



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Commissioner for Standards

Annual Report 2025-26

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 first annual report as Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards since taking up the post on 3 November 2025. The report offers an overview of the work conducted in the last year by both my predecessor and myself.

I want to extend my thanks to the Assembly staff whose assistance and courtesy have been invaluable in my introduction to my new role. I also wish to thank the Committee on Standards and Privileges for its welcome, diligence and careful scrutiny, respecting the independence of the Commissioner's role.

The report provides information on complaints received from 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026 and information on the resources associated with this office.

Paragraph 7 of Schedule 4 to the 2011 Act requires that, as soon as practicable after the end of each financial year, the Commissioner for Standards shall lay before the Assembly a report on his activities, including the use of resources, during that year.

The role of the Standards Commissioner is to safeguard public trust by ensuring that those in public office meet the standards of behaviour necessary for democracy to function with integrity. These standards, grounded in the Seven Principles of Public Life (the Nolan Principles), require honesty, integrity, accountability, and leadership.

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 to build on the work of my predecessors to continue to support and strengthen that trust.

Stephen Wright
NI Assembly Commissioner for Standards
8 June 2026

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1 Introduction

- 1.1 This is my first report since taking up the role of Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards on 3 November 2025.
- 1.2 This report provides information on overall complaints received from 1 April 2025 to 31 March 2026, including a breakdown of MLA and Ministerial complaints, highlights from investigation reports and resources associated with the Office.

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 2025-26

- 3.1 During the 2025–26 reporting period (up to 31 March 2026) the office received a total of 161 complaints, representing an increase compared to the previous year but aligning to the numbers seen in other years. Of these, 73 complaints were deemed inadmissible, while 84 were assessed as admissible (52%) and proceeded to formal investigation. Three complaints were ongoing at the end of the reporting period and 1 was discontinued.

- 3.2 A total of 7 decisions on admissibility were referred to the Committee. The Committee considered the referrals, and all inadmissibility decisions were upheld.

Table 1. Complaints overview 2024-2025

	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-2026
Complaints received*	164	162	65	149	161
Complaints by member of public	147	161	63	131	152
Complaints by an MLA	16	1	2	18	9
Complaints by a Minister	1	0	0	0	0
Inadmissible	144	160	56	129	73
Admissible	19	2	9	16	84**
Discontinued	1	0	2	4	1
Ongoing	9	23	3	2	3

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

**The higher number of admissible complaints was due to the fact that 65 complaints related to the same incident.

- 3.3 Preliminary and full investigations have been conducted using in-person and remote interviewing. In line with good practice, the services of an external second interviewer has been utilized where necessary to assist with complaints that proceeded to full investigation. External/independent legal advice has been obtained when necessary.

4 Complaints against MLAs

- 4.1 Of the 161 complaints received, 66 were against MLAs representing 41% of the total. A total of 54 were deemed inadmissible; 9 were admissible and led to 3 investigation reports. Three complaints are ongoing.

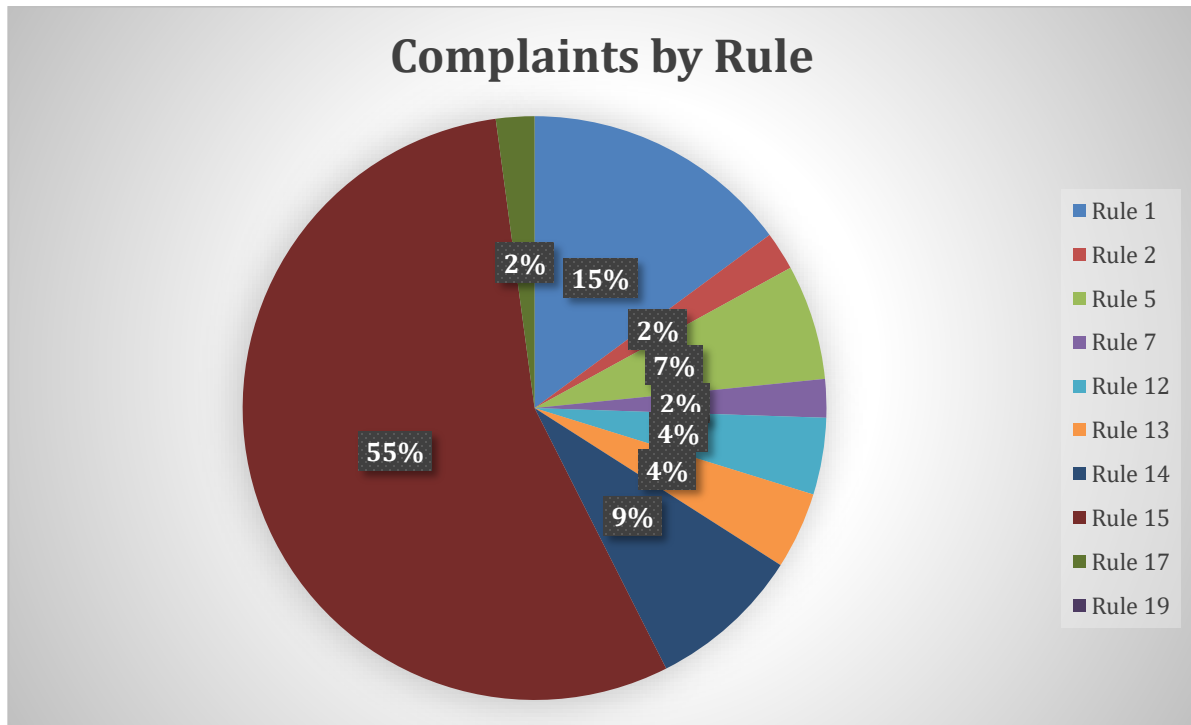
Table 2. Complaints against MLAs

	2021- 22	2022- 23	2023- 24	2024- 25	2025- 26
Complaints received against MLAs	164	162	65	149	66
Complaints by member of public	147	161	63	131	59
Complaints by an MLA	16	1	2	18	7
Complaints by a Minister	1	0	0	0	0
Inadmissible	144	160	56	129	54
Admissible	19	2	9	16	9
Discontinued	1	0	2	4	0
Ongoing	9	23	3	2	3

*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 3 investigation reports, 2 have now been considered and adjudicated on by the Committee and are referenced in this report.
- 4.3 Complaints were most frequently related to breaches of Rule 15, followed by Rule 1. 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. 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".
- 4.4 Figure 1 shows a breakdown of complaints made against MLAs by the alleged rule breached for the year 2025-26. The MLA Code of Conduct can be found on the Commissioner's website.

Figure 1



5 Reports on MLA Complaints

- 5.1 In the 2025-26 reporting period, a total of 3 investigation reports were submitted to the Committee. This report includes a summary of the two considered reports from this year and 2 from the previous year.

Report into a complaint by Mr Graham Fergus against Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA¹

- 5.2 On 26 June 2025, the previous Commissioner received a complaint from Mr Graham Fergus alleging that Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA had breached Rule 15 and Rule 17 of the Assembly's Code of Conduct when he disclosed in a press release, confidential information relating to a complaint that he had submitted to the Commissioner regarding Minister Gordon Lyons MLA.
- 5.3 The Commissioner assessed the complaint as admissible and commenced an investigation on 5 August 2025. Upon reviewing the complaint, the Commissioner also identified that Rule 12 had been engaged. The report was submitted to the Committee for consideration on 3 September 2025.

¹ <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/contentassets/9f780935d95c4feebb2be805d3eef04d/report-on-a-complaint-against-mr-matthew-otoole-mla-15-february-2025.pdf>

- 5.4 Rule 17 states; “you shall not disclose details in relation to such an investigation except when authorized by law or the investigatory authority.” The Commissioner found that as the complaint had not progressed to the stage of investigation at the time of the press release, there could be no breach of Rule 17.
- 5.5 Rule 12 prevents disclosure of confidential or protectively marked information unless authorized to do so. The complaints process is confidential from the point of submission until its conclusion. The Commissioner therefore found that issuing a public press release concerning an active and confidential complaint was inappropriate and in breach of Rule 12.
- 5.6 Rule 15 prohibits MLAs from subjecting anyone to an unreasonable and excessive personal attack. The Commissioner found that Mr O’Toole had the right under Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights to express his views on the conduct of Minister Lyons and that nothing said in his statement reached the threshold for a breach of Rule 15.
- 5.7 The Committee considered the report and the response from Mr O’Toole to the report at its meeting on 15th October 2025. The Committee agreed with the Commissioner’s conclusions on why the respondent had not breached Rules 15 and 17.
- 5.8 In relation to Rule 12 the Committee considered that the press release contained more than merely the fact that a complaint had been made and therefore concurred with the Commissioner’s conclusion that the respondent had breached rule 12 of the Code.
- 5.9 After consideration, the Committee agreed that the matter should be resolved by requesting that the Member make a formal apology which was subsequently provided.

Report into a complaint by Mrs Diane Forsythe MLA against Mr Mark Durkan MLA and Ms Cara Hunter MLA²

- 5.10 On 23 October 2025 I received a complaint from Ms Diane Forsythe MLA alleging that the respondents had breached Rule 12 of the Code through the publication of a plenary motion in their names which referenced the findings of an inquiry by the Public Accounts Committee whilst the relevant report remained under embargo.
- 5.11 I assessed the complaint as admissible and commenced an investigation on 10 December 2025. My report was submitted to the Committee on 4 March 2026.
- 5.12 Rule 12 prevents the disclosure of confidential or protectively marked information unless authorized to do so. In this case I found that there was no evidence that either respondent

2

https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/contentassets/d9fd4d541219465c92d6464fafb8e9df/the_committee_on_standards_and_privileges_report_nia_155-22_27.pdf

had read the report or were aware of the embargo. The references in the motion to the findings of the Inquiry could have been derived from other publicly available sources such as the Northern Ireland Audit Office report on 'Managing the Schools Estate' and open session meetings of the PAC. I therefore found that it was not possible to conclude to the required standard of proof that there had been a breach of Rule 12.

- 5.13 At its meeting on 18 March 2026, the Committee agreed with my conclusion and reasoning that it was not possible to conclude that either Mr Durkan or Ms Hunter had disclosed confidential or protectively marked information and therefore the allegation of a breach of the Code was not upheld.

Reports carried forward from previous reporting year

Report into a complaint by Mrs Sinéad Ennis MLA against Mr Timothy Gaston MLA³

- 5.14 On 25 March 2025, the previous Commissioner received a complaint from Mrs Sinéad Ennis MLA alleging that Mr Timothy Gaston MLA had breached Rule 12 of the Assembly's Code of Conduct when he issued a press statement disclosing that he had submitted a formal complaint to the Commissioner regarding the First Minister, Mrs Michelle O'Neill MLA.
- 5.15 The Commissioner assessed the complaint as admissible, and commenced an investigation on 7 May 2025. Her report was submitted to the Committee on 23 May 2025.
- 5.16 Rule 12 prohibits MLA's from disclosing confidential or protectively marked information unless authorized to do so.
- 5.17 Mr Gaston contended that merely disclosing the fact that a complaint had been lodged should not constitute a breach of Rule 12. The Commissioner however found that Mr Gaston had disclosed more than the fact of having made a complaint as his press release included a statement and a photograph relating to his allegations. On that basis she concluded that Mr Gaston knew or ought reasonably to have known that issuing the press release was inappropriate and in breach of Rule 12.
- 5.18 The Committee agreed with the finding and having considered the circumstances of the case sought to resolve the matter by requesting that Mr Gaston make a formal apology which was subsequently provided. The Committee took the opportunity to remind all MLA's of the importance of maintaining confidentiality during the complaints process.

³ <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/committees/2022-2027/standards-and-privileges/reports/2025-2026/timothy-gaston-complaint-report-sep25.pdf>

Report into a complaint by Ms Paula Bradshaw MLA against Mr Timothy Gaston MLA⁴

- 5.19 On 11 February 2025, the previous Commissioner received a complaint from Mrs Paula Bradshaw MLA alleging that Mr Timothy Gaston MLA had breached Rules 11, 14 and 17 of the Assembly's Code of Conduct during proceedings of the Committee for the Executive Office on 23 October 2024. The complaint alleged that he failed to follow the Chairperson's directions, disregarded the rules relating to the Committee's remit and repeatedly made false or misleading public statements about Mrs Bradshaw. The complaint further alleged that Mr Gaston made an inappropriate and misogynistic comment during the Committee meeting. Following clarification by the Commissioner with the complainant, it was confirmed that the complaint alleged breaches of Rules 13 and 15. In addition, the Commissioner, upon reviewing the complaint, also identified Rule 10 as being engaged.
- 5.20 The Commissioner considered the complaint and decided it was admissible following a preliminary investigation, before moving to investigation on 1 May 2025. She submitted her report to the Committee on 23 May 2025.
- 5.21 Rule 15 prohibits MLAs from subjecting anyone to an unreasonable and excessive personal attack. The Commissioner found that Mr Gaston's comment was both unreasonable and excessive as it served to undermine the authority of the Chair and implied that she was emotionally unbalanced or incapable of managing proceedings. Mr Gaston did not accept that the comment was misogynistic but did concede that it was ill-judged. The Commissioner found that the comment could reasonably be regarded as a gratuitous personal insult and as such, would not qualify for the enhanced protection typically afforded to political expression hence constituted a breach of Rule 15.
- 5.22 Rule 13 concerns improper interference with the functioning of the Assembly or its Committees. The Commissioner found that Mr Gaston had on several occasions acted in a manner that appeared to improperly interfere with the effective functioning of the Committee by persisting, despite multiple interventions, to pose questions which fell outside the remit of the Committee. The Commissioner therefore found that Mr Gaston had acted in breach of Rule 13.
- 5.23 Rule 10 requires observance and compliance with the Rules on All-Party groups and any policy, guidance and instructions approved by the Assembly. The Commissioner found that Mr Gaston's conduct failed to uphold the NI Assembly Behaviour Code in not treating others with courtesy and respect which breached Rule 10.
- 5.24 The Committee considered the report, Mr Gaston's written submissions and sought legal advice on various aspects of the case. Ultimately the Committee concurred with the Commissioner's findings in respect of Rule 15, Rule 13 and Rule 10. In addition, The

⁴ <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/committees/2022-2027/standards-and-privileges/reports/2025-2026/timothy-gaston/timothygastoncomplaintreport.pdf>

Committee agreed with the Commissioner's findings that Mr Gaston's conduct had failed to uphold a number of the principles of conduct contained in the Code.

- 5.25 Upon recommendation from the Committee, the Assembly subsequently sanctioned Mr Gaston by excluding him from the Assembly for two sitting days.

6 Complaints Against Ministers

- 6.1 Complaints against Ministers made up 59% (n=95) of all complaints received (n=161).
- 6.2 Of the 95 complaints received, 2 were referred to the Committee for further consideration/appeal of my inadmissibility decision. The Committee upheld my decisions in both referrals.

Table 3. Complaints against Ministers 2025-26

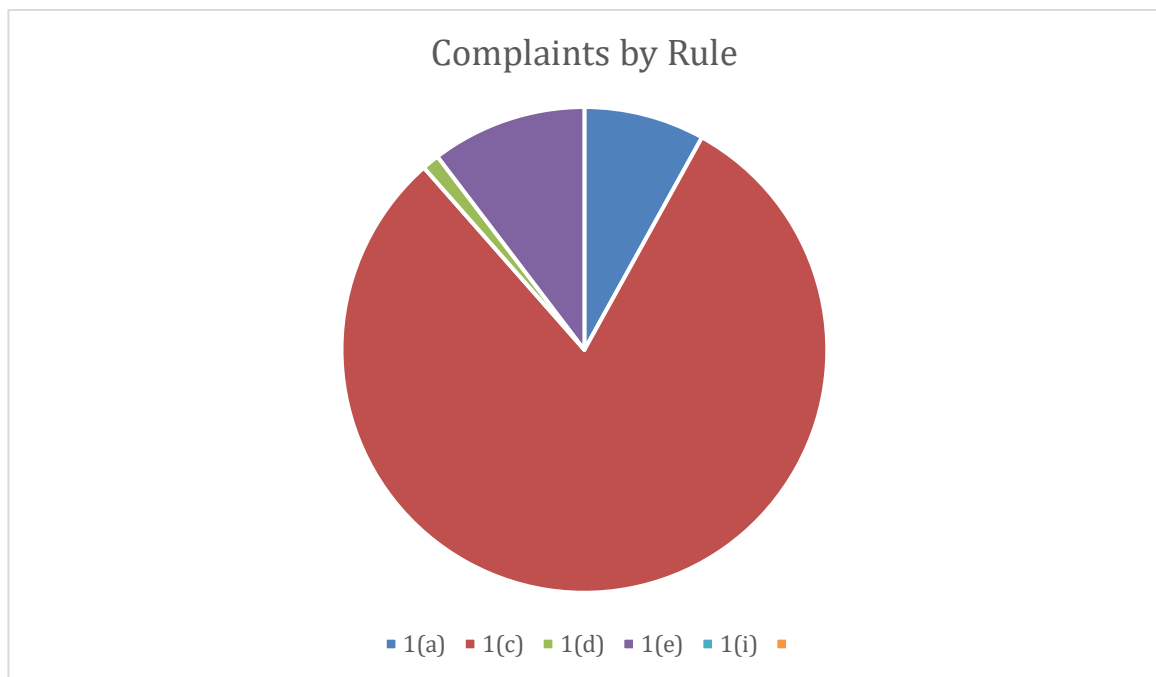
	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25	2025-26
Complaints received against Ministers	122	136	11	26	95
Inadmissible	113	136	11	24	19
Admissible	9	0	0	2	75*
Discontinued	0	0	0	0	1
Ongoing investigations	9	0	0	0	1
Referrals to be considered by Committee	1	3	1	5	2
Reports awaiting Committee consideration	0	2	0	0	1

* The higher number of admissible complaints was due to the fact that 65 complaints related to the same incident.

- 6.3 The main reasons for inadmissibility were the complaints being beyond the scope and spirit of paragraphs 1.5 and 1.6 of the Ministerial Code. In addition, several of the complaints were deemed inadmissible due to a failure to provide relevant information in accordance with paragraph 3.8 of the General Procedures Direction.

- 6.4 Figure 2 shows a breakdown of complaints by the alleged rules breached for the year 2025-26 for all complaints against Ministers. The vast majority of Ministerial complaints were related to breaches of Rule 1 (c) – Uphold the Nolan Principles. The Ministerial Code of Conduct is available on the Commissioner’s website.

Figure 2



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 the findings of one investigation from this year which resulted from 65 complaints.

Report into complaints against Minister Gordon Lyons MLA⁵

- 7.3 Between 11 and 15 June 2025, the previous Commissioner received 64 complaints from members of the public and 1 from Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA alleging that Minister Lyons had breached the Code, the Nolan Principles and the Pledge of Office when he posted on social media on 11 June 2025 about a planned protest at Larne Leisure Centre.
- 7.4 The Commissioner considered the complaints and decided that they were admissible before commencing her investigation on 20 June 2025. The complaints alleged breaches of a number of the rules contained within the Ministerial Code of Conduct however the investigation focused on whether there was a breach of rules (iv), (vi) and (vii) of the Code. The investigation report was forwarded to the Committee on 11 August 2025.
- 7.5 In relation to rule (iv); *'Follow the seven principles of public life'*, the Commissioner found that the Minister failed to prioritise public safety, omitted critical details about Leisure Centre users and did not act solely in the public interest. By blurring the lines between his personal, political and Ministerial roles, questions were raised about his integrity. Furthermore, in a situation that required leadership, the Minister's post was shaped by his personal or political considerations rather than an objective assessment of the situation.
- 7.6 The Commissioner therefore found that, on the balance of probabilities, Minister Lyons breached rule (iv) due to his failure to follow the principles of public life.
- 7.7 Regarding the second allegation that the Minister had breached rule (vi), *'Operate in a way conducive to promoting good community relations'*, the Commissioner found that the Minister should have given greater consideration to both the context and the wording of his message. She found the post showed a lack of due care which was not conducive to fostering positive community relations and therefore breached rule (vi).
- 7.8 In respect of the allegation that the Minister had breached rule (vii); *'Not to use information gained in the course of their service for personal gain'*, the Commissioner did not believe that a breach had occurred.
- 7.9 At its meeting on 15 October 2025, the Committee considered the report in addition to the respondent's written submissions. In light of those submissions, the Committee offered the Commissioner the opportunity to respond. Under current procedural arrangements where the Committee has no adjudicative role in relation to Ministerial complaints, the Committee noted the Commissioner's report and published the report and the associated responses from the respondent and the Commissioner.

⁵ <https://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/committees/2022-2027/standards-and-privileges/reports/2025-2026/gordon-lyons-january-2026/finalreport-gl202500040-links.pdf>

8 Other Matters

- 8.1 The Standards Network conference and Regulator and Oversight Forum were both unavoidably cancelled. Both these events offer valuable opportunities for shared learning and collaboration. It is hoped that these events will take place in the current year.
- 8.2 Throughout the year, I complied with the Code governing my conduct and registration of interests.

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 2025-26

	2025-26
Commissioner's pay	54,243
Employer's National Insurance Contribution	7,497
Travel and Subsistence	244
TOTAL	61,984

- 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;

Table 5. Expenditure 2025-26

	2025-26
Complaint processing software	14,007
Legal Advice	-
Zoom Annual Fee	-
Data Protection Registration	-
Specialist Support	-
Interview Transcription	-
Other	137
TOTAL	14,144

10 Miscellaneous

NI Assembly Standards Framework

10.1 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

10.2 The Northern Ireland Assembly is 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. In my view this framework would be further enhanced by extending the adjudicative function of the

Committee to such investigations to provide scrutiny, challenge, oversight and consistency to this important work.

Ministerial Code of Conduct

- 10.3 The Ministerial Code of Conduct must be relevant, robust, and aligned with contemporary standards in public life. To this end the Code has been updated by virtue of the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concerns) Act 2022.

11 Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Shane McAteer, the Clerk of Standards and the Committee staff as well as Jonathan McMillen and the Assembly Legal Services team who have been extremely helpful in providing timely procedural and legal advice. I would also like to thank Rose Morwood for the secretarial support received.



Commissioner for Standards Annual Report 2025-2026

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

<https://standardscommissionerniassembly.org>

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