



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

AUDIT COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

**WEDNESDAY 16 SEPTEMBER 2020, ROOM 21, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS,
BALLYMISCAW, STORMONT**

Present: Joanne Bunting MLA, Deputy Chairperson
Jim Allister MLA
Alan Chambers MLA
Emma Sheerin MLA

Apologies: Daniel McCrossan MLA, Chairperson

In Attendance: Clairita Frazer, Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk
Aoibheann Baker, Assistant Assembly Clerk

The meeting commenced at 13:05pm in open session with the Deputy Chairperson assuming the role of Chairperson.

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed Mr Allister to his first meeting of the Audit Committee.

1. Apologies

As above

2. 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.

3. Draft Minutes

The Committee noted that the Minutes of Proceedings of the meetings on 4 and 5 March 2020 were approved under the provisions of temporary Standing Order 115(9) on 6 May 2020.

4. Matters Arising

Members noted a Committee Secretariat paper setting out the decisions made by the Committee under temporary Standing Order 115(9) since the last formal meeting on 5 March 2020. The decisions included:

- Approval of the Committee response to the Finance Committee regarding the Budget 2020-21;
- Approval of the Minutes of Proceedings for the meetings held on 4 and 5 March 2020;
- Approval to seek responses from the 3 non-Ministerial Public Bodies regarding the scrutiny points in the Assembly Research and Information Service (RaISe) paper on the June Monitoring Round;
- Approval to seek further information from the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) on its reduced requirement in the June Monitoring Round;
- Approval to issue draft letters to the NIAO and Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (NIAC) regarding the June Monitoring Round;
- Position on potential changes to Sitting Days, Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) Departmental Annual Report and Accounts, Freedom of Information (FOI) requests over recess; and
- Approval of the Estimates for the NIAO and NIPSO and the subsequent Committee Report.

There were no further matters arising.

The meeting moved into closed session at 13:06pm

5. Assembly Legal Services – Briefing on Powers of the Audit Committee

Members received a briefing from Assembly Legal Services on the powers of the Audit Committee. This advice had been commissioned to inform the Committee's approach in relation to correspondence received. The Committee also noted background papers.

Emma Sheerin left the meeting at 13:45pm

Emma Sheerin re-joined the meeting at 13:48pm

Members discussed the legal advice and posed a number of questions following the briefing.

Agreed: To commission follow-up legal advice on queries arising from the briefing.

Whilst noting the Committee's defined role and function in relation to the NIAO and NIPSO; members *agreed* to consider the scope for improving the related

governance and accountability arrangements and the appropriate avenues for implementing any future improvements.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the draft responses to correspondents would be amended and circulated to members for further consideration.

Alan Chambers left the meeting at 14:22pm

The meeting moved into open session at 14:23pm

6. Assembly Research Briefing – Topical issues including the work of Comparative Committees

Members received a briefing from RaISe on ‘Topical issues including the work of Comparative Committees’, which the Committee had commissioned to help inform its forward work planning and its consideration of strategic priorities for the remainder of this mandate. The briefing covered a range of topics including the key roles and responsibility of the Committee and its counterparts located in GB; key roles and responsibilities of each and an explanation of the relationship with each jurisdiction’s audit office, including roles, responsibilities, governance arrangements and work programmes in recent years.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek further information on a number of issues, identified during the briefing.

Following the research briefing, members discussed related issues, which could potentially be added to the Committee’s Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that a review both of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the NIAO and of the MOU with NIPSO will be added to the agenda of a future Committee meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that, arising from its earlier deliberations and the comparative research, it will consider the option of a Committee motion to alert the Assembly to potential gaps in the governance and accountability arrangements for C&AG/NIAO and NIPSO.

7. Northern Ireland Assembly Commission – Briefing on budgetary implications of the Determination covering members’ allowances

The Deputy Chairperson welcomed the following officials representing the 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 briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

Alan Chambers re-joined the meeting at 14:53pm

Emma Sheerin left the meeting at 14:56pm

Agreed: The Committee agreed to commission research on the variance figures and thresholds in relation to virement that apply in relation to comparator bodies.

8. Budget 2020-21 in respect of the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, Northern Ireland Audit Office and Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman.

Members received a briefing from the Committee Secretariat on a proposed way forward in relation to the Budget 2020-21 process in respect of the NIAC, NIAO and NIPSO.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to proceed with arrangements for the next two Committee meetings and to circulate the scrutiny timetable to the three non-Ministerial departmental bodies.

9. Correspondence

Agreed: The Committee agreed that any future routine correspondence received by the Committee that is not directly relevant to its functions shall be circulated to members via email for noting purposes only.

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

- 9.1 Northern Ireland Judicial Appointment Ombudsman Annual Report
- 9.2 Local Government Commissioner for Standards Annual Report

Agreed: to seek information on the NIPSO role in respect of the Local Government Commissioner for Standards

- 9.3 Correspondence from the Clerk to the Committee for the Executive regarding *New Decade, New Approach*
- 9.4 Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman Report
- 9.5 Letter from the Speaker regarding the establishment of a Youth Assembly
- 9.6 Letter from the NIPSO to Chair of the Audit Committee

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Committee Secretariat would arrange an informal meeting between members and the new NIPSO, Margaret Kelly.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the NIAC in relation to the initiation of the legislative process to establish NIPSO as a Complaints Standards Authority as provided for in Part 3 of the Public Services Ombudsman (Northern Ireland) Act 2016.

10. Any Other Business

- 10.1 Committee Scheduling

The Committee noted that concerns raised by some members regarding scheduling clashes with other Committees have now been resolved.

10.2 Codifying the Committee's role in respect of the NIAC

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek further information and advice on the best approach to codifying its role in regards to scrutinising and agreeing the budgets of the NIAC.

11. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next meetings of the Committee will take place on Wednesday 7 October at 1pm in Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

The Deputy Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 15:19pm

Daniel McCrossan MLA
Chairperson
Audit Committee