Written Ministerial Statement

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Department of Education

GIVAN WELCOMES STANDARDS COMMISSIONER'S REPORT ON ISRAEL TRIP

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Mr Givan (The Minister of Education): On 10 November 2025, the Northern Ireland Assembly debated the following motion, proposed by Gerry Carroll MLA:

"That this Assembly, under section 30(1)(b) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, resolves that, further to his recent visit to Israel, the Minister of Education no longer enjoys the confidence of the Assembly, because of his failure to observe paragraphs (cd) and (ce) of the Pledge of Office, relating to his duty to uphold and support the rule of law; and his failure to observe paragraph (g) relating to his duty to comply with the Ministerial Code of Conduct; and that he should be excluded from holding office as a Minister or junior Minister for a period of 12 months."

This motion was based on a visit to Israel (23 to 31 October 2025), part of which involved my visit to a school in Jerusalem.

Following a debate, 47 members (including 100% of the nationalists who voted) voted that I should be excluded from holding office for the maximum period of twelve months.

During the debate, I highlighted the absurdity of the situation:

"What is the case against me? Going to Israel on a fact-finding mission to hear from the victims of terrorism? Going to a country with which the United Kingdom retains full diplomatic relations and an embassy in Tel Aviv? Going to visit a school during that trip? Are Members seeking to tell me what to think or where to go? Is it, as some would suggest, merely asking the Department to publicise my visit to a school — yes, a school — on the departmental website and on social media, a request that was properly approved at the highest level in the Department before it was issued? As I said last week, my Permanent Secretary assessed the Department's role with regard to the trip and concluded that its involvement was limited and administrative in nature. That was deemed appropriate, given the need to manage the Israel trip within my broader Ministerial diary and the need to cancel other engagements.

"Where do those alleged offences fit into the annals of the Assembly? Has it been forgotten that, far from simply visiting a school, there are Members in the House, some of whom have served as Ministers, including as Education Minister, who were personally guilty of the most heinous crimes without one word of regret or remorse?"

That day, the complete paucity of evidence to justify the exclusion was obvious to all objective observers, yet the Northern Ireland Assembly was turned into a kangaroo court. Thankfully, I had the protection of a cross-community requirement. However, the matter did not end there. Following a complaint, the Commissioner for Standards and Privileges conducted a full, independent inquiry into the matter.

Today, that report has been published. As is evident from his detailed findings, the Commissioner found no breaches of the Ministerial Code of Conduct in this case.

The Commissioner's report carefully examines every aspect of the trip and exposes the falsehoods at the heart of the motion that was tabled.

In a rush to judgment by nationalist MLAs and the Alliance Party, all objectivity was set aside and instead they opted for an attempted political lynching. This is in stark contrast to the considered report of the Standards Commissioner.

It is impossible not to contrast the approach of the Alliance Party in voting for my exclusion and to the position they adopted in relation to role of Sinn Féin Ministers on the Garvaghy Road.

As stated by Eoin Tennyson MLA in the 12 October 2026 exclusion motion in relation to Sinn Féin Ministers:

"There may well be further scrutiny through the established standards and accountability mechanisms of the Assembly, but respect for the rule of law means allowing those processes to reach their conclusion before rushing to judgement in a kangaroo court."

Clearly, Mr Tennyson has either undergone a Damascene conversion following his vote to exclude me last year or demonstrates political hypocrisy of the worst kind, where unionist Ministers face one set of rules from Alliance Members and Sinn Féin Ministers another.

Those who tabled and supported this motion will face no consequences for their actions. Not for the first time (or no doubt the last), allegations were made in the Assembly about my conduct that did not withstand the most cursory independent scrutiny. Not for the first (or no doubt the last) time, I have had to have recourse to a Written Ministerial Statement to put on the record the verifiable facts.

For the sake of completeness, I recite the Commissioner's findings in full.

"Findings on allegations

66. My conclusions in respect of the specific allegations are as follows.

Code section 1.5(v) comply with this Code and with rules relating to the use of public funds

67. Neither the evidence provided by the Permanent Secretary to the Education Committee nor the Department's Report would give rise to a suspicion that any public funds were used inappropriately with all costs being met by the Israeli Embassy. Costs in relation to the visit were properly declared by Mr Givan in the Assembly Register of Members' Interests in accordance with the rules of the Assembly Members' Code of Conduct. Departmental support for the visit was limited to a small number of administrative tasks such as would be the case on any occasion that a minister was absent or unavailable and no other departmental staff attended. There is therefore no evidence to support an allegation that public funds were misused.

Code section 1.5 (vi) Operate in a way conducive to promoting good community relations and equality of treatment

68. Logically this rule must relate to operating in a way conducive to promoting good community relations in Northern Ireland. Ultimately there is no evidence to support a conclusion that the Ministerial aspect of the visit by Mr Givan to Israel, specifically the OFEK school, would have any effect on equality of treatment in Northern Ireland or was not conducive to promoting good community relations. The community in Northern Ireland have differing views on the politics and conflict in Israel and Gaza. It is difficult to see how this school visit would have any impact on those pre-existing views.

Principle of Integrity

69. This requires that holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might influence them in the performance of their official duties. Mr Givan has properly registered this visit in accordance with the rules. In addition, international relations are excepted matters and the potential for conflict of interest is therefore remote.

Principle of Openness

70. This requires that holders of public office are as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. There is no evidence that Mr Givan has withheld any information regarding his trip either from the Assembly or this investigation.

Principle of Accountability

71. This requires that holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions. There is no evidence that Mr Givan has failed to submit himself to scrutiny from any quarter in respect of the visit.

Principle of Selflessness

72. This requires that holders of public office should take decisions in terms of the public interest. Public opinion and commentary would suggest that there is no agreed position which could represent the greater public interest in relation to the Israel / Gaza conflict. There is no evidence which suggests that Mr Givan stands to gain financially or in terms of other material benefits from his participation in this visit.

Principle of Leadership

73. This requires that holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example. Having not found a breach of the other principles, it is not possible to conclude that Mr Givan failed to show leadership in this context.

Conclusion

74. I am satisfied on the basis of the evidence, my analysis and reasoning that on the balance of probabilities, Mr Givan's conduct in participating in the delegation to Israel and visiting the OFEK school did not breach any aspect of the Ministerial Code of Conduct."

The contrast between the findings of the Standards Commissioner and the speeches in the Assembly by those who wished to exclude me from office for twelve months could not be greater.