



Audit Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

29 September 2021

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA (Chairperson)
Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Alan Chambers MLA
Mr Jim Allister MLA

Apologies: Ms Emma Rogan MLA

In Attendance:

Ms Marie Austin (Clerk to the Committee)
Ms Sohui Yim (Assistant Clerk)
Ms Karen Barry (Assistant Clerk)
Ms Alison Ferguson (Clerical Officer)

In attendance by Video or Teleconference:

Mr Jim Nulty (Clerical Supervisor)



Agreed: Members agreed to commence the meeting at 12.43pm in closed session.

1. Apologies

As noted above.

2. Declaration of Interests

For agenda item 6, Mr Jim Allister declared an interest as a complainant in an on-going investigation regarding audit in local government.

3. Codification of the Audit Committee's function in relation to agreeing the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission budget

Ms Maeve Corrigan, Legal Adviser, joined the meeting at 12.45pm.

The Legal Advisor provided advice on codification of the Audit Committee's function in relation to agreeing the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (NIAC) budget.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Speaker advising of its position on the codification of its function in relation to agreeing the NIAC budget.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to codify its functions in respect of reporting to the Assembly on the draft budgets of the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman by way of an amendment to Standing Orders.

The Chairperson thanked Ms Corrigan for the legal advice.

The Legal Adviser left the meeting at 12.59pm.



The Committee moved into open session at 1.00pm

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 7 July 2021.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered responses from Northern Ireland Audit Office and Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman to its request for comments on the relevant clauses of the Department of Finance's Financial Reporting (Departments and Public Bodies) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the responses to the Committee for Finance for consideration.

6. Review of governance and accountability arrangements for the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) - Oral evidence

Ms Colette Kane, Local Government Auditor and Mr Rodney Allen, Chief Operating Officer, Northern Ireland Audit Office, joined the meeting at 1.05pm.

The witnesses provided evidence as part of the Committee's review of governance and accountability arrangements for the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman.

The oral evidence was followed by a question and answer session.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked Ms Kane and Mr Allen for their evidence.



The witnesses left the meeting at 1.21pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Comptroller and Auditor General to seek clarification on who performs the challenge/oversight function in respect of the work of the Local Government Auditor, and details of what that function entails.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that, subject to receiving clarification on the challenge/oversight arrangements for the Local Government Auditor, all the necessary evidence had been taken to allow it to commence deliberations at a future meeting.

7. Northern Ireland Assembly Commission budget: Consideration of thresholds on Committee input to in-year adjustments

The Committee considered a proposal by the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (NIAC) that an in-year adjustment of plus or minus 10% of the NIAC agreed budget for a year should be brought to the Committee for its view. Members noted that if these thresholds are not exceeded, the Committee's view would not be sought.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request details of the rationale for the 10% threshold proposed by the NIAC and an assessment of the level of accountability it would provide in relation to its budget.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request an update from the NIAC on spend to date on a range of areas during the 2021/22 budget period.

8. Annual Report and Accounts 2020-21: Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

The Committee considered the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission (NIAC) Annual Report and Accounts for year ended 31 March 2021.



Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek further information/clarification on a number of issues to assist it in preparing for its scrutiny of the NIAC budget for the 2022-2025 period.

9. Annual Report and Accounts 2020-21: Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman

The Committee considered the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman (NIPSO) Annual Report and Accounts for year ended 31 March 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek further information/clarification on a number of issues to assist it in preparing for its scrutiny of the NIPSO budget for the 2022-2025 period.

10. Annual Report and Accounts 2020-21: Northern Ireland Audit Office

The Committee considered the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) Annual Report and Accounts for year ended 31 March 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek further information/clarification on a number of issues to assist it in preparing for its scrutiny of the NIAO budget for the 2022-2025 period.

11. October 2021 Monitoring Round

The Committee noted the October 2021 Monitoring Round positions in respect of the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission, Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman.



12. Draft Scrutiny Timetable: Budget 2022-25

The Committee considered a draft scrutiny timetable for Budget 2022-25.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the scrutiny timetable for Budget 2022-25 and the actions contained therein.

The Committee noted that additional meetings may need to be scheduled to accommodate budget scrutiny.

13. Appointment of NIAO Chairperson and Non-Executive Members

The Committee considered correspondence from the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) requesting that consideration be given to endorsing the extensions of the appointments of the Chairperson of the Northern Ireland Audit Office Advisory Board and two Non-Executive Members.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek clarification on a number of issues regarding the Advisory Board including the appointment process and associated remuneration details.

14. Scrutiny Schedule

The Committee noted the Scrutiny Schedule. The Committee further noted that the schedule included an item yet to be programmed in relation to the salary of the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to commission research on the background and current salary arrangements of the C&AG; the salary arrangements for comparable cases; and the maximum salary currently being paid to any person employed in the Northern Ireland Civil Service.



15. Correspondence

The Committee considered correspondence from the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) advising that he intends to retire at the end of March 2022.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to commission legal advice on the options for providing that the next C&AG is recruited on a non-renewable term of between 8 and 10 years with the current compulsory retirement age of 65 removed, and the most appropriate legislative vehicle.

Noted: The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for Finance providing a link to its Report on an Independent Fiscal Council for Northern Ireland.

Noted: The Committee noted the Northern Ireland Practice and Education Council Annual Report and Accounts 2020-21.

Mr Jim Allister left the meeting at 1.58pm.

16. Any Other Business

The membership of the Audit Committee was raised including the difficulties a membership of five MLAs and a quorum of two presented.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that options on increasing the membership of the Audit Committee should be investigated.

17. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next Audit Committee meeting will take place on Wednesday 3 November 2021, at 12.40pm in Room 29.

The meeting was adjourned at 2.05pm.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Daniel McCrossan MLA, Chairperson, Audit Committee

3 November 2021