

The Assembly Commission and Clerk/Chief Executive's Office



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Mr Timothy Gaston MLA
Parliament Buildings

29 April 2026

Dear Mr Gaston

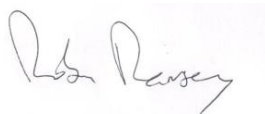
Further to Mr Andy Allen's answer below on behalf of the Assembly Commission to your written question, the Assembly Commission has agreed to place the document attached in the library as a deposited paper.

Mr Gaston's question and Mr Allen's response on behalf of the Assembly Commission are shown below:

To ask the Assembly Commission, pursuant to AQW 40728/22-27, to place a copy of the business case for this work in the Assembly library. (AQW 43756/22-27)

A copy of the business case has been placed in the Assembly Library.

Yours sincerely



Robin Ramsey
Adviser to the Speaker/Head of Corporate Support

Paper submitted by: Director of Parliamentary Services

Subject: Business Case for the refurbishment of the Communications unit offices B4 and B5

Date for discussion: SMT meeting on 26 September 2025

Recommendation

This paper sets out the business case for the refurbishment of the Communications Office in light of an increase in staff and the needs of digital working. SMT is asked to endorse the recommended option: progressing the required refurbishment works (option (b)).

Preceding Papers/Discussions: None.

Timescale: For consideration by SMT on 26 September 2025.

Fol Implications: This paper is potentially fully disclosable.

Legal Implications: This paper does not contain legal advice and there are no known legal implications.

Financial/Tax Implications: The financial requirement of this project is reflected in the 2025-26 capital budget (£45K).

Staffing Implications: No staffing implications will arise as a result of this paper.

Equality/Section 75 Implications: No equality or Section 75 issues will arise because of decisions made by SMT in relation to this paper.

Equality Screening: This paper does not require equality screening as it does not propose any changes to any Assembly Commission policies.

Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA): The obligations imposed on data controllers by Article 35 of the General Data Protection Regulations have been considered. A DPIA is not required as no processing of personal data is involved.

Consultation: Engagement with Building Services is ongoing.

Attachments: None.

Executive Summary

- The purpose of this paper is to outline the necessity for a redesign and refurbishment of rooms B4 and B5 (Communications Offices) to meet modern needs and an increased staff level.

Background

1. The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission's (the Assembly Commission) 2023-28 Corporate Strategy is based on four priorities, including "The public will understand and value the role of the Assembly and be engaged in its work." The objectives beneath this priority include "making the work of the Assembly more accessible", "implement a strategy for communicating the impact of the Assembly," and "create more opportunities to engage with Committees."
2. The primary deliverer of outputs, campaigns and reputational protection aimed at underpinning the priority set out in paragraph 1 is the Assembly Communications Office.
3. The communications landscape has changed beyond recognition since the business unit structures and scoping were first put in place in the late 1990s and early 2000s. This landscape is now digital, and understanding and adapting to digital consumption trends by the Communications Office has been essential to deliver the objectives in paragraph 1. To adapt, the communications staff complement has increased by three in the new positions of digital content and communications producers.
4. The Communications Office has an 'open door' policy to journalists, with frequent call-ins on sitting days from accredited correspondents and other reporters.

Discussion

5. The present Communications Office includes desks for 12 personnel, a meeting desk, and an adjacent office for the Head of Communication, within a floor space of approx. 20m x 6m including an area of 3m x 2m for necessary storage cabinets and a broadcasting technical rack. The room was originally configured in the early 2000s as a press conference room and all walls are clad in 2 inch deep sound proofing. The carpet was laid as part of the original installation.
6. The footprint of desks has had to grow to accommodate double monitors and further new needs will be to accommodate the MacBooks and laptops being used alongside desktop PCs by four team members carrying out video production work. The result is an inefficient and cluttered workspace and a high ambient temperature due to the running of up to 16 devices and a broadcast equipment rack. Video editing is a task which requires a degree of high concentration, aural and visual focus and lack of distraction.

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Submission Number: SMT21514

7. The aims of the refurbishment and redesign of the Communications Office are to:
- Create an environment incorporating ergonomic work booths for the editing of video material on MacBooks and laptops.
 - Provide Communications staff with large wall mounted monitor to watch, be aware of and react to live committee and plenary business.
 - Provide a branded backdrop for official staff photographs.
 - Provide built-in lighting suitable for the reduction of glare on screens.
 - Expose and restore the walls behind the torn cladding.
 - Maximise the total floor space of B4 and B5.
 - Create a working environment which reflects the professional and welcoming nature of the Assembly to visiting media and Assembly Commission colleagues.
8. The works will include the stripping back of walls, potential removal of an internal glass partition wall, carpet and lighting carried out through building services registered contractors.

Costs

9. The budget for the project is £45K.

Outline costings from engagement with Building Services are as below:

Item	Cost (£000) Exc. VAT
Carpet & Painting	11
Blinds	1
Desks & Chairs	15
Lighting	2
Meeting table & Chairs	2
Breakout area seating	1
TOTAL	32

A considerable amount of the preparatory work will be carried out by Building Services personnel, including the removal of extensive interior soundproof cladding, and installation of lighting, resulting in savings on external labour costs. We have built in some contingency as it is difficult to fully anticipate what lies beneath the layer of cladding (installed in the early period of the Assembly), and any corresponding additional costs arising.

In addition the project will require a large Multi-viewer smart-screen (circa £3k) however IS have confirmed they have provision in their budget via a central contract.

Options

10. The options within this paper are to
- (a) Do nothing.

This option will see the status quo maintained of an inefficient and cluttered workspace reflecting poorly on the image of a modern parliament to visitors and new staff. The staff in the Communications Office will continue to work in one of least maintained and uncared for offices in Parliament Buildings

(b) Progress the refurbishment works.

This option will allow achievement of the aims outlined in paragraph 7.

(c) Find alternative space to relocate.

This option requires there being available space on the ground floor closer to the main media events of the sitting week which would allow for better knowledge of what is happening on the ground and closer access to committee room sittings.

Recommendation

11. It is recommended that option (b) is adopted as a way forward with option (a) least favoured and option (c) undeliverable due to lack of room space.

Benefits

12. This project will allow for a lift in the projection of a positive brand of the Assembly to media personnel, new joiners and members of the Executive Information Service. Digital production staff will have tailored work zones, and media facing staff will become better aware of real time issues or potential stories at Plenary or Committee sittings. This will enable enhanced capacity to produce video content highlighting the Assembly's key messages.

Disbenefits

13. Disbenefits are the costs of the works and a move to temporary accommodation during them.

Risks.

14. Risks include delays in the availability of contractors and potential surrender of capital budget in-year. Contingency plans will be developed to address contractor delays.

Author: John Hart, Head of Communications