Northern Ireland Assembly

Audit Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

22 October 2025

Meeting Location: The Senate, Parliament Buildings

Present:

Alan Chambers MLA (Chairperson)

Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

John Blair MLA

Jemma Dolan MLA

Nick Mathison MLA

In Attendance:

Ashleigh Mitford, Assembly Clerk

Elaine Farrell, Assistant Clerk

Alison Ferguson, Clerical Supervisor

Laura Gourley, Clerical Officer

Sinead McDonnell, Head of HR, NIA (agenda item 6)

Maeve Corrigan, Assembly Legal Advisor (agenda item 7)

The meeting commenced at 10.02 a.m. in open session

1. Apologies

None.

2. Declaration of Interests

Jemma Dolan declared an interest that she is a member of the Committee for Finance.

Diane Forsythe declared an interest that she is member of the Committee for Finance and the Public Accounts Committee.

3. Draft minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 24 September 2025.

4. Correspondence

Noted: The Committee noted the correspondence dated 22 September 2025 from the Committee for Finance on the Department of Finance Fiscal Briefing. Members noted that the presentation slides from the briefing are available from the Committee Office on request.

Noted: The Committee noted the correspondence dated 25 September 2025 from the Committee for Finance on the Analysis of the 2025-26 Outturn and Forecast Outturn.

Agreed: The Committee noted the emailed correspondence dated 29 September 2025 from a member of the public in respect of issues that do not fall within the remit of the Committee and agreed to advise the correspondent accordingly.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to move into Closed Session at 10.05 a.m.

5. Matters arising

The Committee Clerk briefed the Committee on correspondence dated 17 October 2025 from the Committee for Finance on the updated position from the Department of Finance (DoF) on Clause 20 of the Administrative and Financial Provisions Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence from the Committee for Finance.

6. Review of the arrangements in relation to the C&AG salary – evidence session on the Role Evaluation and Salary Benchmarking Report

The Chairperson reminded members that the Committee had previously agreed to treat all papers related to the review as Assembly Restricted.

The Chairperson advised members that as the Committee was in closed session, there would be no Hansard taken of the evidence session.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to record the evidence session on a stand-alone device, noting that the recording would be used to assist in the production of a detailed written note, and that the recording would be deleted once the written note was complete.

The Committee Clerk briefed the Committee on this agenda item.

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 10.23 a.m.

Sinead McDonnell, Head of Human Resources, NI Assembly

Joanne Kane, Director, HeadsTogether

The witnesses confirmed that they were content with the arrangements for the recording of the briefing.

The witnesses briefed the Committee and this was followed by a question and answer session.

John Blair left the meeting at 10.56 a.m.

John Blair rejoined the meeting at 10.59 a.m.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it would be important to ensure its Options Paper contained sufficient information on the annual uplift mechanisms in other jurisdictions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Chief Operating Officer of the NIAO to ask if the NIAO was content with the level and nature of engagement undertaken during the C&AG salary benchmarking exercise.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Assembly Commission to ask it to confirm if it was content that the Role Evaluation and Salary Benchmarking Report met the specification for the exercise.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider the Options Paper for the review at the meeting on 19 November 2025.

7. Review of the arrangements in relation to the C&AG salary – legal briefing

The Committee Clerk briefed the Committee on this agenda item.

The Assembly Legal Officer, Maeve Corrigan, joined the meeting at 11.16 a.m. and briefed the Committee on her legal advice as requested by the Committee. This was followed by a question and answer session.

Jemma Dolan left the meeting at 11.16 a.m.

Jemma Dolan rejoined the meeting at 11.20 a.m.

John Blair left the meeting at 11.28 a.m.

John Blair rejoined the meeting at 11.34 a.m.

The Chairperson thanked the Legal Advisor for her attendance.

8. Committee Report on Budgets for 2026-2029/30 for the NIAO, NIPSO and the NIAC

The Committee undertook formal consideration of the report as follows:

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Title Page, Table of Contents, Committee Powers and Membership as drafted stands part of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Introduction section at paragraphs 1-9 stands part of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Context of Committee Consideration section at paragraphs 10-12 stands part of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that Northern Irelands Assembly Commission section at paragraphs 13-35 stands part of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Northern Ireland Audit Office section at paragraphs 36-48 stands part of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman section at paragraphs 49-62 stands part of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Conclusions and Recommendations section at paragraphs 63-74 stands part of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chairperson agree the minutes for the meeting today so that they may be included in the Minutes of Proceedings Appendix to the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Appendix 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 stand part of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Audit Committee report on the budget requirements for the Northern Ireland Audit Office, the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission for 2026-29/30 be published online on the Northern Ireland Assembly website.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward a copy of the report to the NIAO, NIPSO, the NIAC and the DoF for information.

Noted: The Committee noted that a copy of the report will be laid in the Assembly Business Office.

Noted: The Committee noted that the Assembly Commission intends to bring a motion for debate on its budget on 11 November 2025.

Noted: The Committee noted that the Chairperson will speak on behalf of the Committee during the debate in terms of its scrutiny of the NIAC budget proposals as set out in the Committee's report.

9. Draft End of Session Report

The Committee considered the draft End of Session Report for the period 3 February 2024 -31 August 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the 'Remit, Powers and Membership' section of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the 'Key Activities, Outputs and Achievements' section of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the 'Other Areas Considered by the Committee' section of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the 'Looking Ahead to the 2025/26 Session' section of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the 'Committee meetings' section of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the 'Committee Expenditure' section and related Appendix.

Noted: The Committee noted that the End of Session report will be published on the Committee webpage in due course.

10. Committee draft response on the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council Bill

The Committee Clerk briefed the Committee on this agenda item.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the draft response on the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council Bill and that this should be issued to the Committee for Finance.

11. Forward Work Programme

Noted: The Committee noted the planned oral evidence session with NIPSO on 19 November 2025 ahead of the updating of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Committee and NIPSO.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Forward Work Programme.

12. AOB

None.

13. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting of the Audit Committee will take place on 19 November 2025 at 10.00 a.m. in Room 21.

The meeting was adjourned at 11.50 a.m.

Alan Chambers MLA

Chairperson, Audit Committee

22 October 2025