

The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Meeting Venue: Parliament Buildings, Room 106

Meeting date: Thursday, 16 May 2024

Meeting Time: 10.30 am



Assembly Commission Members:

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

Maurice Keady, Independent Member and Acting Chairperson of the Assembly
Commission Audit and Risk Committee (ACARC)
David Lynn, Roof Project Manager (Item 9)
Alice McKelvey, Legal Adviser (Item 9)
Steve Cardwell, Principal Usher (Item 13)
Frank Geddis, Clerk Assistant (Item 14)

The meeting commenced at 10.36 am.

1. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest.

3. CHAIRPERSON'S BUSINESS

The Speaker confirmed that following the issuing of letters to the smaller Parties and Independent Members in relation to the allocation of votes on the Assembly Commission, Claire Sugden MLA had responded requesting that her vote be allocated to Robbie Butler.

The Speaker also informed Members that Oral Questions to the Assembly Commission were scheduled for 25 June 2024.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

Minutes from the Assembly Commission meeting on 19 March 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 the following items of correspondence:

A letter from the Chairperson of the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee dated 15 March 2024, in relation to Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee resources, and the Speaker's response dated 16 April 2024.

A letter from the Leader of the Ulster Unionist Party dated 8 April 2024, in relation to the Financial Assistance to Political Parties Scheme, and the Speaker's response dated 16 April 2024.

The Speaker's response dated 3 May 2024, to a request from Kellie Armstrong MLA for a review of remuneration for standing committees, as noted at the Assembly Commission meeting on 19 March 2024.

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 she highlighted the salient points.

Management Accounts – March 2024

Mrs Hogg advised Members of the provisional outturn for Resource DEL and Capital DEL as at 31 March 2024.

Mrs Hogg outlined a number of underspends across Members' costs, Admin costs and Staff Salaries.

Pay Claim 2024

Mrs Hogg referred Members to the Pay Claim for 2024 which had been lodged by NIPSA.

Mrs Hogg advised that officials had had an initial discussion with NIPSA to gain an understanding of the rationale for each element of the claim and she noted that NIPSA have subsequently indicated that they wish to put Pay Claim discussions on hold, and follow a similar timeframe to the one used in 2023.

Mrs Hogg stated that a paper would be brought to a future meeting to help inform the Assembly Commission's deliberations.

Systems Review Update 2024

Mrs Hogg informed Members of issues with the supplier procured to deliver integrated corporate finance and HR systems, and that whilst every effort had been made by the Assembly Commission Project Team and Project Board to facilitate delivery of the project, agreement with the supplier had not been reached and therefore the Project Board had decided to terminate the contract and consider other options to deliver the project.

Litigation Update

Members noted the ongoing litigation matters.

Information Commissioner's Office Complaint (ICO)

Mrs Hogg updated Members on an ICO complaint.

Annual Insurance Update

Mrs Hogg advised that no new claims had been made during the insurance year and that all previous cases had been closed.

Internal Audit Review of Corporate Governance

Mrs Hogg informed Members that the Internal Audit review of corporate governance which had been scheduled to commence on 26 February 2024, had been delayed by the auditors and did not therefore start until 15 April 2024. Mrs Hogg noted that she had been advised that the audit fieldwork had been completed and that the report was being drafted.

Assembly Commission Staff Charity of the Year

Mrs Hogg advised that following nominations by staff of a charity which met the Speaker's selected charitable purpose of 'the advancement of health or the saving of lives', the 'Air Ambulance NI' had received the highest number of votes. In line with the Charity Policy, she sought Assembly Commission approval for the 'Air Ambulance NI' to become the official Staff Charity of the Year. Members approved the nomination and were advised that there would be a launch later in the year.

Complaints Policy and Procedures Report 2023/2024

Mrs Hogg noted that there were no admissible complaints during the 2023/2024 reporting period.

Annual Health and Safety Report for 2023

Members noted the Health and Safety Report for 2023.

David Lynn and Alice McKelvey joined the meeting at 10.45 am for agenda item 9.

9. DEFECTS IN THE ROOF OF PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

David Lynn provided Members with an update on the current position regarding the High Court action in respect of the defects in the roof of Parliament Buildings.

Mr Lynn informed Members of the actions that had taken place since the last update provided to the Assembly Commission at its meeting on 19 March 2024.

Mr Lynn advised that planning was underway for remedial works to all affected areas, and that a business case seeking approval to proceed with remedial works would be presented to the Assembly Commission, once costs and timeframes had been established. In the interim, Mr Lynn confirmed that defects continued to be monitored with mitigating measures put in place as required.

Members highlighted the need for remedial works to proceed at pace, and asked that details of the timeframe be brought to the next Assembly Commission meeting in June 2024.

David Lynn and Alice McKelvey left the meeting at 11.08 am.

10. THE ASSEMBLY MEMBERS (REMUNERATION BOARD) BILL

Tara Caul noted that a paper on the Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill had been considered at the Assembly Commission meeting on 19 March 2024, at which time Members requested that some further

amendments be incorporated and a revised Bill brought to the next Assembly Commission meeting.

Ms Caul advised that the amendments had been incorporated and sought Members views on the revised draft Bill.

Members requested that some further amendments be made. It was agreed that further time would be given to allow Members to consult with their parties and that the draft Bill would be revised as discussed and circulated for comment by correspondence by 24 May 2024.

Action: Ms Caul to arrange for the draft Bill to be revised as agreed by Members and circulated for comment by correspondence by 24 May 2024.

11. BUDGET 2024-25 MOTION

Steven Baxter noted that the Assembly Commission had agreed an updated budget position for 2024-25 at its meeting on 19 January 2024, which was subsequently presented to the Audit Committee and agreed without amendment in March 2024.

Mr Baxter therefore sought agreement of the proposed Assembly Commission's 2024-25 Budget Motion, for inclusion on the Order Paper for Monday, 3 June 2024.

Members approved the Motion for inclusion on the Order Paper for Monday, 3 June 2024.

Sinéad Ennis left the meeting at 11.45 am.

12. FINANCIAL ASSISTANCE FOR POLITICAL PARTIES SCHEME ('FAPP SCHEME') 2024

Following consideration at the Assembly Commission meeting on 19 March 2024 and further consultation with Members, Mr Baxter presented and sought approval of a revised FAPP Scheme 2024.

Sinéad Ennis re-joined the meeting at 11.47 am.

All Members, with the exception of Mr Butler who asked for his opposition to be recorded, approved the revised FAPP Scheme 2024, and agreed that the Motion to approve the scheme be tabled for debate in the Assembly at an early opportunity.

Steve Cardwell joined the meeting at 11.51 am for agenda item 13.

13. PERSONAL SECURITY AND SAFETY OF MEMBERS AND THEIR STAFF AT CONSTITUENCY OFFICES, OR MEMBERS' PRIVATE DWELLINGS

Following consideration of a paper on the review of security arrangements for MLAs at the Assembly Commission meeting on 29 November 2023, it was agreed that Members would consider the proposals within the paper and engage with officials directly regarding any specific circumstances or considerations before considering the matter further.

Steve Cardwell advised that individual meetings had now taken place between Members and the Director of Corporate Services to inform the paper being presented.

Mr Cardwell stated that the paper recommended that further security provision for MLAs and their staff be taken forward in line with Option (ii), namely that Constituency Office Establishment Expenses be increased by up to a maximum of £4k, to be used exclusively for the provision of security measures at constituency offices and/or MLAs' private dwellings, and that this would also cover the provision of lone working devices should Members elect to purchase these for themselves or their office staff.

Following consideration, Members approved the recommended option and Mr Baxter agreed to provide Members with potential supplier information in relation to lone working security devices.

Action: Mr Baxter to provide Members with potential supplier information in relation to lone working security devices.

Mrs Hogg advised that the Assembly Members (Salaries and Expenses Determination (Northern Ireland) 2016) would need to be amended to give effect to the decision, and it was agreed that a revised Determination would be brought to the next Assembly Commission meeting along with associated guidance for MLAs, for approval.

Members noted that there were other matters to be addressed in a further Determination, but acknowledged that these might require more detailed consideration and therefore would be deferred until later in the year.

Steve Cardwell left the meeting at 12.08 pm.

Robbie Butler left the meeting at 12.08 pm.

Tara Caul left the meeting at 12.08 pm.

Frank Geddis joined the meeting at 12.08 pm.

14. CORPORATE PLAN 2023-2028 AND ANNUAL PLAN 2023-2024

Frank Geddis noted that the draft Corporate Strategy 2023-2028 considered and approved by the Assembly Commission at its meeting on 29 November 2023, contained four priorities and 22 objectives. Mr Geddis presented the

Corporate Plan as the next step in developing the detailed actions and milestones proposed to deliver each objective during the period 2023-2028.

Robbie Butler re-joined the meeting at 12.09 pm.

Mr Geddis outlined each of the priorities, namely:

- The Assembly will be empowered to achieve its full potential;
- The public will understand and value the role of the Assembly and be engaged in its work;
- Our staff will be a motivated, resilient and expert team; and
- Our systems and facilities will be modern, secure and efficient.

Mr Geddis also presented a draft Annual Plan 2023-2024, which he advised provided a yearly stocktake on the achievement of objectives and an opportunity to focus on lessons learned.

Mr Geddis stated that the Annual Plan for 2023-2024 contained 38 actions, 32 of which were fully completed, and six partially completed which would be carried into the next financial year.

Mr Geddis noted that the lack of a dedicated Corporate Planning team had contributed to the time it had taken to prepare both Plans and he highlighted the need for appropriate staff resources going forward.

Mr Geddis sought approval of both the draft Corporate Plan 2023-2028 and draft Annual Plan 2023-2024.

The Speaker acknowledged the work that had gone into producing both Plans and Members approved the draft Corporate Plan 2023-2028 and draft Annual Plan 2023-2024, as presented.

Frank Geddis left the meeting at 12.13 pm.

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

Robin Ramsey referred to the Assembly Commission meeting on 19 March 2024, when it was agreed that he would prepare an advice paper for consideration by Members, on the request from Jim Allister MLA to request and display a portrait of his Majesty The King in Parliament Buildings.

Mr Ramsey presented an advice paper, noting that a draft equality screening document had been produced. Mr Ramsey noted that there were a number of factors to be balanced, including the Assembly Commission's equality and good relations obligations, its responsibilities as an employer and the role of Parliament Buildings as a parliamentary institution.

Mr Ramsey provided Members with a number of suggested approaches which might mitigate potential issues arising from the request and sought Members' views and direction on the way forward.

A range of initial views were provided by Members. Following discussion, it was agreed that Members would consult with their Parties and liaise individually with Mr Ramsey regarding any further views and proposals and that, following this engagement, the matter would be returned to the Assembly Commission for further consideration.

Action: Assembly Commission Members to engage with Mr Ramsey, if desired, to give further views and proposals to enable a further discussion at a future Assembly Commission meeting.

16. AOB

There was no other business.

17. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Speaker noted that the date of the next meeting was scheduled for 20 June 2024.

The meeting ended at 12.29 pm.