



**Northern Ireland  
Assembly**

**AUDIT COMMITTEE**

**MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS**

**WEDNESDAY 4 MARCH 2020, ROOM 21, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS,  
BALLYMISCAW, STORMONT**

Present: Daniel McCrossan MLA, Chairperson  
Andrew Muir MLA, Deputy Chairperson  
Joanne Bunting MLA  
Alan Chambers MLA  
Emma Sheerin MLA

Apologies: None.

In Attendance: Clairita Frazer, Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk  
Aoibheann Baker, Assistant Assembly Clerk  
Jim Nulty, Clerical Supervisor  
Gareth Cross, Clerical Officer

*The meeting commenced at 1pm in closed session.*

**1. Introductory Briefing on NI Assembly Research and Information Service (RaISe)**

The Committee received a briefing from RaISe on the services which it offers to Members to support their work across a range of business areas, including: constituency matters; preparing for plenary debate; scrutinising the work of departments; and bringing forward legislation in the form of a Private Members' Bill.

*Mr Chambers joined the meeting at 1.07pm*

**2. NI Assembly Research and Information Service (RaISe) Public Finance Awareness.**

Members received a briefing from RaISe on *Public Finance Awareness*. The briefing covered a range of topics including the Public Finance Framework; available funding sources; the "Parity Principle"; the Fiscal Council; and multi-year budgets.

The Committee undertook preparation in relation to agenda items 7, 8 & 9; and a working draft of a Committee report on the draft Budgets 2020-21 of the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (NIAC), Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), and Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO).

*The Committee moved into open session at 1.40pm.*

### **3. Apologies**

As above.

### **4. Declaration of Interests**

Members were advised of the ongoing requirement to declare relevant financial or other interests as and when they arise on the Committee.

No interests were declared.

### **5. Draft Minutes**

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Thursday 13 February 2020.

### **6. Matters Arising**

#### **6.1 Committee Position on the Draft Budget 2020-21**

The Committee noted that today's evidence sessions with NIAC, NIAC and NIPSO will be in open session and that the meeting will move into closed session for the Committee to give initial consideration to its report on the draft Budgets 2020-21 for the three non-Ministerial bodies.

#### **6.2 Recent Correspondence**

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to commission formal legal advice in respect of correspondence previously noted at the Committee meeting on 13 February including in terms of the Audit Committee's power to investigate the issues raised.

There were no further matters arising.

### **7. Background Briefing from the NIAC on Draft Budget Plan 2020-21**

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials representing NIAC to the meeting and invited them to brief the Committee:

- Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Assembly; and
- Richard Stewart, Director of Corporate Services, Northern Ireland Assembly.

The session was recorded by Hansard.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session in which the Committee questioned the officials on a range of issues including: the financial implications of the “New Decade, New Approach” agreement; income generation options; anticipated staffing resources in light of the now fully functioning Assembly; and proposed elements of the Commission’s capital works programme, including replacing the Assembly’s analogue telephone system. Members also noted the Assembly Commission’s contingency plans in response to COVID-19.

*Ms Sheerin left the meeting at 2.55pm*

#### **8. Briefing from the NIAO on Draft Budget Plan 2020-21**

The Chairperson welcomed the following NIAO officials to the meeting and invited them to brief the Committee:

- Pamela McCreedy, Chief Operating Officer, NIAO; and
- Rodney Allen, Director of Corporate Services, NIAO.

The session was recorded by Hansard.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session in which the Committee questioned the officials on a range of issues including: the NIAO accommodation project and capital budget for 2020-21, as well as the work of the NIAO in support of the Public Accounts Committee. Members also noted the NIAO’s contingency plans in response to COVID-19.

*Mr Chambers left the meeting at 3.10pm*

The NIAO officials agreed to keep the Committee informed of any updates in regards to the capital expenditure for the NIAO accommodation project.

*Mr Chambers rejoined the meeting at 3.14pm*

*Mr Muir left the meeting at 3.14pm*

#### **9. Briefing from the NIPSO on Draft Budget Plan 2020-21**

The Chairperson welcomed the following NIPSO officials to the meeting and invited them to brief:

- Paul McFadden, (Nominated) Acting Ombudsman; and
- John McGinnity, Director of Finance and Corporate Services, NIPSO.

The session was recorded by Hansard.

*Mr Muir rejoined the meeting at 3.19pm*

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session in which the Committee questioned the officials on a range of issues including: a breakdown of NIPSO’s capital budget; and the need to replace the complaints handling system given the wider remit

and functions of NIPSO. Members also noted NIPSO's contingency plans in response to COVID-19.

*The Committee agreed to move into closed session to consider its draft Committee report.*

*The meeting moved into closed session at 3.24pm*

## **10. Committee Position in relation to Budget 2020-21**

The Committee considered an initial draft of Committee report on the draft Budgets 2020-21 for NIAC, NIAO and NIPSO.

Members discussed a number of issues and additions to the report.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed that the report will be amended to take account of the issues raised during today's meeting. A revised draft will be emailed to members for their consideration. Members undertook to submit suggested amendments or comments to the Committee office before 10am on Thursday 5 March.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to meet on Thursday 5 March at 12.30pm in Room 21 to agree the final report.

## **11. Correspondence**

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

**11.1** Correspondence from The Speaker dated 25 February 2020, in regards to the recruitment of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the NIPSO office for its information.

## **12. Any Other Business**

There was no other business.

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

The next meeting of the Committee will take place on Thursday 5 March 2020 at 12.30pm in Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

*The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 15.37pm*

**Daniel McCrossan MLA**  
**Chairperson**  
**Audit Committee**  
**6 May 2020**