



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

AUDIT COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

**WEDNESDAY 25 NOVEMBER 2020, ROOM 29, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS,
BALLYMISCAW, STORMONT**

Present: Daniel McCrossan MLA, Chairperson
Joanne Bunting MLA, Deputy Chairperson (*via StarLeaf*)
Jim Allister MLA
Alan Chambers MLA (*via StarLeaf*)
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 12:47pm in open session.

1. Apologies

No apologies were received.

2. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

Jim Allister joined the meeting at 12:48pm

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 21 October 2020.

4. Matters Arising

4.1 Update on draft Budget 2021-22

The Committee noted an update in relation to draft Budgets 2021-22 for the three non-Ministerial Bodies and the anticipated Committee meetings thereafter.

4.2 Letter from the Speaker regarding Part 3 of the Public Services Ombudsman Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Committee noted correspondence from the Speaker on the above pending more substantial consideration at a future meeting.

5. Review of the Governance and Accountability Arrangements for the Northern Ireland Assembly Audit Office (NIAO) and Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) – Research Briefing: Public Audit Governance

The session was recorded by Hansard.

Joanne Bunting joined the meeting at 12:58pm

Alan Chambers joined the meeting at 13:02pm

Members received a briefing from the Assembly's Research and Information Service on Public Audit Governance. The briefing covered a number of topics relating to the reform of Comptroller and Auditor General/audit offices in the other UK jurisdictions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Assembly Research and Information Service would provide further information on any international standards regarding governance of public audit.

6. Review of the Governance and Accountability Arrangements for the NIAO and NIPSO – Research Briefing: Governance and accountability arrangements for the offices of the Ombudsman in other legislatures

The session was recorded by Hansard.

Members received a briefing from the Assembly's Research and Information Service on governance and accountability arrangements for the offices of the Ombudsman in other the other jurisdictions of the UK.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Assembly Research and Information Service would provide:

- further information on the independent members of Audit and Risk Committees, to ascertain the criteria/mechanisms for their appointment and tenure; and
- a tabular analysis comparing the applicable governance arrangements in Northern Ireland with what exists in the other jurisdictions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to create an area on the Committee's webpages dedicated to the Review, to include the Terms of Reference (ToR), relevant research papers presented to the Committee and Hansard transcripts of oral evidence taken by the Committee in connection with the review.

The meeting moved into closed session at 13:43pm

7. Review of the Governance and Accountability Arrangements for the NIAO and NIPSO – Legal advice and other matters

Members received a briefing from Assembly Legal Services on matters in relation to the Committee's Review of the Governance and Accountability Arrangements for the NIAO and NIPSO. Members also received a briefing from the Clerk on draft core issues for expert witnesses. The Committee noted follow-up papers and correspondence including draft responses to correspondents.

Joanne Bunting left the meeting at 14:20pm

Agreed: The Committee agreed additions to the list of expert witnesses/organisations and also agreed an amended list of core issues in that regard.

Agreed: The Committee agreed final responses to correspondents.

Joanne Bunting re-joined the meeting at 14:31pm

The meeting moved into open session at 14:31pm

8. NIPSO – Briefing on Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20

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.

Joanne Bunting left the meeting at 14:36pm

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session in which the Committee questioned the officials on a range of issues including: the impact of the current pandemic on NIPSO's work and any expected increase in complaints specifically related to the pandemic; the continued upward trend in the number of complaints received; increased costs for temporary staff; and monitoring round returns.

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

The Chairperson thanked the Deputy Ombudsman for all his work during his time in NIPSO and wished him well in his new post.

9. Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (NIAC) – Research Briefing

Members received a briefing from the Assembly's Research and Information Service on "In-year Audit Committee scrutiny: A comparative perspective". The briefing covered a number of topics including the NIAC budget setting process, NIAC budget scrutiny and budget scrutiny in other legislatures.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share the research paper with the NIAC.

10. Correspondence

The Committee noted the following items of correspondence:

10.1 Letter from the NIPSO regarding the Review of Governance Terms of Reference.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue a response to the NIPSO regarding the timescale for the Review.

10.2 NIPSO Quarterly Bulletin – Winter 2020.

10.3 Memo from the Committee on Procedures regarding Hybrid Proceedings.

10.4 Letter from the NIPSO regarding follow up information.

10.5 Letter from the NIAO regarding Minutes published on the NIAO website and the October Monitoring Round.

10.6 Letter from the C&AG to the Public Accounts Committee regarding the NIAO draft Budget 2021-22.

10.7 Letter from the C&AG regarding the Review of Governance Terms of Reference.

10.8 Letter regarding the updated NIAO Annual Report and Accounts.

10.9 Letter from the NIPSO regarding the October Monitoring Round.

10.10 NIAC Annual Report and Accounts.

10.11 Update from the NIAC on the October Monitoring Round.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to all three non-Ministerial Bodies to request information in respect of the January Monitoring Round.

11. Any Other Business

There was no other business

12. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The Committee agreed that the next meeting of the Committee will take place on Wednesday 9 December, at 12:40pm in Room 29 with a further shorter meeting scheduled thereafter to agree the Committee's report on the draft Budgets 2021-22.

The Chairperson adjourned the meeting at 15:11pm

Daniel McCrossan MLA
Chairperson
Audit Committee