



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

AUDIT COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

**WEDNESDAY 9 DECEMBER 2020, ROOM 29, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS,
BALLYMISCAW, STORMONT**

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

Apologies: None

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

The meeting commenced at 13:02pm in open session.

1. Apologies

No apologies were received.

2. Declaration of Interests

Mr Allister declared an interest in relation to having raised a complaint with the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) which contributed in giving rise to its forthcoming audit of land dealings by the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 25 November 2020.

4. Matters Arising

4.1 Follow-up research on Public Audit Governance

The Committee noted the follow-up research by the Assembly's Research & Information Service (RaISe) on Standards of Public Audit Governance and that this paper would be added to the Committee webpages.

4.2 Follow-up research on governance and accountability arrangements for the offices of the Ombudsman in other legislatures

Members noted an update in relation to this follow-up research by RaISe.

5. NIAO – Evidence session on draft Budget 2021-22

The session was recorded by Hansard.

The Committee noted a briefing paper from NIAO and a number of background papers. 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 briefing was followed by a question and answer session in which the Committee questioned the officials on a range of issues including: the current NIAO staffing profile; contracting-out audit costs; data enabled audit; the impact of a reduced budget on Public Reporting work; the NIAO refurbishment project; income generation; the impact of a reduction in work relating to the European Agricultural Fund; and the NIAO oversight role in respect of the recommendations from the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) Inquiry.

6. Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) – Evidence session on draft Budget 2021-22

The session was recorded by Hansard.

The Committee noted a briefing paper from NIPSO and a number of background papers.

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 briefing was followed by a question and answer session in which the Committee questioned the officials on a range of issues including: the increasing number of complaints; commencement of the Complaints Standard Authority role; the ability to generate revenue via hard-charging for services and associated legislative constraints; and the NIPSO staffing profile.

Jim Allister left the meeting at 14:22pm

7. Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (NIAC) – Evidence session on draft Budget 2021-22

The Committee noted that this agenda item had been deferred pending receipt of the finalised budget plan for the Commission and would be considered at the next meeting of the Committee on Monday 14 December 2020.

The meeting moved into closed session at 14:25pm

Alan Chambers left the meeting at 14:26pm

8. NIAO, NIPSO and NIAC – Consideration of Committee position on draft Budgets for 2021-22

The Committee noted a secretariat briefing paper and background papers in regard to the draft budget plans for the three non-Ministerial Public Bodies.

In light of the evidence received, members discussed a provisional Committee position in regard to the budget plans for the NIAO and NIPSO. Members also discussed a number

of issues in relation to the budget plan for the NIAC, which would be considered at the next Committee meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed its provisional position in regard to the budget plans for NIAO and NIPSO, subject to confirmation of a number of areas; and agreed to give further consideration to the NIAC draft budget position at a Committee meeting on 14 December 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the secretariat would amend the draft letter to the Minister of Finance to reflect today's evidence and deliberations and that a revised draft would be considered and finalised at the next meeting of the Committee on 14 December 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the secretariat would obtain clarification on the final Resource and Capital Budget figures for the NIAO and NIPSO.

9. Correspondence

The Committee noted correspondence from two members of the public.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that draft responses to the correspondence would be prepared in light of discussions and for consideration at the next meeting of the Committee on 14 December 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the secretariat would collate the key themes arising from the various communications which the Committee had received from the correspondents.

10. Any Other Business

There was no other business

11. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The Committee agreed that the next meeting of the Committee will take place on Monday 14 December, at 11am in Room 30.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 15:20pm

**Daniel McCrossan MLA
Chairperson
Audit Committee**