



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday, 17 June 2021

Meeting Location: The Senate, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Harry Harvey MLA
Mr David Hilditch MLA
Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA
Mr Andrew Muir MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Mr Roy Beggs MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan MLA
Ms Órlaithí Flynn MLA
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA

Apologies: None

In Attendance: Ms Lucia Wilson (Assembly Clerk)
Ms Gillian Barker (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Ms Karen Barry (Clerical Supervisor)



Northern Ireland
Assembly

The meeting commenced in Closed Session at 2.06 pm

The Committee noted Mr William Humphry MBE, MLA, Chairperson, would be leaving the meeting at 4.00pm. Mr Andrew Muir MLA proposed Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA to take the Chair in the interim, and was seconded by Mr Harry Harvey MLA.

Agreed: The Committee unanimously agreed Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA would take the Chair in the interim of Mr William Humphrey MBE, MLA leaving the meeting.

The following NIAO Official joined the meeting:

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

The Committee noted the three evidence sessions would be heard separately at Agenda Items 6, 7 & 8:

- The Ulster University Greater Belfast Development Project, in closed session due to commercial sensitivities;
- The inquiry into Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy, in open session; and
- The delays in Ministerial Directions, in open session.

The Clerk briefed the Committee on the three briefing sessions, highlighting any pertinent issues to Members for their consideration.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

The Committee was briefed by Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG and Mr Tomas Wilkinson, Director NIAO on the paper received from the Department dated 8 June 2021, regarding analysis of KPMG's report 'An economic review of small-scale wind in Northern Ireland'.

The Committee noted the follow-up response, dated 14 April 2021, from Mr Mike Brennan, addressing issues raised after the evidence session on 18 March 2021.

The Committee noted the updated list of Ministerial Directions from NIAO.

The meeting went into Open Session at 2.23 pm.

1. Apologies

None

2. Draft Minutes of 3 June 2021

Agreed: The draft minutes of the meeting of 3 June 2021 were signed and agreed to be published.

3. Declaration of Interest

None



Northern Ireland
Assembly

4. Matters Arising

None

5. Correspondence

None

The meeting went into Closed Session at 2.25 pm

6. Briefing on the Ulster University Greater Belfast Development Project

The following Officials joined the meeting:

Mr Mike Brennan, Permanent Secretary/Accounting Officer, DfE;
Ms Heather Cousins, Deputy Secretary, Skills and Education Group, DfE and
Professor Paul Bartholomew, Vice-Chancellor, Ulster University joined the
meeting.

Also in attendance:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG, NIAO; and
Mr Stuart Stevenson, TOA, DoF [remotely].

The Committee noted the relevant papers for the evidence session:

- The Clerk's briefing paper dated 14 June 2021 on the Ulster University Greater Belfast Development Project; and
- Biographies of the witnesses.

Mr Mike Brennan, AO DfE and Professor Bartholomew updated the Committee regarding the Ulster University Greater Belfast Development Project [UUGBD]. The Committee was pleased to note that recommendations from PAC's Major Capital



Northern Ireland Assembly

Projects Report, regarding governance and contractual matters have been taken up by the Ulster University's Council.

The Committee noted the Belfast Campus is near completion and aims to open October 2021

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Professor Bartholomew for some additional information.

***The meeting was adjourned at 2.50 pm
The meeting went into Open Session at 3.04 pm***

7. Inquiry on Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy

The following Departmental officials joined the meeting:

Mr Mike Brennan, Accounting Officer, DfE;
Mr Richard Rodgers, Head of Energy Group; and
Mr Trevor McBriar, Principal Officer, Renewable Electricity

Also in attendance:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG NIAO; and
Mr Stuart Stevenson, TOA DoF [remotely].

The Committee noted the relevant papers for the evidence session:

- The NIAO report Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy;
- KPMG report 'An Economic Review of Small Scale Wind';
- Correspondence dated 8 June 2021 from Mike Brennan, AO, DfE, 'Analysis of KPMG report';
- NIAO Verbal brief – Key Points from the DfE review of KPMG analysis;
- Correspondence dated 14 April 2021 from Mike Brennan AO DfE regarding further information following the evidence session of 18 March 2021; and
- Biographies of the witnesses.



Northern Ireland Assembly

Mr Mike Brennan and Officials briefed the Committee on their analysis of KPMG's Report including outlining the differences between the rates of return between the Department and KPMG reports. The Committee noted the important lessons learnt for future energy schemes and welcomed the joined up approach for the department's future 'Energy Management Strategy and Action Plan to 2030'.

The C&AG also welcomed the Departments joined up approach to the new Energy Management Strategy 2030 and the lessons learnt for future schemes.

Mr Harry Harvey MLA left the meeting at 3.27 pm

The meeting was adjourned at 3.33 pm

The meeting went into Open Session at 3.36 pm

8. Delays in Ministerial Directions

The following Departmental officials joined the meeting:

Mr Mike Brennan, Accounting Officer, DfE; and
Mr Colin Woods, Director of Corporate Governance.

Also in attendance:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG NIAO; and
Mr Stuart Stevenson, TOA DoF [remotely].

The Committee noted the following papers for the evidence session:

- Updated list of Ministerial Directions; and
- Biographies of the witnesses.

Mr Brennan made an opening statement regarding the unprecedented numbers of Ministerial Directions that his department has received as a result of COVID 19. To



Northern Ireland Assembly

date, DfE has received 15. Mr Brennan highlighted the huge pressures on the Department to process these Ministerial Directions, their complexity, and the urgent need to support businesses to stay open.

The Committee noted the situation and appreciated the challenges and pressures in processing the Ministerial Directions at this time and discussed future Ministerial Directions and how these will be managed.

The Committee noted the appointment of Mr Colin Woods as Director of Corporate Governance, and that there are now formal arrangements in place to centralise and manage Ministerial Directions.

Mr Stuart Stevenson, TOA, endorsed the good work being done by the Department together with his Department, DoF in managing and processing Ministerial Directions.

The Chair thanked Mr Mike Brennan AO DfE and his colleagues for their contributions and attending the meeting.

Mr William Humphry MBE MLA left the meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at 3.55 pm

The meeting remained in Open Session at 4.02 pm

Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA took the Chair at 4.02 pm

9. Ministerial Directions

The following NIAO Officials joined the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG NIAO;

Mr Tomas Wilkinson, Director NIAO;

Mr Neil Gray, Director, and

Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer NIAO [remotely].

Mr Roy Beggs MLA declared his father had sheep and would avail of the Ministerial Direction 'Support for Wool Producers'.



Northern Ireland Assembly

Publication of the list of Ministerial Directions,

The Committee noted correspondence, dated 9 June, which has been copied to the Committee by Mr Peter McCallion, Chair of the Finance Committee, from Mr Andy Monaghan Departmental Assembly Liaison Officer, DoF regarding clarity on the list of Ministerial Directions.

The Committee noted that rather than hold up the publication of the list of Ministerial Directions, it was decided to publish an interim list in May 2021 which excluded those not yet discussed by PAC. The full list will be published as soon as this Committee has had a chance to discuss those which remain outstanding.

Agreed: The Committee welcomed the correspondence, in particular that the list will be updated and published on a regular basis; and the role the Committee had taken in initiating greater transparency in the publication of Ministerial Directions.

Ministerial Directions:

Funding of Lough Neagh COVID support Scheme

The Committee noted correspondence from Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG, dated 10 June 2021 and correspondence dated 23 April 2021 to the C&AG from Mr Denis Mahon, AO DEARA on a Ministerial Direction to provide short term support for the impact of COVID-19 on Lough Neagh inland fishermen.

The Committee noted that the documentation received does not include the Permanent Secretary's submission to the DAERA Minister; and that the Department is refusing to provide this to the Committee, citing legal privilege.

The Committee noted the Ministerial Direction was to addresses losses incurred by inland fishermen, on Lough Neagh, as a result of not being able to fish due to the



Northern Ireland Assembly

COVID-19 pandemic during 2020. The Department estimates that the **total cost will be £198k.**

Agreed: The Committee noted the relevant papers and that the Department of Finance Minister approved this proposal on 16 April 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to express disappointment that the C&AG did not have sight of the submission, citing reasons of legal privilege.

COVID 19 Disruption Payment of £60 to Higher and Further Education Students at CAFRE to address Digital Poverty

The Committee noted correspondence from Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG, dated 10 June 2021 and correspondence dated 23 April 2021 to the C&AG from Mr Denis Mahon, AO DEARA regarding a Ministerial Direction. The Ministerial Direction will make payments to CAFRE students to address digital poverty due to COVID-19 disruption. Support payments of £60 will be paid to full time and part time Higher Education and Further Education students. The estimated total cost is projected to be approximately £100k.

Agreed: The Committee noted payments for the Scheme will be met within the Departmental COVID-19 budget for 2020 – 21; the relevant papers show the Department of Finance Minister approved this proposal on 16 April 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask if any other students have or would be receiving such a payment

Funding of the COVID-19 Support for Wool Producers Scheme

The Committee noted correspondence from Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG dated 10 June 2021 and correspondence dated 23 April 2021 to the C&AG from Mr Denis



Northern Ireland Assembly

Mahon, AO DEARA regarding a Ministerial Direction. The Ministerial Direction will make payments under a COVID-19 Support for Wool Producers Scheme. Support payments of £1.40 per ewe, to be made to farm businesses with the Department identifying eligible numbers of ewes from the Animal and Public Health Information System (APHIS). The estimated total cost is projected to be approximately £1.265 million with eligible farm businesses receiving on average £130.

Agreed: The Committee noted payments for the scheme will be met within the Departmental COVID-19 budget for 2020-21; the relevant papers show the Department of Finance Minister approved this proposal on 16 April 2021.

Support Scheme for impact of flooding in the Glenelly and Owenkillew river catchment areas

The Committee noted correspondence from Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG dated 10 June 2021 and correspondence dated 23 April 2021 to the C&AG from Mr Denis Mahon, AO DEARA regarding a Ministerial Direction. The Ministerial Direction will provide support for farmers under the impact of flooding in the Glenelly and Owenkillew river catchment areas.

The Department estimates that the total cost will be £3.45m million to be met within the 2020-21 budget.

Agreed: The Committee noted the relevant letter indicating that the Department of Finance Minister approved this proposal on 28 April 202.

Agreed: The Committee noted the C&AG will keep all these matters under review as the audit of the 2020-21 financial statements progresses and will brief the Committee at the earliest opportunity.

The meeting went into Closed Session at 4.20 pm



Northern Ireland Assembly

10. Draft Forward Work Programme

The following officials remained in the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG;
Mr Tomas Wilkinson, Director;
Mr Neil Gray, Director and
Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer NIAO.

Evidence Sessions – Discussions

The Committee discussed each of the evidence sessions heard at Agenda Item 6, 7 & 8 and welcomed the updated information received from Mr Mike Brennan, AO DfE and his Officials.

The Committee agreed the draft report ‘Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy’ will be considered at next week’s meeting and to include any amendments from today’s evidence session.

Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted two draft Forward Work Programmes showing options for the remaining 3 Committee meetings to summer recess.

The Committee noted correspondence dated 4 June 2021 from Antoinette McKeown CE Sports NI, and correspondence dated 4 June 2021 from Ms Tracy Meharg AO DfC regarding rescheduling the evidence session for ‘Related Sports Sustainability Grant Scheme Report’ from 1 July to 8 July 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to reschedule the evidence session for ‘Related Sports Sustainability Grant Scheme Report’ to 8 July 2021.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request an updated list of NIAO Reports for next week's meeting to decide on the Autumn / Winter 2021 draft Forward Work Programme.

Mr Cathal Boylan MLA left the meeting at 4.42 pm

The meeting remained in Closed Session at 4.44 pm

11. Any Other Business

The Committee agreed to write to the newly appointed Head of NICS, Ms Jayne Brady, once in post, to invite her to meet with the Committee to discuss recent PAC reports and its recommendations.

The Committee asked the Clerk to seek information on the scope of the new Permanent Secretary's post in the Executive Office.

12. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Public Accounts Committee will take place on Thursday 24 June, at 2.00 pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 4.47 pm.

Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA
Chairperson
Public Accounts Committee
17 June 2021