



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday, 23 September 2021

Meeting Location: The Senate, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr Roy Beggs MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch MLA
Mr Andrew Muir MLA
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Mr Cathal Boylan MLA

Apologies: Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA (Chairperson)
Ms Órlaithí Flynn MLA
Mr William Irwin MLA
Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA

In Attendance: Ms Aoibhinn Treanor (Assembly Clerk)
Ms Gillian Barker (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Ms Karen Barry (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Suzanne Patton (Clerical Supervisor)



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The Committee noted that Mr Roy Beggs MLA, Deputy Chairperson, will chair today's meeting as Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA, Chairperson, is not available and has given his apologies.

The meeting went into Open Session at 2.07 pm.

1. Apologies

Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA (Chairperson)
Ms Órlaithí Flynn MLA
Mr William Irwin MLA
Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA

2. Draft Minutes of 16 September 2021

Agreed: The draft minutes of the meeting of 16 September 2021 were signed and agreed to be published.

3. Declaration of Interest

None.

4. Matters Arising

None.

5. Correspondence

The following NIAO Official joined the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG NIAO; and
Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer NIAO [remotely]



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Committee for Infrastructure

The Committee noted correspondence dated 10 September 2021 from the Committee for Infrastructure regarding primacy over NIAO Reports. The Committee is requesting that we provide information on upcoming reports relating to the Department for Infrastructure when available.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write back to the Committee for Infrastructure informing them there are currently no reports on PAC's forward work programme relating to Committee for Infrastructure.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to inform the Committee for Infrastructure that the Memorandum of Reply on Major Capital Project's Report is now available and may be of interest to the Committee.

Sustainability of Schools Report

The Committee noted correspondence dated 10 September 2021 from Dr Mark Browne AO DE regarding 'Sustainability of Schools Report', which highlights the actions the Department has undertaken to address PAC concerns into the number of surplus school places. PAC conducted an inquiry into the Sustainability of Schools in 2016.

The Committee noted Recommendation 4, that the Department made a commitment to review the approved enrolment number and to report back to the Committee on its findings. A copy of the report was included with the correspondence which highlights the actions the Department has undertaken to progress with this recommendation.

Agreed: The Committee had some concerns with the Sustainability of Schools Report and agreed Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG should initially examine the Report and then brief the Committee in the coming weeks, before the correspondence might be forwarded to the Education Committee.



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Update on Land Registry Fees Order

The Committee noted correspondence dated 16 September 2021 from Colum Boyle, AO, DoF regarding an update on the Land Registry Fees Order. In PAC's Major Capital Project Report, the level of Land Registry fees was addressed in paragraphs 70 to 72. The Committee noted that the Department had commissioned analysis by the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre of the likely impact on the property market of the pandemic and that the Department intend to use this analysis to inform the new fee proposals. Mr Boyle has attached the finalised report by UU 'Property Market Analysis to inform land registration Fees'

Agreed: The Committee noted the Department will be commissioning further analysis in the first quarter of the next financial year, with a view to view to bring forward a revised Fees Order (if appropriate) in the next mandate of the Assembly.

The meeting remained in Open Session at 2.23 pm

6. Memorandum of Reply – Capacity and Capability in the NICS

The following NIAO Official joined the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG NIAO;
Mr Rodney Allen Director NIAO remotely; and
Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer NIAO, remotely.

The Committee noted correspondence dated 12 August 2021 regarding PAC's fifth Report 'Capacity and Capability in the NICS and the Memorandum of Reply received. The MOR is the Executive's formal response to PAC and was present to the Assembly on 12 August 2021.

The Committee noted there were 12 recommendations coming out of the Report to be implemented by either Department for Finance, the Executive Office or both Departments. Eleven recommendations have been accepted; however



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recommendation 11, regarding the role of NI Civil Service Commissioners has been noted only, as it falls outside of the remit of NICS.

The Committee welcomed the MOR and noted the Departments will be working over the next 3 – 6 months to focus on strategic HR and organisational development at the centre of government to deliver cross-cutting transformation in the context of the wider NICS transformation agenda.

Agreed: The Committee noted plans to invite the new HOCS, Dr Jayne Brady to PAC in the near future. The Committee will discuss this further under Agenda 10, the draft Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Secretary of State to respond to recommendation 11 and that this issue is currently outside of the remit of NICS.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request an update on the implementations of the recommendations before the end of the mandate.

The meeting remained in Open Session at 2.30 pm

7. Memorandum of Reply – Driver and Vehicle Agency

The following NIAO Official joined the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG NIAO
Ms Collette Kane, Director NIAO, remotely and
Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer NIAO, remotely.

The Committee considered correspondence dated 26 July 2021 regarding PAC's sixth Report Driver and Vehicle Agency 2019 – 2020 and the Memorandum of Reply received. The MOR is the Executive's formal response to PAC and was present to the Assembly on 26 July 2021.



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The Committee noted the three recommendation coming out of the report have been accepted, including the Department commissioning a review of the appropriateness of DVA continuing to operate as a full trading fund. It is anticipated that the review will be progressed by the end of the 2021-22 financial year.

Agreed: The Committee noted the MOR and agreed that as implementation dates for all three recommendations are for late 2022, it will be for a new Committee to follow up on progress.

The meeting remained in Open Session 2.34 pm

8. Ministerial Direction: Strule Shared Education Campus (SSEC)

The following NIAO Official joined the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG NIAO;

Mr Patrick Barr, NIAO remotely and

Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer NIAO, remotely.

The Committee noted correspondence from Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG dated 20 September 2021, regarding Ministerial Direction from the Education Minister to proceed with the Strule Shared Education Campus Programme. The Permanent Secretary received a direction from the Education Minister, dated 7 July 2021. The approach was endorsed by the Executive in September 2020.

The Committee noted the Minister's previous position (August 2020) where he agreed to seek Executive approval to issue a Ministerial Direction.

The Committee noted to date, £45m has been invested in the SSEC Programme. The latest estimate is that up to a further £182m investment is required to complete the construction of the campus. The vast majority of this funding will be provided under the FSA, however, there will be a shortfall across the years 2022-2026.



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Agreed: The Committee noted the relevant correspondence which underpins the decision to proceed with the delivery of the scheme.

Agreed: The Committee discussed with Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG the business case approval regarding value for money for the completion of the SSEC Programme and noted C&AG will be monitoring these costs.

The meeting went into Closed Session at 2.46 pm

9. First Consideration of Draft Report – ‘Inquiry into Speeding up the Justice System’.

The following official joined in the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG, NIAO;

The following Officials joined the meeting remotely:

Mr Neil Gray, Director NIAO
Mr Michael Heery, Audit Manager and
Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer NIAO.

The Committee noted the draft report is classified as RESTRICTED and therefore for Members use only.

The Committee considered its draft report, ‘Speeding up the Justice System’ and agreed the title of the report is ‘**Speeding up the Justice System**’.

The Committee noted the section on Membership and Powers and the List of Abbreviations.

The Committee made the following decisions regarding each section and paragraphs within the report, that is – **Agreed, Agreed as amended or to be reworded.**



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Executive Summary: Paragraphs 1 – 10

Paragraph 1: Read and Agreed
Paragraph 2: Read and Agreed as amended
Paragraph 3: Read and Agreed
Paragraph 4: Read and Agreed
Paragraph 5: Read and Agreed as amended
Paragraph 6: Read and Agreed
Paragraph 7: Read and Agreed as amended
Paragraph 8: Read and Agreed
Paragraph 9: Read and Agreed
Paragraph 10: Read and Agreed

Recommendations 1 - 6: Paragraphs 11 – 16

Recommendation 1	Paragraph 11: Read and Agreed as amended
Recommendation 2	Paragraph 12: Read and Agreed as amended
Recommendation 3	Paragraph 13: Read and Agreed
Recommendation 4	Paragraph 14: Read and Agreed as amended
Recommendation 5	Paragraph 15: Read and Agreed as amended
Recommendation 6	Paragraph 16: Read and Agreed

Amendments to the paragraphs 17 - 45 are noted below under each section title.

Section ‘Introduction’: Paragraph 17

Paragraph 17: Read and Agreed

Section ‘Background’: Paragraphs 18 – 23

Paragraph 18: Read and Agreed
Paragraph 19: Read and Agreed
Paragraph 20: Read and Agreed
Paragraph 21: Read and Agreed
Paragraph 22: Read and Agreed
Paragraph 23: Read and Agreed as amended



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Agreed: Section Title 'Justice organisations have begun to work together to address these long-standing issues'. Paragraphs 24 – 25

Paragraph 24: Read and Agreed

Paragraph 25: Read and Agreed

Agreed: Section Title 'Despite all these initiatives, the overall timeliness of Crown Court cases has not improved'. Paragraphs 26-28

Paragraph 26: Read and Agreed

Paragraph 27: Read and Agreed

Paragraph 28: Read and Agreed

Agreed: Section Title 'The Criminal Justice Board takes the strategic lead for speeding up justice, but there is little evidence of a clear strategic focus'. Paragraphs 29 -31.

Paragraph 29: Read and Agreed as amended

Paragraph 30: Read and Agreed as amended

Paragraph 31: Read and Agreed as amended

Agreed: Section Title 'There remain significant gaps in understanding the system'. Paragraphs 32-36.

Paragraph 32: Read and Agreed

Paragraph 33: Read and Agreed

Paragraph 34: Read and Agreed

Paragraph 35: Read and Agreed

Paragraph 36: paragraph to be re-worded



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Agreed: Section Title 'Achieving fewer, more effective hearings in the Crown Court depends on judges, the prosecution and defence working together to manage cases'. Paragraphs 37-43

Paragraph 37: Read and Agreed

Paragraph 38: Read and Agreed

Paragraph 39: Read and Agreed

Paragraph 40: Read and Agreed

Paragraph 41: Read and Agreed

Paragraph 42: Read and Agreed

Paragraph 43: paragraph to be re-worded

Agreed: Section Title 'The justice system has begun to utilise new technology to enhance efficiency'. Paragraphs 44-45

Paragraph 44: Read and Agreed

Paragraph 45: Read and Agreed

Agreed: The Committee noted this concluded the first consideration of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the appendices of the report would include:

- Extract from the minutes
- Hansard
- Correspondence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule a final consideration of the report at next week's PAC meeting, 30 September 2021.

10. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted the September to March 2022 draft forward work programme and agreed the order of the inquiries following their inquiry into 'Addiction Services in Northern Ireland', which will be scheduled into the forward work programme.



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Agreed: The Committee agreed an inquiry into NIAO's Report 'Strategic Review of the Budget Process' will be first, followed by an inquiry into NIAO's Report 'Broadband Investment in Northern Ireland'. The Committee agreed the Chair of the Fiscal Council, Dr Robert Chote, would be invited to give evidence regarding the inquiry into 'Strategic Review of the Budget Process'.

The Committee noted the new HOCS, Dr Jayne Brady is now in post and agreed to invite Dr Brady to attend PAC in the forthcoming months to address issues that have risen from recent PAC inquiries – Capacity and Capability in the NICS and Major Capital Projects.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite Dr Jayne Brady, HOCS, to attend PAC in the forthcoming months.

The meeting remained in Closed Session at 4.03 pm

11. Any Other Business

12. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Public Accounts Committee will take place on Thursday 30 September, at 2.00 pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 4.04 pm.

Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA
Chairperson
Public Accounts Committee
23 September 2021