



The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission Minutes of Proceedings

Meeting Venue: Parliament Buildings, Room 21

Meeting date: Tuesday 28 June 2022

Meeting Time: 2.00 pm

Assembly Commission Members:

Alex Maskey, Speaker (Chairperson)
Trevor Clarke MLA
John Blair MLA
Robbie Butler MLA
Dolores Kelly

Officials present:

Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive
Tara Caul, Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services
Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services
Richard Stewart, Director of Corporate Services
Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support
Gavin Ervine, Private Secretary to the Speaker
Janet Hughes, Clerical Supervisor

Others in attendance:

Pat Sheehan MLA
Edward Lord, Secretariat Audit and Risk Committee Chairperson
David Lynn, Head of Building Services (Item 11)
Alice McKelvey, Legal Adviser (Item 11)
Shane McAteer, Clerk of Standards (Item 12)
Susie Brown, Head of Communications (Item 15)
Tracey Wilson, Information Officer (Item 15)
Trevor Steenson, Acting Head of Information Systems (Items 16 and 17)

The meeting commenced at 2.03 pm.

1. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

3. CHAIRPERSON'S BUSINESS

The Speaker noted that a vacancy had arisen on the Assembly Commission following the appointment of John O'Dowd MLA to the position of Minister for Infrastructure and that Members had agreed an 'Interim Protocol to Allow Attendance at Assembly Commission Meetings While Vacancies Cannot be Filled', by written procedure. The Speaker confirmed that Pat Sheehan MLA had therefore been nominated by Sinn Féin to attend Assembly Commission meetings and welcomed him to the meeting.

The Speaker recorded the Assembly Commission's thanks to Mr O'Dowd for his service to the Assembly Commission over the last two and a half years.

Action: The Speaker to write to Mr O'Dowd to formally recognise the contribution made by him during his time on the Assembly Commission.

4. DRAFT MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

Minutes from the Assembly Commission meeting on 9 February 2022 were approved for publication.

5. MATTERS ARISING

Members raised concerns in relation to the allocation of accommodation to Parties and the time taken to clear rooms by MLAs and Parties, following the May 2022 election. It was noted that the matter was not yet resolved and Members suggested that it may be helpful to review the process.

The Clerk/Chief Executive outlined the process which had been adopted successfully over previous Mandates and the particular difficulties encountered on this occasion.

The Speaker and Clerk/Chief Executive committed to have a discussion on the issues raised and agreed to come back to Members with a proposal on how to move the matter forward, should there be no resolution following further consultation with Parties.

Action: The Speaker and Clerk/Chief Executive to come back to Members with a proposal on how to move the allocation of accommodation to Parties forward, should the matter not be resolved following further consultation with Parties.

6. COMMISSION ACTIONS

Members noted the status of actions.

7. CORRESPONDENCE

Members noted the following items of correspondence.

A letter dated 10 February 2022 from the Speaker to the Chairperson of the Audit Committee, in relation to the consideration of thresholds on committee input to in-year adjustments and the Chairperson's response dated 17 February 2022.

An email dated 14 February 2022 from the Open University in Ireland, in relation to its proposed new course 'Introduction to making political and social change' and the Speaker's response dated 2 March 2022.

A letter dated 23 February 2022 from Jonathan Buckley MLA, Mervyn Storey MLA and Keith Buchanan MLA, requesting that the Union Flag be flown from Parliament Buildings on 28 May 2022 to coincide with the Orange Institution's centenary parade and the Speaker's responses dated 14 March 2022 and 25 May 2022.

A letter dated 4 March 2022 from the Chairperson of the Working Group on an Unacceptable Behaviours Policy, in relation to the Report on the Development of an Unacceptable Behaviours Policy. The Speaker noted that this would be considered under agenda item 12.

Finally, a letter dated 24 June 2022 from the Speaker to Michelle O'Neill MLA in relation to the nomination of a Sinn Féin MLA to attend Assembly Commission meetings, following Mr O'Dowd's appointment as the Minister for Infrastructure, as noted under Chairperson's Business.

8. CLERK/CHIEF EXECUTIVE UPDATE

Lesley Hogg noted that her report provided Members with an update on the key issues, which had arisen since the last Assembly Commission meeting, and that in view of the heavy agenda, she would only highlight key points.

Annual Accounts

Mrs Hogg advised that the Assembly Commission's Annual Report and Accounts for the year ended 31 March 2022 were considered by the Secretariat Audit and Risk Committee (SARC) at its meetings in May 2022

and June 2022, with a recommendation that they are signed by her as Accounting Officer.

SARC Terms of Reference

Mrs Hogg advised of a small number of changes proposed by SARC following a review of its Terms of Reference. She highlighted that these included a proposal to change SARC's name to the Assembly Commission Audit and Risk Committee (ACARC), to more properly reflect the fact that the Assembly Commission is the name of the legal entity.

Members approved the proposed updated Terms of Reference.

Annual Litigation Update

Mrs Hogg provided Members with an update on actual and potential litigation involving the Assembly Commission.

Simultaneous Translation of Assembly Business in Irish and Ulster Scots

Mrs Hogg stated that following a survey of all MLAs on their intention to make substantive contributions in plenary and/or in committee business in Irish and Ulster Scots, simultaneous interpretation for both Irish and Ulster Scots was subsequently introduced at the start of the new Mandate. However, given the election in May 2022, Mrs Hogg proposed that the survey be re-issued in order to obtain the views of current MLAs. Members approved the proposal.

Action: Gareth McGrath to survey MLAs, to re-assess the level of demand required for translation services in Irish and Ulster Scots, following the May 2022 election.

2022 Staff Survey and Link to Industrial Action

Mrs Hogg informed Members of a recent press release issued by NIPSA, the Assembly Commission's recognised Trades Union, on the dispute with the Assembly Commission regarding its pay rise for 2021 and draft Homeworking Policy, which also referenced the recently published 2022 Staff Survey.

A discussion took place on the draft Homeworking Policy and it was noted that a further version of the policy had been presented to TUS for consultation.

9. ANNUAL PLAN 2021-22 END OF YEAR PERFORMANCE REPORT

Richard Stewart highlighted that of the targets set in the Annual Plan 2021-22, 87% had been achieved or partially achieved, and that the key factor behind almost all of the 13% not fully achieved, was other activity required to manage the legislative workload at the end of the Assembly Mandate.

Mr Stewart confirmed that any residual actions from the 2021-22 Annual Plan that were not fully completed would be added to the 2022-23 Annual Plan. He also stated that there would be a sharper focus on core parliamentary activities in future Annual Plans, in relation to the final year of the Mandate.

Mr Stewart commended staff on the actions and activities that had been delivered in 2021-22, in spite of the challenges faced.

Members noted the report.

10. PAY CLAIM 2022 AND UPDATE ON INDUSTRIAL ACTION

Mr Stewart presented a paper detailing the proposed pay claim submitted by NIPSA for 2022.

Mr Stewart set out the basis of the pay claim, as CPI plus 2% which equated to a 9% increase for all pay points on all pay scales or a £3,000 increase, if that was greater. It was noted that the claim also proposed a movement in the effective date of future pay claims from 1 August each year to 1 April.

Members considered the NIPSA pay claim and asked how a possible response to a claim of this level might compare with other employers across the public sector. It was agreed that additional information would be provided on this at a subsequent meeting.

Action: Mr Stewart to provide Members with information on the response to the 2022 pay claim from other employers across the public sector, at a subsequent Assembly Commission meeting.

Jonathan McMillen and David Lynn joined the meeting at 3.14 pm for agenda item 11.

11. DEFECTS IN THE ROOF OF PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

Jonathan McMillen updated Members on the current position with regard to the potential legal action against those companies responsible for undertaking the roof refurbishment works.

John Blair MLA left the meeting at 3.15 pm.

Jonathan McMillen and David Lynn left the meeting at 3.18 pm

John Blair MLA re-joined the meeting at 3.19 pm.

Change to agenda running order.

26. SARC REPORT TO THE NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSION FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2022

Edward Lord, SARC Chairperson, presented the SARC Annual Report for 2021-2022, which provided a Satisfactory level of assurance in relation to corporate governance.

Members noted the report.

The Speaker advised Members that the meeting would now move into closed session for the Assembly Commission's annual meeting with the SARC Chairperson.

Officials left the meeting at 3.20 pm.

The meeting went into closed session at 3.21 pm.

Robbie Butler MLA left the meeting at 3.32 pm.

Officials re-joined the meeting at 3.40 pm and the meeting resumed in open session.

Pat Sheehan MLA left the meeting at 3.40 pm.

Shane McAteer, joined the meeting at 3.41 pm for agenda item 12.

12. REPORT ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN UNACCEPTABLE BEHAVIOURS POLICY

The Speaker noted that in the previous Mandate, three members of the Assembly Commission had served along with members of the Standards and Privileges Committee, on a Joint Working Group, in relation to developing a policy to deal with unacceptable behaviours.

Members noted the report from the Joint Working Group and were content for officials to commence consultation on the Unacceptable Behaviours Policy with Trade Union Side.

Shane McAteer left the meeting at 3.43 pm.

Pat Sheehan MLA re-joined the meeting at 3.43 pm.

13. COVID-19 ARRANGEMENTS

Mr Stewart updated Members on the changes that had been made to the COVID-19 guidance issued by the Executive in the week commencing 6 June 2022, and recommended a number of changes to the COVID-19 arrangements in Parliament Buildings.

Members agreed with the recommendations.

John Blair MLA recorded his thanks to Assembly Commission staff for their prompt response to all COVID-19 related matters.

14. REVIEW OF THE FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FOR POLITICAL PARTIES SCHEME ('FAPP SCHEME') 2016

The Speaker noted that potential amendments to the FAPP Scheme had been considered on a number of occasions, most recently at the last Assembly Commission on 9 February 2022, when Members requested more time to consult on the three residual areas.

Mr Stewart outlined each of the residual issues and asked for Members' views following consultation with their respective Parties.

Based on the views provided, it was agreed that more time was required for consultation with Parties and that the paper presented would be considered again at a subsequent Assembly Commission meeting.

18. APPOINTMENT OF TRUSTEES FOR THE ASSEMBLY MEMBERS PENSION SCHEME (NORTHERN IRELAND) 2016

Mr Stewart advised Members that five MLAs are appointed as Trustees for the Assembly Members Pension Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2016, but that as three of the current Trustees either did not stand for re-election or were not re-elected following the Assembly election in May 2022, there was a need to appoint new Trustees.

Mr Stewart therefore asked that Members liaise with their Parties and submit Trustee nominations to the Finance Office.

19. NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSION COMPLAINTS POLICY AND PROCEDURES REPORT 2021-22

Members noted the Complaints Policy and Procedures Report for 2021-22.

20. THE GOOD RELATIONS ACTION PLAN 2016-21 CLOSURE REPORT

Members noted the Good Relations Action Plan 2016-21 Closure Report.

21. DRAFT GOOD RELATIONS ACTION PLAN 2022-25 PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Members noted the draft Good Relations Action Plan 2022-25 and that a full public consultation would be undertaken.

Edward Lord left the meeting at 3.55 pm.

22. PUBLICATION OF THE AUDIT OF INEQUALITIES CLOSURE REPORT 2016-21

Members noted the Audit of Inequalities 2016-21 Closure Report.

23. CONSULTATION ON DRAFT EQUALITY SCHEME AND AUDIT OF INEQUALITIES REPORT AND ACTION PLAN 2022-26

Members noted the draft Equality Scheme and Audit of Inequalities Report and Action Plan 2022-26 and that a full public consultation would be undertaken.

24. GENDER ACTION PLAN: MARCH 2022 UPDATE

Members noted the progress on the Gender Action Plan 2019-23.

25. ANNUAL EQUALITY PROGRESS REPORT TO THE EQUALITY COMMISSION 2021-22

Members noted the Annual Equality Progress Report to the Equality Commission 2021-22.

Mr Stewart referred to the volume of Equality papers that had been presented at the meeting and proposed reducing this going forward by only presenting the Annual Equality Progress Report which incorporated updates on the Disability Action Plan, the Gender Action Plan and the Good Relations Action Plan into the Annual Equality Progress Report.

Members were content with this proposal.

27. PAPERS ISSUED VIA CORRESPONDENCE

Covid-19 Response.

28. DECISIONS MADE VIA CORRESPONDENCE

Members noted the following decisions made via correspondence since the last meeting:

Request to fly the Union Flag from Parliament Building on 28 May 2022 – **Declined on the basis of no consensus.**

Lighting Requests:

Earth Hour – **Approved.**

International Nurses Day – **Approved.**

Centenary Parade – **Approved.**

Platinum Jubilee – **Approved.**

29. AOB

There was no other business.

Susie Brown and Tracey Wilson joined the meeting at 3.59 pm for agenda item 15.

15. BUSINESS CASE FOR THE REFURBISHMENT OF AUDIO AND VIDEO SYSTEMS IN THE ASSEMBLY COMMITTEE ROOMS

Susie Brown presented the business case to refurbish the audio and video systems in all committee rooms, along with the estimated cost.

Following consideration, Members approved the business case to refurbish the audio and video systems in all committee rooms.

Susie Brown and Tracey Wilson left the meeting at 4.04 pm.

16. PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS WI-FI NETWORK REPLACEMENT PROJECT 2022

Dr McGrath presented the business case for the replacement of the Wi-Fi network in Parliament Buildings.

Dr McGrath stated that it was the view of the IS Office, that the current system had reached the limit of its effectiveness and consequently no improvement was likely until the Assembly Wi-Fi network system, including a dedicated internet connection, was replaced.

Members approved the business case to replace the Wi-Fi network and internet connection in Parliament Buildings.

Trevor Steenson joined the meeting at 4.07 pm for agenda item 17.

17. CONSTITUENCY OFFICE BROADBAND SERVICES

Trevor Steenson presented a paper on the provision of broadband connections to constituency offices.

Mr Steenson highlighted that the Assembly Commission's current contract for broadband services did not provide an effective service for all constituency offices and that it was the view of the IS Office that increasing the available speeds under a similar replacement contract with a single supplier would not adequately address the current and predicted requirements of geographically dispersed constituency offices.

In light of this, Mr Steenson proposed to discontinue the provision of a centrally funded broadband contract and that instead, MLAs would choose the most appropriate telecoms provider for their area and fund the costs from Office Cost Expenses. He said that the IS Office would provide advice and assistance to MLAs to help them identify suitable providers.

Following consideration, Members agreed that MLAs should choose their own broadband/telecoms supplier and that costs would be funded from Office Cost Expenses, as recommended.

Trevor Steenson left the meeting at 4.14 pm.

30. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting is to be confirmed.

The meeting ended at 4.15 pm.