

# Office of the Official Report Corporate Report 1999-2002

## **FUNCTION**

The Office of the Official Report (Hansard) does exactly as its name suggests – it produces the Official Report of all sittings of the Northern Ireland Assembly, including details of debates, resolutions, Questions, Votes and appropriate Committee sessions.

The Hansard report, which is available to the public, lists the names of all the Members, reports what they say and records all the Assembly's decisions. It is published at 8:30am the day after each Assembly sitting in printed format and electronically on the Internet.

A “bound volume” containing reports of all the sittings, Committee stages of Bills and answers to written Questions over a certain period is then published. This is the definitive version of Assembly business.

Hansard reports the Assembly's business in the language used by Members, but it does not produce a verbatim account of proceedings. Rather, it is an edited version, the proper definition of which is contained in ‘Erskine May’ and based on that adopted in 1907 by the House of Commons.

It 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 report of what they said before it is published, and they can suggest amendments. However, it is up to the Editor to determine whether these changes should be made. It is also important to note that Members may examine

only their own contributions – they are not allowed to see those of other Members.

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

During the period covered by this report Hansard has faced a number of challenges, most notably relating to the recruitment and training of staff, together with the identification and development of efficient and effective systems and procedures.

Various actions, for example rigorous recruitment exercises, the development of bespoke training programmes, procedural guides, a business plan, forward job plans and personal development plans, etc, have been initiated to tackle these challenges.

Strong links with other legislatures have been established. These have included exchange and working trips by staff at all levels to the Parliaments/Assemblies in England, Scotland, Wales, the Republic of Ireland and Canada and have allowed Hansard to contribute to, and build on, best practice elsewhere.

In addition, Hansard was largely instrumental in the formation of the British-Irish Parliamentary Reporting Association, which was established at a meeting in Belfast in November 2001. The meeting was attended by the heads of the parliamentary reporting staff in the Northern Ireland Assembly, the House of Commons, the Scottish Parliament, the National Assembly for Wales, the Tynwald, the Oireachtas and the States of Jersey. The Editor of Debates at the Northern Ireland Assembly was elected as the association's secretary.

As a result of all these actions, and despite having had to start from scratch, Hansard now boasts a team of around 40 staff. Headed by the Editor of Debates, it includes a deputy editor, assistant editors, parliamentary reporters, word-

processing operators and administrative staff and possesses a rich mix of editorial, language, communication and general skills.

It is this team that has been directly responsible for Hansard's extremely successful performance in the Assembly's formative years. During the reporting period Hansard has:

- Continuously met its target of publishing the first eight hours of debate in the Assembly by 08:30am the following day;
- Reported on nearly 700 hours of debate in 125 Assembly sittings;
- Produced reports for 715 Committee sessions;
- Produced six bound volumes of reports.

In addition, Hansard has been responsible for providing the Speaker with a simultaneous interpretation service in both Irish and Ulster Scots during all sittings of the Assembly.

As the official report of the Assembly, Hansard is a hugely important source of information both for Members and the public. A monthly average of 24,000 Hansard pages were read on the Assembly's web site during the last quarter of 2001. The Speaker also refers to Hansard to help resolve queries from Members and to enable him to make rulings.

### **THE KEY CHALLENGES FOR 2002/2003**

- To develop its staffing structure and complement, reinforced by a recruitment schedule, staff development programme and system of performance management; and
- Ensure that its working methods, workflows and production processes continue to remain efficient, effective and economical and directly relevant to the needs of all its customers.