

Appendix G

IFRP Survey of Assembly Members (October 2011)

Summary of Results

317. A survey of Assembly Members was conducted by the Independent Financial Review Panel (IFRP) during October 2011. A total of 31 out of the 108 questionnaires were completed – a response rate of only 29%. While the response was disappointingly low, it is similar to the poor response rate of 31% achieved in the last Members Survey conducted earlier in the year.
318. It should be noted that the survey results remain valid and informative as all Members were given the opportunity to respond, although it does mean that it would be meaningless to attempt any breakdown of the results in relation to office holders or any other categories. The additional comments (presented in Annex A) are also informative.
319. The main results are as follows:
- MLAs reported working an average of around 56 hours per week. Almost half of this time (48%) involves constituency work, 23% is spent on plenary work, 16% on Committee work, with an average of 13% of time spent on 'other' work.
 - Nine out of the 31 MLAs were also Councillors. Other responsibilities reported by respondents included the District Policing Partnership (2), Assembly Private Secretary (1) and various community groups (1).
 - On their reasons for becoming an MLA, 'support for your constituents/the public' emerged as the primary reason, 'contribution to your party' was second, 'contribution to the Assembly' was third, with 'self development' and 'financial reward' ranked as the least important reasons.
 - Consistent with this, the main reason given for taking up a position of office (or wanting to do so in the future) was 'support for your constituents/the public', with 'contribution to the Assembly' ranked second, 'contribution to your Party' third, and 'self development' and 'financial reward' again last.
 - The most important area of work in carrying out their role, as an MLA, was 'protecting/promoting the interests of your constituency', with 'dealing with constituency casework' second, 'contributing to the work of the Assembly in Plenary sessions' third, 'contributing to the work of the Assembly in Committee(s)' fourth, and 'representing and supporting your Party' the least important.

- On the issue of whether or not MLAs felt that their salary reflected the responsibilities of their role, most of them (77%) said that the salary should be higher, while five (17%) said yes, it did reflect their responsibilities, and two (7%) said that the salary should be lower.
- Most of the respondents felt that all positions of office should receive an additional allowance. Support was almost unanimous for additional allowances for Ministerial positions (97%), and also high for the Speaker's position (84%) and for Committee Chairs (87%), but not just as high for the positions of Deputy Speaker (70%), Deputy Committee Chair (68%) or Member of the Commission (61%). A number of suggestions were also made in relation to payment of allowances for some Office Holder responsibilities that are not currently paid (see Annex A).
- In response to the question for office holders on whether or not their additional allowance is appropriate, six out of the ten respondents said yes, it was. The other four said that the allowance should be higher.

Comments

Reasons for becoming an MLA

- The desire to challenge the inherent undemocratic nature of the structures whereby even an opposition is denied and pursuant to the system of mandatory coalition the electorate are effectively denied the opportunity to change their government. These are prime motivators for me.
- To play a part in making a difference for constituents especially in rural areas who for too often are marginalised.

Role of an MLA

- It would be wrong to put any of the above before another. It all has to be worked together.
- In promoting interests of constituency I would include constituency work, although much of this can be done by my support staff.
- In addition I am Party Whip and attend and contribute to the Business Committee.

Average week of an MLA

- NIABT, A&Gs UNSCR1325, Children, Co-operatives partly-related Assembly work. Assembly-related media work.
- Take part in the many events in Stormont and constituency related to committee business weekly.

- Administration - dealing with correspondence by post and emails re: general enquiries, public campaigns etc. (10 hrs). Managing the constituency office - dealing with invoices, HR issues etc. (2 hrs).
- These figures are very variable/ no allowance for weekend work.
- Party work: 10 hours. Very hard to divide it up. Reading/mail/documents is ongoing all the time. Over the weeks I average 72 hours each week. The above does not include party work which is very much part of all of the above and should not be excluded!
- I normally work 70 plus hours a week starting at 7-7.30am until 10.00pm most nights Monday thru Friday. I try to keep Saturdays as free as possible.
- Cross Party Working Groups.
- Every week is different; so hard to answer.
- In addition I have 2 staff to manage and monitor in my role as an MLA. As Chief Whip I also have responsibility for management and monitoring of Assembly Party Group Staff [4] and interns.
- Travel.
- I also serve as a councillor; 20 hrs per week.
- It is difficult to say. I would work over 100+ hrs a week average on a crossover of all the above. I reside within my constituency/community and many people would call to my door with constituency queries 24/7.

Office Holder Responsibilities

- Represent Party on these issues. Colleagues seek regular meetings with constituents on related issues. Considerable media issues.
- The main role is to provide active leadership and direction for the committee during its deliberations. This requires a thorough reading of all the papers and a proper understanding of their implications. You do have to act as a bridge between the Assembly and the relevant department, in particular, the relevant minister.
- Pre-meeting preparation with Committee Clerk; chairing weekly meetings; representing committee at events; meeting stakeholders; speaking on behalf of committee at plenary sessions; meetings with the ministers/senior departmental officials for briefings.
- Running the Commission.
- Many more meetings expected of an office holder. More lobbying and responsibility to ensure party members are kept fully informed of all issues within Committee, etc.
- Occasional Chairpersonship; additional preparation/liaison with Clerks; attendance at events and public speaking.

Skills required for Office Holder roles

- Communication. Consensus building. In-depth knowledge of subject matter. Confidentiality when appropriate. Inter-personal skills for constant meetings with a cross-section of community.
- Preparation must be good and comprehensive. The ability to read quickly and absorb thoroughly information supplied. Good analytical tools. Good chairmanship, in as far as giving everybody a fair hearing, but at the same time maintaining proper control of the meeting. The ability to communicate and the ability to listen.
- Understanding of committee's remit and responsibilities; understanding work of department; communication skills; leadership skills.
- Management skills; financial background; personnel skills; business experience.
- Common-sense and determination to ensure that what is good for the people of NI is brought to the fore and legislated for.
- Strategic Planning; Analytical Planning; Organisational Skills and Presentation.

Reasons for taking on Office Holder role

- I would do the role if there was no financial remuneration.
- I would have done it whether or not I got a financial reward.
- Since I reject the system as constructed I have no desire to sustain it by holding office within it.
- I never came into politics for financial gain but to serve my community and Party.

Any other Office Holder responsibilities for which allowance should be paid

- Party Whips – sliding scale based on size of Party/same as Chair of Committee/£5,000.
- Deputy Whip – £2,500.
- Assembly Private Secretary – £10,000.
- Party Leader – £16,000.
- Policing Board Nominee – £15,000/same as Independents who sit on the Board/£10,000.
- Audit Committee Chair (8 hours + responsibility).
- Standing Committee Chairs – £2,000.

Other Comments

- This is supposedly a “Legislative Assembly”, but so far in 11/15 term we haven’t legislated - no bills, no programme for govt, so no justification for a pay rise, rather on the basis of productivity a strong case for reduction. We are not comparable to Scotland - its parliament works! 2. The ability of many MLAs suggests they are already overpaid - out of the 108, how many outside Stormont could earn £43,000 pa? 3. In these austere times, with working families hurting and many without work, increasing salaries for MLAs would be wholly inappropriate. 4. Though I disagree with any increase, any upward adjustment should be self-financing through reduction in the number of MLAs.
- The basic salary is not appropriate as it is too low. Having said that I would still seek re-election because money is not the dominant factor in wanting to be elected to the Assembly. Poor salary is I believe a marginal issue for most Assembly members. It does not stop people standing for the Assembly but it could inhibit future young professionals from seeking election.
- I feel it would be easier to justify additional support and resource, e.g. OCE, than a huge salary rise, given the public perception of the efficiency of the NIA, not least the last election turnout percentage.
- The post of Assembly Member has failed to attract public esteem for several reasons. This has to change in the best interests of Northern Ireland.
- I believe if we are going to encourage high skilled personnel to the Assembly, they must be suitably incentivised.
- You have no private life and everything you can do is open to an overbearing level of scrutiny. Politics must attract the very best from society whether business/social or any other. Once in politics in Northern Ireland you can be blighted from any other work. This must all be remunerated/compensated for.
- OCAs are probably insufficient to maintain an office, paying rent, rates, heat, light and adequate staff salaries. I believe we do not/cannot pay our support staff enough. In some rural constituencies it is necessary to have more than one office and this exacerbates the problem
- Most Assembly Members while given poor press work extremely hard for their constituents. This is demonstrated by the vote made every 4 years. Therefore anyone who holds an Assembly post deserves to be paid in accordance with that work.
- There is an old saying ‘ If you pay peanuts you get monkeys’. The salary of an MLA is well below that of a middle ranking civil servant or even middle ranking police officers - C/Insp./Supt. It does not compare with private or public sector equivalent.
- I would prefer an increase in OCA to a pay rise.

- I am not aware of any Member that seeks election to the NIA for financial gain. The hours are long but I, personally, do not mind the long unsociable hours. The salary has though fallen behind colleagues in other devolved institutions over the years.
- OCA needs increasing and staff of MLA's need to be linked to a grade within the Civil Service to keep quality staff in place i.e. Graduates need £20K+.