



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday, 17 February 2022

Meeting Location: The Senate, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch MLA
Mr Andrew Muir MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Mr Cathal Boylan MLA
Ms Órlaithí Flynn MLA
Ms Cara Hunter MLA
Mr William Irwin MLA
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA

Apologies: None

In Attendance: Ms Aoibhinn Treanor (Clerk)
Ms Gillian Barker (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Ms Suzanne Patton (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Marion Johnston (Clerical Officer)

The following NIAO Officials joined the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG;



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Ms Colette Kane, Director; and
Mr Roger McCance, Audit Manager.

The following NIAO Official joined the meeting remotely:

Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer.

Prior to the meeting going into Public Session

The Committee noted that the Infrastructure Committee is doing a review of the Planning Act NI 2011. The Committee has been assured by the Clerk and Chair of the Infrastructure Committee that they will not go into areas PAC's inquiry Planning in Northern Ireland will cover as per the primacy arrangements between PAC and the statutory Committees of the Assembly.

The meeting Opened in Public Session at 2.06 pm.

1. Apologies

None.

2. Draft Minutes of 10 February 2022

Agreed: The draft minutes of the meeting of 10 February 2022 were signed and agreed to be published.

3. Declaration of Interests

The following Members declared an interest regarding Agenda Item 7, First Consideration of Sports Sustainability Fund:

Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA declared he was Vice President of Woodvale Cricket Club;

Mr David Hilditch MLA declared he was Vice President of Carrickfergus Cricket Club; and



Mr Andrew Muir MLA declared he is a member of NI Athletics Club.

4. Matters Arising

None.

5. Correspondence

The following NIAO Officials joined the meeting room:

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG;
Ms Colette Kane, Director; and
Mr Roger McCance.

The following NIAO Official joined the meeting remotely:

Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer.

Secondments from Strategic Investment Board to NICS

The Committee noted correspondence from the Executive Office to Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG regarding secondments from the Strategic Investment Board to the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Agreed: The Committee noted that C&AG has already reported on this matter in the report 'Capacity and Capability in the NICS' which is in the public domain.

Governance and Accountability Arrangement for the NIAO and NIPSO

The Committee noted correspondence from the Audit Committee date 10 February 2022 regarding their review of the Governance and Accountability Arrangements for the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman.

Agreed: The Committee noted the report and its recommendations.



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Fermanagh and Omagh District Council – Project Stratum

The Committee noted correspondence dated 10 February 2022 from Audit Committee regarding their review of the Correspondence dated 14 February 2022 from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council regarding Project Stratum.

Agreed: The Committee noted the correspondence, anticipating these concerns would be highlighted in PAC's forthcoming report 'Broadband Investment in NI'.

The meeting remained in Public Session at 2.12 pm

Mr Cathal Boylan MLA joined the meeting at 2.12 pm

Mr Maolíosa Mc Hugh MLA joined the meeting at 2.18 pm

6. Ministerial Directions

Ministerial Direction - Mental Health Support Fund

The Committee noted correspondence dated 14 February from Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG, regarding a letter the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Health outlining Ministerial Direction to provide additional funding for the 'Mental Health Support Fund'.

The Mental Health Support Fund was established in March 2021 under another Ministerial Direction, which allocated £10 million to the Fund. The Fund's role is to support mental health charities in contributing to high level mental health outcomes and support HSC services. This Direction now requires the Accounting Officer to provide an additional £6.02 million to that Fund.

The Committee noted that as with the original fund, funding this will be allocated to charities by an intermediary funding body, the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland. The Department of Finance agreed to this proposal on 1 February 2022.



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Agreed: The Committee noted the Ministerial Direction and that this will be kept under review by the C&AG.

Ministerial Direction - Additionality to Pay Recommendations

The Committee noted correspondence dated 14 February 2021 to Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG, from the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Health outlining a Ministerial Direction in respect of a decision to provide additional funding for the 2021-22 pay rounds for those employed within the HSC Sector.

The Direction requires the Accounting Officer to provide a graduated pay award for those directly employed staff of between 1.5 per cent and 0.5 per cent, depending on grade. These pay awards will be made on a non-consolidated and non-pensionable basis.

The Committee noted the Department estimates the total cost will be £25 million. The Department of Finance agreed to this proposal on 27 January 2022.

Agreed: The Committee noted the Ministerial Direction and that this will be kept under review by the C&AG

Ministerial Direction - Support Scheme for NI Search and Rescue Services

The Committee noted correspondence dated 14 February 2022 to Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG, from the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, outlining a Ministerial Direction in respect of a decision to fund nine Northern Ireland Search and Rescue organisations.

The Ministerial Direction requires the Accounting Officer to implement a support scheme for NI Search and Rescue Services that will equip them to effectively provide essential emergency services to people using rural areas. These



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organisations face significant challenges as a result of the pandemic which have prevented them from investing in essential equipment.

The Committee noted the Department estimated the total cost will be £1.9 million. The Department of Finance agreed to this proposal on 19 January 2022.

Agreed: The Committee noted the Ministerial Direction and that this will be kept under review by the C&AG.

The meeting remained in Public Session at 2.18 pm

7. Inquiry into 'Planning in Northern Ireland' – Evidence Session

The following SOLACE Members joined the meeting:

Ms Alison McCullagh, Chief Executive, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council; and

Ms Kate Bentley, Director of Planning and Building Control, Belfast City Council.

In attendance:

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG; and
Mr Stuart Stevenson TOA, remotely.

The Committee noted the relevant papers for the evidence session for the inquiry 'Planning into Northern Ireland'. The papers included:

- NIAO Report 'Planning in Northern Ireland',
- NIAO Restricted Briefing Paper and Potential Questions;
- Background information on SOLACE; and
- SOLACE Witness Biographies.

The Committee also noted further submissions received in relation to the inquiry:

- Mr George McLaughlin, Natures Keepers International; and



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- Mr Dean Blackwood, on NIAO's Report; Planning in NI

Ms Alison McCullagh made an opening statement which was followed by a question and answer session.

Agreed: The Committee noted that its secretariat had issued a letter to the Department seeking further information as agreed at last week's meeting. The Committee agreed to send a further letter requesting more details on the Planning Forum.

Mr Andrew Muir MLA left the meeting at 3.00 pm

Mr Andrew Muir MLA re-joined the meeting at 3.04 pm

Ms Cara Hunter MLA joined the meeting at 3.25pm

Mr David Hilditch MLA left the meeting at 3.26 pm

Mr David Hilditch MLA re-joined the meeting at 3.31 pm

The meeting was adjourned at 3.46 pm

The meeting went into Closed Session at 3.54pm

8. Inquiry 'Planning in Northern Ireland' – Discussion

The following NIAO Officials joined the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG; and
Ms Colette Kane, Director

The following NIAO Officials joined the meeting remotely:

Mr Roger McCance, Audit Manager;
Ms Claire Turner, Senior Auditor; and
Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer

The Committee discussed the evidence session with the NIAO Officials who agreed to produce an Issues Paper that will cover both the Departments' evidence session of 10 February and this week's evidence session from SOLACE.



Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite NILGA to give evidence in this inquiry.

The meeting remained in Closed Session at 4.04 pm

9. Final Consideration of Report 'Review of Northern Ireland Budget Process'

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG;
Ms Colette Kane, Director; and
Ms Roger McCance, Audit Manager.

The following NIAO Official joined the meeting remotely:

Mr Neil Gray, Director;
Ms Karen Beattie, Audit Manager;
Ms Pamela Dugdale, Senior Auditor and
Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer

The Committee noted the draft report is classified as RESTRICTED for Member' attention and therefore should not be published more widely.

The Committee noted this is the Final Consideration for the report 'Review of Northern Ireland Budget Process'.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the following paragraphs to be amended from last week's meeting: Paragraphs: 9, 15 and 27 were agreed.

This concluded the Final Consideration of the Report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Report is to be Ordered to Print.

The meeting remained in Closed Session at 4.07 pm



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10. Draft Press Release – Report into ‘Sports Sustainability Fund’.

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG;
Ms Colette Kane, Director; and
Mr Roger McCance, Audit Manager.

The following NIAO Officials joined the meeting remotely:

Mr Tomas Wilkinson, Director;
Ms Catherine O’Hagan, Audit Manager; and
Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer.

The Committee noted the draft press release for the Sports Sustainability Fund and agreed to reword a paragraph. The amended press release will then be circulated to Members for agreement.

Agreed: The press release with the agreed amendments to be issued with the Sports Sustainability Fund Report when published on 25 February 2022.

The meeting remained in Closed Session at 4.12 pm

11. Draft Forward Work Programme

The following NIAO Officials joined the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG;
Ms Colette Kane, Director; and
Mr Roger McCance, Audit Manager

The following Official joined the meeting remotely:
Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer.



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The Committee noted the December 2021 to March 2022 draft Forward Work Programme to the end of the mandate.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to publish the draft Forward Work Programme.

Take Note Debate

The Committee noted the Take Note Debate is scheduled to be heard on Monday 28 February 2022, 8.00 pm – 10.00 pm, indicative timings. The Committee noted an Information Paper for Members regarding the reports for debate will be in next week's meeting pack and discussed at next week's meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to circulate the list of reports for the debate, to enable Members to decide which report to speak on.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to discuss the debate further at next week's meeting.

The meeting remained in Closed Session at 4.16 pm

12. Any Other Business

None

13. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Public Accounts Committee will take place on Thursday 24 February 2022.

The meeting adjourned at 4.16 pm

Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA



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Chairperson
Public Accounts Committee
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