

Committee on Standards

END OF SESSION REPORT

This is the end of session report of the Committee on Standards (CoS) of the Northern Ireland Assembly from 1 September 2025 to 31 August 2026.

Remit:

The Committee on Standards 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 Order Nos. 51 and 57. Further provisions on the Committee's functions are also included in Standing Orders 69, 69A, 69B, and 69C

Powers:

The Committee has the power:

- 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 or 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 membership at 31 August 2026 was as follows:

Cathy Mason MLA (Chairperson)¹

Connie Egan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)²

Keith Buchanan MLA³

Trevor Clarke MLA⁴

Stewart Dickson MLA

Mark Durkan MLA⁵

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

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

³ From 3 March 2026 Keith Buchanan replaced Harry Harvery as a member of the Committee.

⁴ From 3 March 2026 Trevor Clarke replaced Brian Kingston as a member of the Committee

⁵ From 8 September 2025 Mark Durkan replaced Colin McGrath as a member of the Committee.

Paul Frew MLA
Declan McAleer MLA⁶
Emma Sheerin MLA⁷

Key Activities, Outputs and Achievements

The Register of Members' Interests

1. The Committee on Standards has responsibility for examining the arrangements for 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. An updated version of the Register of Members' Interests (in PDF format) was published on the Assembly website during this session, in addition to the maintenance of a live version of the Register which is continually updated as changes are notified by Members.

All-Party Groups

2. During this session, five new All-Party Groups (APGs) were approved by the Committee, with two APGs removed from the register due to non-compliance with the rules.

Complaints against Members

3. It is the role of the independent Commissioner for Standards to consider complaints against MLAs of alleged breaches of the Members' Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules ('the Code and Guide') and report to the Committee on those complaints which met the threshold for investigation. Following the completion of Dr Melissa McCullough's term of office, Mr Stephen Wright was appointed with effect from 3 November 2025, as the new Commissioner for Standards. The Committee paid tribute to Dr McCullough for all her work as Commissioner and welcomed Mr Wright to the role.
4. The Committee published a total of four [reports](#) on its adjudication of complaints against Members (which included the related Commissioner investigation reports).
5. In addition, the Committee gave further consideration to decisions of the Commissioner in which he had deemed seven complaints against Members to be inadmissible (the Committee agreed with the Commissioner's decision in each case); and considered two cases in which the Commissioner sought permission

⁶ From 10 February 2025 Declan McAleer replaced Carál Ní Chuilín as a member of the Committee.

⁷ From 24 November 2025 Emma Sheerin replaced Jemma Dolan as a member of the Committee.

to discontinue consideration of the complaints (the Committee granted approval for discontinuation in each case).

Complaints against Ministers

6. In the last session the Committee agreed, in principle, that it should have a role in adjudicating on complaints against Ministers of alleged breaches of the Ministerial Code of Conduct and agreed to consult with Assembly parties and independent Members on the matter. Following consideration of the responses during this session, the Committee agreed to refer the issue to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) for its consideration, given the role it has to review matters relating to the functioning of the Assembly, including Assembly Committees. The Committee will further consider the matter having received a response from the AERC.
7. In the meantime, 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. During the period of this report, the Commissioner carried out one investigation on a complaint against a Minister which was considered by the Committee and [reported](#) on.

Repeal of Standing Order 70

8. Following a policy review of Assembly Standing Order 70 (Privilege), which was informed by research and legal advice, the Committee agreed to seek the repeal of the Standing Order and to various consequential amendments to other Standing Orders, including removing reference to “Privileges” in the Committee title. The Committee agreed to ask the Committee on Procedures to undertake the work necessary to bring the proposed repeal and amendments to Standing Orders to the Assembly for approval.
9. The motion to repeal Standing Order 70 and associated consequential amendments was debated and agreed by the Assembly on 29 June 2026.⁸

Review of the General Procedures Direction

10. The Committee progressed its work on the review of the General Procedures Direction, which sets out procedural arrangements relating to the Commissioner for Standards’ handling of complaint cases.

⁸ See the following links for background on the reasons for the repeal of Standing Order 70:
<https://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/plenary/details.aspx?sp=0&pid=2&doc=453799+>
<https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/committees/2022-2027/procedures/information-on-changes-to-standing-orders/repeal-of-standing-order-70-and-consequential-amendments-to-standing-orders.pdf>

11. Following legal advice on the proposed revisions to the Direction, the Committee agreed to provide the proposed revisions to the Commissioner for information and comment. The Committee will formally agree the updated Direction and provide it to the Commissioner in September 2026.

Unacceptable Behaviours Policy

12. The Committee concluded its deliberations on measures to support the implementation of the Unacceptable Behaviours Policy ('the Policy'), which had been developed jointly with the Assembly Commission and agreed by the Committee in July 2025. These include proposed amendments to the Code and Guide, including to highlight the importance of the Policy by making explicit reference to it within the Rules of Conduct.
13. A number of amendments were agreed in relation to the General Procedures Direction, and the Committee has requested that the Committee on Procedures takes work forward to amend Standing Order 69C to extend the scope of the 'rectification procedure' to cover complaints made against MLAs under the Policy.
14. In recognition of the importance of confidentiality within the complaints process, the Committee agreed that the Commissioner for Standards should administer a confidentiality agreement for parties to any complaint under the Policy who are not MLAs (since these parties are not bound by a similar Code of Conduct). The requirements of that agreement apply to complaints which are under consideration and the Committee also agreed to propose an amendment to the Guide to the Rules to highlight the equivalent confidentiality obligations on Members in terms of complaints that are under consideration.

Review of the Members' Code of Conduct and Guide to the Rules

15. Following approval of the Unacceptable Behaviours Policy by the Assembly Commission in November 2025, the Committee considered a range of other separate and unrelated updates needed to the Code and Guide.
16. In addition to amendments to the Code and Guide related to the Policy, other updates were required to reflect: changes to Members' legal requirements under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA); the change of the Committee's name to the Committee on Standards; amendments to clarify the scope of the Code, including in relation to its application to Assembly committee chairpersons and to applicable conduct in the Chamber; and a number of typographical and drafting improvements.
17. At its meeting on 2 July 2026, the Committee agreed its draft report on the proposed updates to the Code and Guide. The embargoed Committee report,

together with an accompanying motion, was subsequently laid in the Business Office, awaiting scheduling for debate early in the next session.

Digitisation of the process for registering Members' interests

18. The previous Committee had agreed proposals to develop an interface to enable Members to register and update their interests online. Preparatory work was consequently undertaken, including process mapping and the development of initial specifications, ahead of the current mandate.
19. The Committee subsequently agreed that the project should be progressed by the Assembly IS Office. Work on the project is ongoing and anticipated to be in place for the new mandate.

Committee meetings

20. The Committee held 12 formal meetings during the period covered by this report, all of which were held entirely in closed session due to the confidential nature of the Committee's work.

Committee expenditure

21. The Committee expenditure for the period covered by this report is included as an Appendix.

Appendix

Committee on Standards

Expenditure for the period 1 September 2025- 31 August 2026

Budget area	Details	Expenditure
Committee Travel - committee members and staff travel and subsistence in relation to visits and meetings outside Parliament Buildings	Includes the cost of committee visits to: [location] - to meet [name of key organisation/person] to discuss [issue] [location] to consider [issue] and x number of meetings held outside Parliament Buildings	£0
Printing of committee reports	Includes the cost of committee reports on: - Inquiry into [name of inquiry] [name of] Bill	£0
Advertising – the cost of public notices relating to committee inquiries, the committee stage of Bills and meetings held outside Parliament Buildings	Includes the cost of public notices in relation to: - Inquiry into [name of inquiry] [name of] Bill	£0
Specialist Advice - the cost of specialist advisers appointed by the committee and commissioned research, also the cost of drafting Standing Orders	Specialist adviser to the Committee on [issue/inquiry to which the advice related]	£0
Refreshments & Hospitality	Includes the cost of all refreshments and hospitality provided by the committee; to include meetings, working lunches, seminars and any other such expenditure.	£485.71
General expenses	Includes the cost of seminars (excluding refreshments and hospitality); room hire; witness expenses; gifts provided by the committee during visits; and conference fees for members, including Member Development costs	£15.70
Total Expenditure		£501.41