



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Commissioner for Standards

Annual Report 2021-22

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Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 This is my second report and my first full reporting year since taking up the role of Assembly Commissioner for Standards on 7th September 2020.
- 1.2 The continued pandemic conditions throughout the year were challenging; however, I continued to work effectively to process new and existing complaints due to the backlog.
- 1.3 The overall number of complaints rose by 33% this year, primarily due to my functions being extended to include consideration of complaints against Ministers. Notably, there was a 67% decrease in complaints against MLAs compared with last year.
- 1.4 This report provides information on overall complaints received from 1 April 2021 - 30 March 2022, complaints carried forward from 2020-21, a breakdown of MLA and Ministerial complaints, highlights from investigation reports and recommendations, resources associated with the Office, other work carried out during this year and a look at the year ahead.

2 Functions of the Commissioner

- 2.1 The functions of the Commissioner are set out in section 17(1) of the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 ("the 2011 Act") and may be summarised as follows –
 - To investigate complaints and referrals.
 - To initiate a Commissioner investigation where the Commissioner decides that there is a prima facie case that a breach of the Code of Conduct ('the Code') or the Ministerial Code, or both, may have occurred.
 - To report to the Assembly on the outcome of investigations.
 - To give advice on any matter of general principle relating to standards of conduct of members of the Assembly, including Ministers.
- 2.2 The Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 came into force on 22 March 2021. This legislation extends the role of the Commissioner to consider complaints of alleged contravention of the Ministerial Code of Conduct.
- 2.3 All investigations are carried out in accordance with the "Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 (General Procedures) Direction 2021 ("the General Procedures Direction").

3 Complaints Overview

Complaints carried forward from 2020-21

- 3.1 There were 54 complaints carried forward from the 2020-21 reporting year. Of the 54 complaints, I conducted 28 preliminary investigations to assess admissibility. All 54 were inadmissible. There were 2 appeals referred to the Committee for consideration and both were upheld.¹
- 3.2 There were 3 ongoing investigations relating to 16 complaints from 2020-21. These were reported on in the current year. These reports can be viewed on the Committee's website.²

New complaints 2021-22

- 3.3 There was a total of 164 complaints for the 2021-22 reporting period up to 31 March 2022. While there was a 67% reduction in complaints against MLAs, overall there was a 33% increase in overall complaints compared with the previous year due to the inclusion of consideration of complaints against Ministers as well as MLAs.

Table 1. Complaints overview 2021-22

	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22
Complaints received*	7	9	6	123	164
Complaints by member of public	5	8	4	74	147
Complaints by an MLA	2	1	2	49	16
Complaints by a Minister	0	0	0	0	1
Inadmissible	3	4	1	110	144
Admissible	2	0	2	11	19
Discontinued	2	5	3	2	1
Ongoing	0	0	0	0	9

*Each act or omission of alleged misconduct is counted as a separate complaint and numerous complaints can relate to a single alleged breach/incident.

- 3.4 Of the 164 complaints received, 144 were inadmissible, 19 were admissible; 18 proceeded to full investigation with 1 discontinued.
- 3.5 I held 11 preliminary investigations for 2021-22 complaints to assess admissibility. A total of 7 decisions on admissibility were referred to the Committee; all were upheld.

1 A referral to the Committee is an appeal of the Commissioner's decision on admissibility by the complainant

2 <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/2017-2022/standards-and-privileges/reports/>

4 Complaints Against MLAs

- 4.1 There were 42 complaints received against MLAs. A total of 31 were inadmissible and 10 were admissible. This was a welcome 67% reduction in complaints made against MLAs in this reporting year compared with last year.

Table 2. Complaints against MLAs

	2020-21	2021-22
Complaints received against MLAs	123	42
Inadmissible	110	31
Admissible	11	10
Discontinued	2	1
Ongoing	0	0

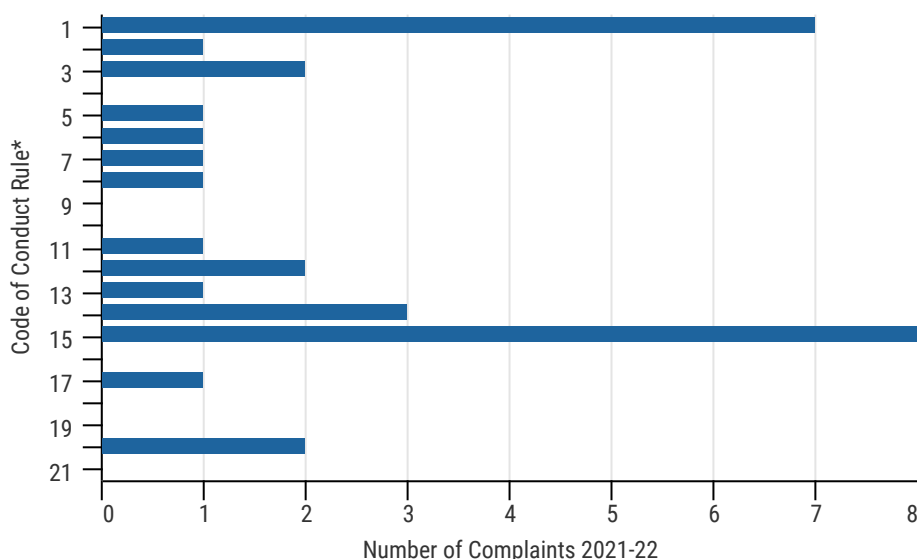
*Each act or omission of alleged misconduct is counted as a separate complaint and numerous complaints can relate to a single alleged breach/incident.

- 4.3 There were 10 admissible complaints leading to 3 investigations; 1 investigation was discontinued at the request of the complainant in accordance with para 4.2(c) of the General Procedures Direction. The 2 resultant investigation reports can be accessed on the Committee's website.³
- 4.4 The most frequent complaints received continue to be in relation to Rule 15 'unreasonable and excessive personal attack' and in the main relate to how a Member expresses an opinion. Freedom of expression is a right shared by all, and whilst this right is not absolute, in the political sphere there is enhanced protection of this right. This is why the vast majority of complaints relating to opinions stated by Members are inadmissible. I will continue to carry out appropriate preliminary investigations on these cases, but remind Members and Ministers of the importance of taking care when using social media including posting, tweeting, re-tweeting or liking posts of others.
- 4.5 In last year's annual report, I raised concern about the large number of Rule 15 complaints (32%). Of the 42 complaints received this year, Rule 15 complaints made up 20% of those complaints which represents a 12% reduction on the previous year. This may, in part, be explained by the many preliminary investigations carried out in 2020-21 where discussions around Rule 15 took place with a large number of MLAs and also the procurement by the Assembly of social media training training for MLAs requested by the Committee following my recommendation to the Committee.

4.6 Figure 2 below shows a breakdown of complaints made against MLAs by the alleged rule breached for the year 2021-22.

4.7 Complaints were most frequently related to breaches of Rule 1 and Rule 15. Rule 1 relates to acting in the public interest at all times. Rule 15 reflects the complaints received in relation to things said by MLAs through any medium, including social media. The full Code of Conduct is available on the Commissioner's website.⁴

Figure 2. Complaints by alleged rule breached for 2021-22



* 1. You shall base your conduct on a consideration of the public interest, avoid conflict between personal interest and the public interest and resolve any conflict between the two, at once, and in favour of the public interest.

2. You shall uphold the criminal law. You fail to uphold the law only if you are convicted of, or admit formally, an offence committed when acting in your capacity as a Member.

3. You shall uphold the law in relation to equality. You fail to uphold the law in relation to equality only if a court or tribunal makes a finding against you, or you accept formally that you have breached the law, when acting in your capacity as a Member.

5. You shall declare, whether in Assembly proceedings or in any approach to a Minister, public representative, public body or public official, any relevant interest which might reasonably be thought to influence your approach to the matter under consideration.

6. You shall not accept any gift, benefit or hospitality that might reasonably be thought by others to influence your actions as a Member.

7. You shall not, in return for payment or benefit, advocate or initiate any cause or matter on behalf of any outside body or individual. Nor shall you, in return for benefit or payment, urge any other Member to do so.

8. You shall not seek to confer benefit exclusively upon a body (or individual), from which you have received, are receiving, or expect to receive a financial or material benefit, or upon any client of such a body (or individual).

11. You shall use information which you receive in confidence only in your capacity as a Member. You shall never use, nor attempt to use, such information for the purpose of financial gain.

12. You shall disclose confidential or protectively marked information only when you are authorised to do so.

13. You shall not act in any way which improperly interferes, or is intended or is likely to improperly interfere, with the performance by the Assembly of its functions, or the performance by a Member, officer or staff of the Assembly of their duties.

14. You shall not use, or attempt to use, your position as a Member to improperly confer an advantage or preferential treatment for either yourself or any other person; or to avoid disadvantage or create disadvantage for someone else.

15. You shall not subject anyone to unreasonable and excessive personal attack.

17. You shall take reasonable care to ensure that your staff, when acting on your behalf, uphold these rules of conduct.

20. You shall not urge another Member to contravene any rule of conduct.

⁴ <https://standardscommissioneriassembly.org>

5 Reports on MLA Complaints

- 5.1 I presented 5 investigation reports to the Committee this year; 3 ongoing from the previous year and 2 from the current year. These reports can be accessed via the Committee's website.
- 5.2 Of the 5 investigation reports, those relating to complaints against Steve Aiken MLA and Jim Wells MLA in relation to Rule 15 and a complaint against Steve Aiken MLA relating to confidentiality are of particular note in terms of the recommendations made to the Committee. These are summarised in brief below.
- 5.3 **Report on complaint made by Bill Pauley against Steve Aiken MLA and Jim Wells MLA**

Case Summary

Mr Bill Pauley, a senior civil servant at the Department of Finance, alleged that during his evidence session at the Committee for Finance on 17 June 2020, Steve Aiken MLA and Jim Wells MLA were aggressive towards him in their tone and behaviour on a number of occasions and as a result he felt threatened, intimidated and unable to give his evidence effectively. He alleged they were in breach of the Code's Rule 15 which states "You shall not subject anyone to unreasonable and excessive personal attack". He believed both Dr Aiken and Mr Wells violated the Code's Respect principle. Having considered all of the evidence, it was my view that Dr Aiken and Mr Wells displayed unacceptable and offensive behaviour and that both Mr Wells' and Dr Aiken's behaviour was in breach of Rule 15 (para 4.15) and the Respect principle of the Code.

Adjudication by the Committee

The Committee did not agree with my findings with the exception of Mr Wells' 'Do you want to phone a friend?' remark to Mr Pauley which they agreed was a gratuitous personal comment which broke Rule 15 and, consequently, was a breach of the Code. As such, the Committee upheld this one element of the complaint by Mr Pauley. It further agreed that the Respect principle was breached by both, although the principles themselves are 'aspirational rather than enforceable'.

Commissioner Recommendations

1. Training should be developed and delivered to Committee Chairs and Members in relation to the Respect principle and Rule 15 of the Code of Conduct, with a focus on treatment of witnesses and each other.
2. A thorough, useful and practical overview of the Code of Conduct and Guide, including the principles, rules and General Procedures Direction outlining the complaints process should be developed and included as mandatory within the induction programme for all Members.
3. A meaningful and mandatory equality, diversity and inclusion programme should be developed and delivered, preferably one that has some proven positive outcomes on organisational culture elsewhere.

5.4 Report on complaint made by Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA against Dr Steve Aiken MLA

Case Summary

Mr McHugh alleged that Dr Aiken's disclosure at a Finance Committee meeting on 4th November 2020, that he had submitted a complaint to the Commissioner for Standards including his disclosure of details of that complaint, was in breach of Rule 17 of the MLA Code of Conduct which states that 'You shall not disclose details in relation to such an investigation except when authorised by law or by the investigatory authority' and contravened section 33 of the 2011 Act.

After considering all of the evidence in relation to Mr McHugh's complaint, I found Dr Aiken's disclosure was not in breach of Rule 17 of the MLA Code of Conduct due to the wording of the rule itself. However, I found Dr Aiken's disclosure breached Rule 12 of the MLA Code of Conduct. In the course of my investigation, Rule 16 of the Code of Conduct which states "You shall co-operate at all times with any investigation by or under the authority of either the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards or the Assembly" was breached as a result of Dr Aiken's failure to cooperate at all times with my investigation. Further, I found his behaviour inconsistent with the Seven Principles of Public Life, namely the Respect and Leadership principles.

Adjudication by the Committee

In its adjudication, the Committee concluded that Dr Aiken breached the Code by breaking rules of conduct 12 and 16 and agreed that Dr Aiken's conduct was inconsistent with both the Respect Principle and the Leadership Principle within the Seven Principles of Public Life. The Committee considered that this "was an egregious breach of the Code given that, as a member of the Committee on Standards and Privileges, Dr Aiken should have been leading by example in maintaining the confidentiality of complaints and in co-operating at all times with the Commissioner's investigation". It continued "In terms of the latter, the Committee firmly believes that the vital role which the independent Commissioner plays in the Assembly's ethical standards regime must be recognised, respected and safeguarded by all Members – to not do so undermines the office of the Commissioner and, consequently, the Committee and the wider Assembly."

The Committee concluded that, in its view, the circumstances of the case warrant a recommendation being made to the Assembly for the imposition of a sanction upon Dr Aiken under Standing Order 69b. However, given that there would be insufficient time remaining in the current mandate for any recommended sanction to be debated in the Assembly, the Committee proposed that the successor committee identifies an appropriate sanction for recommending to the next Assembly and tables the necessary plenary motion early in the next mandate as applicable.

Commissioner Recommendations

1. Rules 16 and 17 are unsatisfactorily drafted and do not fully reflect the protections for the confidentiality of the Commissioner's functions contained in the 2011 Act. The Committee may wish to consider revising both Rule 16 and Rule 17 during the Stage 2 Review of the MLA Code of Conduct.
2. The provisions of section 29(2) and (3) of the 2011 Act require notices to be sent by recorded delivery. In this case, it is clear that the serving of the Notice can be nullified where the recorded delivery is signed for and delivered to another address. The Committee may wish to consider whether and how the legislation can be redrafted to reduce the risk of this occurring again in future investigations.
3. My investigation has highlighted that the procedural rules in the 2021 Direction that state a complaint must meet the preconditions at paragraph 3.3 before it can be considered admissible, is a constraint on the discretion of the Commissioner and does not find a basis in the terms of section 17 of the 2011 Act. This could be addressed by including a general "notwithstanding" provision in the Direction that allowed the Commissioner to exercise a discretion permitting a complaint to be admitted even if the procedural rules were not fully complied with.

In its Legacy Report, the Committee recommended that the successor committee considers taking forward my recommendations regarding: amending the wording of rules of conduct 16 and 17 to underpin the confidentiality requirements attaching to complaints; improving the provisions in the 2011 Act regarding notices; and amending the General Procedures Direction to recognise the Commissioner's discretion on admissibility requirements. The Committee also recommended to its successor committee that it examines the case for legislation to amend section 33 of the 2011 Act to make clear that the restriction on the disclosure of information applies to complainants and respondents and to create a statutory offence for breaches of this requirement.

6 Complaints Against Ministers

- 6.1 There were 122 complaints against Ministers; 113 were inadmissible and 9 were admissible.

Table 3. Complaints against Ministers 2021-22

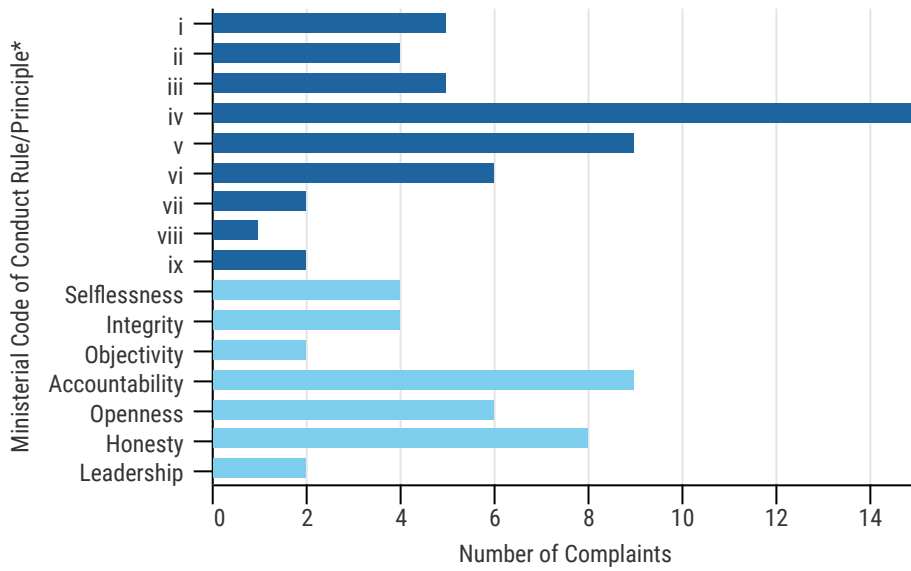
	2021-22
Complaints received against Ministers	122
Inadmissible	113
Admissible	9
Discontinued	0
Ongoing Investigations	9

*Each act or omission of alleged misconduct is counted as a separate complaint and numerous complaints can relate to a single alleged breach/incident.

- 6.2 Complaints against Ministers made up 75% (n=122) of all complaints received and contributed to a 33% increase in complaints overall compared with 2020-21.
- 6.3 The main reasons for inadmissibility included the complaint being beyond the scope and spirit of paras 1.5 and 1.6 of the Ministerial Code. Complainants were signposted, where applicable, to other agencies that may be more appropriate to consider their complaint.
- 6.4 Due to a conflict of interest, I recused myself from consideration of a complaint against a Minister in July 2021. Mr Douglas Bain, my predecessor and currently the Welsh Standards Commissioner, was approached by the Committee to take on the role of Acting Commissioner in this case. Mr Bain agreed and the Committee tabled a plenary motion to this effect, which was debated and agreed by the Assembly on 18 October 2021.
- 6.5 Investigations are currently ongoing relating to the 9 admissible complaints. These will be reported on in 2022-23.

6.6 Ministerial complaints were most frequently related to breaches of Rule 4 (iv) and 5 (v). Rule 4 relates to following the Seven Principles of Public Life and Rule 5 relates to complying with the rules of the Code. The Ministerial Code of Conduct is available on the Commissioner's website. Figure 2 below shows a breakdown of complaints by the alleged rules breached for the year 2021-22 for all complaints against Ministers.

Figure 2. Complaints by alleged rule and/or principle breached for 2021-22



- * 1.5
- (i) observe the highest standards of propriety and regularity involving impartiality, integrity and objectivity in relationship to the stewardship of public funds;
 - (ii) be accountable to users of services, the community and, through the Assembly, for the activities within their responsibilities, their stewardship of public funds and the extent to which key performance targets and objectives have been met;
 - (iii) ensure that all reasonable requests for information from the Assembly, users of services and individual citizens are complied with; and that departments and their staff conduct their dealings with the public in an open and responsible way;
 - (iv) follow the seven principles of public life set out by the Committee on Standards in Public Life;
 - (v) comply with this Code and with rules relating to the use of public funds;
 - (vi) operate in a way conducive to promoting good community relations and equality of treatment;
 - (vii) not use information gained in the course of their service for personal gain; nor seek to use the opportunity of public service to promote their private interests;
 - (viii) ensure they comply with any rules on the acceptance of gifts and hospitality that might be offered; and
 - (ix) declare any personal or business interests which may conflict with their responsibilities. The Assembly will retain a Register of Interests. Individuals must ensure that any direct or indirect pecuniary interests which members of the public might reasonably think could influence their judgement are listed in the Register of Interests.

1.6
The seven principles of public life referred to at (iv) above are as follows:

Selflessness: Holders of public office should take decisions solely in terms of the public interest. They should not do so in order to gain financial or other material benefits for themselves, their family, or their friends.

Integrity: Holders of public office should not place themselves under any financial or other obligation to outside individuals or organisations that might influence them in the performance of their official duties.

Objectivity: In carrying out public business, including making public appointments, awarding contracts, or recommending individuals for rewards and benefits, holders of public office should make choices on merit.

Accountability: Holders of public office are accountable for their decisions and actions to the public and must submit themselves to whatever scrutiny is appropriate to their office.

Openness: Holders of public office should be as open as possible about all the decisions and actions that they take. They should give reasons for their decisions and restrict information only when the wider public interest clearly demands.

Honesty: Holders of public office have a duty to declare any private interests relating to their public duties and to take steps to resolve any conflicts arising in a way that protects the public interest.

Leadership: Holders of public office should promote and support these principles by leadership and example.

7 Other Work

- 7.1 In addition to considering current in-year complaints (n=164), pending complaints (n=54) and carrying out investigations from 2020-21 and 2021-22 admissible complaints, I also updated internal processes for complaints handling, updated policies in accordance with GDPR, attended internal and external meetings, contributed to external consultations, and launched the new Commissioner for Standards website and complaints handling platform.
- 7.2 The new complaint handling software system was launched on 1 April 2021. The system has worked well this year and has enabled the Office to be more efficient, focussed and GDPR compliant.
- 7.3 The Commissioner for Standards website went live on 9th September 2021. Its purpose is to engage with the public, explain the complaints processes and create a space to promote awareness of the importance of high standards in public life. The website also enables direct access to the online complaints form, making the process more streamlined and easier for complainants to use. Since going live, there have been 730 new users and 1,672 page views up to 31 March 2022.
- 7.4 I regularly met, both virtually and in-person, with Standards Commissioners from the other UK jurisdictions. I also met with the NI Public Services Ombudsman and the NI Audit Office. Additionally, I was invited to speak at the Institute for Government's Standards in Public Life conference on 4 November 2021.
- 7.5 I was in regular contact with the PSNI when and where appropriate. Additionally, we have commenced work to update the Memorandum of Understanding between the Commissioner's Office and the PSNI; this work is ongoing.
- 7.6 I worked both remotely and in-office in accordance with Covid regulations, to ensure the existing backlog, investigations and in-year complaints were fully considered by the end of this reporting period. I successfully carried out preliminary and full investigations through remote and in-person interviewing. In line with good practice, I continued to enlist the services of a second interviewer/analyst to assist with complaints that proceed to full investigation. I obtained external/independent legal advice when necessary.
- 7.7 Throughout the year, I complied with the Code governing my conduct and registered all relevant financial and other interests and all hospitality received.

8 Resources

- 8.1 Paragraph 3 of Schedule 4 to the 2011 Act requires the Commission to -
'Provide the Commissioner with such administrative and other support, including staff, services and accommodation, as the Commissioner may reasonably require for the purposes of discharging the functions imposed on the Commissioner by this Act.'
- 8.2 Paragraph 8 of that Schedule requires the Commission to -
(a) pay such sums as are payable in accordance with the Commissioner's terms and conditions of appointment;
(b) pay or reimburse any expenses properly incurred by the Commissioner; and
(c) indemnify the Commissioner in respect of any payments agreed under section 28(5) or any other liabilities incurred by the Commissioner.'
- 8.3 Costs this year were much higher than in previous years due to the consideration of Ministerial complaints, the existing backlog of complaints, five in-year investigations and reports, and office transformations in line with GDPR and good practice. It is hoped that this will revert to normal levels in the coming year, but this will depend on the volume of Ministerial and MLA complaints received. The sums paid under paragraph 8(a) are set out in Table 2.

Table 2. Commissioner's pay and expenses

	2021-22
Commissioner's pay	136,119.04
Employer's National Insurance Contribution	17,563.99
Travel and Subsistence	0
TOTAL	153,683.03

- 8.4 I was provided with an office within Parliament Buildings and with IT and office equipment required to do my work.
- 8.5 The original budget for expenses and other goods and services (not including Commissioner's pay) was £18,505.80 as agreed with the Assembly Commission.

Table 3. Expenditure 2020-21

	2021-22
Complaint processing software	1500.00
Data Protection Registration	40.00
Specialist Support	12,612.07
Interview Transcription	465.21
Website	2604.00
Total	17,221.28

9 Promoting High Standards

9.1 Review of the MLA Code of Conduct

The formation of a working group that took forward the development of a policy on the handling of complaints of inappropriate behaviour/unacceptable behaviour involving Members, Members' staff, Party staff and Assembly Commission employees, covered much of the ground that a Stage 2 review of the MLA Code would have, including reviewing the Code and procedures & process to identify necessary improvements. I had the opportunity to meet with the working group and provide my views in relation to the draft policy. At its final meeting of the mandate, the Committee considered the Group's report and agreed, in principle, that it was content with the proposed reforms and that it would recommend that its successor Committee considers taking these forward early in the next mandate as applicable.⁴

9.2 Ministerial Code of Conduct

The new functions that came into force on 22 March 2021 with the passing of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 means that I now consider complaints against Ministers. The underpinning principle of the independent Commissioner for Standards investigating Ministerial complaints is unique to Northern Ireland among the UK jurisdictions. While it is undoubtedly in the public interest, the Ministerial Code of Conduct in its current form is too imprecise and leads to varying interpretations, creates overlap with other bodies such as the NIPSO, the NI Audit Office, among others. In its current form, it raises real issues for complainants, Ministers and for me as Commissioner. There is an urgent need for the Ministerial Code of Conduct to be updated to ensure its application when handling complaints is clear, proportionate and promotes the high standards of conduct expected from Ministers. It is my hope that an updating of the Ministerial Code of Conduct would also assist in reducing the number of complaints received.

9.3 External Engagement

I was delighted to be invited to speak at the Institute for Government's Standards in Public Life conference in November 2021. The main focus was the unique position of Northern Ireland in relation to the Commissioner's role in considering complaints against Ministers.

9.4 Social Media and Rule 15 Complaints

I was pleased that the Assembly procured training for MLAs on how to protect their reputation on social media platforms. These training workshops were well attended by MLAs and their staff, and I believe contributed, in part, to the 12% decrease in Rule 15 complaints this year.

⁴ <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/2017-2022/standards-and-privileges/report-on-the-development-of-an-unacceptable-behaviours-policy/>

10 Year Ahead

10.1 Ministerial Complaints

There remains an urgent need for a review of the Ministerial Code of Conduct, and clarity not only on the scope of the Ministerial Code of Conduct but also on where responsibility for guidance and review of the Ministerial Code of Conduct falls. I highlighted this to the Committee in my 2020-21 annual report and soon after the Committee wrote to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland raising this issue and its urgency. Additionally, I wrote to and subsequently met with the Head of the Civil Service and additionally raised this issue with a number of Ministers informally. I have received no correspondence to date to confirm whether or when the Ministerial Code will be updated nor have I any further clarity on the aforementioned vitally important issues.

I also await the final decision on how the Committee will consider investigation reports relating to Ministerial behaviour. In February 2022, the Committee decided that its preferred approach will be to seek procedural changes to ensure that it has no role in the consideration of investigation reports on the behaviour of Ministers, but recommended that the incoming Committee takes forward this matter in the next Assembly mandate, including consideration of any consequential issues arising from this decision and the necessary procedural changes. Undoubtedly, there will be many consequential issues and I look forward to working with the Committee in the new mandate.

10.2 Unacceptable Behaviours Policy

Based on the new draft policy on unacceptable behaviours including bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct agreed by the joint working group made up of members from the Committee and the Assembly Commission, there is likely going to be a role for the Commissioner in terms of processing complaints and the investigation of complaints. I will continue to engage with the Committee (when formed) as the proposed reforms are taken forward early in the next mandate.

10.3 Lay Members

I look forward to the incorporation of lay members on the Committee. It is my view that this proposed change will strengthen the public's trust in the Assembly and will further promote the highest standards in public life. It is envisaged that this welcome change will occur early in the new mandate.

10.4 Induction of New Members

I will be taking part in induction sessions for all newly elected MLAs soon after the May 2022 election. Additionally, along with the Clerk of Standards, we took part in making a short training video that all MLAs can access online.

10.5 Commissioner's Standards Forum

This year I am hoping to assess Members' interest in the development of a Standards Forum. My hope is to create a space for MLAs and their parties to further learn, engage and reflect on standards and ethics in public life.

10.6 MOU with PSNI

I will continue to work with the PSNI to update the existing MOU between my Office and the PSNI in relation to complaints.

11 Acknowledgements

I am grateful to all of those in the Assembly Secretariat who have provided me with an exceptional level of assistance and support over the past year including Shane McAteer, the Clerk of Standards and the Committee staff, Jonathan McMillen and the Assembly Legal Services team, and secretarial support from Elizabeth McKenna and Rose Morwood. I would also like to thank John Devitt for his support and assistance in consideration of a number of cases. I have also been fortunate to have had support from the Standards Commissioners across the UK, and locally from the PSNI, the NI Public Services Ombudsman and its staff for which I am extremely grateful.



Melissa McCullough
NI Assembly Commissioner for Standards

22 June 2022



Northern Ireland
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Commissioner for Standards Annual Report 2021-2022

An electronic copy of this report can be found on the NI Assembly Commissioner for Standards website:

<https://standardscommissionerniassembly.org>

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