



Audit Committee Minutes of Proceedings

3 November 2021

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present:

Mr Jim Allister MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA (Chairperson)

Mr Alan Chambers MLA

Apologies:

Mr William Irwin MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Ms Emma Rogan MLA

In Attendance:

Ms Marie Austin (Clerk to the Committee)

Ms Karen Barry (Assistant Clerk)

Mr Simon Gallaher (Clerical Supervisor)

Ms Alison Ferguson (Clerical Officer)

In attendance by Video or Teleconference:

Mr Jim Nulty (Clerical Supervisor)



Agreed: Members agreed to commence the meeting at 12.49pm in closed session.

1. Apologies

As noted above.

2. Declaration of Interests

No interests were declared.

3. Tenure of the C&AG

Mr Chambers joined the meeting at 12.51pm

Mr Alyn Hicks, Legal Adviser, provided legal advice in relation to the tenure of the Comptroller & Auditor General (C&AG).

The Committee considered correspondence from the Assembly Commission on the recruitment of a new C&AG. The Committee noted the Commission's intention to recruit on the basis that the post change from a permanent appointment to a single, non-renewable term of 10 years; the current statutory retirement age of 65 will be removed; and, post-employment restrictions will be included in the contract of employment.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to suggest to the Assembly Commission that it might consider approaching the Secretary of State to request that the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern) Bill, which is currently proceeding through Parliament, be amended to effect the change proposed in relation to the tenure of the C&AG.



Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chairperson should sit on the panel to identify a person to be nominated by the Assembly as the next C&AG.

The Chairperson thanked Mr Hicks for his legal advice.

The Legal Adviser left the meeting at 1.21pm.

4. Correspondence

The Committee agreed to bring forward Agenda item 12 to consider one item of correspondence in closed session.

The Committee considered correspondence from an individual to Mr Jim Allister MLA, regarding the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward a copy of the correspondence to the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman for comment.

The Committee moved into open session at 1.24pm

5. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 29 September 2021.

6. Matters Arising

The Committee considered responses from the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman to the Committee's request for views on amending their respective Memorandums of Understanding with the Committee.



Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider the proposed revised Memoranda at a later date.

The Committee considered the issue of Audit Committee membership and the difficulties that a membership of five and a quorum of two presents.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to commission research to establish the background/rationale for the membership and quorum of the Audit Committee.

7. Draft Budget 2022-25 - Oral Evidence: NI Assembly Commission

Mrs Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Assembly, joined the meeting at 1.27pm.

The witness provided evidence on the Assembly Commission's budget plans for 2022–2025.

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

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witness for her evidence.

The witness left the meeting at 1.50pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an update from the Assembly Commission on the Parliament Buildings roof project and details of the catering subsidy that applies to catering outlets within Parliament Buildings, for consideration at the Committee meeting on 24 November 2021. Given that some of the information in relation to the Parliament Buildings roof project might be of a commercially sensitive nature, the Committee agreed that it should be considered in closed session.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek confirmation of the salary scales for parliamentarians in a number of other jurisdictions.



8. Draft Budget 2022-25 – Oral Evidence: Northern Ireland Audit Office

Mr Rodney Allen, Chief Operating Officer, and Mr Brian O'Neill, Director, Northern Ireland Audit Office, joined the meeting at 1.53pm.

The witnesses provided evidence on the Northern Ireland Audit Office's budget plans for 2022–2025.

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

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 2.06pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to defer consideration of Agenda Item 9, NI Assembly Commission budget: Consideration of thresholds on Committee input to in-year adjustments; and, Agenda Item 10, Codification of the Audit Committee's function in relation to agreeing the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission budget, until the next Committee meeting on 24 November 2021.

9. Draft Budget 2022-25 – Oral Evidence: Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman

Ms Margaret Kelly, Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman; Mr Sean Martin, Acting Deputy Ombudsman and Mr John McGinnity, Director of Finance and Corporate Services, Office of the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman, joined the meeting at 2.07pm.

The witnesses provided evidence on the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman's budget plans for 2022–2025.

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



The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

The witnesses left the meeting at 2.19pm.

10. Appointment of NIAO Chairman and Non-Executive Directors

The Committee considered further information provided by the Northern Ireland Audit Office, which was requested by the Committee to assist its consideration of the request to endorse extensions of the appointments of the Chairperson of the Northern Ireland Audit Office Advisory Board and two Non-Executive Directors.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider this matter further at its next meeting on 24 November 2021.

11. Correspondence - continued

The Committee noted the Northern Ireland Audit Office report: 'Assembly Members' Contributory Pension Fund Accounts 2020'.

The Committee considered correspondence from an individual to Mr Jim Allister MLA, regarding the quality of the work carried out by the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward a copy of the correspondence to the Northern Ireland Audit Office asking that it responds directly to the individual and copies the Committee into the response.

12. Any Other Business

There was no other business.



13. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next Audit Committee meeting will take place on Wednesday 24 November 2021, at 12.40pm in Room 29.

The meeting was adjourned at 2.24pm.

Daniel McCrossan MLA, Chairperson, Audit Committee

24 November 2021