



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday, 27 May 2021

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

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

Present by Video or Teleconference:

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

Apologies: Mr David Hilditch MLA

In Attendance: Ms Lucia Wilson (Assembly Clerk)
Ms Gillian Barker (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Ms Karen Barry (Clerical Supervisor)

The meeting went into Open Session at 2.07 pm.



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1. Apologies

Mr David Hilditch MLA

2. Draft Minutes of 20 May 2021

Agreed: The draft minutes of the meeting of 20 May 2021 were signed and agreed to be published.

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



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Mr Colum Boyle, Interim AO DoF

The Committee noted correspondence dated 21 May 2021 from Colum Boyle AO DoF regarding the Memorandum of Reply for the Major Capital Projects Report. Mr Boyle has apologised for the delay and advises that this work is now in the final stages. The Committee noted the DoF Minister will be writing to Executive Colleagues imminently to seek agreement to the MOR wording and request final sign off.

Agreed: The Committee noted Mr Boyle's response.

Mr Trevor McKee

The Committee noted correspondence dated 23 May 2021 from Mr Trevor McKee to the Audit Office regarding a statement concerning the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland accounts.

The Committee noted further correspondence dated 24 May 2021 from Mr Trevor McKee regarding CCNI accounts.

Agreed: The Committee noted there is on-going dialogue between Mr Kieran Donnelly, C&AG and Mr McKee on this matter.

The meeting remained in Open Session at 2.11 pm.

6. Ministerial Directions

. The following Officials joined the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB Comptroller & Auditor General (C&AG) for Northern Ireland Assembly (NIAO);
Mr Neil Gray, Director NIAO;
Mr Patrick Barr, Director NIAO, remotely; and
Mr Kyle Bingham Assembly Support Officer, NIAO remotely.



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The Committee noted they are considering 4 of 5 'late' Ministerial Directions from Department for Economy, and that Mr Mike Brennan AO DfE will be in front of the Committee on 17 June to discuss the delays in receiving the directions.

The Committee noted the C&AG is taking forward, with the Department, the reasons for the delays and will be updating the Committee, in due course, on what actions are being taken.

MINISTERIAL DIRECTIONS:

EXTENSION TO COVID RESTRICTIONS BUSINESS SUPPORT SCHEME [CRBSS] & LARGE TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY BUSINESS SUPPORT SCHEME [LTHBSS] TO 31 MARCH 2021.

The Committee noted correspondence from Mr Kieran Donnelly C&AG dated 24 May 2021 regarding a Ministerial Direction to extend the 'Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme' (CRBSS) and 'Large Tourism and Hospitality Business Support Scheme' (LTHBSS) to cover the period to 31 March 2021. Mr Mike Brennan AO DfE wrote to the C&AG on 19 April 2021 to advise that he had sought a Ministerial Direction from the DfE Minister, Diane Dodds MLA, on 26 February 2021.

The Committee noted the relevant correspondence which underpins the decision to proceed with the delivery of the two schemes:

- Annex A: Submission from the Accounting Officer to the Minister;
- Annex B: Read out of 4 March Executive Meeting in which proposal was approved; and
- Annex C: Ministerial Directions (one for each scheme) issued by the Minister.

Agreed: The Committee noted the C&AG will keep this matter under review as the audit of the 2020-21 financial statements progresses and will brief the Committee at the earliest opportunity.



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Agreed: The Committee noted the Ministerial Direction

EXTENSION TO COVID RESTRICTIONS BUSINESS SUPPORT SCHEME [CRBSS] & LARGE TOURISM AND HOSPITALITY BUSINESS SUPPORT SCHEME [LTHBSS] BEYOND 31 MARCH 2021.

The Committee noted correspondence from Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG dated 24 May 2021, regarding a Ministerial Direction to extend the Covid Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS) and Large Tourism and Hospitality Business Support Scheme (LTHBSS) to cover the period beyond 31 March 2021. Mr Mike Brennan, AO DfE wrote to the C&AG on 19 April 2021 to advise that he had sought a Ministerial Direction from the DfE Minister, Diane Dodds MLA, on 23 March 2021.

The Committee noted the relevant correspondence which underpins the decision to proceed with the delivery of the two schemes:

- Annex A: Submission from the Accounting Officer to the Minister;
- Annex B: Minutes of Executive Meeting 25 March showing approval;
- Annex C: Ministerial Directions (one for each scheme) issued by the Minister; and
- Annex D: DoF response re: funding for the schemes beyond 31 March 2021.

Agreed: The Committee noted the C&AG will keep this matter under review as the audit of the 2020-21 financial statements progresses and as he plans the audit programme for the 2021-22 financial statements.

Agreed: The Committee noted the Ministerial Direction.

BED AND BREAKFAST, GUEST HOUSE AND GUEST ACCOMMODATION SCHEME.



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The Committee noted correspondence from Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG dated 24 May 2021 regarding a Ministerial Direction to implement a 'Bed and Breakfast, Guest Houses and Guest Accommodation Scheme'. Mr Mike Brennan, AO DfE wrote to the C&AG on 19 April 2021 to advise that he had sought a Ministerial Direction from the DfE Minister, Diane Dodds MLA, on 18 January 2021. There was some delay in the Department communicating the details to the C&AG; hence the delay in the C&AG's correspondence to the Committee.

The Committee noted that the Minister issued a direction for the Accounting Officer to proceed with the scheme on 22 January 2021. The C&AG provided the relevant correspondence which underpins the decision to proceed with the delivery of the scheme:

- Annex A: Submission from Accounting Officer to Minister;
- Annex B: Paper from Minister to Executive colleagues;
- Annex C: Readout from Executive Meeting on 21 January;
- Annex D: Submission to Minister extending scheme; and
- Annex E: Direction issued by Minister.

Agreed: The Committee noted the C&AG will keep this matter under review as the audit of the 2020-21 financial statements progresses and as he plans the audit programme for the 2021-22 financial statements.

Agreed: The Committee noted the Ministerial Direction.

HIGH STREET STIMULUS SCHEME (HSSS)

The Committee noted correspondence from Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG dated 24 May 2021 regarding a Ministerial Direction to implement the 'High Street Stimulus Scheme' [HSSS]. Mr Mike Brennan AO DfE wrote to the C&AG on 11 May 2021 to advise that he had sought a Ministerial Direction from the DfE Minister, Diane Dodds MLA, on 22 April 2021.



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

Annex A: Submission from Accounting Officer to the Minister (including Executive Paper);

Annex B: Read out of the Executive Meeting of 29 April 2021; and

Annex C: Ministerial Direction issued by Minister Dodds on 29 April.

Agreed: The Committee noted that the number of Ministerial Directions generated due to the COVID pandemic, has been unprecedented, and that in ‘normal’ years, only one or two Ministerial Directions will come to PAC, to ‘flag up’ any issues. The Committee thereby noted the pressures on the Departments and Officials at this time and welcomed this Ministerial Direction as part of Department’s Recovery Action Plan.

Agreed: The Committee noted the size and timing of this Ministerial Direction and the cost will be £145 million in financial year 2021/22. The C&AG noted that lessons have been learnt in previous Ministerial Directions implemented, and expects VFM throughout the implementation of this Ministerial Direction.

Agreed: The Committee noted the C&AG will keep this matter under review as the audit of the 2020-21 financial statements progresses, as he plans the audit programme for the 2021-22 financial statements

FUNDING - CITY OF DERRY AIRPORT (CODA) / LONDON PUBLIC SERVICE OBLIGATION (PSO) ROUTE.

The Committee noted correspondence from Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG dated 24 May 2021 regarding a Ministerial Direction to fund the City of Derry Airport (CoDA) / London Public Service Obligation (PSO) Route post March 2021. The Committee noted that Mr Mike Brennan AO DfE wrote to the C&AG on 20 April 2021 to advise



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that he had sought a Ministerial Direction from the DfE Minister, Diane Dodds MLA, on 11 February 2021.

The Committee noted that the City of Derry Airport was the subject of previous directions (2007 & 2020) which supported funding to maintain and develop the airport and its infrastructure. This direction, however, relates to the Public Service Obligation (PSO) Route and not to general funding to the airport.

The Committee noted the relevant correspondence which underpins the decision to proceed with the proposal:

- Annex A: Submission from Accounting Officer to Minister & Executive Paper;
- Annex B: Direction issued by Minister;
- Annex C: Readout from Executive Meeting on 21 January;
- Annex D: Letter from David Silk, Director – Airports, infrastructure & commercial interventions, DfT confirming CoDA / London PSO funding.

Agreed: The Committee discussed the on-going financial viability of the City of Derry Airport and noted that the C&AG is keeping a watching brief on this specific matter.

Agreed: The Committee noted the C&AG will keep this matter under review as the audit of the 2020-21 financial statements progresses and as he plans the audit programme for the 2021-22 financial statements.

Agreed: The Committee noted the Ministerial Direction.

The meeting went into Closed Session at 2.44 pm



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7. Inquiry into ‘Speeding up Justice’: Issues Paper

The following officials remained in the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG;
Mr Neil Gray, Director,
Mr Michael Heery, Senior Auditor [remotely] and
Mr Kyle Bingham Assembly Support Officer [remotely].

The Committee discussed the Issues Paper, with Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG and his team, regarding the evidence session of 20 May 2021 into the inquiry ‘Speeding Up the Justice System’, and noted evidence had been received from the Department of Justice, the PSNI and the PPS. The Committee noted that evidence had not been sought from the judicatory system.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Lord Chief Justice to seek a view on the issues detailed in the NIAO report pertaining to the Committee’s inquiry.

Agreed: The Committee agreed NIAO’s Issues Paper would form the main part of the inquiry report into ‘Speeding Up the Justice System,’ in addition to the views expressed by Members discussed under this agenda item.

The meeting remained in Closed Session at 3.04 pm.

8. Inquiry into Driver and Vehicle Agency 2019 – 2020 – Press Release.

The following officials remained in the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG;
Mr Neil Gray, Director; and
Mr Kyle Bingham Assembly Support Officer [remotely]

The Committee considered the press release for the Report on ‘Driver and Vehicle Agency 2019-2020’. The Committee noted their fifth report will be published on Thursday 3 June 2021 alongside the press release.



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Agreed: The Committee agreed the press release.

The meeting remained in Closed Session at 3.05 pm.

9. Draft Forward Work Programme

The following officials remained in the meeting:

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

The Committee noted the draft Forward Work Programme covering the period 15 April to 8 July 2021. The Clerk updated the Committee on the format for Mr Mike Brennan's session on 17 June 2021, and that this will cover three areas: MCP Ulster University Campus, in closed; Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy update and delays in Ministerial Directions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to formally invite witnesses Ms Tracy Meharg, AO DfC and Ms Antoinette McKeown, CE Sports NI to appear on Thursday 1 July 2021 regarding their eight inquiry into 'Sports NI Sustainability Funding and COVID Expenditure'.

Mr Roy Beggs MLA left the meeting at 3.10 pm
The meeting remained in Closed Session at 3.10 pm.



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10. Any Other Business

Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy

The Committee noted an email from Mr Steven Agnew, RenewableNI dated 25 May 2021 regarding the Committee's letter of 20 May 2021 to Mr Russell Smyth KPMG Partner regarding his letter of 6 May 2021 on inquiry into 'Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy'.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Mr Agnew, RenewableNI to confirm if he was responding on behalf of Mr Russell Smyth, Partner, KPMG to the Committee's letter of 20 May 2021.

11. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Public Accounts Committee will take place on Thursday 3 June, at 2.00 pm in The Senate, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 3.12 pm.

Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA
Chairperson
Public Accounts Committee
27 May 2021