

The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission



Meeting Venue: Parliament Buildings, Room 106

Meeting date: Monday 10 October 2022

Meeting Time: 3.45 pm

Assembly Commission Members:

Alex Maskey, Speaker (Chairperson)

Trevor Clarke MLA

John Blair MLA

Robbie Butler MLA (joined remotely)

Dolores Kelly (joined remotely)

Officials present:

Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive

Tara Caul, Director of Legal, Governance and Research Services

Gareth McGrath, Director of Parliamentary Services

Robin Ramsey, Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support

Janet Hughes, Clerical Supervisor

Others in attendance:

Pat Sheehan MLA

Edward Lord, Assembly Commission Audit and Risk Committee Chairperson

Sebastien Mingout, Support Services Manager (Item 9)

Frank Geddis, Clerk Assistant (Item 10)

Barbara Love, Assembly Clerk (Item 10)

The meeting commenced at 3.57 pm.

1. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

None.

3. CHAIRPERSON'S BUSINESS

The Speaker noted a letter from Pam Cameron MLA dated 7 October 2022 that had been copied to Members, which sought Assembly Commission funding for sign language interpretation for meetings organised by MLAs. The Speaker informed Members that officials were currently reviewing the sign language pilot with a view to presenting a paper at the next Assembly Commission meeting and he proposed that Mrs Cameron's request be considered at the next meeting alongside that item. Members were content with the proposal.

Action: Gareth McGrath to prepare a paper on the review of the sign language pilot, for consideration at the next Assembly Commission meeting.

Action: Richard Stewart to prepare an advice paper on Mrs Cameron's sign language interpretation funding request, for consideration at the next Assembly Commission meeting.

Action: Speaker to write to Mrs Cameron advising her that her request would be fully considered at the next Assembly Commission meeting following review by officials.

4. DRAFT MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

Minutes from the Assembly Commission meetings on 28 June 2022 and 6 September 2022 were approved for publication.

5. MATTERS ARISING

The Speaker advised that both he and Lesley Hogg had given further consideration to the issues raised concerning office accommodation in Parliament Buildings, following discussion at the last Assembly Commission meeting on 6 September 2022.

The Speaker noted that Mrs Hogg had arranged meetings with Members to discuss potential options and that once the individual views of Members had been considered, a further discussion would be arranged to conclude the matter.

6. COMMISSION ACTIONS

Members noted the status of actions.

Mrs Hogg reminded Members, following the Assembly Commission meeting on 9 February 2022, of the need to provide a view on potential changes to incorporate the Assembly Commission's budget setting process into Standing Orders. Mrs Hogg noted that while the absence of a functioning Assembly meant that changes to Standing Orders could not be made at this time, it would be helpful if Members could indicate if their Parties had formed a view on this matter.

7. CLERK/CHIEF EXECUTIVE UPDATE

Mrs Hogg noted that her report provided Members with an update on the key issues which had arisen since the last Assembly Commission meeting, and she highlighted the salient points.

Management Accounts – August 2022

Mrs Hogg advised Members of the current forecast for expenditure for 2022/23 in relation to Resource DEL and Capital DEL and provided explanations for variations against budget.

In particular, Mrs Hogg highlighted that the forecast cost of electricity and gas had increased more than anticipated in the budget, because of significant rises in wholesale markets. She also stated that a more detailed analysis of MLA costs would be undertaken and that savings were anticipated for Party Allowance due to the fact that changes in the Financial Assistance for Political Parties Scheme 2016 had not yet been made.

Mrs Hogg informed Members that while the budget had been agreed by the Audit Committee and the Assembly, the Assembly had not yet passed the necessary Budget Act to establish the agreed budget position for government Departments and other publicly funded organisations, including the Assembly Commission. In the event of a Budget Act not being passed in this financial year, Mrs Hogg advised that the maximum that could be approved for the Assembly Commission would be 95% of last year's Spring Supplementary Estimate position, which would mean a shortfall for Resource DEL and Capital DEL based on the current forecast.

Dolores Kelly joined the meeting at 4.03 pm.

Claim for Injuries for Damage to Feelings Arising from Changes to Public Service Pension Provisions in 2014

Mrs Hogg informed Members that a claim had been lodged by the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) on behalf of its members, relating to injuries for damage to feelings arising from changes to public service pension provisions in 2014.

Complaints to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO)

Mrs Hogg advised that two complaints had been made to the ICO, relating to a Freedom of Information request and an Environmental Information request.

Retirement of the Director of Corporate Services

Mrs Hogg advised that Richard Stewart, Director of Corporate Services, had tendered his resignation and would be retiring at the end of December 2022.

Mrs Hogg informed Members that under her delegated authority from the Assembly Commission, matters relating to the appointment, terms and conditions and remuneration of Directors were excepted matters and she subsequently sought the approval of the Assembly Commission to commence a recruitment competition for a new Director of Corporate Services. Members approved the commencement of a recruitment competition.

John Blair MLA recorded his thanks and appreciation to Mr Stewart for his service to the Assembly Commission.

External Christmas Tree

Mrs Hogg advised that it was not intended to have an external Christmas tree this year outside Parliament Buildings, due to storm damage caused to it in previous years.

8. PAY CLAIM 2022 AND UPDATE ON INDUSTRIAL ACTION

Mrs Hogg referred to the discussion on the NIPSA Pay Claim 2022 at the Assembly Commission meeting on 28 June 2022, when Members requested additional information on pay settlements in other public sector entities.

Mrs Hogg updated Members on pay settlements in other public sector entities and subsequently sought approval of a proposed one-year pay offer encompassing a consolidated increase of 4% on all pay points; an amendment to the effective date of the pay increase to bring it forward from 1 August to 1 April; a tiered, one-off non-consolidated 'cost of living' payment ranging from £250 to £1,000 for staff at AG5 to AG8; and a one-step progression subject to satisfactory performance.

Following consideration, Members approved the proposed pay offer as outlined above and it was noted that this would be formally offered to NIPSA.

Mrs Hogg also advised that NIPSA had de-escalated the industrial action by its members following the introduction of a Hybrid Working Policy.

Change to agenda running order.

11. 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 Assembly Commission on 28 June 2022, when Members agreed to return to the matter at a subsequent meeting, following consultation with their Parties on three residual areas.

Mrs Hogg outlined the three residual issues requiring agreement and asked for Members' views following consultation with their respective Parties.

In discussion, Members considered the proportionate level of funding between larger and smaller parties and asked for further information on the arrangements in other legislatures.

Action: Mr Stewart to provide Members with further information on the funding arrangements for Political Parties in other legislatures, at the next Assembly Commission meeting.

Sebastien Mingout joined the meeting at 4.52 pm for agenda item 9.

9. BUSINESS CASE FOR THE RETENDERING OF THE SUPPORT SERVICES CONTRACT 2023

Mrs Hogg informed Members that there were two issues to be considered in relation to the Support Services contract. The first of which was the approval of an increase to the current Support Services contract overall value, which Mrs Hogg stated was likely to exceed its approved business case value.

Following consideration, Members approved the proposed increase in value of the current Support Services contract.

Mrs Hogg advised that the second issue for consideration related to the retendering of the Support Services Contract 2023. It was noted that the Assembly Commission had approved a business case for the contract at its meeting on 9 February 2022, but that the subsequent tender exercise had not identified a suitable contractor. In light of this, Mrs Hogg informed Members that a review of the procurement process had been undertaken and a revised business case prepared. Mrs Hogg highlighted a number of changes that had been made to both the Terms and Conditions of the contract and to the specification, and sought approval of the revised business case.

Following discussion, Members approved the revised business case.

John Blair MLA left the meeting at 5.21 pm.

The Speaker thanked officials for the work undertaken in preparing the revised business case.

Sebastien Mingout left the meeting at 5.22 pm.

Frank Geddis and Barbara Love joined the meeting at 5.22 pm for agenda item 10.

Trevor Clarke MLA left the meeting at 5.22 pm.

10. OUTLINE BUSINESS CASE FOR THE PROCUREMENT OF NEW LEGISLATIVE DRAFTING SOFTWARE

Frank Geddis advised Members that the current support contract for the legislative drafting software used by the Assembly ends on 31 August 2023 and he outlined the business reasons and rationale for the procurement of a new contract.

John Blair re-joined the meeting at 5.27 pm.

Barbara Love stated that the outline business case presented, considered four possible options following expiry of the current contract, with a recommendation to proceed on the basis of Option 2, as it provided the best value for money, was fit for purpose and was deliverable in the required timeframe.

Gareth McGrath advised Members that this procurement project had not been included in the approved budget for 2022-25, and whilst some funds were available to progress it in 2022-23, there was currently no budgetary provision in 2023-24 and 2024-25. It was noted that the Assembly's Audit Committee would need to be briefed on this additional budgetary requirement with a revised Assembly Commission budget approved and included in the Budget Acts for 2023-24 and 2024-25.

Frank Geddis and Barbara Love left the meeting at 5.32 pm.

Following consideration, Members approved the outline business case for the procurement of new legislative drafting software.

12. SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETATION OF ASSEMBLY BUSINESS IN IRISH AND ULSTER SCOTS

Dr McGrath advised that in December 2021, all MLAs were surveyed to assess the level of demand for interpretation of Assembly business in Irish and Ulster Scots and that in light of the May 2022 election the survey had been repeated.

Dr McGrath provided Members with a summary of the responses received.

Members agreed that the responses received demonstrated that there was demand for the simultaneous interpretation of Assembly business in Irish only at this point, but that should there be a change in circumstances with an MLA indicating that they intended to make contributions during Assembly business in Ulster Scots, officials would work to secure the services of Ulster Scots interpreters. It was also noted that a review would be carried out after six months of resumption of Assembly business.

13. PROPOSAL FOR A MEMORANDUM OF UNDERSTANDING (MoU) BETWEEN THE NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSION AND THE NORTHERN IRELAND YOUTH ASSEMBLY

Dr McGrath noted that the Assembly Commission, as part of its agreement to support the establishment and operation of a Youth Assembly, had previously agreed that the parameter of this support should be set down in an MoU with the Youth Assembly and he subsequently presented and sought approval of a draft MoU.

Following consideration Members approved the draft MoU.

14. OVERVIEW OF ASSEMBLY COMMISSION EVENTS TO MARK DECADE OF CENTENARIES 2012-2022

Robin Ramsey presented a paper to conclude the Assembly Commission's series of events to mark the decade of centenaries. Mr Ramsey confirmed that there had been 15 events held by the Assembly Commission since 2012 to mark the decade of centenaries, all of which had received positive feedback.

Mr Ramsey noted that the events held during the decade of centenaries had been agreed in line with principles agreed by the Assembly Commission in May 2012. He proposed that some elements of the principles could be referred to as a guide for other projects on historical or politically sensitive issues in the future. Members were content with the proposal.

15. HOSTING OF 'SILENT TESTIMONY' EXHIBITION IN THE LONG GALLERY PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS DURING THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE GOOD FRIDAY AGREEMENT IN APRIL 2023

Mr Ramsey informed Members that the Speaker and officials would be developing a programme of events and initiatives to mark the 25th Anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement and the first sitting of the Assembly in 2023.

Mr Ramsey subsequently advised Members of an approach that had been made to host the 'Silent Testimony' exhibition by prolific artist Colin Davidson in The Long Gallery, Parliament Buildings during the anniversary of the Good

Friday Agreement. He confirmed that The Long Gallery was available to host the exhibition, but that it would mean that it would not be available for other event bookings during the period of the exhibition.

Following consideration, Members agreed that the 'Silent Testimony' exhibition could be hosted in The Long Gallery from 3 April to 28 April 2023.

16. PAPERS ISSUED VIA CORRESPONDENCE

Advice Note in Relation to a Vacancy on the Assembly Commission.

17. DECISIONS MADE VIA CORRESPONDENCE

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

Lighting Request:

Ukraine Independence Day – **Approved.**

Other:

Approval was given to close Parliament Buildings to the public during the period of official mourning for Her Majesty The Queen.

Members also approved a proposed response to the Review Team, as set out in the paper on the 'Review of the Northern Ireland Commissioner of Children and Young People and Review of the Commissioner of Older People Northern Ireland'.

18. AOB

There was no other business.

19. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The date of the next meeting is to be confirmed.

The meeting ended at 5.43 pm.