



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

AUDIT COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

WEDNESDAY 10 FEBRUARY 2021, VIRTUAL VIA STARLEAF

- Present: Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA, Chairperson
Ms Joanne Bunting MLA, Deputy Chairperson
Mr Jim Allister MLA
Mr Alan Chambers MLA
Ms Emma Rogan MLA
- Apologies: None
- In Attendance: Ms Marie Austin (Clerk to the Committee)
Ms Aoibheann Baker (Senior Assistant Clerk)
Mr David McClure (Assistant Clerk)
Mr Jim Nulty (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Alison Ferguson (Clerical Officer)
Ms Georgina Ryan-White (Researcher) – for Item 7 only

The meeting commenced at 12:45pm in open session.

1. Apologies

No apologies were received.

2. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 9 December 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 14 December 2020.

4. Matters Arising

Decisions taken under Standing Order 115 (9)

The Committee noted the decisions that were made by the Committee under temporary Standing Order 115(9), since the last formal meeting on 14 December 2020:

- To issue correspondence from the Minister of Finance to the three Non-Ministerial Public Bodies; and
- To agree the way forward in relation to the publication of the Committee position on the draft budget 2021-22.

Key themes

The Committee noted the key themes arising from communications received from individuals.

January 2021 Monitoring Round

The Committee noted a response from the Northern Ireland Audit Office providing information on its January 2021 Monitoring Round return.

5. Commencement of Part 3 of the Public Services Ombudsman Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 - Oral Evidence from the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman

The Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) and her officials joined the meeting at 12:47pm.

Ms Margaret Kelly, Ombudsman, NI Ombudsman's Office
Mr Sean Martin, Acting Deputy Ombudsman, NI Ombudsman's Office
Mr John McGinnity, Director of Finance and Corporate Services, NI Ombudsman's Office.

The Ombudsman briefed Members on her resource plans to enable her office to exercise a complaints standards authority role should Part 3 of the Public Services Ombudsman Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 be commenced.

The oral evidence was followed by a question and answer session.

The oral evidence was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the Ombudsman and her officials for the briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Ombudsman's resource plans are appropriate to enable her office to exercise a complaints standards authority role should Part 3 of the Public Services Ombudsman Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 be commenced, and to advise the Speaker and the Committee for the Executive Office accordingly.

6. Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman Strategic Plan and Business Plan - Oral Evidence from the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman

The Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and her officials remained at the meeting.

The Ombudsman briefed Members on the NIPSO Strategic Plan 2020 - 2023 and Business Plan 2021- 2022.

The oral evidence was followed by a question and answer session.

The oral evidence was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the Ombudsman and her officials for their attendance.

The Ombudsman and her officials left the meeting at 1.35pm.

7. Governance Arrangements in the offices of the Ombudsmen in the other UK Legislatures - RaISe briefing

The Committee noted the research paper: *Governance Arrangements in the offices of the Ombudsmen in the other UK Legislatures*.

8. Draft Budget 2021-22: Further Consideration

The Committee reconsidered its position on the 2021-2022 budget plans for the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) and the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (NIAC), in light of various correspondence received from the Minister of Finance and the NIAO, NIPSO and NIAC.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that its position on the 2021/2022 budget plans for the NIAO and NIAC, as originally agreed at its meeting on 14 December 2020, remains unchanged. However, in relation to the NIPSO, the Committee agreed that the non-ringfenced DEL should be reduced from £3.633 million to £3.588 million to reflect a zero percent pay lift in 2021/2022. The Committee agreed to advise the Minister of Finance, the Committee for Finance and the three independent bodies accordingly.

Agreed: In light of its role in considering value for money, the Committee agreed to write to the Speaker asking that a further update is provided at a time when a value can be placed on the remedial work required for Parliament Building's roof, and confirmation of whether any of the costs will be incurred by the Assembly Commission in the 2021/2022 financial year.

Mr Allister left the meeting at 1:56pm

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek clarity from the Minister of Finance on whether the announcement made by the Chancellor as part of the 2020 Spending Review, regarding the public sector pay freeze, would have any impact on the

movement of departmental staff through the current salary pay scales by way of pay progression in the 2021/2022 financial year.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek clarity from the NIAO and NIPSO on whether their 2021/2022 financial year budget plans provided for the movement of staff through the current salary pay scales by way of pay progression.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek clarity from the Minister of Finance on whether there have been changes to Enterprise Shared Services since 2016, particularly in relation to the pricing structures or self-delivery standard.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a further breakdown of the £496k increase in the non ring-fenced resource DEL for the Assembly Commission.

9. Review of the governance and accountability arrangements for the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman – Handling Arrangements

The Committee noted the three responses received to its request for written evidence on its Review of the governance and accountability arrangements for the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to place the written evidence on the Committee Review webpage.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule oral evidence sessions with those who submitted written evidence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek written and oral evidence from three academics who have published work about the role of the Ombudsman and the President of the International Ombudsman Institute.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider whether to schedule oral evidence sessions with comparative bodies at a later date.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule longer Committee meetings to facilitate oral evidence sessions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to commission research on the role of the Comptroller and Auditor General as Accounting Officer for the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the scrutiny mechanisms that exist in relation to the role; and the comparative position in other jurisdictions.

10. Scrutiny Schedule

The Committee noted the draft Scrutiny Schedule.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Northern Ireland Audit Office requesting to brief the Committee on its Corporate Plan; Business Transformation Programme 2018-2021; and, Public Reporting Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule an evidence session with the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

11. Correspondence

- i. The Committee considered correspondence from an individual regarding the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

Agreed: The Committee agreed a response for issue.

- ii. The Committee considered correspondence from an individual regarding the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

Agreed: The Committee agreed a response for issue.

- iii. The Committee noted guidance that had issued to Chairpersons in relation to the format for committee meetings.

- iv. The Committee noted a response from the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman in relation to the Committee's agreed position on NIPSO's proposed budget.

- v. The Committee noted a number of E-Newsletters from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission.

12. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

13. Date, Time and Place of next meeting

The date, time and place of the next meeting will be agreed in due course.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 2:31pm.

Daniel McCrossan MLA
Chairperson
Audit Committee
10 March 2021