



Audit Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

7 July 2021

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present:

Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson)

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Mr Jim Allister MLA

Apologies:

Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA (Chairperson)

Mr Alan Chambers MLA

Ms Emma Rogan MLA

In Attendance:

Ms Marie Austin (Clerk to the Committee)

Ms Sohui Yim (Assistant Clerk)

Ms Alison Ferguson (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 12.46pm in open session.



1. Apologies

As noted above.

2. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 2 June 2021.

4. Matters Arising

Noted: The Committee noted a copy of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) whistleblowing policy and details of the process for the removal of a member from the NIPSO Audit and Risk Committee.

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Northern Ireland Audit Office regarding its June 2021 Monitoring Round return.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to bring forward Agenda items 7, 8, 9 and 10.

5. NI Assembly Commission Budget: Consideration of thresholds on Committee input to in-year adjustments

The Committee considered the thresholds that should apply to scrutiny of the Assembly Commission's in-year budget adjustments.



Agreed: The Committee agreed to defer consideration of the thresholds for scrutiny of the Assembly Commission's in-year budget adjustments to a later meeting.

6. Scrutiny Schedule

Noted: The Committee noted the draft Scrutiny Schedule.

7. Chairperson's Business

The Deputy Chairperson informed members that the Clerking and Member Support Office (CAMs) is seeking expressions of interest for a member development session on effective questioning at the beginning of September 2021. Any Member wishing to express an interest should contact the Clerk.

The Chairperson informed members that it is normal practice for Committees to delegate to the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson the authority to submit views on the releasing or withholding of information in any non-routine/contentious Freedom of Information (Fol) requests received during recess. In such circumstances, the Committee would be advised of any such requests, the views expressed by the Chairperson and/or Deputy Chairperson and the response issued by the Fol Unit, at the first available meeting following the recess period.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to continue the practice of delegating authority to the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson to submit views on the releasing or withholding of information in any non-routine/contentious Fol requests received during recess.

8. Correspondence

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance on the Forecast Outturn Data for March 2021.



Noted: The Committee noted the RalSe paper on Gender Budgeting and Gender Inequalities in NI Education Policy.

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the NIPSO on the launch of the: Consultation on creating complaints handling standards for the Northern Ireland public sector.

Noted: The Committee noted the NIPSO report: PIP and the Value of Further Evidence: An Investigation by the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman into Personal Independence Payment.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for Finance on the Financial Reporting (Departments and Public Bodies) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek comments from the NIPSO and NIAO on the Financial Reporting (Departments and Public Bodies) Bill.

Noted: The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee on Standards and Privileges regarding the Assembly Members (Independent Financial Review and Standards) Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 (General Procedures) Direction 2021.

Noted: The Committee noted the following Northern Ireland Audit Office reports:

- Broadband Investment in Northern Ireland;
- Closing the Gap - Social Deprivation and Links to Educational Attainment;
- The Management and Delivery of the Personal Independence Payment Contract in NI;
- Northern Ireland Budget process; and
- Overview of the Northern Ireland Executive's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The Committee returned to Agenda items 5 and 6.



9. Review of governance and accountability arrangements for the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) - Oral evidence

Professor Alan Alexander, Chairperson of Audit Scotland joined the meeting at 12.59pm.

Professor Alan Alexander provided evidence as part of the Committee's review of governance and accountability arrangements for the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO).

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

The Deputy Chairperson thanked Professor Alexander for his evidence.

The witness left the meeting at 1.23pm.

10. Review of governance and accountability arrangements for the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) - Oral evidence

Mr Jim Allister declared an interest as the complainant in an on-going investigation regarding audit in local government.

Mr Kieran Donnelly, Comptroller and Auditor General; Martin Pitt, Chair of the Northern Ireland Audit Office Board and Rodney Allen, Director, Northern Ireland Audit Office joined the meeting at 1.23pm.

Mr Kieran Donnelly, Comptroller and Auditor General; Martin Pitt, Chair of the Northern Ireland Audit Office Board and Rodney Allen, Director, Northern Ireland Audit Office provided evidence as part of the Committee's review of governance and accountability arrangements for the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO).



The oral evidence was followed by a question and answer session

The Deputy Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 1.53pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the NIAO and the NIPSO to seek views on their respective Memorandum of Understanding with the Audit Committee, and request details of any factual amendments that need to be made to reflect organisational or other changes.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the Local Government Auditor to provide oral evidence as part of the Committee's review and to request information on the current status of the auditor post.

11. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

12. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next Audit Committee meeting will take place on Wednesday 29 September 2021, at 12.40pm in Room 29.

The meeting was adjourned at 1.54pm.

William Irwin MLA

Deputy Chairperson, Audit Committee

29 September 2021