



COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS AND PRIVILEGES

WEDNESDAY, 5TH MARCH 2014
ROOM 21, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

- Present: Mr Alastair Ross (Chairperson)
Ms Anna Lo (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Steven Agnew
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Declan McAleer
Mr Fra McCann
Mr Ian McCrea
Mrs Sandra Overend
- In Attendance: Mr Paul Gill (Assembly Clerk)
Ms Ursula McCanny (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Mr Jonathan Watson (Clerical Supervisor)
- Apologies: Ms Paula Bradley
Mr Colum Eastwood
Mr Mervyn Storey

The meeting commenced at 1.42pm in closed session.

Chairperson's Introduction

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the meeting should be held in closed session.
The Deputy Chairperson welcomed Committee members to the meeting.

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Declaration of Interests

The Deputy Chairperson reminded Members of their obligation to declare any relevant financial or other interests before and during each Committee meeting.

3. Draft minutes of the meeting held on 19th February 2014

Agreed: The draft minutes of the meeting held on 19th February 2014 were agreed by the Committee.

4. Matters arising

There were no matters arising.

The Committee agreed that, in the absence of the Chairperson, it would move to agenda item 6 and return to agenda item 5 later in the meeting.

6. Review of the Code

Members noted the Clerk's Paper on the Rules of Conduct.

Members noted that any decision or view taken by the Committee at this stage would be reflected in the Committee's consultation document. However, they would not be binding as far as the future Code is concerned. Final decisions will not be taken until after the Committee has considered the responses to the consultation.

The Clerk briefed the Committee on Section 43 and Standing Order 69.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that as part of the review of the Code the Committee should consider whether the wording of standing order 69 remains appropriate.

The Clerk briefed the Committee on the Rules of the Code of Conduct.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the wording of those rules in the Code applying section 43 of the Northern Ireland Act and Standing Order 69 should be considered again.

The Clerk briefed the Committee on the Registration of Interests.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider each of the current categories of registrable interest and assess the extent to which they might be streamlined and simplified without compromising transparency.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider whether the thresholds below which no registration is required remain appropriate.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider whether there are any circumstances in which the receipt of a gift might be perceived as compromising the integrity of the Member.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to review the threshold of 0.5% of the current salary of an Assembly Member (currently £240) for the registration of gifts.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to review the threshold for registration of shares (currently where either the nominal value of the shares at the relevant date is, or was, greater than 1% of the total nominal value of the issued share capital of the company or other body, or the market value of the shares at the relevant date exceeds, or exceeded, 50% of the current salary of an Assembly Member).

The Clerk briefed the Committee on dual reporting and the Electoral Commission.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to explore with the Electoral Commission the extent to which the Assembly's reporting requirements in respect of electoral support and political donations; gifts, benefits and hospitality; overseas visits; and overseas benefits and gifts might be aligned with the requirements under PPERA without necessarily raising the thresholds for registering these interests.

The Clerk briefed the Committee on the rule on Declaration of Interests.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider whether the advice in paragraphs 81-94 of the Guide might be clarified or simplified while ensuring that transparency is not compromised.

The Clerk briefed the Committee on the Advocacy Rule.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider whether the Advocacy Rule and the guidelines on its application remain appropriate.

The Clerk briefed the Committee on non-financial interests.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider whether either the Code or the Guide should provide formally for Members to be excluded from proceedings of the Assembly when they have certain non-financial interests.

The Clerk briefed the Committee on the Attorney General for Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to evaluate the categories of registrable interest in light of their application, where relevant, to the Attorney General for Northern Ireland.

The Clerk briefed the Committee on the current provisions in relation to bringing the Assembly into disrepute.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider the merits of such a rule as part of the review.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Clerk should draft an issues paper, reflecting these agreed points, for consideration and approval at the Committee's next meeting.

7. Unauthorised Disclosure of Correspondence from the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards

The Committee considered correspondence from Mr Spratt regarding the unauthorised disclosure of correspondence from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Standards.

Mr Declan McAleer left the meeting at 2.23pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the unauthorised disclosure is unlikely to interfere with the work of the Committee. On that basis, the Committee agreed that it would not conduct its own internal investigation into the matter.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Clerk should write to Mr Spratt to inform him of this decision.

8. Correspondence from the Social Development Committee

The Committee considered correspondence from the Social Development Committee and a draft response.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the draft response.

9. Application for an All-Party Group on Fairtrade

Mr Agnew and Ms Lo declared an interest as proposed members of this group.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content to approve the application.

The meeting suspended at 2.42pm and resumed at 2.47pm.

5. Correspondence on Complaints Against a Member

Members noted the Clerk's Paper and the report from the Acting Assembly Commissioner for Standards.

Mr Boylan declared an interest as having attended the event in question.

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed Mr Stuart Allan, Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards, and invited him to brief the Committee on his report.

Mr Allan briefed the Committee on his report and answered questions from Members.

The Chairperson, Mr Alastair Ross, joined the meeting at 3.14pm.

Ms Anna Lo left the meeting at 3.19pm.

The Chairperson thanked Mr Allan for his briefing. The Chairperson also thanked Mr Allan for all of his assistance to the Assembly and wished him well in his retirement.

Mr Allan left the meeting at 3.28pm.

The Committee discussed Mr Allan's report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed with the finding of Mr Allan's report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Clerk should draft a report on the matter, for consideration and approval at the Committee's next meeting.

Mr Fra McCann left the meeting at 3.37pm.

10. Any other business

The Clerk briefed the Committee on the schedule and costs for the Committee visit to Washington DC on 13th and 14th March 2014 to meet with the House Ethics Committee, the Senate Ethics Committee and the General Assembly of Maryland.

The Clerk advised Members that he will circulate a folder with information on the visit in advance of departure.

11. Time, date and place of next meeting

The next meeting of the Committee will be held on Monday, 10th March 2014 at 12.15pm in Room 21 (lunch will be available from 12noon). The papers shall be available to read from 11.45am.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 3.41pm.

Mr Alastair Ross MLA
Chairperson, Committee on Standards and Privileges
10th March 2014