



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Public Accounts Committee

## Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday, 15 April 2021

**Meeting Location:** Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

**Present:** Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA (Chairperson)  
Mr Roy Beggs MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Harry Harvey MLA  
Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA

**Present by Video or Teleconference:**

Mr Cathal Boylan MLA  
Ms Órlaithí Flynn MLA  
Mr Andrew Muir MLA  
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA

**Apologies:** David Hilditch MLA

**In Attendance:** Ms Lucia Wilson (Assembly Clerk)  
Ms Gillian Barker (Assistant Assembly Clerk)

**In Attendance by Video or Teleconference:**

Ms Karen Barry (Clerical Supervisor)



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The meeting commenced at 2.07 pm in Open Session

### **1. Apologies**

Mr David Hilditch MLA

### **2. Draft Minutes of 25 March 2021**

**Agreed:** The draft minutes of the meeting of 25 March 2021 were signed and agreed to be published.

### **3. Declaration of Interest**

Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA declared he was acquainted with Mr Pollock regarding a submission received by the Committee, on the inquiry into Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy which was to be discussed at Agenda Item 5, Correspondence.

### **4. Matters Arising**

The Committee noted Ms Sue Gray's, AO DoF new appointment as the Cabinet's Office Second Permanent Secretary, and agreed to write to Ms Gray to congratulate her on her new appointment and to thank her for all her support to PAC over the past year.

The Committee noted Mr Rodney Allen, NIAO has been appointed as NIAO's Chief Operating Officer, and offered him their congratulations.



## **5. Correspondence**

The following Officials joined the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB Comptroller & Auditor General (C&AG) for Northern Ireland Assembly (NIAO);  
Mr Rodney Allen, Chief Operating Officer, NIAO; and  
Mr Kyle Bingham Assembly Support Officer, NIAO joined the meeting remotely.

### **Audit Committee Review**

The Committee noted correspondence dated 12 March 2021 from the Audit Committee regarding a 'Review of the Governance and Accountability arrangements for the Northern Ireland Audit Office and Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman'.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to consider this matter in closed session at Agenda Item 10, under Any Other Business.

### **Whistleblower through Ms Lesley Hogg's Office, The Clerk / CE of the Assembly**

The Committee noted correspondence dated 22 March 2021 from the Whistleblower regarding an email of 12 March 2021 through Ms Lesley Hogg, The Clerk/Chief Executive for NI Assembly on 15 March 2021.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to consider this matter in closed session at Agenda Item 10, under Any Other Business.

### **Whistleblower regarding Sport NI Sustainability Fund.**

The Committee noted an email received on 25 March 2021 from a Whistleblower via Andrew Muir MLA, regarding Sports NI Sustainability Fund, which was also discussed at PAC's meeting of 25 March 2022 during which the Chairperson made a statement regarding COVID related expenditure:



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*'I have spoken with the Audit Office which has confirmed it will be scrutinising COVID related expenditure in their audits of government departments and in their public reporting programme. The Audit Office has also confirmed that this type of grant expenditure will be examined.'*

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed, in line with the Chair's statement, to forward the Whistleblower's email to NIAO and request that it is considered as part of the C&AG's report into Covid related expenditure.

### **Raymond Pollock**

The Committee noted correspondence received on 25 March 2021 from Mr Raymond Pollock regarding an Anaerobic Digester Plant operating on Mr Pollock's property. This is in connection with the Committee's inquiry into 'Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy'.

The C&AG stated his office is aware of the issues Mr Pollock has raised and that these are referenced in NIAO Report 'Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy' dated 13 October 2020.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the correspondence, and noted the correspondence is already held by the NIAO.

### **Fergal Stewart**

The Committee noted correspondence dated 26 March 2021 from Fergal Stewart regarding the £500 Student Hardship Payments, in which he queries why universities and colleges are potentially being paid £2M to administer the scheme, i.e. 10% of the £20M fund.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward this correspondence to NIAO and to write to the Department for Economy to seek further clarification on the cost to administer the scheme.



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### **Committee for Justice**

The Committee noted correspondence dated 26 March from the Committee for Justice, regarding a whistleblowing submission received from a member of the public, in relation to a boundary dispute. The member of the public has requested that their correspondence is treated as whistleblowing and has asked the Committee for Justice to forward it to the Public Accounts Committee and the NI Audit Office on that basis.

The Committee discussed, with C&AG, if this matter was within its statutory remit.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted that this matter was not within PAC's remit nor NIAO.

### **Noel Craig**

The Committee noted correspondence received on 29 March 2021 from Noel Craig, a retired teacher, in which he refers to PAC's report on 'Special Educational Needs.' Mr Craig is concerned about training for professionals in autism and the lack of offering by the Health and Social Care Trusts in applied behaviour analysis despite the availability of expertise in both NI universities.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed this matter is outside of its remit, and agreed the correspondence should be forwarded to the Education Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to Mr Craig to inform him of this action.

### **Minister of Health, Robin Swann MLA**

The Committee noted correspondence dated 31 March 2021 from Minister Swann to the Business Office regarding Covid-19 Indemnity Arrangements for Spring/Summer 2021. The Minister is notifying the Assembly of the indemnities that the Department has entered into by means of this letter. This letter has been copied to the Chairs of the Health and Public Accounts Committees.



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**Agreed:** The Committee noted the correspondence.

### **Minister of Health, Robin Swann MLA**

The Committee considered correspondence dated 7 April 2021 from Minister Swann to the Business Office regarding 'One-off payment to HSC Charitable Trust Funds'. The Minister has stated that, in order to supplement the work of these funds going forward, and to further support staff, as they move out of the pandemic, he has recommended a disbursement to be split evenly between the five main Trusts, and to be used to provide support to staff.

As required by the appropriate guidance, Executive colleagues' approval has been sought and secured for this one off payment.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the correspondence.

The meeting remained in Open Session at 2.20 pm

### **6. Memorandum of Reply: Management of the NI Direct Strategic Partner Project - Helping to deliver Digital Transformation/The LandWeb Project: an update.**

The following Officials remained in the meeting:

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

The Committee noted the Memorandum of Reply regarding PAC's Report 'Management of the NI Direct Strategic Partner Project - Helping to deliver Digital Transformation/The LandWeb Project: an update.'



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The Committee noted the Memorandum on the Report was presented to the NI Assembly on 25 March 2021 by the Minister of Finance Conor Murphy, MLA.

The Committee noted out of the 11 recommendations made, all were accepted, except recommendations 3 and 5 which were partially accepted.

The Committee welcomed this positive response to the report.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to request an update on the recommendations in 6 months' time.

The meeting went into Closed Session at 2.26 pm

### **7. Inquiry into Capacity and Capability in the NICS – Consideration of draft report.**

The following Officials joined in the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG NIAO;  
Mr Rodney Allen, Chief Operating Officer NIAO;  
Ms Christine Burns, Audit Manager;  
Mr Connor McGeown, Senior Auditor; and  
Mr Kyle Bingham Assembly Support Officer, NIAO remotely.

The Committee was reminded that, due to the virtual nature of the committee's work at present, it was no longer possible to issue 'paper based' confidential packs. The draft report had been issued in the tabled pack, marked restricted, and remained each Members' responsibility to keep these restricted papers, and for members use only.



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The Committee considered its draft report inquiry into 'Capacity and Capability into the NICS' and agreed the title as 'Report on Capacity and Capability into the Northern Ireland Civil Service'.

The Committee made the following decisions regarding each section and paragraphs within the report, that is - Agreed; Agreed as amended; or, to be revised and brought back to the Committee.

### **Executive Summary: Paragraphs 1 – 13**

Paragraph 1	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 2	Read and Agreed
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
Paragraph 8	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 9	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 10	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 11	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 12	To be revised and brought back to the Committee
Paragraph 13	To be revised and brought back to the Committee.

### **Recommendations 1 - 12: Paragraphs 14 – 30**

Recommendations 1 & 2	Paragraph 14	To be revised and brought back to the Committee.
	Paragraph 15	To be revised and brought back to the Committee.
Recommendation 3	Paragraph 16	Read and Agreed
	Paragraph 17	Read and Agreed as amended
Recommendation 4	Paragraph 18	Read and Agreed
Recommendation 5	Paragraph 19	Read and Agreed
Recommendation 6	Paragraph 20	Read and Agreed
	Paragraph 21	Read and Agreed





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	Paragraph 22	Read and Agreed
Recommendation 7	Paragraph 23	Read and Agreed as amended
	Paragraph 24	Read and Agreed as amended
Recommendation 8	Paragraph 25	Read and Agreed
Recommendation 9	Paragraph 26	Read and Agreed as amended
	Paragraph 27	Read and Agreed
Recommendation 10	Paragraph 28	Read and Agreed
Recommendation 11	Paragraph 29	To be revised and brought back to The Committee
Recommendation 12	Paragraph 30	Read and Agreed as amended

The Committee agreed the wording of **ALL section titles** for the remainder of the report, covering paragraphs 31 – 82. Amendments to the paragraphs 31 - 82 are noted below under each section title.

### **Background & Introduction. Paragraphs 31 - 36**

Paragraph 31	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 32	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 33	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 34	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 35	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 36	Read and Agreed

### **Leadership skills and standards need to be enhanced and developed to enable greater capability to move the NICS forward. Paragraphs 37 – 40.**

Paragraph 37	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 38	Read and Agreed as amended
Paragraph 39	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 40	To be revised and brought back to the Committee



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**The HR operating model in the NICS needs to be reviewed with roles and responsibilities clarified. Paragraphs 41 – 44.**

Paragraph 41	Read and Agreed as amended
Paragraph 42	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 43	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 44	Read and Agreed

**Steps must be taken to urgently improve strategic workforce planning across the NICS. Paragraphs 45 – 47.**

Paragraph 45	Read and Agreed as amended
Paragraph 46	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 47	Read and Agreed as amended

**The NICS must reduce the current level of vacancies and use of temporary staffing solutions to a more sustainable level. Paragraphs 48 – 52.**

Paragraph 48	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 49	Read and Agreed as amended
Paragraph 50	Read and Agreed as amended
Paragraph 51	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 52	Read and Agreed as amended

**NICS recruitment processes need to be less cumbersome and protracted and must ensure the right people are selected for the right posts. Paragraphs 53 – 57.**

Paragraph 53	Read and Agreed as amended
Paragraph 54	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 55	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 56	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 57	Read and Agreed



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**The skills and capability of the NICS workforce needs to be expanded and developed to encompass key functional areas such as contract and project management. Paragraphs 58 – 62.**

Paragraph 58	Read and Agreed as amended
Paragraph 59	Read and Agreed as amended
Paragraph 60	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 61	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 62	Read and Agreed

**There is a need for greater focus on the age imbalance and other areas of diversity in the NICS. Paragraphs 63 – 66.**

Paragraph 63	Read and Agreed as amended
Paragraph 64	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 65	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 66	Read and Agreed as amended

**The performance management approach in the NICS must be overhauled. Paragraphs 67 – 70.**

Paragraph 67	To be revised and brought back to the Committee.
Paragraph 68	To be revised and brought back to the Committee
Paragraph 69	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 70	Read and Agreed

**There needs to be a much greater focus on talent management and learning and development. Paragraphs 71 – 72.**

Paragraph 71	Read and Agreed
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Paragraph 72      Read and Agreed

**The culture around sickness absence in the NICS needs to change.  
Paragraphs 73 – 75.**

Paragraph 73	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 74	Read and Agreed as amended
Paragraph 75	Read and Agreed

**The role and responsibilities of Civil Service Commissioners for NI need to be refreshed.’ Paragraphs 76 – 79.**

Paragraph 76	Read and Agreed as amended
Paragraph 77	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 78	To be revised and brought back to the Committee
Paragraph 79	Read and Agreed

**The C&AG’s Report dated 18 November 2020. Paragraphs 80 – 81.**

Paragraph 80	Read and Agreed
Paragraph 81	Read and Agreed

**Witnesses must provide open and direct responses at evidence sessions.’  
Paragraph 82.**

Paragraph 82	Read and Agreed
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**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



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- Hansard
- Correspondence.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to schedule a final consideration of the report at its meeting of 29 April 2021; and it was proposed to launch the report towards the end of May 2021.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted a press release will be prepared by the Clerk prior to launch date for the Committee to agree.

The meeting remained in Closed Session at 3.48 pm

## **8. Inquiry into ‘Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy’**

The following Departmental Officials joined the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG NIAO;  
Mr Rodney Allen, Chief Operating Officer, NIAO  
Mr Brian O’Neill, Senior Auditor remotely; and  
Mr Kyle Bingham Assembly Support Officer, NIAO remotely.

The Committee discussed, with Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG and his team, next week’s two evidence sessions on the inquiry into ‘Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy’.

The Committee noted the following papers in respect of the two evidence sessions:

- NIAO report on Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy;
- KPMG report on behalf of RenewableNI – ‘An Economic Review of Small Scale Wind’;



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- Witness biographies – Steven Agnew, Head of RenewableNI; Russell Smyth, Partner KPMG and Michael Thompson, Managing Director of Everun;
- Paper dated 12 April 2021 from Professor Hughes – ‘Small wind generation in Northern Ireland’;
- NIAO restricted paper ‘Suggested Areas of Questions’;
- Article by Peter Donaghy, regarding NI’s expensive push towards renewable electricity; and
- Partial response from Mike Brennan AO DfE dated 14 April 2021 regarding evidence session of 18 March 2021

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to invite Mr Agnew to give evidence first and to offer him and his colleagues the option to remain for Professor Hughes evidence session.

The meeting remained in Closed Session at 3.55 pm

### **9. Draft Forward Work Programme**

The following officials remained in the meeting:

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

The Committee noted the draft Forward Work Programme covering the period 15 April to end of May 2021, including the two evidence sessions regarding its inquiry into ‘Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy’ at next week’s meeting. The Committee discussed the need for any further evidence sessions specific to this inquiry.



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**Agreed:** The Clerk agreed to bring back to the Committee some information specific to the Renewable Energy inquiry, to allow the Committee to consider if a further evidence session is required.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted PAC's 7<sup>th</sup> inquiry, 'Speeding up Justice, delays in the criminal system', and that the witness session is scheduled in the Forward Work Programme for the end of May 2021.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to consider, at next week's meeting, the list of NIAO Current and Forthcoming Reports, to help schedule the draft Forward Work Programme through to the Summer.

The meeting remained in Closed Session at 3.58 pm

### 10. Any Other Business

#### **Whistleblower through Lesly Hogg, Clerk / Chief Executive for NI Assembly**

The Committee noted correspondence dated 22 March 2021 from the Whistleblower regarding email of 12 March 2021 through Ms Lesley Hogg, The Clerk/Chief Executive for NI Assembly on 15 March 2021.

**Agreed:** The Committee considered its statutory remit and concluded that it has no remit to consider any individual cases that pertain to physical and financial detriment.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Whistleblower and to reiterate that all areas have been exhausted; that the Committee now considers this matter closed and is unfortunately not in a position to consider this matter any further.



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### **The Audit Committee Review**

The Committee noted correspondence dated 12 March 2021 from the Audit Committee regarding a '*Review of the Governance and Accountability arrangements for the Northern Ireland Audit Office and Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman*'.

The Committee noted the terms of reference regarding the review; NIAO's report on the Review of the Governance and Accountability Arrangements for the NIAO and the Clerks' memo outlining potential areas of reply.

The Committee discussed if there were any comparisons that could be made with other Public Account Committees.

**Agreed:** The Clerk agreed to further look into this matter.

### **Committee Press Releases**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the Chair should meet with the NIA Head of Communications Ms Susie Brown, regarding the issue of committee press releases.

### **Committee Motions**

The Committee discussed bringing forward PAC Reports to the Assembly floor for a 'take note' debate, including Report on Capacity and Capability in the NICS.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to consider this once the MOR has been received.

### **11. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting**

The next meeting of the Public Accounts Committee will take place on Thursday 22 April 2021, at 2.00 pm in The Senate, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 4.24 pm.





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**Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA**  
**Chairperson**  
**Public Accounts Committee**  
**15 April 2021**