

# Clerk Assistant's Directorate Corporate Report 1999-2002

## FUNCTION

The Clerk Assistant's Directorate provides support to the Northern Ireland Assembly to enable it to fulfil its duties under the Belfast Agreement. During the period of the Report the Directorate established and reviewed systems, procedures and practices to support the work of the Assembly. The Directorate provided support and training to enable its staff to carry out their duties effectively.

The Directorate is organised into three offices – the Bill Office, the Business Office and the Committee Office – which each have distinct but inter-related roles. The key challenges, which apply to all sections of the Clerk Assistant's Directorate in the coming year, are to:

- Continue to meet the needs of Members and Committees when carrying out Assembly business;
- Establish a team of competent, trained and highly motivated staff and maintain a programme of continuous staff training and development; and
- Maximise resources within its budget.

## The Bill Office

### FUNCTION

The function of the Bill Office is to support the work of the Assembly when considering primary legislation. Its key functions include:

- The preparation and publication of primary legislation documents;
- The provision of procedural and technical advice on Bills to the Speaker, the Clerk to the Assembly, Committees and Members;
- Assisting Committees and Members when drafting and tabling amendments to Bills;

- The provision of regular information to Members; and
- Liaising with Committees, Departments and the Office of Legislative Counsel.

### ACTIVITY DURING THE PERIOD TO 31 MARCH 2002

During the period of this report, 34 bills were introduced, of which 30 were Executive Bills, three were Assembly Commission Bills and one was a Private Members' Bill – 27 received Royal Assent and became Acts. Throughout this period, the Bill Office ensured that all legislative documents (Bills, Explanatory and Financial Memorandums, Notices and Marshalled Lists of Amendments) were printed and distributed to Members within 24 hours of production and posted promptly on the Assembly web site. The Office met its target of a two-day turn around for reprinting all Bills which were amended at Consideration / Further Consideration Stages. On a weekly basis, the Office also provided a table for the Assembly web site, setting out the progress of each Bill through the Assembly.

The Bill Office has undertaken preliminary work on the development of new procedures for Committee Bills, Members' Bills and Private Bills. This involved detailed research of practices in other legislatures and the development of proposals designed to meet the unique needs of the Northern Ireland Assembly in these important areas.

A detailed guide was prepared for Members on the role and functions of the Bill Office, the primary legislative process, the tabling, admissibility, selection and grouping of amendments to Bills and plenary procedure. Training sessions and talks on the legislative process and plenary procedure for Bills were delivered to departmental and Assembly staff, Members and visitors from other legislatures.

To assist with the smooth passage of primary legislation through the Assembly, the Bill Office established and continually developed its systems, procedures, controls and important communication links with persons inside and outside the Assembly.

**THE KEY CHALLENGES FOR 2002/03**

- To provide ongoing operational and procedural advice on Bills;
- To ensure, as far as is possible, that Committees and Departments are provided with the information they need to enable Bills to complete all their Assembly stages and receive Royal Assent before the Assembly election in May 2003;
- To devise, in conjunction with the Committee on Procedures and other business areas, procedures for handling Committee and Members' Bills;
- To prepare additional guidance for Members on Committee and Members' Bills;
- To devise, in conjunction with the Committee on Procedures and other business areas, procedures for handling Private Bills;
- To prepare and publish information guidelines about Private Bill procedures;
- To implement any changes to procedures on Bills agreed by the Assembly in response to the Report on the Review of the Legislative Process;
- To continue to provide training sessions and talks on the primary legislative process;
- To examine, in conjunction with IT colleagues, the further development or replacement of the software for drafting and amending primary legislation; and
- To develop user-friendly information on the Bill Office for the Assembly Intranet and web site.

The Committee Office

**FUNCTION**

The function of the Committee Office is to service and support the Committees of the Assembly. Its key roles include:

- Making appropriate arrangements for meetings of Statutory, Standing and Ad Hoc Committees;
- Providing administrative support before and after committee meetings;
- Arranging public evidence sessions, including arranging the attendance of witnesses at committee meetings;
- Liaising with Government Departments, other public sector bodies and organisations, the private sector, the community and voluntary sectors and individuals to ensure that committees are provided with the information and evidence they require;
- Providing the public with information on the work of Assembly Committees;
- Co-ordinating research activities and facilities for committees;
- Co-ordinating the arrangements for committee visits; and
- Providing procedural advice to committees.

**ACTIVITY DURING THE PERIOD TO 31 MARCH 2002**

Since devolution on 2 December 1999 the Committee Office has provided support to 10 Statutory Committees, four Standing Committees and six Ad Hoc Committees. Committee Office staff have serviced and supported 1037 committee meetings and 78 visits by committees, of which 28 were outside Northern Ireland. The Committee Office has also supported Assembly Committees in producing 71 reports and in considering and reporting on 25 Bills and 283 Statutory Rules.

The Committee Office has produced detailed guides for members of Statutory and Standing Committees and guidance for witnesses appearing before them. It also produced operational and procedural guidance for committee staff,

including guidance on providing effective research for committees. In addition, the Committee Office reviewed its communication systems, and a Committee Office database was designed and set up in conjunction with the Assembly's Information Systems Office.

### **ASSEMBLY COMMISSIONER FOR STANDARDS**

In 2001, the Committee on Standards and Privileges published a report, the key recommendation of which was the appointment of an independent Assembly Commissioner for Standards to investigate complaints against Assembly Members.

The Committee is sponsoring primary legislation by means of a Committee Bill to enable the Assembly Ombudsman for Northern Ireland to fulfil the role and functions of the Assembly Commissioner for Standards. It is the Committee's intention to introduce this legislation in the Assembly in September 2002.

Until new legislation can be brought to the Assembly for its consideration, interim arrangements have been agreed with the Assembly Ombudsman to investigate complaints against Assembly Members.

### **THE KEY CHALLENGES FOR 2002/03**

- To service and support effectively the committees of the Assembly during a period when they will be required to scrutinise a significant legislative programme;
- To prepare committees for the end of the mandate and develop first day briefings for committee members;
- To prepare and implement an induction training and development support plan for Committee Office staff;
- To develop systems and procedures to enhance the information provided to the public on the work of Assembly Committees;
- To revise and implement the guidance on committee procedures;
- To implement guidelines on commissioning research and specialist advisers;
- To review Committee Office systems to ensure that maximum use is made of information technology; and
- To agree protocols covering the working relationship between Committees and Departments, including the provision of information and evidence to committees.

## The Business Office

### **FUNCTION**

The functions of the Business Office are to:

- Support plenary meetings of the Assembly;
- Provide procedural advice to the Speaker and Members;
- Administer oral and written questions;
- Arrange the printing and production of all Assembly publications; and
- Provide facilities for the laying of documents before the Assembly.

It has four separate sections which deliver these functions:

The Plenary Section provides service and support to the Business Committee and Assembly plenary sessions. It produces weekly Order Papers, prepares the Speaker's brief, prepares the Minutes of Proceedings of the Assembly, which is the legal record of the Assembly's decisions, and deals with Executive Committee/Private Members'/Assembly Committee motions. It facilitates the laying of documents, Statutory Rules and other publications before the Assembly.

The Procedures Section performs the clerking function for the Committee on Procedures and is responsible for producing and maintaining Standing Orders.

The Questions Section administers Oral and Written Questions, provides advice and assistance to Members about Questions, produces the Written Answer Booklets and provides guidance to Northern Ireland Departments on the arrangements for Assembly Questions.

The Printed Paper Office manages the Assembly's printing contract and provides Members and staff of the Assembly with all the publications they need.

## **ACTIVITY DURING THE PERIOD TO 31 MARCH 2002**

During the period of the report the Business Office supported 125 plenary meetings of the Assembly, processed 3,147 oral and 8,477 written Assembly questions and supported 83 Business Committee meetings (the Business Committee was established on 29 November 1999) and 48 meetings of the Committee on Procedures. Some 505 Statutory Rules and 180 documents were laid, and 555 papers were presented to the Assembly. The running of the business of the Assembly was improved through 47 amendments to Standing Orders. The Business Office established systems, procedures and controls to enable it to support plenary meetings of the Assembly. It carried out a series of induction programmes to help staff understand the workings of the Assembly. It prepared guidance to Members on the role and function of the Business Office and supported the work of the Business Committee on the running of plenary meetings. It also provided a comprehensive guide for Clerks at Table.

In conjunction with Assembly IT staff the Business Office designed software to handle the processing of Questions, and copies of the software were made available to other legislatures. They also

developed software for the use of templates in the organisation of plenary business. Business Office staff gave presentations on the implications of Standing Orders and particularly on the arrangements for running the d'Hondt formula for the appointment of office-holders. It also reviewed the arrangements for Assembly Questions, and staff gave presentations to Departments on the administration of Questions.

The Printed Paper Office processed some 1641 printing requests and in excess of 787 requests for publications were met. It also published six bound volumes of the Official Report.

## **THE KEY CHALLENGES FOR 2002/03**

- To maintain a complete procedural service to the Speaker, the Assembly and its Committees in all circumstances;
- To develop software on the organisation of Plenary business, especially for Clerks at Table;
- To redesign the Table, incorporating the new software package for Plenary business;
- To conduct a survey to obtain Members' views on the support provided by the Business Office;
- To produce bound journals of Minutes of Proceedings;
- To update guidance for Clerks at Table; and
- To produce with the Speaker an Assembly companion on parliamentary practice.