

Office of the Official Report

FUNCTION

The Office of the Official Report (Hansard) produces the Official Report of all sittings of the Northern Ireland Assembly, including details of debates, resolutions, questions and divisions. Hansard also records some committee sessions.

The Official Report is a hugely important source of information. It is available to Members and the public, is used by the Speaker to help resolve queries and to enable him to make rulings, and may be used during legal proceedings.

Each report lists the names of all the Members (and, in committees, witnesses) who speak, provides a report of what they say and reports all the Assembly's decisions. For plenary sittings, a report is published at 8.30 am the day after each Assembly sitting in printed format and, later that morning, electronically on the Internet.

A 'bound volume' containing reports of all the sittings over a longer period, Committee Stages of Bills and answers to written questions over a certain period is then published. This is the definitive report on Assembly business.

Hansard reports the Assembly's business in the language used by Members and takes its terms of reference from 'Erskine May' which states that the Hansard report 'though not strictly verbatim, is substantially the verbatim report, with repetitions and redundancies omitted and with obvious mistakes corrected, but which on the other hand leaves out nothing that adds to the meaning of the speech or illustrates the argument'.

Assembly Members have the right to examine the Hansard draft of what they said before it is published, and they can suggest amendments. However, in the first instance it is up to the Editor to determine whether these changes should be made. Members may, however, appeal to the Speaker if they remain dissatisfied

with how they have been reported. It is also important to note that, at draft stage, Members may examine only their own contributions – they are not allowed to see those of other Members.

In addition, Hansard provides the Speaker and Clerks at Table with a simultaneous interpretation service in both Irish and Ulster Scots during all sittings of the Assembly.

ACTIVITIES DURING THE PERIOD

1 APRIL 2002 TO 31 MARCH 2003

The main performance indicators show that during the year Hansard:

- Always met its target of publishing the first eight hours of debate in the Assembly by 8.30 am the following day;
- Reported on 184 hours of debate in 34 sittings, covering 2,825 columns;
- Produced reports for 261 committee meetings;
- Produced four bound volumes of reports, covering over 5,500 columns; and
- Received a monthly average of 39,000 hits on its web site pages (40% from overseas).

At the start of the business year Hansard faced two key challenges – the recruitment and training of staff, and the identification and development of efficient and effective systems and procedures. The suspension of the Assembly in October intensified both these challenges, as did a 36% increase over the previous year in the number of hours of debate to be reported (up to the date of suspension).

Recruitment competitions were held for Assistant Editors, Assistant Editor (Irish) and Parliamentary Reporters, and appointments were made to all three grades. However, the timing of suspension dictated that only four out of 13 Parliamentary Reporter posts were filled, and a competition for a Deputy Editor of Debates (Committees) had to be suspended at the shortlisting of applications stage.

The arrival of new staff lent impetus to Hansard's drive to develop a bespoke training course for reporting and editing staff. With the help of a secondee from Hansard in the House of Commons at Westminster, an intensive 10-week parliamentary reporting course was designed and delivered to new staff in the period October to December 2002. Following evaluation, the course was modified, and delivered to another four of the existing reporting staff in the period January to March 2003.

The development of this course is one of the most important steps that Hansard has taken in its brief history. It is the crucial element in ensuring that the Assembly has a skilled cadre of reporting staff and thus the ability to produce an Official Report to the standard expected by Members.

There were several other notable staff development achievements during the year, including the holding of subject-specific training courses on grammar, proof-reading and indexing, and attendance by the majority of reporting staff at a bespoke course on the work of the Clerk Assistant's directorate. In addition, four members of staff obtained National Examining Board for Supervision and Management (NEBS) introductory certificates in management, and three members of staff were awarded certificates for their success in the Assembly's in-house computer training programme.

Taken together, these developments have ensured that Hansard staff continually improved their skills and abilities. Indeed, the standard of reporting was indirectly recognised by requests to take staff on loan from the Scottish Parliament, House of Commons, House of Lords and the National Assembly for Wales. In total 12 different members of staff were seconded to those legislatures for varying periods, particularly during suspension, and two working visits were made to the Houses of the Oireachtas.

These secondments helped to build on the already strong links with other legislatures in the British Isles, aided by Hansard's contribution as a founding member of the British-Irish

Parliamentary Reporting Association (BIPRA). The Editor of Debates was re-elected as the secretary of BIPRA; six members of staff attended the association's inaugural annual conference at Westminster; and staff assisted BIPRA in reporting the twenty-fifth and twenty-sixth plenary meetings of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body.

In addition, links were forged through membership of the Commonwealth Hansard Editors Association and attendance at its triennial conference; representation at the Canadian Hansard Association's annual conference; development visits to the Scottish Parliament, National Assembly for Wales, House of Commons, House of Lords and the Houses of the Oireachtas. Hansard also hosted visits by reporting staff from the National Assembly for Wales and the House of Commons, and the Editor of Debates from the Bahamas.

Useful work was undertaken on the review and updating of procedure and style guides. These are essential in helping to ensure the accuracy, consistency and clarity of the Official Report.

During the year Hansard undertook a review of its accommodation and, with advice and assistance from the Office of the Keeper, a major refurbishment of all Hansard offices was completed in August 2002, resulting in a significant improvement to the working environment.

In conjunction with the Researchers and Information directorate, further research was undertaken into the development of a digital audio system for recording proceedings in the Assembly and on the possibility of introducing the computer mark-up language XML to the Hansard workflow process. Both technologies have the potential to bring improvements to the work of Hansard, and the research undertaken has provided a useful foundation on which to move forward.

Links with the Clerk Assistant's directorate remained close, especially liaison with the Business Office on all plenary sitting days. A draft protocol was agreed with the Committee Office on levels of service to committees.

Hansard also contributed fully in helping the Assembly to take forward a number of cross-cutting issues by providing representation on a number of corporate working groups covering subjects such as staff development, pay and grading, internal communications, freedom of information, health and safety, and equality.

Other developments and achievements during the year included:

- The inclusion of a new Standing Order to make provision for the Official Report;
- Achieving earlier publication of Hansard on the web site;
- Development and implementation of an archiving plan;
- Completion of a directorate risk assessment;
- A review of Gallery accommodation for reporting staff;
- Production of an Official Report of a Youth Parliament held by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB);
- The hosting of nine separate visits by work experience students; and
- Presentations to delegations from Kosovo and European Parliament interpreters.

Finally, and with great sadness, the sudden death of Mr Harry O'Prey in July 2002 must be reported. Harry was employed in Hansard on a consultancy basis in respect of Irish language translating and interpreting. He was present on more or less all sitting days from the establishment of the Assembly and his passing robbed the Assembly of a wealth of experience and expertise.

KEY CHALLENGES FOR 2003-04

Hansard's detailed business plan for the 2003-04 year will take account of a number of key challenges and will set out specific objectives and targets to deal with them.

Staffing and working methods will remain as key challenges as Hansard enters the 2003-04 business year, but there will be some change in their focus.

On the staffing side, the revival of recruitment competitions and the induction of new staff from those competitions will be crucial. In addition, Hansard faces the potential loss of up to nine experienced members of staff who have secondment agreements. Ensuring Hansard achieves and maintains a cadre of appropriately skilled reporting staff will, therefore, remain the number one challenge.

The other main challenges that can be foreseen are:

- The development and implementation of the Assembly-wide review of pay, grading and terms and conditions, including job evaluation;
- The effect of the change of mandate post election; and
- The development of working methods, workflows and production processes to ensure efficient, effective and economical delivery of services to all customers of Hansard.