

The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

Meeting Venue: Parliament Buildings, Room 106

Meeting date: Thursday, 20 June 2024

Meeting Time: 10.30 am



Assembly Commission Members:

Edwin Poots MLA, Speaker (Chairperson)

Sinéad Ennis MLA

Trevor Clarke MLA

Nuala McAllister MLA

Robbie Butler MLA

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:

Maurice Keady, Independent Member and Acting Chairperson of the Assembly
Commission Audit and Risk Committee (ACARC)

David Lynn, Roof Project Manager (Items 9 and 10)

Alice McKelvey, Legal Adviser (Items 9 and 10)

Paula McClintock, Head of Finance (Item 11)

The meeting commenced at 10.35 am.

1. APOLOGIES

Apologies were received from Colin McGrath.

2. DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no declarations of interest

The Speaker noted that there was an item in the Clerk Chief Executive's Report at agenda item 8, that related to Assembly Commission Audit and Risk

Committee recruitment and that Maurice Keady would be asked to leave the meeting whilst the item was considered.

3. CHAIRPERSON'S BUSINESS

The Speaker reminded Members that Oral Questions to the Assembly Commission were scheduled for 25 June 2024 and that draft responses would be issued to Members.

4. MINUTES OF PREVIOUS MEETINGS

Minutes from the Assembly Commission meeting on 16 May 2024 were approved for publication.

5. MATTERS ARISING

The Speaker noted that following the discussion on the displaying of a portrait of His Majesty The King at the Assembly Commission meeting on 16 May 2024, it had been agreed that Members would engage with Robin Ramsey, if desired, to give further views and proposals to enable discussion at a future Assembly Commission meeting.

Given the announcement of the General Election, the Speaker advised that the matter would be considered after the summer recess and asked that Members engage with Mr Ramsey in the interim.

6. ASSEMBLY COMMISSION ACTIONS

Members noted the status of actions.

7. CORRESPONDENCE

Members noted the following items of correspondence:

The Speaker's letter dated 17 May 2024 in response to the Chairperson of the Standards and Privileges Committee's letter, noted at the Assembly Commission meeting on 19 March 2024, in relation to recognition of the status of MLAs on parental leave. Robbie Butler, Trevor Clarke and Sinéad Ennis noted that they were members of the Committee on Procedures and that the Committee was in the process of reviewing procedures for proxy voting in particular circumstances.

An email dated 28 May 2024 from Gerry McCann, Rosetta Trust, in relation to the Historical Institutional Abuse (HIA) memorial and the Speaker's response dated 4 June 2024.

The Speaker advised that as previously agreed, both he and Mr Ramsey had met with Patrick Gallagher from The Executive Office (TEO) to discuss some of the concerns raised by some of the HIA groups, but that there was no consensus amongst the victims and survivors groups on the HIA memorial. He stated that the First Minister and deputy First Minister had agreed to meet the groups to discuss a range of HIA matters and that he expected communication from TEO following that meeting, after which the Assembly Commission could give further consideration to these matters.

Maurice Keady left the room at 10.39 am.

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 highlighted the salient points.

Management Accounts – April 2024 Provisional Outturn

Mrs Hogg informed Members of the current forecast for expenditure for 2024/25 in relation to Resource DEL and Capital DEL.

Mrs Hogg confirmed that the Department of Finance had allocated the additional funding that the Assembly Commission had requested for the Windsor Framework Costs, highlighting that the money was ringfenced and could not be used for any other purpose.

The Assembly Members' (Remuneration Board) Bill

Mrs Hogg noted that, following consideration at the Assembly Commission meeting on 16 May 2024, an updated Assembly Members' (Remuneration Board) Bill and associated documents had been circulated to Members for approval via correspondence.

Mrs Hogg advised that some Members had indicated that they required more time to consider the Bill and it was therefore agreed that the Bill would be discussed again following the summer recess.

Internal Audit Review of Corporate Governance

Mrs Hogg advised that Ernst and Young (EY), the Assembly's internal auditors, had held audit close-out discussions with the Senior Management Team (SMT) following completion of the audit fieldwork for the Review of Corporate Governance, and she noted that the draft audit report was being finalised.

ACARC Recruitment

Mrs Hogg referred to the current vacancy in the role of Chairperson of ACARC and that the initial term of the Independent Member of ACARC would end in May 2025.

Mrs Hogg noted that at its meeting on 19 March 2024, the Assembly Commission agreed to pause the recruitment of a new Chairperson pending conclusion of the Internal Audit Review of Corporate Governance, in case there were any relevant recommendations that might arise from the review.

Mrs Hogg proposed that as the review was nearing completion, that preparation was now made to commence a recruitment competition for both a Chairperson and an Independent Member, to ensure that the terms of appointment for the both positions continue to be aligned. Mrs Hogg also stated that if there were any matters arising from the internal Audit Review of Corporate Governance that would impact the recruitment process, these would be brought back to the Assembly Commission for consideration. Members were content with this proposal.

Mrs Hogg subsequently asked the Assembly Commission to delegate authority to her to put arrangements in place for the recruitment process to identify and appoint a Chairperson and Independent Member of ACARC and also to agree the recruitment panel. Members were content.

The Speaker proposed that the panel would consist of him as chairperson, another Assembly Commission Member, officials and a relevant external person with suitable experience. Members subsequently agreed that Mr Butler, as the Member currently serving on ACARC, would be the representative on the panel.

Maurice Keady re-joined the meeting at 10.43 am.

Sponsored Events in Parliament Buildings Policy

Mrs Hogg informed Members that the 'Events in Parliament Buildings and its Grounds' Policy, had been refined following review by Internal Audit and referred Members to the proposed 'Sponsored Events in Parliament Buildings' Policy.

Mrs Hogg advised that the main change related to the exclusion of school formals taking place in Parliament Buildings.

Following review, Members approved the revised policy as presented.

Complaints to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO)

Mrs Hogg updated Members on an ICO complaint.

Sensitivity Review

Mrs Hogg provided Members with details on further files that had been approved by SMT for transfer to the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI).

Corporate Risk Register – June 2024

Mrs Hogg referred Members to the current Corporate Risk Register (CRR) dated 14 June 2024.

Mrs Hogg highlighted key changes made to the CRR, in addition to the normal updates made to root causes, risk responses and actions.

David Lynn and Alice McKelvey joined the meeting at 10.46 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 16 May 2024.

Mr Lynn stated that regular reviews of the defects were continuing and that monthly reports were prepared to evidence the ongoing deterioration in the affected areas.

Mr Lynn advised that initial health and safety/investigatory works were planned to take place during the summer recess and that the investigatory works would provide the necessary detail for the full remedial works to be carried out. He then provided an outline timescale for completion.

Members requested that the remedial works commence as quickly as possible.

10. ROOF REMEDIAL REPAIRS BUSINESS CASE

Mrs Hogg presented a business case, which sought approval for Building Services to carry out the necessary remedial works to address the defects arising from work carried out to the roof of Parliament Buildings.

Following consideration, Members approved the recommendation within the business case to proceed with Option 3 - to outsource the work for the repairs on a phased approach. Members also noted and approved the associated financial expenditure.

David Lynn and Alice McKelvey left the meeting at 10.53 am.

Paula McClintock joined the meeting at 10.53 am for agenda item 11.

11. DETERMINATION ON MEMBERS ALLOWANCES AND EXPENSES

Paula McClintock presented a paper which summarised the provisions previously considered and agreed by the Assembly Commission for incorporation into a new Determination. She also outlined other areas for potential review in a new Determination, including rent, travel allowances, sign language services and disability expenses.

Mrs McClintock noted that, if the publication of a Determination was paused briefly, a wider review of the Determination could be undertaken over the summer thereby providing the opportunity to incorporate other necessary changes. Mrs Hogg advised that an options paper on the wider range of issues, including a proposed draft Determination, could then be brought to the Assembly Commission meeting in September.

Members queried whether a delay in publishing a Determination on security provision would have a detrimental impact on MLAs who had a current need to install security measures.

Mrs Hogg confirmed that this should not be the case as MLAs should be able to carry out work under existing provisions and that costs could be reallocated once the new Determination was published. Mrs McClintock agreed to engage with MLAs, as required, to take account of individual circumstances and to remind them of the provisions within the current Determination.

It was noted that, once agreed, the new Determination would be communicated to MLAs, along with associated guidance.

Following discussion, Members agreed with the proposal to consider a new draft Determination in September 2024.

Action: Mr Baxter to prepare a new draft Determination for consideration by the Assembly Commission in September 2024.

Paula McClintock left the meeting at 11.04 am.

12. SYSTEMS REVIEW PROJECT UPDATE

Mrs Hogg provided Members with an update on the Systems Review Project.

Mrs Hogg advised that, due to numerous delivery issues with the supplier contracted to deliver a new integrated HR, payroll, finance and procurement solution, the contract had been terminated.

Mrs Hogg informed Members that alternative options were being considered to deliver the Assembly Commission's system requirements, and should expenditure for any new proposal exceed her delegated authority approval would be sought from the Assembly Commission.

13. ANNUAL EQUALITY PROGRESS REPORT TO THE EQUALITY COMMISSION FOR NORTHERN IRELAND 2023-2024

Mrs Hogg presented the 2023-2024 Annual Equality Progress Report.

Mrs Hogg stated that the Report incorporated status updates on the Assembly Commission's Disability Action Plan 2022-25, Good Relations Action Plan 2022-25 and Audit of Inequalities Action Plan 2022-26.

Members noted the Report.

14. ASSEMBLY COMMISSION AUDIT AND RISK COMMITTEE REPORT TO THE NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY COMMISSION FOR THE YEAR ENDED 31 MARCH 2024

Dr Keady presented the ACARC Annual Report for 2023-2024, which he stated had been considered by ACARC at its meeting on 16 May 2024.

Dr Keady outlined the work undertaken by ACARC throughout the year and noted that the position of Chairperson of ACARC was currently vacant.

Dr Keady thanked Mr Clarke for his work on ACARC during the year and welcomed Mr Butler to the Committee. Dr Keady also thanked the Clerk/Chief Executive, SMT and Members for their support.

Dr Keady advised that the Assembly Commission's Internal Auditor's Annual Assurance Report had provided a satisfactory level of assurance on the system of internal control in the Assembly Commission.

Members noted the Report.

Mr Keady confirmed to Members that he had no additional issues to raise which would require a closed session.

15. ISSUED VIA CORRESPONDENCE

Revised Assembly Members' (Remuneration Board) Bill and Associated Documents.

15.1 DECISIONS MADE VIA CORRESPONDENCE

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

Lighting Request:

Amal's Playdate – **Declined**.

16. AOB

Mr Butler noted that he had been approached about images of former Members from the Northern Ireland Parliament being added to the items on display in Parliament Buildings. He advised that he had discussed these with officials and was content with the advice, but wanted to make the Assembly Commission aware.

Mr Ramsey stated that there had been approaches to a number of Members about this issue, in some cases in relation to the same person. Mr Ramsey recalled that the Assembly Commission had agreed the images on display, on the basis of highlighting significant figures and stories of interest (as advised by Dr Eamon Phoenix), while recognising that it would be impossible to feature every former Member. Mr Ramsey noted that the Assembly Commission had the ability to reopen the agreed package, but that it would be unlikely that one image could be added without considering other proposals.

Members confirmed that the agreement of the package of items on display had been a significant achievement and, while it recognised that there might be disappointment that some Members were not included, it would be impossible to include everyone who had served. Members were therefore content the display of items would not be reviewed.

17. DATE OF NEXT MEETING

The Speaker noted that officials would be in contact with a date for the next full meeting after the summer, but stated that an earlier meeting would be held, if business required.

The meeting ended at 11.26 am.

The Speaker asked Members and Mr Ramsey to stay for a closed session.