



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Audit Committee

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Budget 2020-21:  
Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

4 March 2020

# NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

## Audit Committee

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Daniel McCrossan (Chairperson)  
Mr Andrew Muir (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Joanne Bunting  
Mr Alan Chambers  
Ms Emma Sheerin

**Witnesses:**

Mrs Lesley Hogg	Clerk and Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Assembly
Mr Richard Stewart	Northern Ireland Assembly

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** I remind members that the session is being reported by Hansard. I welcome Lesley Hogg and Richard Stewart to the Committee meeting. Lesley is chief executive of the Assembly, and Richard is director of corporate services of the Assembly. I invite you to make your opening statement.

**Mrs Lesley Hogg (Clerk and Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Assembly):** I will start by thanking the Committee for undertaking the scrutiny of the Assembly Commission's budget proposals for 2020-21. As the Commission's accounting officer, I feel that that scrutiny, which is in line with the methodology for setting the Commission's budget included at annex A of the submission to the Committee, is a crucial part of the wider Assembly governance process.

Over the past three years, when the Assembly was not meeting, the Commission sought to make decisions based on three priorities: the need to keep staff levels and services at an appropriate level in order to facilitate a return to Assembly business at short notice; the need to make sure that, in doing so, we used public money wisely; and we sought to maintain the skills and experience of the staff who would be needed when we got back up and running. That meant that a large number of staff were redeployed to other publicly funded bodies. Our contracts with external providers were also reviewed to achieve an appropriate balance of minimising costs whilst keeping them in an appropriate state of readiness for a seamless restart to normal Assembly operations. When a member of staff left the organisation, they were not replaced other than in a very small number of specialist posts, and, over that three-year period, the number of staff in the Assembly secretariat fell to the point where it was almost 50 full-time equivalent posts below our staff complement.

I turn now to the budget numbers for next year. The total amount presented for departmental expenditure limit (DEL) resources is £44.847 million, along with £1.093 million for capital expenditure.

Those figures are set out in annex B to the submission. Normally, the budget could usefully be compared with the expenditure for the prior year, but that comparison is not particularly relevant this year because of the change in political circumstances. If it would help the Committee, I will go over the categories that make up the budget in the same order as they are set out in the submission to the Committee.

The first category is income. Next year, the Commission will receive an anticipated income of £739,000. As mentioned in the submission, most of that — just over £580,000 — relates to the recovery of ministerial salaries from Executive Departments. Of the remaining income forecast, the majority relates to the recoupment of salaries for a small number of staff who are seconded to other public-sector entities, and the balance relates to income from events and other sundry income.

The second category covers salaries and expenses paid to Members. Over the year, the total for this category is expected to be £13.105 million. That covers the four subcategories that are highlighted in the submission. The first of those is Members' salaries, which are forecast to cost £6.676 million. That forecast is relatively certain, as the level of salary paid to Members and the salary paid to Ministers and other office holders is set for the financial year. As well as salary payments to Members, there is the cost that Members can recover to meet the costs of running constituency offices. That includes the cost of Members' support staff, rent and rates, office utilities and other costs that can be met under the determination issued by the Independent Financial Review Panel in 2016. That subcategory is expected to total £6.018 million. The last two subcategories of payments for Members cover travel costs, at £293,000, and other costs, which include winding-up expenses and ill-health retirement costs, which are estimated at £118,000.

The third category in the Commission's budget for 2020-21 is the largest. It covers the salary payments for secretariat staff and the administrative costs that are incurred to deliver the full range of services that are needed by the Assembly. The first of those — secretariat staff salary costs — are forecast at £21.88 million for next year. I will set out what the Commission expects to be delivered in that salary budget. While we have filled approximately 20 of the 50 vacancies that we had on a temporary basis, there are now a further 30 posts to be filled. We are, therefore, continuing to actively fill those vacancies on a temporary basis, but we will then need to permanently fill them by open recruitment competition over the next year or so.

The biggest change to staffing for next year is the need for additional posts to deliver on the new political arrangements, especially those that are set out in 'New Decade, New Approach'. The largest number of posts — there are 13 in total — are needed to deliver some of the strands that affect the Assembly. Those posts will provide for the implementation of 'New Decade, New Approach' and support for the Assembly Committees that are required. As I set out at paragraph 28 of the submission, those are for the scrutiny Committee on the Executive subcommittee on Brexit, the Ad Hoc Committee to consider the creation of a bill of rights and the Committee to monitor progress against the Programme for Government. That support will include the normal Committee teams as well as research and legal support.

For work on the scrutiny of legislation, we anticipate that additional support will be needed for the provision of legal assistance and advice, including scrutiny of secondary legislation by the Examiner of Statutory Rules. We also expect to have additional staff in place to increase support for Members seeking to take forward private Members' Bills. As noted in the submission, a non-Executive Bill team is planned, and it is expected that five new posts in the Bill Office will be required.

In the submission, I refer to the need for additional ICT staffing support in 2021. That support is needed across a range of services, including responsibility for cybersecurity, increased capacity for software development and for enhancing our service and help desk provision. Subject to the required internal approvals, that is expected to result in an increase of eight posts. Members will also be interested to note that the Commission has been developing plans to make progress on the formation of a youth Assembly, and additional staff resources will be included to take that forward.

Delivery of Member development, including support for the Assembly women's caucus and training for Members' support staff has been an important focus for the Commission in conjunction with Politics Plus over the last number of years. Given the significant number of new Members, that work is more important than ever. Now that Politics Plus has been wound up, delivery will be undertaken by the Commission, and dedicated staff resource is in place to do that.

Filling the existing 50 vacancies, along with the new posts that have been outlined, will require an extensive and sustained open recruitment programme. Five additional posts will be required to support

that, but they are time-limited and will not last beyond the end of the recruitment programme. In all, we expect that approximately 37 posts will be needed over and above what was previously in place.

I should point out to Committee members that the staffing resources that are envisaged for next year and their associated budget take no account of any changes in working practices in the Assembly that might come about as a result of any aspect of the RHI inquiry report.

This category also includes the Commission's administration costs. Those are forecast to be £6.131 million next year. Administration costs cover a wide range of expenditure items, including Committee travel and expenses; building utility costs, including rates, electricity and gas; repairs and maintenance costs; third-party support for our business-critical IT systems; the cost of our recurring contracts for things like broadcasting, catering and research subscriptions and learning and development and well-being for secretariat staff.

I would like to highlight a few items in that subcategory that might be of particular interest to the Committee. The first of those covers the cost of drafting a Bill. Naturally, that includes the anticipated number of private Members' Bills that Members will seek support for. As well as drafting PMBs, there is the possibility of the need for Bill drafting services to be provided directly to the Commission if the Assembly decides on alternative arrangements for providing financial support to Members, particularly in the area of terms and conditions for Members' support staff. Another area where the Commission wants to invest next year is in Member development. That is direct investment in addition to the staffing support that I mentioned. Those few areas are perhaps the most visible investment in support for Members, but this category covers a large number of our normal, day-to-day expenditure items. For example, we expect to pay just over £840,000 for our property rates. We have contractual commitments for broadcasting the Assembly's proceedings, for the cost of subscriptions that are used to provide research and library services to Members, for our catering and cleaning costs, for the PSNI cover in the Building and for our contribution to the cost of securing the wider Stormont estate. Those recurring costs are expected to come in at almost £3.6 million next year.

The next category is payments to parties under the financial assistance for political parties scheme 2016 or "FAPP", as it is more universally known. As I set out in the submission, we expect those costs to reduce slightly next year to £725,000 because of the formation of the Executive. Under the terms of the scheme, an MLA who is a Minister is not included in the calculation of FAPP payments for the Minister's party, so the costs are likely to reduce next year.

The penultimate category of expenditure is slightly more technical. It covers depreciation and impairment charges and the cost of notional charges to the Commission. For the next year, depreciation charges are forecast to be £3.7 million, largely because we occupy such a beautiful building that is valued at almost £150 million. We also have depreciation charges for things like PCs and printers, but they are very small in comparison with the depreciation charge for Parliament Buildings. Our notional costs of £45,000 come from the fees charged by the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) to carry out the statutory audit of the Commission's annual report and accounts.

The final element of the costs set out in the submission to the Committee covers capital expenditure. The Commission anticipates that it will incur capital expenditure of £1.093 million in the next financial year. The projects that make up that total are set out in annex D to the submission. I would like to highlight a small number of those projects to give the Committee some indication of the things that are required from a capital perspective.

When we met the Committee in October 2016, some of the projects were on the capital plan for 2017-18, including, for example, investment in the replacement of the current and antiquated analogue telephone system and our television screens. However, political circumstances and other unexpected priorities and staff resourcing issues led to delays or postponements of those projects until now.

The capital plan also includes a number of necessary back-office or unseen improvements. They range from building security systems to investment in basic things like furniture. Where appropriate, the Commission has considered and agreed the business cases for those as part of its normal corporate governance arrangements. In a typical financial year, the Commission would forecast to spend roughly £1 million per year on capital investment. In the first year of getting back to the Assembly's normal operation, we will expect to spend something similar to that amount.

I have included a comparison of our budget proposals with those for 2020-21 for the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament at annex C of the submission. That is simply for context. I recognise the dangers of high-level comparisons without the full context, but annex C shows

the staffing positions along with the comparable budget positions for each of the other devolved legislatures. The comparison with Wales is, perhaps, more relevant, given the range of powers that each institution enjoys, but the figures are provided by way of background only, so I will leave it there.

There is one important point that I would like to bring to the Committee's attention, and it relates to the reference in 'New Decade, New Approach' to simultaneous translation services for the Assembly. As the Assembly has not yet considered the level of simultaneous translation provision that might be required, no estimates of cost have been included in the budget for next year. The Commission can assess the likely cost of providing that service only once the Assembly has decided on an agreed approach.

Just before I finish, I put on record my sincere thanks to the staff of the Assembly secretariat for their dedication and commitment to the Assembly over the past three years and for their tremendous work in getting us back up and running again so quickly and so efficiently in spite of the large number of staff vacancies. Every plenary session has been facilitated, and every Committee meeting has taken place. That has involved a lot of effort behind the scenes that Members may not see, but I certainly appreciate the professionalism and expertise that our staff, again, have shown. I take the opportunity to record my thanks to the staff of the Assembly secretariat for their very considerable efforts in supporting the Assembly and every one of its Members.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to present the Assembly Commission's budget proposals for next year. Richard and I will be happy to try to answer any questions that the Committee may have.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** Thank you very much, Lesley, for that detailed presentation, which was filled with some very interesting figures throughout. Before we go to questions, on behalf of the Committee, I put on record our sincere appreciation for the wonderful staff we have in the Building and throughout the estate who keep the Building in pristine condition, the staff who assist and facilitate Members and the staff who give due care and attention to ensuring that the public have a strong experience when they are here. That is important, because anyone who visits the estate is quite shocked by how stunning and how well-kept this place is. That happens under your leadership, Lesley, so I congratulate you as well on ensuring that we have the necessary support throughout the Building to do the job that we do.

**Mrs Hogg:** Thank you.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** Members have a number of questions. The estate is vast, and there is quite a lot on it. What is the Speaker's house, for instance, used for?

**Mrs Hogg:** The Speaker's house has not been used by the Assembly since the previous Speaker, Robin Newton, decided not to use it. At the minute, the Assembly Commission is not using it.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** I have never seen it, because it is nestled amongst the trees down there, but I am told that it is a significant enough property.

**Mrs Hogg:** It is a fairly small semi-detached property. It is owned by the Department of Finance but, over the years, it has been used by Speakers who live some distance away from the Assembly.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** So, it does not incur any cost to the Assembly Commission?

**Mrs Hogg:** No, it does not at present.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** OK. I always wondered about it. There are various departmental buildings at the far end of the estate. Where are we responsible for? Are we responsible to the front gates, or do Departments kick in when it comes to the maintenance of the estate? Is the Commission responsible up to the front gates of each departmental building? For instance, I know that the Department of Justice is on the estate.

**Mrs Hogg:** No. We are responsible only down to the apron at the bottom of Parliament Buildings. The rest is for the Department of Finance.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** OK, that is grand.

You mentioned the facilities around the Building. When people come in, particularly young people, they say, "I haven't seen one of those TVs for years" *[Laughter.]*

**Mr Muir:** The TVs are older than they are.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** They are very outdated, and the technology around the Building needs to be updated. I am delighted to hear that work is ongoing on that and that it will facilitate Members as well. What is the cost of updating the TVs and the telephone system? Do you have that figure?

**Mrs Hogg:** Yes.

**Mr Richard Stewart (Northern Ireland Assembly):** It is at annex D to the submission. The cathode-ray tube (CRT) televisions, I suspect, are the ones that the youngsters have never seen before. That will be in the order of £100,000, and that covers every TV in the Building, including the annunciators and the ones that are in rooms. The analogue telephone system is the one just above that. That will be £170,000 in the coming year. There will be additional expenditure on it in the following year, but, in 2021, it will be £170,000.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** I believe that it is necessary given the system that we have currently. I have no issue with that, unless other members do.

Before I raise some questions on a few other items, another thing that sticks out is that, in each of our constituency offices, we have equipment that technically belongs to the Assembly. That equipment is maintained by the wonderful IT department that we have that has some great people who have been very helpful to me, certainly, in my time as a Member. However, I am a wee bit concerned that if, for example, a computer breaks down in my office, a printer breaks down, a cartridge gets stuck or something along those lines, there is no facility in the determination to enable a Member to seek repair of that equipment unless someone from Stormont comes the whole way to Strabane. It may cost only a tenner to fix if I were to call the local repair guy around the corner from my office, which I have done on occasion. I was shocked to learn that the only procedure that is in place when equipment that belongs to the Assembly needs repaired is for someone to leave the Building at a cost — obviously, that incurs the cost of travel to Strabane, as an example — to repair something that could be repaired by a local person at a much cheaper rate than the cost incurred to the Assembly. How does that make sense? That is one example. There are others. That is no reflection on the hard-working staff we have, but I am just wondering who thought that it was a good idea to send someone for that. It does not make sense, and certainly, it is a waste of public money to send someone from the IT department here the whole way to Strabane to repair something that could be fixed by someone local, but that is not facilitated in the determination.

**Mrs Hogg:** It depends really on the nature of the issue. As you say, the equipment belongs to the Assembly Commission. We have a contract for a company to go round and service all the printers, for example, because they are coming up to a certain life expectancy, and to replace any parts and so on. We have a contractor to do that, so that will not be carried out by Assembly staff. The issue is that, because we have spare parts and replacement equipment as well, depending on the nature of the problem, sometimes we might replace equipment rather than repair it. If we were to just outsource that locally, we would not have those facilities. We would always be buying in new parts and paying people for that maintenance who may not be familiar with the equipment. It is certainly something that we can consider.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** I was just a wee bit alarmed by the fact that something quite minor and insignificant could be fixed by someone local at a much more cost-effective rate. That surely would be the most workable thing. I realise that the determination was put down for a particular reason at the time, but a lot of it is unrealistic about serving our constituents' interests while meeting Members' needs to serve those interests. That is a clear example. It might seem minor in the wider spectrum of things, but I am just giving you an example of where an inefficiency has occurred. There are others. That is not to probe at it in any way, shape or form, but I just want to put on the record that we need to be a bit more realistic in how we conduct ourselves, particularly if something can be repaired or replaced at a much cheaper rate than by someone having to be deployed from here to a particular constituency. Thank you for your answer on that. I understand.

**Mrs Hogg:** At present, there is no mechanism to recover those costs under the determination. Do you want to add anything, Richard?

**Mr Stewart:** You are right, Chair; the determination is quite specific. That was done for a purpose, which was to avoid expenditure on computer equipment. Whether that is a good thing or a bad thing I will leave others to decide. Thank you for raising it, because it gives us an opportunity to mention the consultation process. The Commission is looking at the whole system of financial support for Members, whether that involves a replacement panel or however it gets done in the future. I know that Members are particularly concerned about the terms and conditions for their staff, so I will use this as a plea for Members across all parties to get involved in that consultation. It is very important that whatever the Commission comes up with has the support of all parties so that it can iron out these wrinkles to make sure that we have a better system when we put that in place.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** I want to add to that very briefly before I allow Mr Chambers to come in. Equipment that was bought with public money by an individual Member prior to the determination and that is being used in that Member's office can neither be repaired by the Assembly because it is not Assembly equipment and was bought through the budget allocated to Members, nor can a Member seek to have it repaired in a different capacity. For instance, I am aware of another Member, who, prior to the determination, purchased a bit of equipment. It has broken down and cannot be fixed because the Assembly will not allow it. That is another example of how there has been waste. That is just an example of the wee things that could be done a wee bit better with public expenditure.

**Mr Chambers:** On the same theme of computer equipment, over the last couple of years I have tried to get a definitive answer and clarification about this point, but I can never get it. God forbid that we should have a break in, burglary, vandalism or even a fire in our premises, so is there a responsibility for Members to take out insurance on equipment that belongs to the Assembly Commission, or is that something that you would cover without the Member having to have responsibility? Are Members ultimately responsible for replacing equipment that is vandalised, damaged or lost in those circumstances?

**Mr Stewart:** The computer equipment that is issued by the Assembly Commission remains its property. Insurance is slightly different in that, in the determination there is provision for Members to purchase insurance, and I encourage all Members to do that for their contents. You could have an element where there is double cover whereby the Assembly Commission is responsible but Members are buying cover. If it is a breakage of Assembly Commission equipment, it will come back to the Assembly Commission.

**Mr Muir:** Thank you for your presentation and for the information that you provided. I echo our Chair's words about the work that is done by staff. I have been here for only a short time, but, when the decision was made to bring the Assembly back, I was extremely impressed with the swiftness with which staff came in to help. You rightly said that Committee meetings and plenary meetings are all going ahead. Staff behind the scenes are working very hard to deliver those, and that is really appreciated.

We came back under the guise of 'New Decade, New Approach', and there were lots of commitments in that. One of those is translation services. What risk is there to the budget with that? Once an agreement has been made on that, will we be able to accommodate the associated costs? Is there any estimate of the upper limit that we should consider? I am conscious that we could set a budget and then —. Hopefully, there will be an agreement in the next financial year and we will be able to deliver on that.

My other question is about agency staff, the view about the cost associated with their use and being able to transition away from that. That does not give security to the employees, and there are additional costs to the Assembly. In all scenarios, we would want to move away from the use of agency staff because of the cost. I understand why they are here. That is fine, and the work that they do is excellent, but we should plan to move away from that.

I have a question about Wales, but I will come on to that.

**Mrs Hogg:** On 'New Decade, New Approach' and the translation services, until the Committee on Procedures establishes how those translation services should work and to what extent they should be used, it will be difficult to come up with any costings. At the point that the Committee on Procedures

establishes its and the Assembly's requirements, the Assembly Commission will cost those out and seek the appropriate funding.

On agency staff, our preference would be to go straight out and recruit permanent staff, but there is obviously quite a long lead-in time for that. Given that we had only one day's notice of resumption of normal Assembly business and had 50 vacancies and another 120 or so staff who were redeployed, getting to where we are at this point has been no mean feat. At the minute, we rely heavily on agency staff, but that is a very short-term stopgap and we have already started to recruit. We have recruitment ads out at the minute for some permanent staff. We will have to do that in a phased approach, because recruitment is quite time-consuming and we are still working hard to get the Assembly back up and running with a small number of resources. Therefore, our aim is to have permanent posts recruited as quickly as possible.

**Mr Muir:** Before I come on to the comparison that you made with other devolved legislatures, I have noticed that, in Westminster, they have upgraded their broadcasting. Making democracy relevant is particularly important via social media and, in the Westminster scenario, you can download your own clips and do all the bits and pieces yourself rather than having to ask staff. Are there any plans to upgrade those facilities so that we can make what goes on in this Building a bit more relevant to people?

**Mrs Hogg:** As we have already discussed, our broadcasting equipment, along with lots of other equipment, is in need of replacement and upgrade, and that is planned for probably two years down the line. It is unlikely that we will be able to start that next year. We will start project planning and establishing what the Assembly's requirements are and, in the following couple of years, we will implement that. We certainly have plans to upgrade our broadcasting and all the associated equipment.

**Mr Muir:** That would be good so that people can see what happens here.

The comparison with other devolved legislatures is important for me, because there is quite a lot happening here and the staff are working so hard; however, the question is whether we are fully resourced to do that. So many groups come here as well, and it is about how we engage with them. Making a comparison with Wales, which is sort of similar, should we be doing a more detailed study on whether we are fully resourced to be an effective Assembly?

**Mrs Hogg:** Our staffing and resources are driven by what the Assembly and the Assembly Commission want to do, and we try to fulfil those. Staff and costs here have been under pressure over the last number of years, whereas the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales have continued to invest in staffing and other resources. The gap is now quite significant. Even compared to three or four years ago, it has widened considerably. It is for the Assembly and the Commission to establish what their needs are, and, if there is a greater need for wider engagement and other investment, that would need to come back through the Commission and we would need to look and see what resources are required to deliver that.

**Mr Muir:** That is important.

Lastly, Chair, I have some other points. A determination was made, and officials and staff in the Building are delivering it well. One aspect of it — it is important to put this on record — is the security of staff and having money to improve security in offices. Staff and elected reps, and my heart is with the staff, are at particular risk; therefore it is important to provide flexibility and additional security, especially for lone workers in offices. It is important that we note that, because I understand the parameter that we are dealing with in terms of the determination — you are working within that — but people in other parts of the UK or Europe have been hurt and, worse still, murdered. It is important that appropriate security be in place for staff, especially lone workers.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** I will supplement that with two points. By way of numbers, on the first point that Andrew made, there are 60 Members of the Welsh Assembly and 90 Members of this Assembly. In the Welsh Assembly, there are 497 staff, as mentioned in the table, and 391 here, which is a ratio of eight staff to every Member in the Welsh Assembly and just about four to every Member here. We need to ask whether the Assembly is being properly resourced, and that will continue to be under review, I am sure. I completely understand that the absence of this House for three years has changed things quite a bit and delayed quite a lot.

Andrew raises a very valuable point about the security of staff. I have had issues with staff, as, I know, have other members, who do not feel safe in an office environment, particularly if something controversial is coming through the House that exposes them to the public. We are not based in the offices every day when this place is functioning; we are based here. So, if a member of staff is off — remember that we have only two full-time equivalents in our offices — it means that someone is left in a very vulnerable state. That means that you have to have protections in place to ensure that that person is protected in the same way as every person in the Civil Service, for want of a better *[Inaudible.]* Because of an issue in my office, we had to put security measures in place to protect the public and staff. We were told by the Assembly that the costs would have to come out of the office cost expenditure. I understand that we are awarded a budget, but it is extremely limited; you do not get very much security out of it in a year. We need to best protect the people at the front line — the people in our offices. They are concerned; they feel vulnerable, depending on what is being discussed, particularly Brexit, among other things. We could not put anything in. I put equipment in my office at my own expense — other Members will do the same — to ensure that staff are safe. This is something that we need to look at.

MPs in Westminster have considerable security options available to them to ensure that their staff and the public are protected. It is something that needs to be considered. When I made an enquiry about a buzzer for the door, I was told that I would have to speak to the landlord of the building. That is not appropriate whatsoever. He has no obligation to protect me or anyone else. It is the role that we have. I have a responsibility to my staff, as have Andrew, Emma, Alan and Joanne. A valid point has been made, particularly as we enter some very challenging times and issues.

**Ms Bunting:** Chairman, I would wholeheartedly reiterate your comments. We had spoken about it in advance. I appreciate that it is not necessarily for this meeting, but, Lesley, I would like you and the Commission to take on board the situation that we find ourselves in as a result of the determination where we are in breach of the law in respect of lone working directives and maternity leave. I welcome the consultation, and I trust that whatever comes forward will ensure that we are lawful and that we train our staff accordingly, because there is a significant disparity between how the skills of our staff are valued and recompensed and the remuneration for Assembly staff. Our staff have no less skill, and certainly no less risk; in fact, they are at more risk.

I worry myself sick about my staff. The majority of my staff are female and, at times of leave, are left alone in the office. All it takes is for somebody to be opportunistic. Who bears responsibility for that? I appreciate that it is not necessarily for the Commission, but I would like to place it on record.

I have a number of questions. Page 6, paragraph 28(c), of your report relates to the setting up of a committee to monitor progress against each of the Programme for Government outcomes and states that one of the committees will:

*"consider potential measures for achieving improvement."*

I am not clear, Chairman, whether you want me to outline all my questions in one go or to take each one in turn.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** Just take them whatever way you are comfortable.

**Ms Bunting:** Will there be some duplication between that consideration and the measures that will be put in place and the role of scrutiny Committees, which, to my mind, should be monitoring the Programme for Government outcomes of their Departments?

I move now to page 14 and the capital plan. Richard, you mentioned that the budgeting for the telephone system was £170,000 in the next financial year but that there would be additional the following year. I would like to understand more about that. Will you elaborate on the replacement and upgrade of office furniture? What do you envisage that to be? Who is it for? Another of the projects is to:

*"Replace major pieces of broadcasting equipment and infrastructure should they fail".*

Does that mean "in case they fail" or "in circumstances where they do fail"? There is a significant difference. For interest's sake, I am keen to know who the portrait will be of. I welcome the fact, as Andrew mentioned, that you are moving towards trying to ensure that we can more easily access clips and so on without having to request them from the Assembly Communications Office. It is good to

move towards in-house videography services, as it is not a significant expenditure, in the grand scheme of things. However, I wonder about its impact on the broadcasting contract.

Those are pretty much all my questions for you. I have one question for our Committee, Chairman, if I may. Page 11 of Lesley's report, under "key milestones", says:

*"The submission of the Commission's contribution to Monitoring Rounds and the Spring Supplementary Estimate [sic] will be subject to agreed thresholds between the Commission and the Committee. If these thresholds are not exceeded, the Commission will not seek the Audit Committee's view on its in-year position."*

I wonder whether, as a Committee, for probity's sake, we should be asking our officials not just to give an account for overspend but to give an account for underspend so that we understand the variances in our budgets and why there would be an underspend in any given category. It would be fairly easy to explain, but, in the interests of probity and for budgeting, it is important that we understand what, and why, the variances were in the course of a year. Is that reasonable, Chairman?

**Mr McCrossan:** Yes.

**Ms Bunting:** Would you folks have any objection to that?

**Mr Stewart:** I will comment on that. The reference is to thresholds "not exceeded". That is either a plus or a minus so that the Committee might agree that if, after this meeting, you agree a budget position, you could then agree a threshold of plus or minus 5%, for instance. It is not just if we need more money; it is also if we are forecasting an underspend as well.

**Ms Bunting:** That is very useful. It is important that we understand the entire budgeting process and whether there are requests that are not necessary. Thank you. Chairman, on to my other questions.

**Mrs Hogg:** It is worth commenting, very briefly, on security. We are aware that a number of members have raised various security issues and that there is very little by way of support in the determination. It has also been raised by the Commission and is something that we are considering to see whether there are any other mechanisms that could be used to provide security support.

**Mr Stewart:** Chair, you mentioned the support that is available at Westminster. They have engaged the services of a private-sector company that will install various security devices across 650 constituency offices. It is my understanding that that was done by the House authorities as opposed to the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, so we are looking at that. Is it something that the Commission can take responsibility for, as opposed to being part of the determination? That will require legal advice, as it has to do with the interpretation of the Northern Ireland Act, and all manner of things. However, we will investigate it and, if the Commission can fulfil a role there, it is something that I think would be welcome. The alternative approach is to have a different determination that has a pot of money for security issues, but that can be done only if a competent authority changes the current determination. That is something that has been raised by a number of Members and which is actively being looked at.

**Mrs Hogg:** If we could work our way through your questions. Joanne. You talked about scrutiny for the Programme for Government. Obviously, that is a matter for the Assembly and how it wishes to scrutinise that, the level of resource, etc. So, it would be very difficult, from our point of view, to say whether there was any duplication or the extent of it. That is a matter for the Assembly; we simply provide whatever resources you need to support the Committee activity.

**Ms Bunting:** How do you budget, at this point, for what the Assembly envisages?

**Mrs Hogg:** At the minute, there are three Committees that are referred to: Brexit, the Bill of Rights, and PFG. Our plans allow for two Committee teams to support those three Committees. Obviously, again, once the Assembly has decided and we see how that activity is working, we may need more or less, but that is what we have budgeted for.

On the voice over internet protocol (VoIP) costs, the figures that you have are for the capital expenditure on that project. There is capital expenditure, and then there is ongoing revenue

expenditure for annual maintenance and so on. The capital expenditure is totalled. The budget for the total project is £560,000 over 10 years, and the rest is due to the annual maintenance costs.

**Ms Bunting:** Office furniture?

**Mr Stewart:** Joanne, the office furniture has not been limited to any one or any office. We have had three years, maybe more, where we have not spent too much money on office furniture. There is also a proposal in the Commission's corporate strategy to look at an office ergonomics project. Seats like this might look nice, but if you sit on them for an hour they do not feel too nice. The project will look at all occupants of the Building both in individual offices and in meeting rooms like this.

Therefore, the £50,000 is for the first year, as we have not spent much on furniture over the last five years or so. It is for buying replacement furniture, fixing things; it might be for a new suite of desks in a Committee room, but this is really the start. It might be the case that, over the next four or five years, we might radically rethink office furniture in the Building. We are not talking about slides and ball pits, but the phrase, "happy, healthy workplace" was used as a working title. That is the sort of thing we are looking for.

**Ms Bunting:** Broadcasting?

**Mr Stewart:** Yes, broadcasting. You couched it as, "should they fail", and that is more accurate.

**Ms Bunting:** It is in the report as "should they fail", but I am not clear what that means. Does it mean when it fails or in case it fails?

**Mrs Hogg:** Can I pick up on that? Our plan is to try to repair the broadcasting equipment. Some of it is very old, and that is why we have already started a project to look at replacing all the broadcasting equipment. In the first instance, we do try to repair, but, ultimately, we might have to replace it. It is not that we wait until something fails; we repair and maintain it. At some point, however, equipment does require to be replaced, and that is a small amount that we budget every year to allow for those items that will need to be replaced.

**Mr Stewart:** The officeholder portraits are of former Speakers.

**Mrs Hogg:** And First Minister. There is Peter Robinson, former First Minister, and Robin Newton, the former Speaker.

**Mr Stewart:** The final point was about in-house videography. It will not have a big impact on the broadcasting contract. It will not radically bring things in-house that have been done by our broadcast partners. It is more about additional things that we think we can do as well as the broadcasting contract, as opposed to removing it.

**Ms Bunting:** So it is complementary, really?

**Mr Stewart:** Yes.

**Mrs Hogg:** It is.

**Ms Bunting:** Thank you.

**Ms Sheerin:** Thank you, for your presentation. I have questions about the income of £739,000, on page 21, that the Commission will receive. How much of that comes through events like weddings on the Estate?

**Mr Stewart:** As Lesley said, the vast majority of that is just us re-charging ministerial salaries to Departments.

**Ms Sheerin:** So it is not that much.

**Mr Stewart:** Next year, there is about £15,000 of income on weddings and events that we charge for. It is not a significant amount of money. We always try to strike a balance, in that Parliament Buildings

is not a hotel or a convention centre. However, if it is not being used, and the Commission can generate income, it is a sensible thing to do. There are some minor items, where we recover costs of telephone calls, income from the post office, for example. It is in the small thousands of pounds. There is not a lot of that.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** Are we maximising the opportunities there? Is it well enough known publicly that people can hire the Building for such events?

**Mrs Hogg:** It is reasonably well known. We are trying to strike a balance, because we do not want this to become a wedding venue, and also we have to work around Members' activities and Assembly business. The only time that we can accommodate weddings is on Saturdays. There may be other Members' activities or events on at the weekend as well. We do not have an awful lot of time.

**Ms Sheerin:** I have just one more question. We touched earlier on the comparison with the other devolved Administrations, and I know that the current arrangements are set out in the determination that came about as a result of the review.

We have already touched on the workers' rights of our own staff. When the three are compared, the North is the area where a bigger cut goes to the salaries of Members than to constituency costs. The comparison between those figures is a bit depressing.

**Mrs Hogg:** Our figures are a direct lift from the determination. Wales has a remuneration panel that sets their rates as well. In Scotland, the rates are set by the corporate body.

**Ms Sheerin:** In both examples a higher amount goes to constituency costs, whereas here more money goes to Members than to staff their offices and pay for all the various outgoings. I want to put it on record, as other Members have done, that that is not ideal.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** I think that it is clear, Lesley, that there is a disparity, even comparing us with the Welsh Assembly. I saw in a recent document that there are quite a few disparities, if you compare this legislature with the Welsh one. There is a need for quite a few changes. However, we will not go into them today.

We are time-limited, so I will jump into a few issues. Is there anything else that you want to ask about that?

**Ms Sheerin:** No. That is fine.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** Lesley, what consideration has the Assembly Commission given to availing of shared services to maximise its efficiency savings? For example, it might join the NICS shared services?

**Mrs Hogg:** We did a substantial review of that in 2016. Richard was involved in it, so I will ask him to respond.

**Mr Stewart:** It was a fundamental review of our use of shared services. We do not participate in the three big ones, HR Connect, IT Assist and Account NI. They had the biggest focus of that review. The review covered both the quantitative aspect — the cost of services — and the qualitative aspect: the quality of services. We touched on it last time we were with the Committee. The reviews for the three main shared services found heavily in favour of retaining them in-house.

Having said that, I do not want to give the Committee the impression that we do not avail of a shared-services approach. We use a wide variety of frameworks, for example, that are set up by the Central Procurement Directorate. Pretty much all our repairs and maintenance in the Building are done under a framework set up by the Department of Finance Central Procurement Directorate. That is about £600,000 every year. We do our own thing in Account NI, IT Assist, and HR Connect, and we use the other shared services that the Civil Service offers, as appropriate for the Commission's business.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** I know that we are tight for time and that others are waiting.

I want to ask about the big issue at the minute: coronavirus. Lesley and Richard, I am sure that you have already begun work on preparing the Building and staff for the risk.

I am conscious as I walk around it that it is quite a large Building. I have been paranoid all week about washing my hands and avoiding particular contact with people, in light of what has emerged. What measures are you taking to ensure that we are prepared, particularly from an Assembly point of view? For staff, Members and the public, hand hygiene is the big factual point that everyone is focusing on. What is being done about that — sanitisers around the Building, for example?

**Mrs Hogg:** We issued guidance to staff and all Building users last week, following the Public Health Agency's advice. We are monitoring developments on a daily basis and keeping in close contact with the other legislatures. We had a conference call last week, and we are due to have another one this week. Hand sanitisers have been provided, and signs are going up in the toilets, hopefully as we speak or very shortly afterwards, giving more details about hand washing and so on. It is recommended that single-use towels should be used, and those are being installed at the moment.

At this stage, we are taking all those basic steps, and we are monitoring the advice. We have business continuity arrangements in place as well, and, until we see whether the situation develops adversely, all we can do is monitor and plan for what may happen. We also have very detailed arrangements that we had considered for the swine flu pandemic. Again, we are reviewing that plan, because a lot of it is, potentially, very relevant to the current circumstance. It is evolving daily, so we are monitoring it and we will take further action if and when required and if advised to do so.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** Is additional budget provision required?

**Mrs Hogg:** At the moment, there is no additional budget provision, because, obviously, our budget figures have been submitted. Were there to be significant budget implications, we would need to consider that.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** I have been in the Building over the last week but have not noticed any hand sanitisers anywhere. People are conscious of their hand hygiene and, for convenience's sake — that will be the key — where sanitisers are placed, apart from the toilets.

**Mrs Hogg:** At the moment, they are placed at the front desk and at the east and west entrances. The guidance is that hand washing properly is as good as sanitisers; therefore, because of the provision in the toilets, we have not provided them there. If we feel that additional sanitisers are required around the Building, there is no issue at all: we can have those installed.

**The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan):** By way of precaution, it is important that that be considered. A lot of this is about convenience: people cannot very quickly get to a bathroom, and it is important that we consider that in light of the seriousness of the risk of the infection spreading.

Thank you, Lesley and Richard, for your presentation. I am sorry that we took a bit longer to question you. Thank you very much for your detailed answers.