

## The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Meeting Venue: Parliament Buildings, Room 106

Meeting date: Wednesday, 16 October 2024

Meeting Time: 10.00 am



### Assembly Commission Members:

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

### 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) (joined remotely)  
 Jonathan McMillen, Head of Legal Services (Items 11 and 12)  
 Kiera McDonald, Legal Adviser (Item 11)  
 Paul Gill, Clerk Assistant (Item 13)  
 Martha Davison, Editor of Debates (Item 13)

*The meeting commenced at 10.21 am.*

## 1. APOLOGIES

There were no apologies, however, the Speaker noted that Sinéad Ennis would not be in attendance for the start of the meeting.

The Speaker welcomed Andy Allen to his first Assembly Commission meeting.

## **2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

No interests were declared by Members.

The Speaker declared an interest on behalf of all officials in agenda item 10, the Pay Claim 2024. He stated that, when considering this item of business he would ask Mr Baxter to present the paper and take questions from Members, before asking officials to leave the meeting to enable the Assembly Commission to have a further discussion. The Speaker added that Mr Ramsey would remain in order to minute the discussion.

The Speaker also noted that Maurice Keady is a member of ACARC and that as there were a number of matters regarding ACARC to be considered in relation to the Internal Audit of Corporate Governance Arrangements at agenda item 15, he advised that after the initial presentation of the paper, he would ask Dr Keady for any views from an ACARC perspective and then ask that he leave the meeting to enable the Assembly Commission to have a discussion.

## **3. CHAIRPERSON'S BUSINESS**

The Speaker noted that officials had kept Members updated with media responses in relation to recent issues relating to Mr Michael McMonagle. The Speaker also advised that there continued to be a number of written Assembly questions coming to the Assembly Commission on this matter.

The Speaker reminded Members that the Assembly Commission has had a long-standing position, endorsed in 2016, 2018 and 2020, that the elected Members of the Assembly Commission do not get involved in decisions relating to, or the review of, individual cases around the expenses of Members. He said that these matters would be examined by officials under the authority of the Clerk/Chief Executive as Accounting Officer and, once conclusions were reached, it would be for her to take any necessary decisions.

In relation to the allocation of votes at the Assembly Commission, the Speaker confirmed that following the resignation of Robbie Butler from the Assembly Commission, Claire Sugden had allocated her vote to Andy Allen.

## **4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETING**

Minutes from the Assembly Commission meeting on 1 October 2024 were approved for publication.

## **5. MATTERS ARISING**

There were no matters arising.

## 6. ASSEMBLY COMMISSION ACTIONS

Members noted the status of actions.

*Sinéad Ennis joined the meeting at 10.24 am.*

## 7. CORRESPONDENCE

Members noted the Speaker's response to the Security Minister's letter on the Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Bill, agreed at the Assembly Commission meeting on 1 October 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 June Assembly Commission meeting, and highlighted the salient points.

### **Management Accounts – August 2024 Forecast Outturn**

Mrs Hogg informed Members of the current forecast for 2024-25 for Resource DEL and Capital DEL.

### **Cleaning of the Façade of Parliament Buildings**

Mrs Hogg sought to consult Members on a proposal for specialist cleaning and repointing of the front and east and west elevations of Parliament Buildings.

Mrs Hogg advised Members of the need for, and estimated cost of, the work and stated that as per the current financial forecast, there was sufficient budget available to undertake the work in the current financial year. She stated that given the cost, she was consulting with the Assembly Commission on whether it had any objections to this work being undertaken.

Following discussion, Members agreed that specialist cleaning and repointing be undertaken in respect of the east and west elevations initially.

### **Increased Budget for Refurbishment of the Audio and Video Systems in Assembly Committee Rooms and Senate Chamber**

Mrs Hogg advised Members that the final cost for the refurbishment of the audio and video systems in the Assembly Committee rooms and Senate Chamber had exceeded the estimated cost as set out in the Outline Business Case, and she outlined the reasons for the increase.

### **Procurement of Network Components**

Mr Hogg advised Members of the need to replace the network switches in

Parliament Building, along with associated components and licenses. Mrs Hogg noted that under her delegated authority she was required to consult with the Assembly Commission before authorising ICT projects in excess of £50k and, that as the estimated cost exceeded this amount, she sought confirmation from Members that they were content for her to authorise the necessary expenditure. Members were content.

### **Assembly Commission Audit and Risk Committee (ACARC) Recruitment Update**

Mrs Hogg advised that interviews had taken place for the posts of ACARC Chairperson and Independent Member and that pre-appointment checks were being conducted.

### **Blue Flax**

Mrs Hogg noted that the Blue Flax refurbishment was initially expected to take place over the Summer recess, however, she stated that the project had been temporarily paused as the tender submissions exceeded the planned expenditure budget. She advised that the design team was visiting the design to ensure that the project remained within budget and the hope was that the refurbishment work would take place over the Christmas recess. Members discussed the importance of not reducing the capacity of the Blue Flax and Mrs Hogg agreed to circulate the proposed design to Members.

### **Sensitivity Review**

Mrs Hogg informed Members that eight files would be transferred to the Public Records Office for Northern Ireland (PRONI) in October 2024.

Mrs Hogg noted that the regular release of files to PRONI would be required on an ongoing basis and, that as the process is now established, she asked Members if they wished to be notified in advance of each release to PRONI, or only in circumstances when officials consider that the files contain matter that might be considered politically sensitive. Members were content, going forward, to be notified only in the case of the release of matter that might be considered politically sensitive.

### **All Staff Conference Friday 4 July 2025**

Mrs Hogg informed Members of plans to hold an Assembly Commission staff conference in Parliament Buildings on 4 July 2025, similar to the one held on 31 March 2023 and, in order to progress preparations, she sought confirmation from Members that they were content for the building to be closed to the public on 4 July 2025 to maximise the opportunity for all staff to participate. Members were content.

### **Official Portraits**

Mrs Hogg noted that two further official portraits were due to be unveiled in

the coming months, but that remaining display space in the Great Hall was limited. She advised that Officials would therefore be reviewing the location of the existing portraits, the potential available space and that the Assembly Commission would be informed before any changes were made.

### **Request to Display Portrait of His Majesty The King**

Mrs Hogg 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 and that, if no responses were received, the original paper would be tabled at the next full meeting.

### **Oral Questions – June 2024**

Mrs Hogg noted that during Oral Questions to the Assembly Commission in June 2024, a number of Members committed to bringing various matters back to the Assembly Commission for consideration.

Mrs Hogg advised that officials had provided updates on matters raised in relation to Parliament Buildings public transport connectivity; electric charging points; distance markers on the floors; increased showers facilities; and the eradication of single-use plastics.

## **9. ASSEMBLY COMMISSION BUDGET 2025-26**

Steven Baxter presented a paper which advised Members of the proposed budget requirements for 2025-26 for Resource DEL and Capital DEL, as well as the estimated costs associated with the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee.

Following detailed presentation of the budget paper, Mr Baxter sought approval of the proposed budget for 2025-26, including estimated costs associated with supporting the operation of the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee. Mr Baxter advised if Members were content, the 2025-26 budget would be presented to the Audit Committee at its meeting on 13 November 2024.

Members approved the proposed budget for 2025-26, as outlined in the paper, for presentation to the Audit Committee.

## **10. PAY CLAIM 2024**

Mr Baxter presented a paper which outlined the key elements of the 2024 Pay Claim submitted by the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA).

Mr Baxter referred to the first two elements of the Pay Claim, namely:

- a. That the 2024 pay implementation date is effective from 1 April 2024, with pay progression for those entitled staff who have accrued enough service in the 2023 – 2024 reporting period; and
- b. To include an inflation rate, spine point pay rise as per CPI figures released for January 2024 (4.2%) with an additional 6% increase on all scales, or £3,500 per annum added to each pay scale (whichever is higher), to address the ever-increasing cost of living pressures.

In relation to the first element, Mr Baxter stated that it was in line with current practice and recommended that it is accepted by the Assembly Commission. Members agreed this.

In relation to the second element, Mr Baxter recommended an increase to all pay points of £1,325 and a 3% rise to all salary supplements. Members views were sought on this.

*All officials with the exception of Mr Ramsey left the meeting at 11.28 am.*

Members noted that the recommendation of a flat rate increase of £1,325 to all pay points could be accommodated within the budgetary allocation and were therefore content to agree it. Members did however note that any future settlement should return to the Assembly Commission's preferred approach of a set percentage uplift for all pay points.

*Officials re-joined the meeting at 11.31 am.*

In relation to the other elements of the Pay Claim, the Assembly Commission agreed:

- A 3% rise to on-call allowances; and
- An increase in paternity leave from 10 days to 15 days.

It was also agreed that a review of travel and subsistence allowances and an evaluation of health and wellbeing provision would be taken forward under the Clerk/Chief Executive's delegation from the Assembly Commission.

**Action:** Mr Baxter to advise Trade Union Side (TUS) of the Assembly Commission's agreed position in relation to the Pay Claim for 2024.

*Jonathan McMillen joined the meeting at 11.31 am for agenda items 11 and 12.*

*Sinéad Ennis left the meeting at 11.31 am.*

## **11. DEFECTS IN THE ROOF OF PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS**

Jonathan McMillen 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 McMillen advised of updated estimated repair costs following review by the Assembly Commission's Quantum Expert.

*Sinéad Ennis re-joined the meeting at 11.34 pm.*

Mr Baxter provided Members with an update on initial health and safety and investigatory works which had commenced during the summer recess.

Mr McMillen advised Members of the legal costs incurred to date and the estimated projected future costs, and sought approval from the Assembly Commission for an additional £200k to ensure the requisite funds to prosecute this matter at full hearing. Members approved the additional funding.

*Kiera McDonald joined the meeting at 11.37 am for agenda item 12.*

## **12. THE ASSEMBLY MEMBERS (REMUNERATION BOARD) BILL**

Tara Caul reminded Members of the background on the Assembly Members (Remuneration Board) Bill and presented the current draft Bill and Explanatory and Financial Memorandum, which included the benchmarking provision, for approval.

Mr McMillen outlined an indicative timeline for the Bill.

Ms Caul stated that, from a legal and governance perspective, the preferred course of action would be to proceed to introduce the Bill at the earliest opportunity, in parallel with the 2024 Determination on Members Allowances and Expenses.

There was no agreement amongst Members about the timing of the introduction of the Bill and, therefore, Members agreed that publication of the 2024 Determination on Members Allowances and Expenses, considered and agreed at the Assembly Commission meeting on 1 October 2024, would be paused.

It was agreed that Members could further engage with officials and that the matter would be considered again at the next full Assembly Commission meeting.

*Jonathan McMillen and Kiera McDonald left the meeting at 12.01 pm.*

*Nuala McAllister left the meeting at 12.01 pm.*

*Paul Gill and Martha Davison joined the meeting at 12.01 pm for agenda item 13.*

## **13. REVIEW OF SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETATION OF ASSEMBLY BUSINESS IN IRISH AND ULSTER SCOTS**

Paul Gill noted that, on 15 June 2021, the Assembly had directed the Assembly Commission "where there is appropriate demand and subject to

review after six months, to provide a simultaneous and passive system for interpretation in the Assembly”.

Mr Gill stated that, as the simultaneous and passive system for interpretation (the interpretation service) in the Assembly had now been provided for six months following the resumption of Assembly business in February 2024, a review of the interpretation service had been carried out and outlined the findings of the review.

Mr Gill advised that on the basis of the established demand for the interpretation service in respect of Irish, there did not appear to be any grounds to justify increasing it, nor any scope to reduce it.

Mr Gill therefore recommended that the roles should be permanently recruited and advised that job descriptions would be developed for the appointment of full-time, hybrid English/Irish parliamentary reporters/interpreters.

Members noted the review of the interpretation service; noted that other Hansard duties would be incorporated into the job descriptions to help ensure value for money; and agreed that the roles should be permanently recruited.

*Paul Gill and Martha Davison left the meeting at 12.15 pm.*

#### **14. PUBLIC CONSULTATION TO INFORM THE DRAFT DISABILITY ACTION PLAN AND DRAFT GOOD RELATIONS ACTION PLAN (2025-2030)**

Mr Baxter presented the Draft Disability and Good Relation Action Plans (2025-2030).

Mr Baxter noted that the current Disability and Good Relations Action Plans conclude in March 2025 and advised that a pre-consultation exercise had been undertaken in June 2024 with Trade Union Side and specific external Section 75 groups, as part of the development of the draft action plans for 2025-2030.

Mr Baxter advised that a public consultation exercise on both draft action plans was planned to commence and asked Members if they had any comments or if they were content with the draft action plans as presented. Members were content.

#### **15. MATTERS ARISING FROM THE ERNST AND YOUNG (EY) INTERNAL AUDIT OF CORPORATE GOVERNANCE ARRANGEMENTS**

The Speaker noted that EY's report on the Review on Corporate Governance Arrangements had only been received on 14 October 2024 and that officials had worked hard to develop a paper for the meeting. He stated that due to the comprehensive nature of the report and the limited time that Members had had to consider it, he would ask Ms Caul to present the paper, seek comments from Maurice Keady from an ACARC perspective and if, following



discussion, Members required more time to consider the Review report, a further meeting would be arranged to formally take decisions.

Ms Caul noted that the Review report contained a series of recommendations which required a response by the Assembly Commission and proceeded to outline the recommendations along with options for consideration in relation to addressing them. Dr Keady provided comments from an ACARC perspective.

*Colin McGrath left the meeting at 12.39 pm.*

Members noted the presentation on the recommendations and agreed to take time at the next meeting to conclude consideration of them and agree decisions on the recommendations.

## **16. DECISIONS MADE VIA CORRESPONDENCE**

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

### **Lighting Requests:**

Action Mental Health – Campaign Launch ‘I am Someone’ – **Approved.**

World Pancreatic Cancer Day – **Approved.**

## **17. ANY OTHER BUSINESS**

There was no other business.

## **18. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

The Speaker noted that the next meeting was scheduled for Wednesday, 20 November 2024.

*The meeting ended at 12.59 pm.*