



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Commissioner for Standards

Annual Report 2024-25

Laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly pursuant to paragraph 7 of Schedule 4 to the
Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011

Foreword

This is my final annual report as Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards, with my term concluding in September 2025. It offers an overview of the past year's work, along with some broader reflections on my time in the role.

I wish to extend my sincere thanks to the Assembly staff, whose professionalism and courtesy have been greatly appreciated throughout my tenure. I am also grateful to the Committee on Standards and Privileges for its careful scrutiny, exercised with diligence and with due regard for the independence of the Commissioner's role. My thanks go as well to the Members who have engaged with the standards process in a constructive and respectful manner. Their willingness to do so has helped to sustain a culture of integrity in public life. To my successor, I offer my best wishes. I am confident they will bring their own insight, judgement, and commitment to this important role.

At its heart, the role of the Standards Commissioner is to safeguard public trust. It is concerned with ensuring that those in public office meet the standards of behaviour that allow democracy to function with integrity. These standards, grounded in the Seven Principles of Public Life (the Nolan Principles), require honesty, integrity, accountability, and leadership. Thirty years since their introduction, these principles remain as essential as ever.

I began my term as Commissioner for Standards in September 2020, at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. As the Assembly emerged from that period, it then entered a prolonged suspension in May 2022, only reconvening in February 2024. These exceptional circumstances made for an unusual five-year term, and while I am very proud of what has been accomplished, I believe that in different conditions more could have been achieved in areas such as outreach and education.

In my first annual report, I committed to tackling the significant backlog of complaints, modernising internal procedures, updating policies to meet GDPR standards, and creating a dedicated, independent website to improve transparency and public engagement. Since then, I have cleared the three-year complaints backlog and have now considered eight years of complaints in total during my five-year term. The Office has made substantial progress: A GDPR-compliant case management system is now in place; a standalone website has been launched, helping demystify the standards process and increase public understanding and engagement; and a full suite of data protection policies and procedures has been developed in line with legal obligations. These reforms have strengthened the foundations of the Commissioner's Office and improved its capacity to serve both the public and Members.

Holding Members to account fairly and transparently is vital to maintaining confidence in our democratic institutions. For the system to work, both the public and Members must trust that complaints will be taken seriously, that investigations will be conducted with integrity, and that the values underpinning our democracy will be upheld. I hope that during my time in this role I have helped to support and strengthen that trust.

I am deeply grateful for the confidence placed in me to serve in this capacity, and for the many thoughtful conversations, challenges, and collaborative efforts that have shaped my tenure as Commissioner. It has been a privilege to contribute, even in a small way, to the integrity of public life in Northern Ireland.

Melissa McCullough
NI Assembly Commissioner for Standards
13 June 2025

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 This is my fifth and final report since taking up the role of Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards on 7th September 2020.
- 1.2 This report provides information on overall complaints received from 1 April 2024 to 30 March 2025, including 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 some final thoughts as my tenure comes to an end.

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 extended the role of the Commissioner to consider complaints of alleged breaches 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 in 2024-25

- 3.1 During the 2024–25 reporting period (up to 31 March 2025), the office received a total of 149 complaints, representing an increase compared to the previous year but aligning to the numbers seen in other years. Of these, 129 complaints were deemed inadmissible, while 16 were assessed as admissible (12.4%) and proceeded to formal investigation.
- 3.2 A total of 6 decisions on admissibility were referred to the Committee.¹ The Committee considered the referrals, and all inadmissibility decisions were upheld.

Table 1. Complaints overview 2024-2025

	2020- 21	2021- 22	2022- 23	2023- 24	2024- 25
Complaints received*	123	164	162	65	149
Complaints by member of public	74	147	161	63	131
Complaints by an MLA	49	16	1	2	18
Complaints by a Minister	0	1	0	0	0
Inadmissible	110	144	160	56	129
Admissible	11	19	2	9	16
Discontinued	2	1	0	2	4
Ongoing	0	9	23	3	2

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

- 3.3 I successfully carried out preliminary and full investigations through in-person and remote interviewing. In line with good practice, I continued to enlist the services of an external second interviewer where necessary to assist with complaints that proceeded to full investigation. I obtained external/independent legal advice when necessary.

1 A referral to the Committee is an appeal of the Commissioner's decision that the complaint is inadmissible

4 Complaints Against MLAs

- 4.1 Of the 149 companies received, 123 were against MLAs. A total of 105 were deemed inadmissible; 14 were admissible and led to 4 investigation reports.

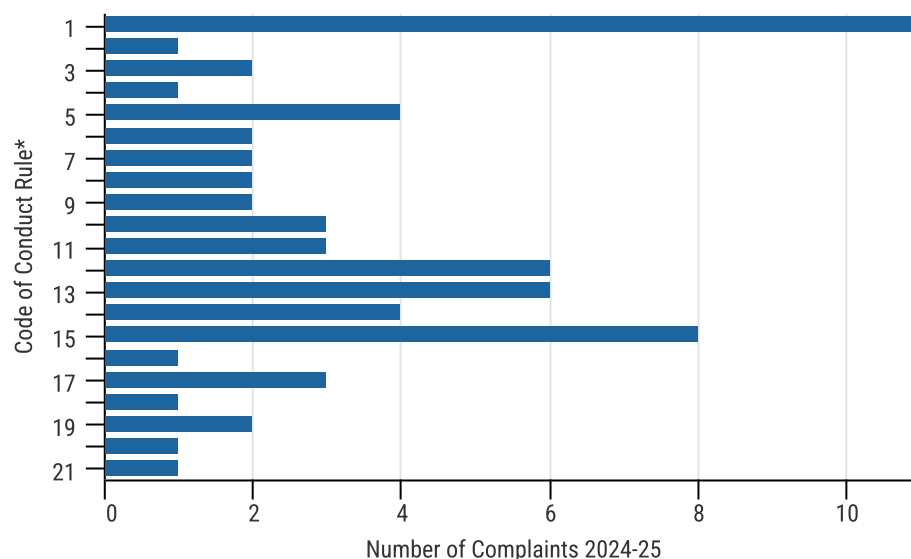
Table 2. Complaints against MLAs

	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Complaints received against MLAs	123	42	26	54	123
Inadmissible	110	31	24	43	105
Admissible	11	10	2	9	14
Discontinued	2	1	0	2	4
Ongoing	0	0	0	0	0
Referrals to be considered by Committee	0	0	5	7	1
Reports awaiting Committee consideration/adjudication	0	2	0	1	2

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

- 4.2 Of the four investigation reports, two have now been considered and adjudicated on by the Committee and are included in this report.
- 4.3 Complaints were most frequently related to breaches of Rule 1, followed by Rule 15. Rule 1 relates to acting in the public interest at all times: "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". Rule 15 relates to "excessive and unreasonable personal attack" which includes complaints in relation to things said by MLAs through any medium, including social media.
- 4.4 Figure 1 below shows a breakdown of complaints made against MLAs by the alleged rule breached for the year 2024-25. The MLA Code of Conduct can be found on the Commissioner's website.²

Figure 1. Complaints by alleged rule breached for 2024-25



*

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..

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).

9. You shall not misuse any payment, allowance or resources available to you for public purposes. You shall strictly observe the requirements of any applicable determination made by any relevant body or by the Assembly Commission and any rules made by the Assembly Commission applying to these or any other payments, allowances and resources.

10. You shall observe and comply with the Rules on All-Party Groups and any policy, guidance or instructions of any kind approved by the Assembly, or issued by the Assembly Commission or Assembly secretariat staff on its behalf or with its authority.

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 not disclose details in relation to such an investigation except when authorised by law or by the investigatory authority.

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

5 Reports on MLA Complaints

- 5.1 In the 2024-25 reporting period, a total of four investigation reports were submitted to the Committee. This report includes a summary of the two considered reports from this year and one from the previous reporting year.

Report into a complaint by Dr Paschal McKeown against Mr Timothy Gaston MLA³

- 5.2 On 22 October 2024, I received a complaint from Dr Paschal McKeown, Director of Age NI, concerning the conduct of Mr Timothy Gaston MLA during a meeting of the Committee for the Executive Office on 25 September 2024. The complaint alleged that Mr Gaston had breached Rules 13 and 15 of the Assembly's Code of Conduct.
- 5.3 The meeting involved oral evidence from representatives of Age NI, Dr McKeown and Dr Kellie Turtle, as part of the Committee's inquiry into gaps in equality legislation for older people. During questioning, Mr Gaston asked several questions of the panel. The complaint focused on the final two questions, particularly one directed at Dr Turtle, which referenced content posted on her X (formerly Twitter) account.
- 5.4 I assessed the complaint as admissible, and commenced an investigation on 5 November 2024. My report was submitted to the Committee on 19 January 2025.
- 5.5 Rule 15 prohibits MLAs from subjecting anyone to an unreasonable and excessive personal attack. The Committee has previously determined that a breach of this rule requires all four elements—attack, personal nature, unreasonableness, and excessiveness—to be present. In this case, I found that Mr Gaston's comment, while excessive, did not meet the cumulative threshold required for a breach. The Committee agreed, noting that Mr Gaston did not quote or detail specific posts from Dr Turtle's social media account, that the account was publicly accessible and referred to older people in the profile, and that he did not persist with the line of questioning. They also acknowledged that Dr Turtle had chosen not to respond to the comments, which is her right. The Committee agreed that evaluating compliance with the Code based solely on the reaction of a witness would be unworkable and risk undermining the legitimate scrutiny function of Committees, including protected political expression.
- 5.6 In relation to Rule 13, which concerns improper interference with the functioning of the Assembly or its Committees, I concluded that Mr Gaston's behaviour, while undoubtedly uncomfortable for the witness, did not constitute improper interference. The Committee accepted that conclusion, noting the rule was intended to cover more serious misconduct such as leaking reports, interrupting or disturbing committee proceedings, deliberately attempting to mislead a committee, or participating in proceedings despite a conflict of interest. In this context, robust questioning by a member does not fall within the scope of Rule 13.

3 <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/2022-2027/standards-and-privileges/reports/report-on-a-complaint-against-mr-timothy-gaston-mla/>

- 5.7 While no breach of the enforceable Rules was established, I did conclude that Mr Gaston's questioning was excessive and lacked due consideration. The Committee agreed, and found that his behaviour failed to uphold the Principle of Respect, which states that Members should show respect and consideration for others at all times. Specifically, the implication that Dr Turtle's views conflicted with those of her employer, without substantiating the claim, was deemed inappropriate. However, as the Principles of Conduct are aspirational rather than enforceable, this did not amount to a breach of the Code. Nonetheless, the Committee reiterated that these Principles reflect the ethical standards all Members are expected to uphold, especially when engaging with witnesses in Committee proceedings.
- 5.8 As a result of this case, I recommended that guidance for witnesses appearing before Committees be updated to include a clear indication that Members may refer to publicly available social media in their questioning. The Committee supported this recommendation and agreed to progress revisions to existing witness guidance accordingly.

Self-referral from the Committee on Standards and Privileges⁴

- 5.9 On 29 May 2024, along with the Committee, I received a complaint from then MLA, Dr Patrick Brown (as a respondent to a live investigation), alleging that details of his case had been leaked to the media following an enquiry he received from a BBC journalist. This was the second instance of concern regarding confidentiality breaches in this case. The information in question was email correspondence sent to me on 22 April 2024 and forwarded to the Committee on 29 April 2024, which was first considered in closed session on 1 May.
- 5.10 In light of repeated concerns, the Committee subsequently referred the matter to me to investigate any unauthorised disclosure.
- 5.11 My investigation confirmed that confidential information had been disclosed, most likely verbally, but I was unable to identify the source. While I found the Committee's procedures for handling sensitive material to be robust, the incident highlighted the limitations of procedural safeguards in fully preventing leaks. Such disclosures compromise fairness, damage trust, and risk undermining both the work and reputation of the Committee, the Office of the Commissioner for Standards and the Assembly.
- 5.12 I recommended the Committee consider withholding confidential documents from online attendees and instead restrict access to physical reading rooms prior to or during meetings, if necessary, to preserve confidentiality without unduly obstructing the Committee's work.
- 5.13 Following consideration of my findings, at its meeting on 24 October 2024 the Committee agreed to implement a series of measures aimed at further strengthening procedures for safeguarding the confidentiality of live complaint cases. These actions included the development of a formal protocol for remote attendance at Committee meetings. The protocol will require remote attendees to have their cameras switched on for the full duration of meetings and will set out clear guidance regarding the sharing of restricted documents on screen. Additionally, access to the reading room facility for viewing restricted meeting papers in advance of Committee meetings will be limited to in-person attendance only. Hard copies of the restricted meeting packs will be available for review during these in-person sessions. In instances where meeting packs are particularly substantial, members will also be provided with additional time immediately before the start of the Committee meeting to review the hard-copy materials.

4 <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/2022-2027/standards-and-privileges/reports/report-on-self-referral-to-the-commissioner-for-standards/>

- 5.14** The Committee expressed its firm view that the leaking of confidential or protectively marked information relating to a live complaint investigation, whether through hard-copy documentation or verbal disclosure, is both dishonourable and dishonest. Such actions constitute breaches of Rules of Conduct 12 and 17 and are regarded as serious violations of the ethical standards expected of Members. The Committee emphasised that the unauthorised disclosure of sensitive information serves no public interest and causes significant reputational harm to the Committee.

Reports carried forward from previous reporting year:

Report on complaint by Shimna Integrated College against then MLA Patrick Brown⁵

- 5.15** On 6 June 2023, I received a formal complaint from Mr Steve Pagan, Principal of Shimna Integrated College, and Mrs Denise Medea, Chair of the school's Board of Governors (BoG). The complaint alleged that a then-sitting MLA, Dr Patrick Brown, had breached multiple rules within the Code of Conduct, specifically Rules 1, 5, 14, and 15, and had failed to uphold several Principles of Conduct, in a manner that risked bringing the Northern Ireland Assembly into disrepute.
- 5.16** The allegations included 1) that Dr Brown's correspondence conflated what he claimed to be in the public interest with what is, in fact, his own personal interest (Rule 1); 2) that the respondent failed to declare a relevant interest, which could reasonably be said to have influenced his approach (Rule 5); 3) that the respondent used his MLA letterhead in relation to personal matters relating to his unsuccessful Department of Education (DE) governor application for Shimna Integrated College (Rule 14); 4) that Dr Brown challenged the integrity of the Chair of the BoG on numerous occasions, without justification or substantiation, and made significant allegations about the professional conduct of the Principal including a defamatory and potentially libellous claim (Rule 15). The complainants also alleged that Dr Brown failed to observe the following Principles of Conduct: selflessness, integrity, openness, objectivity and promoting good relations. The complainants further alleged that the cumulative effect of these actions potentially brings the Assembly into disrepute.
- 5.17** I deemed the complaint admissible and launched a formal investigation on 15 June 2023, culminating in a detailed report submitted to the Committee on Standards and Privileges on 30 October 2023 (when the Assembly was not fully functioning).
- 5.18** I found that there was a clear conflict of interest when Dr Brown combined the issues of governance of Shimna Integrated College BoG on behalf of his constituents (a public interest), with his own personal application to DE for a governor role at Shimna Integrated College (a personal interest). Moreover, Dr Brown failed to address the conflict of interest in favour of the public interest. The Committee agreed with my finding that Dr Brown breached Rule 1. Furthermore, the Committee agreed that all MLAs should be mindful that there should be a clear demarcation between occasions when they are acting in their capacity as a Member on behalf of their constituents and occasions when they are acting in a personal capacity, in order to ensure that no conflict of interest exists or can be perceived as existing.

⁵ <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/2022-2027/standards-and-privileges/reports/report-on-a-complaint-against-dr-patrick-brown/>

- 5.19** With respect to Rule 5, I believed Dr Brown should have declared the relationship he had with the current Shimna Governor to the Department of Education and other agencies he was in contact with. However, the Committee disagreed with my findings, noting the legal advice that a court could take the view that Dr Brown breached the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and/or breached the confidence of a Governor had he disclosed that person's personal data.
- 5.20** In regards to Rule 14, the Committee considered that the Dr Brown had abused his power as an MLA on the occasions when he used his MLA letterhead to communicate with public bodies about his personal complaint regarding his unsuccessful DE governor application. It is clear from Rule 14 that an MLA should not use, or attempt to use, their position as a Member to improperly confer an advantage for themselves. They agreed with my findings of a breach, and that all Members need to be clear on the appropriate use of communication resources when corresponding as an MLA as opposed to corresponding in a personal capacity, in order to avoid the implication that leverage or pressure is being applied for personal gain.
- 5.21** The complainants alleged that Dr Brown challenged the integrity of the Chair of the BoG on numerous occasions, without justification or substantiation; and that, similarly, he made significant allegations about the professional conduct of the principal, including defamatory and potentially libellous claims. This, they believed, was a breach of Rule 15. However, in terms of the high threshold applying to the enhanced protection for political expression, I did not find a breach of Rule 15 nor did the Committee.
- 5.22** In relation to the principles, I found that Dr Brown conflated his own personal unsuccessful governor application with governance issues raised by his constituents; that he used his position as an MLA to exert pressure on Shimna in relation to his own application concerns, and that he should have recused himself from assisting constituents on these matters. I also found that Dr Brown failed to observe the Objectivity principle, as demonstrated by two separate exchanges of letters with the BoG, when he repeatedly failed to provide evidence to support a number of serious allegations against the Principal, the BoG Chair and the BoG. It was my view that in failing to observe the above principles, Dr Brown's conduct brought the Assembly into disrepute. The Committee agreed that the respondent's conduct brought the Assembly into disrepute, including in failing to observe the principles of Selflessness and Objectivity.

6 Complaints Against Ministers

- 6.1 Complaints against Ministers made up 17% (n=26) of all complaints received (n=149).
- 6.2 Of the 26 complaints received, 5 were referred to the Committee for further consideration/appeal of my inadmissibility decision. The Committee upheld my decisions in all 5 referrals.

Table 3. Complaints against Ministers 2024-25

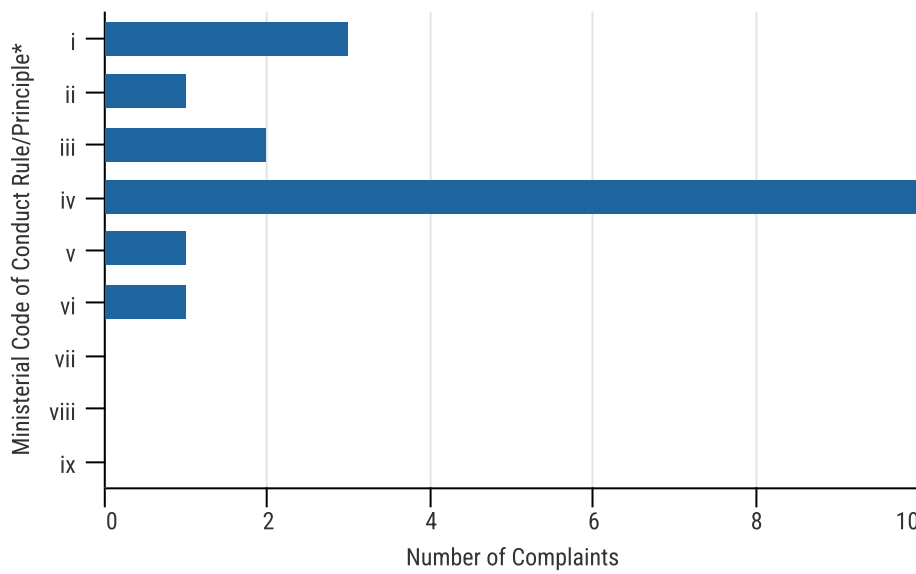
	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Complaints received against Ministers	122	136	11	26
Inadmissible	113	136	11	24
Admissible	9	0	0	2
Discontinued	0	0	0	0
Ongoing Investigations	9	0	0	0
Referrals to be considered by Committee	1	3	1	5
Reports awaiting Committee consideration	0	2	0	0

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

- 6.3 The main reasons for inadmissibility were the complaints being beyond the scope and spirit of paras 1.5 and 1.6 of the Ministerial Code. In the main, inadmissible complaints were related to the exercise of legislative powers by Ministers, which is not an issue of conduct, but policy decisions for which Ministers are accountable to the Assembly. Complainants were signposted, where applicable, to other agencies that may be more appropriate to consider their complaint.
- 6.4 Two investigations into ministerial complaints (resulting in one report) are discussed below, along with two reports from 2021-22 that were completed and submitted to the Committee in the last reporting year but hadn't been considered by the Committee in time for inclusion in last year's annual report.

6.5 Figure 2 below shows a breakdown of complaints by the alleged rules breached for the year 2024-25 for all complaints against Ministers. The majority of Ministerial complaints were related to breaches of Rules 4 (iv) and 1 (i). The Ministerial Code of Conduct is available on the Commissioner's website.⁶

Figure 2. Complaints by alleged rule 2024-25



- * 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 Reports on Complaints against Ministers

- 7.1 Unlike the role of the Committee regarding consideration of investigation reports relating to MLAs and their Code of Conduct, the Committee does not have an adjudication role in complaints against Ministers. However, it has a duty under Standing Order 69A to consider any investigation report by the Commissioner, including reports on ministerial complaints, and to publish such reports (on behalf of the Assembly).
- 7.2 This report will summarise my findings of two cases from this year that were combined and led to one report. It will also highlight two Ministerial reports considered by the Committee from the previous reporting year.

Report into complaints by Timothy Gaston MLA and Doug Beattie MLA against First Minister Michelle O'Neill⁷

- 7.3 On 4 and 6 October 2024, I received complaints from MLAs Timothy Gaston and Doug Beattie, respectively. Both complaints were alleging that First Minister Michelle O'Neill had breached the Ministerial Code of Conduct by misleading the Committee for the Executive Office during a meeting on 2 October 2024.
- 7.4 Mr Gaston's complaint related to the First Minister's claim that she was unaware of Mr Michael McMonagle's whereabouts since his 2021 suspension from Sinn Féin over alleged child sex offences. This was challenged by the existence of a media photograph showing FM O'Neill standing only metres from Mr McMonagle in the Great Hall at Parliament Buildings on 14 February 2023.
- 7.5 Mr Beattie's complaint focused on FM O'Neill's statement that she only became aware on 25 September 2024 that two former Sinn Féin press officers, Caolán McGinley and Séan Mag Uidhir, had provided employment references for Mr McMonagle to the British Heart Foundation (BHF) in August 2022. He questioned the credibility of this explanation and alleged it undermined the Nolan Principles, particularly those of openness and transparency.
- 7.6 Following an initial assessment, I deemed both complaints admissible and launched formal investigations. The investigations were combined into one report due to their related subject matter.
- 7.7 I sought to examine whether the First Minister had misled the Committee regarding her awareness of Mr McMonagle's presence in Parliament Buildings and her knowledge of the employment references. The investigation established that the First Minister had not had any contact with Mr McMonagle since before his suspension in August 2021 and that there was no interaction between them on 14 February 2023, despite their apparent proximity in the photograph. I noted that the Great Hall was crowded on the day in question (not portrayed in the photo), and that the First Minister had been focused on meeting the McGabhann family who had been there as the Assembly had been recalled to discuss organ donation legislation.

7 <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/2022-2027/standards-and-privileges/reports/report-on-complaints-made-by--timothy-gaston-mla-and-doug-beattie-mla-against-first-minister-michelle-oneill/>

- 7.8** Regarding the employment references, the investigation confirmed that Mr McGinley and Mr Mag Uidhir had independently provided the references to the BHF without informing Sinn Féin or the First Minister. Neither reference mentioned Mr McMonagle's suspension or the ongoing police investigation. In August 2023, the BHF raised a query about one of the references, which was handled by the former Sinn Féin HR Director without escalating it to party leadership. I did not find any evidence to suggest that the First Minister was made aware of the issue before 25 September 2024 or that she engaged in any prior discussion about Mr McMonagle or the references.
- 7.9** After analysing the available evidence, with all testimony provided under oath, I concluded that there was no basis to determine that Michelle O'Neill had misled the Committee. The evidence did not support the allegations that she had seen Mr McMonagle at Parliament Buildings or that she had prior knowledge of the references provided to the BHF. Consequently, I found that the First Minister did not breach the Ministerial Code of Conduct or the principles of public life, including those of honesty, openness, and transparency.

Reports carried forward from previous reporting year:

Complaint by Conor Quinn against then First Minister Paul Givan and Ministers Edwin Poots, Michelle McIlveen, Gary Middleton, and Gordon Lyons⁸

- 7.10** On 10 September 2021, I received a complaint from Mr Conor Quinn alleging that several Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) Ministers, including then First Minister Paul Givan and then Ministers Edwin Poots, Michelle McIlveen, Gary Middleton, and Gordon Lyons, breached the Ministerial Code of Conduct by failing to attend North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) meetings. This alleged breach followed a public statement by then DUP party leader Sir Jeffrey Donaldson MP on 9 September 2021, instructing the party to withdraw from North South bodies. The complainant contended that this non-attendance violated paragraph 1.5(v) of the Code (requiring compliance with the Code and rules related to public funds), and thus also paragraph 1.5(iv), which requires Ministers to uphold the Seven Principles of Public Life, including accountability, openness, and leadership.
- 7.11** I deemed the complaint admissible and launched a formal investigation. The investigation established that between 9 September and 7 November 2021, the DUP Ministers either failed to attend scheduled NSMC meetings or did not make reasonable efforts to nominate alternative representatives. The respondents cited various reasons such as lack of nomination, family commitments, or denial that meetings were scheduled. However, I found that the DUP Ministers, by design, disengaged from the NSMC in line with party instructions and actively obstructed the customary scheduling processes—despite formal requests from the then deputy First Minister, Michelle O'Neill, to ensure Unionist representation at these meetings.

⁸ <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/2022-2027/standards-and-privileges/reports/report-on-a-complaint-against-then-first-minister-givan-ministers-lyons-mcilveen-poots-junior-minister-middleton/>

- 7.12** I concluded that this orchestrated non-engagement breached legal obligations under section 52A(4) and section 54A of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and contravened the Ministerial Code of Conduct. Their conduct demonstrated a disregard for legal and ministerial obligations, thereby undermining the rule of law and public trust. Moreover, I found their defence that meetings had not been scheduled disingenuous, as the Ministers were themselves responsible for obstructing the scheduling process.
- 7.13** Based on the evidence, I found that the then DUP Ministers failed to uphold the Seven Principles of Public Life, including leadership, accountability, selflessness, and openness. Their collective actions breached the Ministerial Code of Conduct, setting a poor example for colleagues and the wider public, and contributing to the erosion of confidence in democratic institutions.

Report on complaint by the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) and Conradh na Gaeilge (CnG) against then Minister Gordon Lyons

- 7.14** On 16 April 2021, I received a formal complaint from the Committee on the Administration of Justice (CAJ) and Conradh na Gaeilge (CnG), alleging that Mr Gordon Lyons MLA, then serving as Junior Minister, breached the Ministerial Code of Conduct by failing to attend the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC) Language Body meeting scheduled for 31 March 2021. The complaint set out three key allegations: first, that Mr Lyons' non-attendance constituted a breach of the Pledge of Office, which commits Ministers to participate fully in NSMC activity; second, that he violated paragraph (v) of the Code by failing to comply with the Seven Principles of Public Life—particularly the principles of selflessness and openness; and third, that his failure to attend was part of the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP)'s political strategy to boycott NSMC meetings in protest against the Northern Ireland Protocol.
- 7.15** I found the complaint admissible and commenced an investigation on 14 June 2021. I submitted my report to the relevant Committee on 19 January 2023, a time when the Assembly was not fully functioning.
- 7.16** During the course of my investigation, I established several key facts. Mr Lyons did not attend the virtual NSMC Language Body meeting on 31 March 2021. His Private Office had informed the NSMC Secretariat on 23 March 2021 of his intention not to attend, citing constituency business as the reason. No nomination form was submitted, and although his office attempted to find another Unionist Minister to attend in his place, none were available.
- 7.17** During an interview with me on 7 July 2021, Mr Lyons stated that he could not recall why he had missed the meeting, later concluding it was due to constituency commitments. He also suggested that the meeting had not been confirmed, and therefore, there was no meeting to attend. I found this explanation unconvincing and inconsistent with the evidence.

⁹ <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/committees/2022-2027/standards-and-privileges/reports/2023-2024/complaint-against-gordon-lyons/gordon-lyons-complaint-report.pdf>

- 7.18** With respect to the first allegation regarding the Pledge of Office, I concluded that it was not within my remit, as breaches of the Pledge fall outside the scope of the Ministerial Code of Conduct as defined. I upheld the second allegation, finding that Mr Lyons' actions were not in line with the Seven Principles of Public Life. His failure to attend the meeting, lack of transparency around his reasons, and deprioritisation of legal obligations over constituency business demonstrated a failure of leadership and accountability. I emphasised that Ministers are personally responsible for upholding these principles at all times.
- 7.19** In relation to the third allegation, I noted that Mr Lyons' actions took place in the context of the DUP's publicly declared five-point plan announced on 2 February 2021, which included a pledge to signal that relations with the Irish Government were not operating normally due to the Northern Ireland Protocol. Whether Mr Lyons' motivations were rooted in party strategy or constituency demands, I concluded that he had failed to meet his legal obligations under the Ministerial Code and the Northern Ireland Act 1998.
- 7.20** Ultimately, I found that Mr Lyons had breached paragraph 1.5(iv) of the Ministerial Code of Conduct by failing to follow the Seven Principles of Public Life. His lack of leadership, failure to nominate an alternative representative, and inconsistent justification for his absence illustrated a disregard for the standards expected of a Minister. In my view, this amounted to a breach of his legal duties under sections 52A and 52B of the 1998 Act and contributed to a broader undermining of public trust in political leadership.

8 Other Work

- 8.1 On 10 October 2024, I attended the Standards Network Conference hosted by the Northern Ireland Assembly at Parliament Buildings. The Standards Network brings together parliamentary staff with responsibility for ethics and standards and Commissioners from across the UK and Ireland, including the House of Commons, House of Lords, Scottish Parliament, Welsh Parliament, Northern Ireland Assembly, Houses of the Oireachtas, and the legislatures of Jersey, Guernsey, and the Isle of Man. Meeting approximately every eighteen months, the Network offers a valuable forum for shared learning and collaboration. This year's conference provided an open and constructive space to discuss common challenges, share good practice, and explore developments in parliamentary standards across different jurisdictions. I would like to commend the Assembly Committee staff for organising such a successful event.
- 8.2 I attended the Regulator and Oversight Forum on 7 May 2024. This forum includes the leaders of Northern Ireland Public Service Ombudsman (NIPSO), Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), Equality Commission, Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA), Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY), Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland (CPANI), Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland (CJINI), Charity Commission for Northern Ireland, Police Ombudsman for Northern Ireland (PONI), Information Commissioners Office (ICO), Civil Service Commission and the Commissioner for Older People.
- 8.3 I have been invited to take part as a panellist in the Institute for Government conference celebrating thirty years of the Nolan Principles in June 2025.
- 8.4 Alongside handling current complaints, I participated in a range of internal and external meetings and contributed to consultations aimed at strengthening standards and accountability in public life.
- 8.5 Throughout the year, I complied with the Code governing my conduct and registered all relevant financial and other interests and all hospitality received.

9 Resources

- 9.1 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.'
- 9.2 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.

- 9.3 Compared with the previous year, there was a reduction in Commissioner's pay and expenses. The sums paid under paragraph 8(a) are set out in Table 4.

Table 4. Commissioner's pay and expenses 2024-25

	2024-25
Commissioner's pay	52,389
Employer's National Insurance Contribution	5,998
Travel and Subsistence	0
TOTAL	58,386

- 9.4 I was provided with an office within Parliament Buildings and with IT and office equipment required to do my work.
- 9.5 Expenditure is detailed in Table 5 below. The increase compared to the previous reporting year is primarily due to external legal advice invoiced during this period which covered work undertaken the previous reporting year.

Table 5. Expenditure 2024-25

	2024-25
Complaint processing software	6,529
Legal Advice	10,095
Zoom Annual Fee	130
Data Protection Registration	40
Specialist Support	2668
Interview Transcription	507
Other	409
Total	20,398

10 Final Reflections

- 10.1 Throughout my time in this role, I have been consistently impressed by the dedication, expertise and integrity of those working across the Assembly. From the security staff to the administrative staff, and from legal advisers to committee officials, the commitment to public service values has been evident. I am sincerely grateful for the kindness, support, and friendship extended to me by those working within the Assembly; it has greatly enhanced both my experience and perspective during my time in the role. It has been a privilege to work alongside such dedicated people.

NI Assembly Standards Framework

- 10.2 The Northern Ireland Assembly has put in place a robust legislative and procedural framework that recognises the fundamental importance of independence, impartiality, and fairness in upholding standards in public life. The procedures that accompany this framework demonstrate a clear and commendable commitment to transparency, accountability, and due process. In legislative and procedural terms, it is my view that the machinery of standards in the Assembly is sound, principled and fit for purpose.

Ministerial Complaints

- 10.3 During the first year of my tenure, Northern Ireland became the only UK legislature where the Assembly Commissioner for Standards has the statutory power to investigate complaints against Ministers. This approach is extremely positive for democratic integrity, as Ministers hold significant power and influence over public policy and resources. By allowing the Commissioner to consider complaints against Ministers, Northern Ireland sets a clear example of transparency and accountability; it directly challenges the perception that Ministers are beyond accountability and reinforces the vital principle that all holders of public office, regardless of rank, must uphold the same ethical standards. To date, I have considered 295 complaints against Ministers.

Ministerial Code of Conduct

- 10.4 The Ministerial Code of Conduct must be relevant, robust, and aligned with contemporary standards in public life. Throughout my tenure and in previous reports, I have consistently recommended that the Code be updated, as it has not been revised since 1998. This remains an urgent and unresolved matter. Equally important is the need for clarity around where responsibility lies for ensuring the Code is regularly reviewed and kept up to date.

The Role and Resourcing of the Office of the Commissioner for Standards

- 10.5 At present, the Office of the Commissioner for Standards is made up of just one person—the Commissioner. While there is some limited secretarial assistance provided by the personal secretaries of other Director's Offices for which I am grateful, this support is minimal and restricted to helping with phone calls and arranging meetings with Members when requested.
- 10.6 The role of the Commissioner is a significant public service responsibility. Much of the work involves investigating complex complaints, interpreting Codes of Conduct, liaising with legal advisers, providing advice to Members and to the Committee, writing formal reports, and occasionally responding to media queries and external consultations. This is not straightforward administrative work. It is a highly specialised role that demands fairness, rigour, and careful attention to detail—often within tight timescales and under public scrutiny. For the standards system to work effectively, it's important that the role is properly supported and resourced.

Resourcing the Office of the Commissioner for Standards

- 10.7** The Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 requires that the Assembly Commission provides the Commissioner for Standards with “such administrative and other support... as the Commissioner may reasonably require.”¹¹ In practice, this means ensuring that the Commissioner has the right resources to fulfil a demanding and sensitive role.
- 10.8** The responsibilities of the Commissioner are wide-ranging as stated above. To do the work effectively, the Office needs skilled, professional support to assist with managing records, drafting correspondence, supporting investigative work, planning outreach work, responding to queries from Members and the public and help with day-to-day issues. Unfortunately, despite formal requests for such dedicated support, none has been provided. As a result, much of this important work has had to be managed solely by the Commissioner.
- 10.9** When I served as Acting Commissioner for Standards at the Senedd (the Welsh Parliament) from November 2024 to March 2025, I saw the difference that dedicated, in-house professional support makes. The Senedd Commissioner for Standards has access to a professional and experienced member of staff who, among other things, helps the Commissioner manage complaints, support investigation work, act as a sounding board for the Commissioner, and maintain the quality and efficiency of the process and the Office of the Commissioner for Standards.
- 10.10** In the Senedd’s most recent annual report, 136 complaints were recorded—a figure broadly in line with, and slightly lower than, that of the Northern Ireland Assembly. The Northern Ireland Commissioner also has the additional responsibility of handling complaints against Ministers, something not currently included in the Senedd remit. Yet in Wales, the role is resourced appropriately to reflect its workload. This comparison highlights a clear and important point: to uphold public trust in Northern Ireland’s standards system, the Commissioner’s role must be matched with proper support.

Fair Terms and Conditions

- 10.11** Alongside resourcing, the terms and conditions of the Commissioner’s role also need reviewed. The Commissioner role is advertised as a part-time hourly paid role. The legislation¹² allows the Assembly Commission discretion to decide whether or not to offer pension and related benefits such as holiday pay and sick pay to the Commissioner; none are currently provided. The continued absence of standard entitlements should be reviewed as, among other things, it risks sending the wrong message about how the work is valued and could deter experienced and capable individuals from putting themselves forward in future.

A Commitment to Standards in Public Life

- 10.12** Taking standards seriously means resourcing the role seriously. The Assembly has taken positive steps by establishing a strong legislative framework and appropriate, fair processes for upholding ethical conduct. The next step must be to ensure that the Commissioner is equipped with the practical tools, professional support, and fair terms needed to deliver that framework in practice. Ensuring that the Commissioner’s work is adequately resourced is not just a matter of operational efficiency, it is a statement of commitment to ethical public life and democratic integrity.

¹¹ The Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, Schedule 4, paragraph 3(1): <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2011/17/schedule/4/paragraph/3>

¹² The Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, Schedule 4, paragraph 1: <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2011/17/schedule/4/paragraph/1>

11 Acknowledgements

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Commissioner for Standards Annual Report 2024-2025

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

<https://standardscommissionerniassembly.org>

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