



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

AUDIT COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

**WEDNESDAY 21 OCTOBER 2020, ROOM 30, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS,
BALLYMISCAW, STORMONT**

Present: Daniel McCrossan MLA, Chairperson (via StarLeaf)
Joanne Bunting MLA, Deputy Chairperson
Jim Allister MLA
Alan Chambers MLA
Emma Rogan MLA (via StarLeaf)

Apologies: None

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

The meeting commenced at 12:25pm in open session with the Deputy Chairperson assuming the role of Chairperson.

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 Wednesday 7 October 2020.

4. Matters Arising

4.1 Correspondence from the Department of Finance (DoF) on the Budget Plans for the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) and the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (NIAC)

Members noted the correspondence in relation to the outcome of the Spending Review and considered a way forward in respect of agreeing the draft Budget 2021-22 for the NIAO, NIPSO and NIAC.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule additional evidence sessions with the aforementioned bodies in due course, pending an update from the DoF on the outcome of the Spending Review.

Mr McCrossan joined the meeting at 12:30pm

4.2 Correspondence from the Clerk/Chief Executive in relation to commencement of Part 3 of the Public Services Ombudsman Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

Members noted the correspondence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the letter to the NIPSO for information.

4.3 Comparative research on variance thresholds

Members noted an update in relation to this research.

4.4 Questioning Skills – online training

Members noted an update on this training.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the secretariat will explore the option for any interested members to attend this training outside a formal meeting and to potentially join a session being delivered to another Committee.

The meeting moved into closed session at 12:32pm

5. Powers of the Audit Committee and related matters

Members received a briefing from the Clerk on this matter. The Committee also noted a draft Terms of Reference (ToR) for the Review of the governance and accountability arrangements for the NIAO and the NIPSO, a research paper on expert witnesses and additional follow-up papers including draft responses to correspondents.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the ToR for the Review of the governance and accountability arrangements for the NIAO and the NIPSO as a draft document which could be refined as the review progresses.

Agreed: The Committee agreed a number of suitable expert witnesses and organisations which will be asked to provide evidence for the review; and further agreed that a list of core issues for the expert witnesses to address will be drafted for agreement in advance of the invitations issuing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue correspondence, as amended, to the NIAO and NIPSO regarding the review.

Agreed: The Committee agreed final responses to correspondents.

The meeting moved into open session at 12:51pm

6. NIPSO – Budget Follow Up Written Briefing

Members noted the follow up information provided, which was requested following the meeting on the 7 October 2020.

7. NIPSO - Ombudsman’s Report 2019-20, Northern Ireland Local Government Commissioner for Standards Annual Report 2018-19 and Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Ombudsman Annual Report 2018-19

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

- Margaret Kelly, Ombudsman
- Paul McFadden, Deputy Ombudsman; and
- John McGinnity, Director of Finance and Corporate Services, NIPSO (joined virtually using StarLeaf)

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 number of complaints not pursued for being outside the NIPSO’s remit, particularly due to the option for an alternative legal remedy and how such decisions are reached; and complaints in relation to the Department for Communities and Personal Independent Payments.

The NIPSO officials agreed to provide follow up information as requested.

8. NIAO – Budget Follow Up Written Briefing

Members noted the correspondence from the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) which had already been copied to the NIAO.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the NIAO to provide a formal response to the PAC and copy it to this Committee.

Members noted the follow up information provided, which was requested following the meeting on the 7 October 2020.

9. NIAO – Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20

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.

Mr Allister declared an interest in respect of a recent meeting held with NIAO officials on Local Government Audits.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session in which the Committee questioned the officials on a range of issues including: the rotation of Directors; the NIAO complaints process; amendments to the NIAO corporate governance structure since 2018 and the provision of minutes of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) meeting of the 25 November 2019 online.

The NIAO officials agreed to provide follow up information as requested.

10. Correspondence

There was no correspondence.

11. Any Other Business

11.1 October Monitoring Round

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request briefing from the three non-Ministerial Public Bodies on the October Monitoring Round.

12. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The Committee agreed that the date and time of the next meeting would be scheduled in light of the Spending Review and communicated to members in due course.

The meeting moved into closed session at 13:33pm

Members discussed the need to ensure sufficient time is allocated for future evidence sessions.

The Deputy Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 13:36pm

Daniel McCrossan MLA
Chairperson
Audit Committee