

Mr Robin Newton MBE MLA
Speaker
Northern Ireland Assembly
Room 40
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast BT4 3XX

22 June 2016

Dear Mr Speaker

INDEPENDENT FINANCIAL REVIEW PANEL (IFRP): OFFICIAL OPPOSITION

I write further our recent correspondence on the establishment of an official Opposition in the Assembly.

The Panel was aware of issues relating to an Opposition through its consultation during 2015 on the draft Bill that made provision for an Opposition should parties refuse places on the NI Executive through the operation of the D'Hondt system, and also through the provisions made in the Fresh Start Agreement in December 2015. The IFRP therefore anticipated the need to consider salaries and other support for an official Opposition and indeed referred to this in paragraphs 50 and 51 of the Report accompanying its 2016 Determinations.

Now that two parties are formally recognised as being the Opposition in the Assembly, the Panel has given further consideration to the matter and has agreed to write and formally advise you and the Commission of its considered position and ask that you consider the matter further in the development of the democratic process at the Assembly.

The Panel has decided that it would be in favour of consulting with a view to making an exceptional Determination on the matter of a remunerated Opposition. However, as I am sure you will be aware, the Panel's term of appointment ends on 1 July 2016 and thus it will be unable to undertake this work or to bind any possible successors.

Under the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, which established it, the IFRP is not constrained in considering remuneration of MLAs by the

Standing Orders or by any Assembly Committee. It is, however, mindful of the value of good governance and process in considering matters of remuneration and support for MLAs, whether in office or not, and the Panel is confident that the Commission will wish to see these matters expedited.

The basis on which the Panel would have consulted on the matter of a remunerated Opposition is as follows:

- Designated leaders of political parties who are entitled to but who do not nominate a member of the NI Executive should receive an annual salary of £68,000 (this represents 50% of the difference between an MLA and ministerial salary).
- Designated leaders of political parties who are entitled to but who do not nominate a member of the NI Executive should be available to them the support of an additional member of support staff at Grade 3 level, linked to assisting parliamentary duties only, and based at Parliament Buildings, Stormont.
- Any other views from the public and stakeholders to assist in determining how to finance and resource an official Opposition.

Given the above, and the requirement for the Commission to consider the appointment of a replacement IFRP, or to legislate for alternative arrangements, which may take some time, the Panel has decided to place on record its decision with regard to consultation as outlined above. It is now for others to progress this matter.

The Independent Financial Review Panel wishes you and the NI Assembly every success for the current mandate and beyond.

Yours sincerely



PAT McCARTAN
Chairperson