

The Work of the Assembly Commission

The Assembly Commission is the corporate body of the Northern Ireland Assembly established under Section 40 and Schedule 5 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Commission comprises the Speaker, who chairs the meetings and five other elected Members. It ensures that the Assembly has the adequate property, staff and services to work effectively. The Commission's purpose is to support the Assembly and its Members in their role as elected representatives and legislators and to help the Assembly communicate effectively with the public.

In carrying out its functions, the Assembly Commission is supported by a Secretariat. The Assembly Secretariat provides a wide range of practical and administrative support for Members of the Legislative Assembly and the Assembly Commission. The Secretariat is currently supported by approximately 380 staff, of whom over 50% are directly employed by the Assembly Commission. The remaining staff are either on secondment through the Northern Ireland Civil Service or employed through an external recruitment agency. The Assembly Commission has indicated that by March 2010 it wishes to be in the position of employing all of its own staff rather than relying on staff seconded from other bodies. A major recruitment programme has begun with the expectation that approximately 300 permanent staff will be recruited within this timescale. In addition, the Commission, as recommended by a recent review of the secretariat, intends to develop its own terms and conditions for secretariat staff.

The Assembly Commission with two QUB students who undertook the Secretariat Pilot Internship Programme



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During the period of this report, the Assembly Commission held 31 meetings to progress corporate matters on the Assembly's behalf. With the newly devolved administration in place, the Commission had to ensure that systems were established to allow for the smooth running of the organisation. Computers and other vital technology had become outdated during suspension and the Commission initiated an IT Refresh programme. This included the upgrade of the personal computers and printers used in Parliament Buildings and constituency offices. It also provided a centrally funded Broadband service, ensuring all Members had access to modern communication tools. The PC project renewed 800 PCs and laptops and 300 printers and was completed in July 2007. Work continues to upgrade the other ICT systems to meet the expanding business requirements of Members and the Secretariat.

Contracts such as those for publication management and broadcasting also needed immediate re-tender, and the Commission worked hard to make sure that the work quickly progressed.

The safety and welfare of visitors, staff and members remained paramount alongside the Commission's desire to create an open, accessible and engaging Assembly. As part of this undertaking, a review of security at Parliament Buildings and its environs was undertaken and a series of recommendations were agreed and implemented.

The Commission also initiated discussions relating to outreach and engagement at other centres of government. Between 2007 and 2008 the Commission visited the Scottish Parliament, the Houses of the Oireachtas, and the Canadian Parliament.

The Commission took time off-site in June 2008 to review key policy areas including the Engagement and Outreach Strategy, and to consider the future accommodation needs of the Assembly. The session was very useful as it identified key challenges for the Secretariat in the coming year.



The Assembly Commission's visit to the Canadian Parliament (May 2008)

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After devolution, the Assembly Commission was obliged under Section 75 (the statutory duties) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 to develop an equality scheme. Section 75 states that the Assembly is responsible for promoting equality of opportunity and a culture of rights and responsibilities. The Commission consulted over the reporting year and developed a draft scheme. The scheme was approved and presented to the Equality Commission for Northern Ireland in February 2008.

Another positive measure was the development of the Commission's Disability Action Plan, which outlines how it will fulfil its obligations under the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. The Commission is committed to delivering the action plan and hopes that this will provide more opportunities for people with disabilities to become involved with the Assembly across its full range of activities. The Assembly Commission also agreed with the proposal to establish a Good Relations advisory group. The terms of reference are being developed and significant progress will be made over the next 12–18 months.

In fulfilling the obligations under the Freedom of Information Act 2000, the Assembly Commission has received 142 freedom of information requests, covering subjects from information about visitors and tours, to questions about the source of food products used in the catering at Parliament Buildings.

As the corporate body of the Assembly, the Commission is also responsible for providing the corporate framework for a fully functioning legislature. This unique role is scrutinised in many ways, including answering Assembly Questions. Over the period of this report, the Commission answered four oral questions on the Floor of the House and 114 questions by written answer. These questions related to issues such as the use of and the costs associated with the running of Parliament Buildings, staffing, supporting IT infrastructure, the environment, renewable energy sources, and Section 75/Good Relations.

