



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

AUDIT COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

**WEDNESDAY 7 OCTOBER 2020, ROOM 29, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS,
BALLYMISCAW, STORMONT**

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

Apologies: None

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

The meeting commenced at 13:16pm in open session.

The Chairperson apologised for his absence from the meeting on 16 September 2020.

The Chairperson welcomed Mr Allister and Ms Rogan to the Audit Committee and thanked Ms Sheerin for her work on the Committee since February 2020.

1. Apologies

No apologies were received.

2. Declaration of Interests

Mr Allister declared that he had two live complaints with the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman's Office.

Ms Bunting joined the meeting at 13:19pm

Mr Chambers joined the meeting at 13:19pm

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 16 September 2020.

4. Matters Arising

4.1 Budget 2021-22 Update

Members noted an update in relation to the timetable for agreeing the Executive's draft budget, which has slipped due to the delay in the outcome of the Spending Review.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to proceed with its scrutiny of the Budget 2020-21 for the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (NIAC), Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) and Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) as planned, pending clarification of the revised budgetary timetable.

4.2 Comparative research on variance thresholds

Members noted that a research paper on variance figures and thresholds would be provided for the next meeting of the Committee.

4.3 Committee meeting time

Members noted that the previously agreed starting time of 1pm for the Audit Committee could potentially lead to an overlap with other Committees meeting in the afternoon.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to meet earlier, commencing at either 12:15pm or 12:30pm depending on availability, in order to accommodate those who attend afternoon committee meetings.

The meeting moved into closed session at 13:28pm

5. Powers of the Audit Committee and related matters

Members noted correspondence from the Comptroller & Auditor General (C&AG) regarding the Audit Committee meeting of 16 September 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to send correspondence from the C&AG regarding the meeting of the 16 September 2020 to Assembly Research for information.

Members received a briefing from the Clerk on this matter. The Committee also noted follow-up legal advice and background papers.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to take a number of steps to inform its consideration of the scope for improving the governance and accountability arrangements for the NIAO and NIPSO, including commissioning further research and legal advice and scheduling evidence sessions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue holding responses to correspondents.

The meeting moved into open session at 14:07pm

6. Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (NIAC) – Budget 2021-22

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: proposed elements of the Commission's indicative capital works programme, including the replacement of the existing Security Management System, Electronic Access Control and upgrades to the audio system in the Assembly Chamber. Other issues discussed included the redeployment of front line staff; and Parliament Buildings roof repairs.

The NIAC officials undertook to inform the Committee if there was any change to the draft Budget in the next 6-8 weeks.

The Chairperson, on behalf of the Committee, thanked Assembly staff for all their work in supporting Members, particularly during the current public health crisis.

7. Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) – Budget 2021-22

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 refurbishment project; business transformation; changes within the NIAO staffing profile; best practice and quality assurance matters; and NIAO's Review of Implementation of RHI recommendations.

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

8. Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) – Budget 2021-22

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 Chairperson congratulated Margaret Kelly on her recent appointment as Ombudsman and thanked Paul McFadden for his work as Acting Ombudsman in the interim.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session in which the Committee questioned the officials on a range of issues including: breakdown of the NIPSO's proposed 3-year budget; commencement of the Complaints Standards Authority role; breakdown of complaints for 2019-20; "Own Initiative" Investigations; and the role and powers of the NIPSO in relation to local government investigations.

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

Mr Allister left the meeting at 15:25pm

9. Correspondence

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

9.1 Correspondence from the C&AG regarding the Audit Committee meeting of 16 September 2020.

9.2 Information on "Questioning Skills" online training.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Committee office would circulate additional information to members on the format of the training and schedule it for a forthcoming meeting.

9.3 Correspondence from the Ombudsman's office regarding an informal meeting with the recently appointed Ombudsman.

9.4 Correspondence from the Committee on Procedures regarding a Review of Standing Orders 110-115.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Committee on Procedures to ask if consideration has been given to allowing remote attendance at plenary proceedings.

9.5 NIAO Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule a briefing at a future meeting on the NIAO Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20.

9.6 Correspondence from the Committee on Procedures regarding the budget setting methodology of the NIAC.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to commission legal advice on the most appropriate method to codify the Committee's role in regards to scrutinise the NIAC budget.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to update the Committee on Procedures when it has concluded its deliberations

9.7 Correspondence from a member of the public.

The Committee noted that this was considered under agenda item 5.

10. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

11. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next meetings of the Committee will take place on Wednesday 21 October, commencing at either 12:15pm or 12:30pm depending on availability, with the Room to be confirmed.

The Deputy Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 15:33pm

Joanne Bunting MLA
Deputy Chairperson
Audit Committee