

The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Meeting Venue: Parliament Buildings, Room 106

Meeting date: Wednesday, 15 January 2025

Meeting Time: 2.00 pm



Assembly Commission Members:

Edwin Poots MLA, Speaker (Chairperson)
 Sinéad Ennis MLA (joined remotely)
 Trevor Clarke MLA
 Nuala McAllister MLA
 Andy Allen MBE 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:

David Murphy, Chairperson of the Assembly Commission Audit and Risk Committee (ACARC)
 Jonathan McMillen, Head of Legal Services (Item 9)
 David Lynn, Roof Project Manager (Item 10)
 Alice McKelvey, Legal Adviser (Item 10)
 Paula McClintock, Head of Finance (Item 11)
 Stephanie Mallon, Clerk Assistant (Items 12 and 13)
 Clare Maguire, Head of Public Engagement (Items 12 and 13)

The meeting commenced at 2.12 pm.

1. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

No interests were declared by Members.

3. CHAIRPERSON'S BUSINESS

The Speaker introduced David Murphy as the newly appointed Assembly Commission Audit and Risk Committee (ACARC) Chairperson and welcomed him to his first Assembly Commission meeting.

The Speaker referred to the report published by the Clerk/Chief Executive on 14 January 2025, on the use of certain allowances under the Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2016.

The Speaker noted that at the Assembly Commission meeting on 16 October 2024, he had reminded Members of the Assembly Commission's long-standing position, that the Members of the Assembly Commission do not get involved in decisions relating to, or the review of, individual cases around the expenses of MLAs and that the Assembly Commission had no role in the review and report that was published on 14 January 2025.

The Speaker advised that a motion had been scheduled for debate in the Assembly on these issues on 28 January 2025 and that it would be for the Assembly Commission to indicate if, and who would respond to the motion.

The Speaker referred to an advice note that Robin Ramsey had circulated to Members on these issues and asked that he provide a brief summary.

Mr Ramsey outlined a number of options and following consideration, Members agreed to take a final decision on a response to the motion once the text of the motion was confirmed followed the Business Committee meeting on 21 January 2025.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING

Minutes from the Assembly Commission meetings on 16 October 2024 and 20 November 2024 were approved for publication.

5. MATTERS ARISING

There were no matters arising.

6. ASSEMBLY COMMISSION ACTIONS

Members noted the status of actions.

7. CORRESPONDENCE

Members noted a complaint from Kellie Armstrong MLA, in relation to a

protest which was held on the Stormont Estate, outside Parliament Buildings and its environs, and therefore within the remit of the Department of Finance (DoF), and the Speaker's response.

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 October 2024 Assembly Commission meeting, and highlighted the salient points.

Management Accounts – November 2024 Forecast Outturn

Mrs Hogg informed Members that since the last meeting on 20 November 2024, October and January Monitoring returns had been submitted to DoF.

Mrs Hogg advised of the forecasted position as at 30 November 2024 for Resource DEL, Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee (WFDSC) costs and Capital DEL, noting that this forecasted position had formed the basis of the January Monitoring return, in which the Assembly Commission surrendered monies from both Resource and Capital DEL.

Review of the Use of Certain Allowances Under the Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses) Determination (Northern Ireland) 2016 (the 2016 Determination)

Mrs Hogg advised that she was currently considering recommendations made in the review report and that she intended to introduce a number of new administrative measures to implement them. Mrs Hogg stated that where any changes were required to the 2016 Determination, she would prepare a paper for consideration by the Assembly Commission.

Management Response Report to Ernst and Young (EY)

Members noted EY's report on the Review on Corporate Governance Arrangements, which incorporated the Assembly Commission's Management Responses.

Appointment of Additional ACARC Member

Mrs Hogg updated Members on the appointment of an additional ACARC Member and asked, in light of a potential appointment date of 1 July 2025 and the fact that the appointment end date for one of the current independent members was 17 May 2025, if Members were content for ACARC to operate with two independent members for the short period from 18 May 2025 to 30 June 2025. Members were content.

PSNI Security Review

Mrs Hogg noted the timing of the last formal PSNI security review

and recommended that a request be made to the PSNI to carry out a further security review.

Members were content with the recommendation.

Action: Mrs Hogg to request that PSNI carry out a further security review.

2024 Staff Survey Results

Mrs Hogg noted that the 2024 Staff Survey had been conducted by an external company in conjunction with the Welsh Parliament and that three reports had been produced from the results.

Mrs Hogg advised that the response to the Survey was being led by the Head of HR and the Organisational Development and Learning Manager and that a paper would be prepared for consideration by the Assembly Commission at a future meeting, outlining the findings of the survey and the response plan.

Constituency Office Printing

Mrs Hogg clarified the position in relation to replacement of printers in Constituency Offices.

Assembly Commission Oral Questions – December 2024

Mrs Hogg referred to a supplementary question from Diane Dodds MLA during Oral Questions to the Assembly Commission in December 2024, asking for the Assembly Commission's view on the issue of MLAs wearing sports gear, particularly in Committee meetings, and noted that a commitment had been made to bring this to the Assembly Commission for consideration.

In response to the question, Mrs Hogg advised that the Assembly Commission had no role in relation to the dress code in committee proceedings, and proposed that the matter be raised with the Chairpersons' Liaison Group (CLG) as it had previously considered the matter. Members were content for the matter to be raised with CLG.

Action: The Speaker to raise the matter of dress code in committees with CLG.

Jonathan McMillen joined the meeting at 2.46 pm for agenda item 9.

9. THE ASSEMBLY MEMBERS (REMUNERATION BOARD) BILL

Tara Caul noted that the Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill had been considered by Members on a number of occasions and subsequently presented a further paper and revised Bill, which she stated reflected the Assembly Commission's current policy position.

Ms Caul reminded Members of the key issues relating to the Bill. She stated that if the revised Bill was agreed by Members, the function conferred on the Assembly Commission on 29 June 2020 to make determinations in relation to allowances under section 47 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (the 1998 Act) should also be amended to include the conferral of a function to make determinations in relation to allowances under section 48 of the 1998 Act (winding up, resettlement and ill health allowances). Ms Caul noted that this would be taken forward at the same time the Bill is introduced.

Ms Caul provided an indicative timeline for the passage of the Bill, based on approval of the final Bill by the Assembly Commission for introduction on 15 January 2025.

Ms Caul advised that from a legal and governance perspective, the preferred course of action was to proceed to introduce the Bill at the earliest opportunity and that as the provisions of the Bill form part of a complex matrix of actions, taken to give effect to the policy approach of the Assembly Commission, it would be preferable if the legal position was regularised during this mandate.

Following consideration, Members were content for the Bill to be submitted to the Speaker for introduction.

Members were also content that a further short motion should be tabled, proposing that the function of determining allowances under section 48 of the 1998 Act should be conferred by the Assembly on the Assembly Commission; and that this should be scheduled to coincide with introduction of the new draft Bill.

Members agreed that the new Determination which had previously been agreed by the Assembly Commission, at its meeting on 1 October 2024, could then be published.

Jonathan McMillen left the meeting at 3.09 pm.

David Lynn and Alice McKelvey joined the meeting at 3.09 pm for agenda item 10.

10. DEFECTS IN THE ROOF OF PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

David Lynn updated Members on the current position in relation to the High Court action in respect of the defects in the roof of Parliament Buildings.

Mr Lynn advised that expert quantum reports had been received from all parties and that mediation had been scheduled for 28 January 2025.

Mr Lynn also updated Members on ongoing inspections, Health and Safety and investigatory works and remedial repairs, that had taken place since the last update provided to the Assembly Commission at its meeting on 16 October 2024.

Members noted the current position.

In relation to the meditation scheduled for 28 January 2025, the Speaker noted that officials had requested that a short Assembly Commission meeting be scheduled for 27 January 2025, in order to agree mediation parameters. Members agreed to this request.

Action: Assembly Commission Office to arrange an Assembly Commission meeting for 27 January 2025.

David Lynn and Alice McKelvey left the meeting at 3.17 pm.

Paula McClintock joined the meeting at 3.17pm for agenda item 11.

11. REVIEW OF THE FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS FOR PARTIES WITH INCREASED EMPLOYERS' NATIONAL INSURANCE CONTRIBUTIONS EFFECTIVE FROM 1 APRIL 2025

Paula McClintock presented a paper outlining the findings of a review of the financial implications for parties with increased Employers' National Insurance Contributions effective from 1 April 2025.

Mrs McClintock noted that the Assembly Commission had asked officials to review the potential impact for those political parties who receive funding under the 2024 Financial Allowances for Political Parties (FAPP) Scheme, and she outlined three potential options for consideration.

Following discussion, Members requested more time to consider the potential options and agreed to return to the matter at the next full Assembly Commission meeting.

Paula McClintock left the meeting at 3.29 pm.

Stephanie Mallon and Clare Maguire joined the meeting at 3.29 pm for agenda items 12 and 13.

12. NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSION DRAFT PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY 2025-27

Clare Maguire presented and sought approval of the draft Public Engagement Strategy 2025-27, which she stated had been designed to support the delivery of the Corporate Strategy 2023-2028.

Mrs Maguire advised that the draft Strategy sought to provide opportunities through which the Assembly could engage with the public in all 18 constituencies and demonstrate inclusivity.

Mrs Maguire noted that the draft Strategy was underpinned by three pillars, namely: increasing awareness; improving understanding; and enabling

participation and that these pillars would provide focus and a framework to facilitate achievement of anticipated deliverables within the next two years.

Following consideration, Members approved the draft Strategy as presented.

13. REQUEST FROM STEWART DICKSON MLA FOR THE NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY TO HOST A MEETING OF THE MONITORING COMMITTEE OF THE CONGRESS OF LOCAL AND REGIONAL AUTHORITIES IN EUROPE (CLRAE), IN BELFAST, IN JULY 2025

Mrs Maguire presented a paper, asking Members to consider a request from Stewart Dickson MLA for the Northern Ireland Assembly to host a meeting of the Monitoring Committee of CLRAE in Belfast, in July 2025.

Mrs Maguire advised that Mr Dickson was currently the Deputy Leader of the UK delegation to Congress and a member of its Monitoring Committee. Given his role as Deputy Leader, and the fact that Northern Ireland had yet to host the meeting, Mr Dickson had requested that the Northern Ireland Assembly host a meeting of the Monitoring Committee.

Mrs Maguire outlined the proposed draft programme and budget for the event.

Members acknowledged the importance of international engagement by the Assembly, but were also concerned whether the estimated costs represented good value for this event. Members agreed that the matter would be given further consideration at its next meeting.

Stephanie Mallon and Clare Maguire left the meeting at 3.46 pm.

14. REQUEST FOR THE ASSEMBLY COMMISSION TO DISPLAY A PORTRAIT OF HIS MAJESTY THE KING

The Speaker noted that, at the Assembly Commission meeting on 16 October 2024, Mrs Hogg had advised that officials were awaiting responses from Members, following consideration of advice on the matter of displaying a portrait of His Majesty The King at the Assembly Commission meeting on 16 May 2024.

The Speaker advised that, as no responses had been received, the original paper would be tabled at the next full meeting and asked Mr Ramsey to provide a brief reminder of the position.

Mr Ramsey referred to the detailed advice previously presented and sought positions from each party, with a view to finalising the matter at the next full Assembly Commission meeting.

Members were unable to confirm party positions and it was agreed that Mr Ramsey would write to Members requesting that they provide him with their party's position.

Action: Mr Ramsey to write to Members seeking party positions on the displaying of a portrait of His Majesty The King.

15. ITEMS ISSUED VIA CORRESPONDENCE

The Speaker noted that the minutes of the ACARC meeting of 28 June 2024 were issued to Members for information on 26 November 2024.

16. DECISIONS MADE VIA CORRESPONDENCE

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

Lighting Requests:

NEXUS 40th Anniversary – **Approved.**

Holocaust Memorial Day – 80th Anniversary of liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau – **Approved.**

17. ANY OTHER BUSINESS

There was no other business.

18. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

Officials to liaise with Members in relation to arranging a meeting for 27 January 2025.

The meeting ended at 3.52 pm.