



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

THURSDAY, 10 SEPTEMBER 2020, THE SENATE,
PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

Present: Mr William Humphrey MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan MLA
Ms Órlaithí Flynn MLA
Mr Harry Harvey MLA
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
Mr Andrew Muir MLA
Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA

Apologies: Mr David Hilditch MLA

In Attendance: Mr Peter McCallion, Assembly Clerk
Ms Gillian Barker, Assistant Assembly Clerk
Ms Karen Barry, Clerical Supervisor
Mr Darren Weir, Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 2.03 pm in Public Session.

1. Apologies

Mr David Hilditch, MLA

2. Minutes of meeting on 8 July 2020

The draft minutes of 8 July 2020 were agreed and signed.

Mr Matthew O'Toole joined the meeting at 2:05pm

3. Matters Arising

The Committee noted further correspondence received on 27 August from a whistleblower.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) for a response and to advise the whistleblower accordingly.

4. Declaration of Members' Interests

The following declaration of interests was recorded

- Mr Andrew Muir MLA, declared that he was a former employee of Translink, and specifically in relation to the Major Capital Projects, that his step father is a quality manager for the A6 Dungiven by-pass.

5. Correspondence

The Committee noted a memo from the Finance Clerk dated 3 July 2020 in regards to the Land Registry Fees Order and the letter of explanation from the DoF DALO dated 26 June 2020.

The Committee noted correspondence dated 10 August 2020 from the Minister of Finance in respect of Department of Infrastructure Excess Votes of £39,952,000. The Committee noted the Minister intends to bring this to the Assembly under Budget (No 3) Bill this September.

The Committee noted correspondence dated 12 August 2020 from the Senior Assistant Clerk of the Audit Committee on the Executive's budget advising that the Main Estimates will be processed in early September. The Public Accounts Committee had previously considered the NIAO draft budget position for 2020-21 at its meeting on 20 February 2020. The Committee noted NIAO's Strategic Corporate Framework for 2018-21 and the relevant savings. The Committee also noted the planned capital resource (£4.04m) for the refurbishment of its premises and that NIAO is working with SIB and DoF's Construction and Procurement Delivery to ensure that costs are managed within set budgets.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Audit Committee indicating that its views, as noted at the meeting of the 20 February 2020, remain the same and requesting that it be kept informed of the final budget position and associated timelines.

The meeting remained in Public Session at 2.08 pm

6. Annual Theft and Fraud Report 2018/19

Mr Stuart Stevenson, Treasury Officer of Accounts, Ms Roisin Kelly, Government Accounts Branch DoF, and Mr Kieran Donnelly C&AG NIAO joined the meeting.

The Committee noted with interest the Annual Theft and Fraud Report 2018/19 and expressed concerns in respect of the absence of a sufficient level of co-operation and “joined-up-ness” between the Environment Agency and District Councils in order to tackle the growing problem of fraud relating to illegal dumping. Further to this and in particular, Members felt that the NICS Fraud Forum should meet more frequently than twice per year.

Mr Andrew Muir left the meeting at 2:49pm

Mr Andrew Muir rejoined the meeting at 2:53pm

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance inviting officials to provide a further breakdown on the value and cost of frauds/thefts and to return early in 2021 in order to present the findings of the next Annual Theft and Fraud Report. The Committee agreed to suggest that the next report should set out: the emerging trends in fraud/theft and findings in respect of covid-related fraud/theft during the first quarter of 2020-21. The Committee also agreed to seek the C&AG’s advice in support of its scrutiny of the next Annual Theft and Fraud Report.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

The officials left the meeting at 3.06 pm

7. Inquiry into Major Capital Projects – Correspondence

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB, C&AG, Mr Tomas Wilkinson Director NIAO and Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer joined the meeting.

The Committee considered correspondence received from Ms Tracy Meharg, AO DfC; Ms Sue Gray, AO DoF; and Ms Katrina Godfrey AO DfI in response Committee requests linked to the evidence session of 8 July 2020.

Agreed: Committee agreed to go into closed session to discuss further.

The meeting moved into closed session at 3.10 pm

The Committee discussed correspondence from Ms Tracy Meharg, AO for the Department of Communities dated 24 August 2020.

Agreed: Committee agreed to write to Ms Meharg to request a further breakdown of the Casement Park Project Grant Award figures as outlined in Annex 1 of her response.

The Committee discussed correspondence from Ms Sue Gray, AO for the Department of Finance dated 27 August 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Ms Gray asking her to clearly identify the external members of the Procurement Board.

The Committee discussed correspondence from Ms Katrina Godfrey, AO for the Department for Infrastructure dated 27 August 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Ms Godfrey to request further clarification on the SPD Casework table and information as to how the Planning Forum is constituted and the identity of those on the Forum. The Committee also agreed to seek clarity as to how DfI is to improve the timeliness with which statutory consultees respond to the planning process.

Agreed: Committee also agreed to write to Ms Godfrey requesting a walk through by officials of the planning process for Committee members in order to clarify what appears to be a complex process.

Closed Session - 3.24 pm.

Mr William Humphrey left the meeting 3.38 pm

Mr Roy Beggs took the Chair in the interim

Mr William Humphrey re-joined the meeting 3.40 pm

Mr Maolíosa McHugh left the meeting at 3:43pm

Mr Maolíosa McHugh rejoined the meeting at 3:45pm

8. NIAO Report on Major Capital Projects – Issues Paper 2

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB, C&AG, Mr Tomas Wilkinson Director NIAO and Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer remained in the meeting.

The Committee noted the Issues Paper 2 as presented by Mr Kieran Donnelly and his team. This was followed by a discussion during which amendments were proposed.

The meeting remained in closed session at 3.47 pm.

9. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Clerk briefed the Committee on the draft forward work programme covering the period September 2020 to Easter 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to that it would no longer hold an evidence session on the NIAO Report on Mental Health in the Criminal Justice System but that it would write instead to the DoJ Permanent Secretary to request an update on his Department's progress in addressing the recommendations from this report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to conduct an inquiry into the NIAO Report on Addiction Services.

Agreed: The draft forward work programme was agreed, as amended.

10. Any other business

The Committee noted an invitation to attend a Commonwealth Parliamentary Association virtual conference entitled 'Westminster Workshop on Public Financial Oversight' from 19 – 23 October 2020.

Agreed: Committee agreed to nominate Mr William Humphrey MLA, Mr Roy Beggs MLA and Committee staff to attend. Further information on the programme and timescales are to be provided to Mr Roy Beggs, MLA.

The Committee discussed issues relating to Ulster University's major capital works programme in the Belfast Campus.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite Mr Brennan, Permanent Secretary for DfE to provide an update on the UUBC programme including matters relating to the status of substantial Financial Transaction Capital loans associated with the project.

11. Date, time and place of next meeting

The next PAC meeting will be held on Thursday 17th September 2020 at 2.00 pm in the Senate Chamber.

The meeting was adjourned at 4.00 pm

**Mr William Humphrey MLA
PAC Chairperson
Minutes of 10 September 2020**

Signed: