee on Standards and Privileges Minutes of Proceedings 18 June 2025](#)
- [Committee on Standards and Privileges Minutes of Proceedings 10 September 2025](#)

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