

The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Meeting Venue: Parliament Buildings, Room 106

Meeting date: Tuesday, 1 October 2024

Meeting Time: 3.30 pm

Assembly Commission Members:

Edwin Poots MLA, Speaker (Chairperson)

Sinéad Ennis MLA

Trevor Clarke MLA

Nuala McAllister MLA

Robbie Butler MLA

Colin McGrath MLA

Officials present:

Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive

Steven Baxter, Director of Corporate Services

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:

Paula McClintock, Head of Finance (Item 7)

Jonathan McMillen, Head of Legal Services (Items 7 and 8)

Ken Eccles, Head of Usher Services (Item 8)

The meeting commenced at 3.44 pm.

1. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. CHAIRPERSON'S BUSINESS

The Speaker informed Members that Robbie Butler would be stepping down from the Assembly Commission, on Wednesday 2 October, following his appointment as Chairperson of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee. The Speaker thanked Mr Butler for his service to the Assembly Commission since January 2020.

The Speaker noted that Mr Butler was due to sit on the upcoming interview panel for the Assembly Commission Audit and Risk Committee (ACARC), and he asked if Members were content for him to remain on the panel rather than seek a substitute during an ongoing process. Members were content.

The Speaker also stated that as Mr Butler was the Assembly Commission Member assigned to ACARC, a replacement member would now be required. Given that other Members had already served on ACARC, Members discussed that as part of the rotation either Nuala McAllister or Colin McGrath could be appointed. Officials will confirm which Member is willing to fill the vacancy.

Colin McGrath joined the meeting at 3.46 pm.

4. DRAFT MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Minutes from the Assembly Commission meeting on 20 June 2024 were approved for publication.

5. MATTERS ARISING

There were no matters arising.

6. CORRESPONDENCE

The Speaker referred to correspondence received from Dan Jarvis MBE MP, Security Minister, in relation to the Application of the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill for the Assembly Commission. He advised Members that officials had prepared a paper on this matter for consideration at agenda item 8.

Nuala McAllister joined the meeting at 3.48 pm.

Paula McClintock joined the meeting at 3.48 pm for agenda item 7.

Jonathan McMillen joined the meeting at 3.48 pm for agenda items 7 and 8.

7. DETERMINATION ON MEMBERS ALLOWANCES AND EXPENSES

The Speaker noted that a paper on the Determination on Members Allowances and Expenses had been considered at the Assembly Commission on 20 June 2024, when it was agreed that a new draft Determination would be prepared for consideration.

Steven Baxter noted that the Assembly Commission had previously agreed in principle a number of changes to the Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2016, as amended by the Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) (Amendment) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2020 ("the Determination") and he advised that the budgetary impact of these changes had been incorporated into the 2024-25 budget.

Mr Baxter advised that following discussion at the Assembly Commission meeting on 20 June 2024, a further review of the Determination had been undertaken and he asked Paula McClintock to update Members on a number of additional proposed changes.

Mrs McClintock stated that the additional changes had been identified following an extensive review of the Determination and discussions with Assembly Commission Members.

Mrs McClintock preceded to outline in detail the additional proposed substantive changes to rental limits, disability costs, travel allowances, capped staff costs and staff paid maternity leave.

Members were content with many of the proposals in the paper and proceeded to have a discussion on a number of specific points. Following discussion on rental limits, Members agreed with the proposal to increase the rental limit to £10,000, which research had indicated was the median average value, noting that MLAs should be mindful of the need to negotiate with landlords to ensure value for money.

In relation to Disability Costs, Members were content with the proposal to include additional wording to broaden the scope of this element of the Determination to enable MLAs to claim for reasonable adjustments at their constituency offices. It was noted that MLAs should engage with the landlords of their constituency offices to ensure that the property complied with normal requirements.

Mr Butler asked officials to engage with a disability organisation to give a sense check that the changes would enable MLAs to make accessibility requirements to comply with the Disability Discrimination Act.

On discussing travel allowances, Members considered three proposed options. After discussion, Members agreed to retain the current system with inflationary increases being made.

The Speaker left the meeting at 4.14 pm and asked Sinéad Ennis to act as Chairperson in his absence.

Members considered and agreed increases of capped staff costs and increases in staff paid maternity leave, as proposed.

The Speaker re-joined the meeting at 4.24pm.

Members also considered and approved a proposal to introduce an overnight accommodation allowance for MLAs working late on parliamentary business in Parliament Buildings, subject to removing the proposed mileage clause.

Sinéad Ennis left the meeting at 4.34 pm and re-joined at 4.36 pm.

The Clerk/ Chief Executive strongly advised progressing the new Determination in parallel with the new Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill and noted that a paper on the Bill would return to the next meeting.

Paula McClintock left the meeting at 4.50 pm.

Ken Eccles joined the meeting at 4.50 pm for agenda item 8.

8. APPLICATION OF THE TERRORISM (PROTECTION OF PREMISES) BILL FOR THE ASSEMBLY COMMISSION

The Speaker noted that a paper had been prepared for consideration in response to correspondence received from Dan Jarvis MBE MP, Security Minister.

Jonathan McMillen provided an overview of the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill, advising that, following discussions, the UK Government intended for the Bill not to apply in relation to Parliament Buildings, but, as outlined in the Security Minister's letter, invited that the Assembly Commission would voluntarily comply with the requirements of the Bill. It was understood that this was on the basis that the parliamentary institutions already had many security provisions in place.

Mr McMillen advised of the duties imposed by the Bill and the requirement of certain 'public protection procedures' to be put in place which would be activated in the event of a terrorist attack. Mr McMillen noted that Assembly officials had informed Home Office officials, following receipt of the Security Minister's letter, that while the Speaker believed it was sensible for Parliament Buildings to be treated in line with the other legislatures, he would engage with the political parties on the Assembly Commission to confirm that position.

Mr McMillen noted the duties set out in the Bill as regards standard premises and noted that it was practically necessary, and reputationally desirable, to make equivalent administrative provision in Parliament Buildings to the requirements of the Bill, and that this would be in-keeping with the Assembly Commission's continuous practice of taking security matters seriously.

Mr McMillen advised that if the Assembly Commission did not agree to comply voluntarily, then Parliament Buildings could be specified in the provisions of the Bill.

Mr McMillen subsequently sought Members agreement for Assembly officials to examine options for administrative provisions for requirements in Parliament Buildings comparable to that in the Bill, if not already in place, and bring them back to the Assembly Commission for consideration; and to agree the draft response from the Speaker to the Security Minister, setting out the Assembly Commission's agreement that it should be exempted from the Bill.

Mr Butler asked that consideration be given to testing of preparedness in the event of a security incident. Mr Baxter advised that he would examine the possibility of incorporating this into the Business Continuity exercise planned for November 2024.

Ken Eccles and Jonathan McMillen left the meeting at 5 pm.

9. ANNUAL PLAN 2024-2025

Steven Baxter presented and sought Assembly Commission approval of the Annual Plan 2024-2025, which he noted had been developed from the Corporate Plan 2023-2028 previously agreed by the Assembly Commission.

Mr Baxter advised that the Annual Plan contained a number of new actions and he provided Members with a status update as at 31 August 2024.

Mr Baxter also informed Members that a report would be provided to the Assembly Commission following the end of the financial year.

Members noted and approved the Annual Plan 2024-2025 as presented.

10. AOB

There was no other business.

11. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Speaker noted that the next meeting was scheduled for 10 am on 16 October 2024.

The meeting ended at 5.01 pm.