



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday, 22 April 2021

Meeting Location: The Senate, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Harry Harvey MLA
David Hilditch MLA
Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Mr Cathal Boylan MLA
Ms Órlaithí Flynn MLA
Mr Andrew Muir MLA
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA

Apologies: **None**

In Attendance: Ms Lucia Wilson (Assembly Clerk)
Ms Gillian Barker (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

In Attendance by Video or Teleconference:

Ms Karen Barry (Clerical Supervisor)



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The meeting commenced at 2.04 pm in Closed Session

The following officials joined the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB Comptroller & Auditor General (C&AG) for Northern Ireland Assembly (NIAO);
Mr Tomas Wilkinson, NIAO; and
Mr Kyle Bingham Assembly Support Officer, NIAO joined the meeting remotely.

The Committee considered correspondence dated 15 April 2021 from Mike Brennan, AO DfE regarding follow up information from the evidence session on 'Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy' on 18 March 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite Mr Brennan, AO DfE to return to the Committee and clarify some of the issues in his response dated 15 April.

Agreed: The Committee agreed this would be arranged in line with the Audit Office completing further work on the inquiry.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward this correspondence to the Audit Office.

The meeting commenced at 2.16 pm in Open Session

1. Apologies

None

2. Draft Minutes of 15 April 2021

Agreed: The draft minutes of the meeting of 15 April 2021 were signed and agreed to be published.



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3. Declaration of Interest

None

4. Matters Arising

None

5. Correspondence

The following officials joined the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB Comptroller & Auditor General (C&AG) for Northern Ireland Assembly (NIAO);
Mr Tomas Wilkinson, NIAO; and
Mr Kyle Bingham Assembly Support Officer, NIAO joined the meeting remotely.

Trevor McKee – Charity Commission for Northern Ireland {CCNI}

The Committee noted correspondence dated 9 April 2021 from Mr Trevor McKee regarding CCNI Minutes of Special Board Meeting No 87 held on Monday 18 January 2021.

Agreed: The Committee noted Mr McKee's correspondence and agreed to forward it to the Audit Office as part of its review into CCNI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to inform Mr McKee of these actions.



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Localised Restrictions Support Scheme - Overpayments

The Committee noted correspondence dated 15 April 2021 from Sue Gray, AO DoF regarding 'Localised Restrictions Support Scheme – Overpayments'. Ms Gray provided details of an ongoing review of the approved LRSS applications, and that the Department is seeking recovery of LRSS payments from some businesses that have been overpaid or paid in error.

The Committee noted the Department has recently written to 480 businesses during the week ending 2 April 2020 regarding the overpayment or incorrect payment of LRSS support.

The Committee noted the correspondence has been copied to the C&AG and that the Finance Minister has written in similar terms to the Chair of the Finance Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Ms Gray, AO, DoF to keep the Committee updated on this matter.

Peter May, AO Department of Justice – Evidence Session

The Committee noted correspondence from Peter May, AO, DoJ dated 15 April 2021 regarding confirmation of attendance at the evidence session on 20 May 2021 on yjr inquiry into Speeding up Justice.

The Committee noted the witnesses who will be attending on 20 May 2021:

- Peter May, AO Department of Justice;
- Anthony Harbinson – Deputy Secretary, Access to Justice and Director of the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service;
- Glyn Capper – Head of Justice Performance, Department of Justice; and
- Peter Luney – Chief Operating Officer – NI Courts and Tribunals Service

Agreed: The Committee agreed to additional witnesses for this inquiry, that is the Police Service for Northern Ireland {PSNI} and the Public Prosecution Services Northern Ireland {PPSNI}.



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Impact Review of Special Educational Needs – Memorandum of Reply.

The Committee noted correspondence dated 14 April 2021 from Fiona Elliot, DoF regarding Memorandum of Reply on PAC's Report 'Impact Review of Special Educational Needs', which has been laid in the Business Office.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that, as part of PAC's inquiry process, to add this correspondence to next week's agenda, as a substantial Item.

The meeting remained in Open Session at 2.24 pm

6. Ministerial Directions

The following Officials remained in the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG NIAO;
Mr Rodney Allen, Chief Operating Officer, NIAO; and
Mr Kyle Bingham Assembly Support Officer, NIAO remotely

Publishing Ministerial Directions on DOF website

The Committee noted correspondence dated 14 April 2021, from Sue Gray, AO, DoF regarding an update on publishing Ministerial Directions. Ms Gray stated that guidance was issued to all Accounting Officers on 2 April advising that from 1 April 2021 Ministerial Directions should be copied to the Treasury Officer of Accounts team, who will then arrange for the Ministerial Directions to be published as quickly as possible on the DoF website.

The Committee noted that DoF has been engaging with the NIAO on drawing up a full list of Ministerial Directions to 31 March 2021 since 2007.



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Agreed: The Committee noted that Ms Gray aims to have the historic list finalised and published before the end of April 2021.

Late Notifications of Ministerial Directions

The Committee noted correspondence date 21 April 2021 from Mr Kieran Donnelly CB, C&AG regarding 'Late notification of Ministerial Directions from the Department for the Economy'. The correspondence included a comprehensive list of Ministerial Directions issued since April 2020 and their status, that is '*late notification, potential delay or no delay*'.

The Committee noted the DoF Permanent Secretary has agreed to publish a comprehensive list of all Ministerial Directions issued since devolution in 2007.

The Committee noted the C&AG has identified seven schemes (or scheme extensions) covered by Ministerial Directions obtained by the Department for the Economy (DfE) over the period from 22 October 2020 to 5 March 2021, the details of which, have not, as yet been forwarded to the C&AG.

The Committee noted the C&AG will continue to liaise with DfE and DoF to agree a list for publication and to identify what lessons can be learned, to ensure that this does not happen again.

Agreed: The Committee noted the C&AG will update PAC on a regular basis on this matter.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to address this matter of 'Late Notifications', when the C&AG has completed his work.

The meeting remained in Open Session at 2.30 pm



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7. Inquiry into Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy: Evidence Session 1.

Evidence Session 1

The following witnesses attending the meeting remotely were:

Steven Agnew – Head of RenewableNI
Michael Thompson – Managing Director, Everun
Russell Smyth - KPMG

Also in attendance:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, C&AG, NIAO; and
Mr Stuart Stevenson, Treasury Officer of Accounts, DoF{attending remotely}.

The Committee noted the following papers in respect of the two evidence sessions:

- NIAO report on Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy;
- KPMG report on behalf of RenewableNI – ‘An Economic Review of Small Scale Wind’;
- Witness biographies – Steven Agnew, Head of RenewableNI; Russell Smyth, Partner KPMG and Michael Thompson, Managing Director of Everun;
- Paper dated 12 April 2021 from Professor Hughes – ‘Small wind generation in Northern Ireland’;
- NIAO restricted paper ‘Suggested Areas of Questions’;
- Article by Peter Donaghy, regarding NI’s expensive push towards renewable electricity; and

The Committee welcomed Mr Agnew, Mr Thompson and Mr Smyth to the meeting. Mr Agnew, Head of RenewableNI made a statement to the Committee and there then followed a question and answer session.



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Agreed: The Committee agreed Mr Agnew would remain for Evidence Session 2.

8. Inquiry into Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy: Evidence Session 2

Evidence Session 2

The following witness attended the meeting remotely:

Professor Gordon Hughes, School of Economics, University of Edinburgh.

The Committee welcomed Professor Hughes to the meeting. Professor Hughes made a statement and there then followed a question and answer session.

Mr Andrew Muir MLA left the meeting at 4.15 pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward Professor Hugh's Report 'Small wind generation in Northern Ireland' to Mr Agnew, RenewableNI. The Committee noted the Professor's report would be published tomorrow on the 'Renewable Energy Foundation's' website.

The meeting went into Closed Session at 4.36 pm

9. Inquiry into 'Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy' - Discussion

The following Departmental Officials joined the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG NIAO;

Mr Tomas Wilkinson, Director NIAO

Mr Brian O'Neill, Senior Auditor remotely; and

Mr Kyle Bingham Assembly Support Officer, NIAO remotely.



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The Committee discussed with Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG and his team, the two previous evidence sessions on the inquiry into 'Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy'.

Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA left the meeting at 4.45 pm.

The meeting remained in Closed Session at 4.46 pm

10. Draft Forward Work Programme

The following officials remained in the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG;
Mr Rodney Allen, Chief Operating Officer and
Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer NIAO.

The Committee considered a request from the Finance Committee to release NIAO Report 2017 'Managing the Central Government Estate', this report is still under PAC primacy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to release the NIAO Report, 'Managing the Central Government Estate' and to notify the Finance Committee of this decision.

The Committee noted the draft Forward Work Programme covering the period 15 April through to end of the Summer.

Agreed: The Committee agreed additional evidence sessions for their 7th inquiry 'Speeding Up Justice', and will invite witnesses from PSNI and PPS.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the draft Forward Work Programme and to publish it on the website.



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11. Any Other Business

Committee Press Releases

The Committee noted the Chair and Clerk will be meeting with Head of Communications on this issue next week.

12. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Public Accounts Committee will take place on Thursday 29 April 2021, at 2.00 pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 4.55 pm.

Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA
Chairperson
Public Accounts Committee
22 April 2021