



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Public Accounts Committee

## Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday, 25 March 2021

**Meeting Location:** The Senate, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

**Present:** Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA (Chairperson)  
Mr Harry Harvey MLA  
Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA

**Present by Video or Teleconference:**

Mr Roy Beggs MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Cathal Boylan MLA  
Ms Órlaithí Flynn MLA  
Mr Andrew Muir MLA  
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA

**Apologies:** David Hilditch MLA

**In Attendance:** Ms Aoibhinn Treanor (Assembly Clerk)  
Ms Gillian Barker (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

**In Attendance by Video or Teleconference:**

Ms Karen Barry (Clerical Supervisor)  
Mr Darren Weir (Clerical Officer)



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Before going into Open Session the Committee agreed the Chairperson would make a brief statement before Agenda Item 5, Correspondence, in regards to the Sports NI Sustainability Fund. The Committee discussed the procedures for public interest disclosures and the ambit of the NIAO public reporting programme regarding covid-related expenditure.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the statement to be read out.

The meeting commenced at 2.11 pm in Open Session

### 1. Apologies

Mr David Hilditch MLA

### 2. Draft Minutes of 18 March 2021

**Agreed:** The draft minutes of the meeting of 18 March 2021 were signed and agreed to be published.

### 3. Declaration of Interest

There were no declaration of interests.

### 4. Matters Arising

None



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At this point in the meeting the Chairperson made a brief statement regarding an earlier discussion of covid-related expenditure and the Sports Sustainability Fund:

*'I have spoken with the Audit Office which has confirmed it will be scrutinising COVID related expenditure in their audits of government departments and in their public reporting programme.*

*"The Audit Office has also confirmed that this type of grant expenditure will be examined."*

The Committee noted the statement.

### **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, Director, NIAO; and  
Mr Kyle Bingham Assembly Support Officer, NIAO joined the meeting remotely.

### **COVID 19 Indemnity Arrangements (Spring 21/ Summer 21)**

The Committee noted correspondence dated 15 March 2021 from Robin Swann MLA, Minister of Health regarding COVID 19 indemnity arrangements for Spring / Summer 2021. Further to the Minister's letter of 14 October 2021, this letter is an update on the indemnity cover his Department has put in place in accordance with Section 13 of the Coronavirus Act 2020 and its healthcare responsibilities.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the correspondence.



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### **Kevin Loughran**

The Committee noted correspondence, dated 18 March 2021, from Kevin Loughran inquiring whether: *'there are outdated turbines that are broken 70% of the time, getting money from the public purse, that are not creating electricity for the grid'*.

The C&AG advised the Committee that accredited wind generating stations only earn ROCs based on the amount of electricity they generate and therefore if a turbine is not working, they will not receive any ROCs.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to Mr Loughran to ask if he had any evidence of broken turbines receiving money from the public purse, that would be useful for PAC's inquiry into 'Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy'.

### **Deirdre Toner, NI Civil Service Commissioners**

The Committee noted correspondence dated 15 March 2021 from Mrs Deirdre Toner, NI Civil Service Commissioner regarding the evidence session on 4 March 2021 as part of the Committee's current inquiry into 'Capacity and Capability in the NICS'. Mrs Toner has provided details on the recommendations the Commissioners have made to NICS Departments since she took up post; and the current number of temporary posts within the NICS at Grade 5 or above.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward this response to the Northern Ireland Audit Office to be incorporated into the inquiry report, as appropriate.

The meeting remained in Open Session at 2.18 pm

### **6. Ministerial Direction: Proposal to provide all Full Time Higher Education Students a COVID-19 Disruption Payment of £500.**

The following Officials remained in the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG NIAO;  
Mr Tomas Wilkinson, Director, NIAO; and



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Mr Kyle Bingham Assembly Support Officer, NIAO remotely.

The Committee noted correspondence from Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG dated 18 March 2021, regarding a Ministerial Direction - £500 COVID DISRUPTION PAYMENT SCHEME FOR STUDENTS. The DfE Permanent Secretary wrote to Mr Donnelly on 11 March 2021 to advise he had sought a ministerial direction from the DfE Minister, Diane Dodds MLA, on 4 February 2021 to implement a support scheme for students.

The Committee noted that this is a one-off discretionary payment of £500 to full-time students at Northern Ireland publicly funded Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and full-time Higher Education students at the Further Education Colleges (FECs), in recognition of the disruption suffered by students to their studies due to the impact of Covid-19.

The proposed payment will be made by the HEIs and FECs to all full-time students, undergraduate and postgraduate, enrolled at their Institution. Including the administration cost, the proposed scheme for full-time home, EU and GB students in NI HEIs and FECs is likely to **cost approximately £22m**.

The Committee noted Mr Donnelly's comments that while the Permanent Secretary has indicated that there is political support for this project, and that the Executive has agreed to provide funding for the scheme, the scheme is expensive and carries high risks.

The Committee noted the relevant correspondence which underpinned the decision to proceed with the delivery of the scheme.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the scale of the Ministerial Directions regarding COVID 19 financial support schemes. The C&AG stated that he would be carrying out a review on COVID 19 spend of which the Ministerial Directions would form a part.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to Sue Gray, AO DoF for an update on publishing the Ministerial Directions promptly in regards to the timely/contemporaneous transparency of decision making about public funds.

The meeting remained in Open Session at 2.27 pm



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**7. Ministerial Direction: Department for Health: Additional Financial Support to DOH Core Grant Funded Organisations 2020/21.**

The following Officials remained in the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG NIAO;  
Mr Tomas Wilkinson, Director, NIAO; and  
Mr Kyle Bingham Assembly Support Officer, NIAO remotely.

The Committee noted correspondence from Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG dated 23 March 2021, regarding correspondence from Richard Pengelly, Permanent Secretary on a Ministerial Direction to provide additional financial support for Department of Health Core Grant Funded Organisations.

The sector provides support to some of the most vulnerable children and adults; as vulnerability was exacerbated by the pandemic, the role of the sector was felt to be even more critical than in normal circumstances. In recognition of the challenges faced by the sector during the pandemic, and their contribution to the COVID response, the Health Minister has now directed that core grant allocation in 2020/21 is uplifted by 25%.

The Committee noted that grants to these 65 organisations currently total £3.5 million per annum. The Ministerial direction provides for an uplift of 25% of this grant, **which will provide an extra £872,000.**

The Committee noted the relevant correspondence which underpinned the decision to proceed with the delivery of the scheme.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the Ministerial Direction.

The meeting remained in Open Session at 2.29 pm



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## 8. Ministerial Direction: TEO - Travel Agent Support Scheme

The following Officials remained in the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG NIAO;  
Mr Tomas Wilkinson, Director, NIAO; and  
Mr Kyle Bingham Assembly Support Officer, NIAO remotely.

The Committee noted correspondence from Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG dated 23 March 2021, regarding correspondence from The Executive Office on a Ministerial Direction: COVID SUPPORT SCHEME FOR TRAVEL AGENTS.

The proposal is for a flat payment of £10k to approximately 100 travel agent businesses plus £3.5k to approximately 50 homeworkers. The bespoke scheme would **cost in the region of £1.175m**.

The Ministers wrote to the Interim Accounting Officer of TEO on 11 March requesting that he implements the travel agent support scheme. On 12 March the Interim Accounting Officer sent a copy of the Ministerial Direction to the Department of Finance for approval in accordance with MPMNI.

The Committee noted the relevant correspondence which underpinned the decision to proceed with the delivery of the scheme.

**Agreed:** The Committee discussed whether this was the first Ministerial Direction from the Executive Office. The C&AG agreed to get back to the Committee on this matter.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the Ministerial Direction.

The meeting went into Closed Session at 2.35 pm



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## 9. Inquiry into ‘Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy’ – Issues Paper

The following Departmental Officials remained in the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG NIAO;  
Mr Tomas Wilkinson, Director, NIAO; and  
Mr Kyle Bingham Assembly Support Officer, NIAO remotely.

The Committee discussed with Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG and his team, the evidence session of 18 March 2021, on its inquiry into ‘Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy’, which was attended by Mr Mike Brennan Accounting Officer, Department for Economy, Mr Richard Rogers, Head of Energy, DfE and Mr Trevor McBriar, Principal Officer for Renewable Energy DfE.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted NIAO’s Issues Paper and agreed to write to the Department on a number of follow-up issues.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that NIAO’s Issues Paper would form the main part of the inquiry report into ‘Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy’.

The meeting remained in Closed Session at 3.06 pm

## 10. Draft Forward Work Programme

The following officials remained in the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG;  
Mr Tomas Wilkinson, Director NIAO and  
Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer NIAO.

The Committee discussed correspondence dated 23 March 2021, from Mr Peter May, AO Department for Justice, regarding his follow-up letter of 19 March 2021,





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requesting additional information to support deferral of the inquiry on 'Speeding up Justice, delays in the criminal system' until Autumn 2021.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the subsequent response from Mr May AO DfJ and the comprehensive progress report. After some discussion, the Committee however agreed the inquiry into 'Speeding up Justice, delays in the criminal system' should not be delayed. The Clerk will contact Mr May AO DfJ to schedule the evidence session for May 2021.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to formally invite both RenewableNI and Professor Hughes, to give evidence at PAC's meeting on 22 April 2021 regarding their inquiry into 'Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy'.

**Agreed:** The Committee considered whether any other evidence sessions should be scheduled into the forward work programme to further inquiry into 'Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy'.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the list of NIAO Current and Forthcoming Reports and agreed to revisit this after Easter to schedule the draft Forward Work Programme through to the Summer.

The meeting remained in Closed Session at 3.12 pm

### **11. Any Other Business**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to issue a Press Release. The Press Release will reflect the discussion and statement about covid-related expenditure including the Sports Sustainability Fund recorded at the beginning of today's meeting; and issue in the name of the Chairperson.



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## **12. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting**

The next meeting of the Public Accounts Committee will take place on Thursday 15 April 2021, at 2.00 pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 3.15 pm.

**Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA**  
**Chairperson**  
**Public Accounts Committee**  
**25 March 2021**