



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday, 25 February 2021

Meeting Location: The Senate, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present:

Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Harry Harvey MLA
Mr David Hilditch MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

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

Apologies:

Mr Cathal Boylan MLA
Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA

In Attendance:

Ms Lucia Wilson (Assembly Clerk)
Ms Gillian Barker (Assistant Assembly Clerk)



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In Attendance by Video or Teleconference:

Ms Karen Barry (Clerical Supervisor)

Mr Darren Weir (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 2.06 pm in Open Session

1. Apologies

None

2. Draft Minutes of 18th February 2021

Agreed: The draft minutes of the meeting of 18th February 2021 were agreed and to be published.

3. Declaration of Interest

Mr Roy Beggs MLA declared he was a Governor of Roddensvale School, Larne.

Mr Andrew Muir MLA declared he was a Governor of Priory Integrated College, Holywood.

4. Matters Arising

None



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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, Director, NIAO; and

Mr Kyle Bingham Assembly Support Officer, NIAO joined the meeting remotely.

Justice Committee Memo

The Committee noted correspondence dated 15 February 2021 from the Justice Committee regarding the development and implementation of a Statutory Registration Scheme for Legal Aid Practitioners in Northern Ireland, which was a recommendation in PAC's Managing Legal Aid Report of 2017.

The Committee recalled they had written to the Department of Justice on 16 June 2020 to ask for a further update in 12 months' time on the recommendations out of their 2017 Report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Justice Committee acknowledging their correspondence of 15 February 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Justice to request an explanation on the scaling back of the 'audit ambitions' regarding the Statutory Registration Scheme, and an update on all the 2017 reports' recommendations.

Memo from Audit Committee to Finance Minister regarding 2021-22 Draft Budgets

The Committee noted a memo dated 14 December 2020 from the Audit Committee to the Finance Minister: Response to Draft Budgets 2021-22 for Northern Ireland Assembly Commission [NIAC]; Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman [NIPSO]; and Northern Ireland Audit Office [NIAO]. Draft Budgets agreed are as follows:



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- The Executive's Budget should make provision for the Assembly Commission having a Resource DEL Budget of £49,333K and Capital DEL Budget of £1,684K. The Resource DEL broken down as follows: £45,833K of Non Ring-Fenced DEL and £3,500K of Ring-fenced DEL;
- The Executive's Budget should make provision for NIPSO having a Resource DEL Budget of £3,753K and Capital DEL Budget of £70K. The Resource DEL broken down as follows: £3,633K of Non Ring-Fenced DEL and £120K of Ring-fenced DEL; and
- The Executive's Budget document should make provision for NIAO having a Resource DEL Budget of £8,750K and Capital DEL Budget of £4,450K. The Resource DEL broken down as follows: £8,575K of Non-Ring-Fenced DEL and £175K of Ring-fenced DEL.

The Committee noted that at its meeting of 5th November 2020, the C&AG addressed the issue of the comparative increase in the 2021-22 budget as opposed to the projected budget for the following two years and that PAC was content with the explanation provided. The Audit Committee subsequently noted PAC's decision at its meeting on 9 December.

Agreed: The Committee noted the Audit Committee correspondence.

The meeting remained in Open Session at 2.19 pm

6. Ministerial Direction on 'Direct Payments In lieu of Free School Meals'

The following Officials joined in the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB Comptroller & Auditor General (C&AG); and
Ms Rodney Allen, Director NIAO.

The following Officials joined the meeting remotely:



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Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer NIAO; and
Mr Patrick Barr, Director NIAO.

The Committee noted correspondence dated 18 February 2021, from Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG regarding correspondence he received dated 8 February 2021, from Lianne Patterson, Acting Permanent Secretary, Department of Education informing the C&AG that the Minister of Education, with the agreement of the Finance Minister, has provided a Direction to take forward direct payments to families of all children in special schools who are entitled to free school meals for the period 25 January – 12 February 2021 during the current Covid-19 restrictions.

Background

The Committee noted the background papers that went to the Minister outlining the purpose of making direct payments to families of all children in special schools, entitled to free school meals (FSM), in lieu of the FSM they would have received had they been in attendance at school.

Ministerial Correspondence

The Committee noted the relevant correspondence from the Minister of Education and Minister of Finance dated 2nd and 3rd February 2021 directing payments to families of all children in special schools, entitled to free school meals to a value of £138,955; with potential of a maximum duplication cost of up to £38,232.

Agreed: The Committee noted the Ministerial Directions on 'Direct Payments In lieu of Free School Meals' and were satisfied that any possible duplication of payments has been addressed by the department, noting this legislation will expire post COVID.

The meeting went into Closed Session at 2.26 pm

7. Inquiry into 'Driver and Vehicle Agency 2019-20': NIAO Issues Paper

The following officials joined the meeting:



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M Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG; and
Mr Rodney Allen, Director NIAO.

The following officials joined the meeting remotely:

Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer NIAO;
Ms Colette Kane, Director NIAO; and
Ms Suzanne Murphy, Audit Manager NIAO;

The Committee discussed, with Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG and his team, the evidence session of 18 February 2021, on its inquiry into 'Driver and Vehicle Agency 2019-20' which was attended by Ms Katrina Godfrey Accounting Officer, Department for Infrastructure and Mr Jeremy Logan Chief Executive, Vehicle and Driver Agency [DVA].

Agreed: The Committee noted NIAO's Issues Paper and agreed to write to the department on a number of follow-up issues.

Agreed: The Committee agreed NIAO's Issues Paper would form the main part of the inquiry report into 'Driver and Vehicle Agency 2019-20'.

Mr David Hilditch MLA left the meeting at 2.40 pm

Mr David Hilditch MLA re-joined the meeting at 2.45 pm

The meeting remained in Closed Session at 2.52 pm

8. Inquiry into 'Capacity and Capability in the Northern Ireland Civil Service'

Briefing and Preparation Session:

The following officials remained in the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG; and
M Rodney Allen, Director.

The following officials joined the meeting remotely:



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Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer; and
Mr Conor McGeown, Auditor.

The Committee discussed, with Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG and his team, next week's evidence session with Deidre Toner, Civil Service Commissioner NI and Ian Watmore, Civil Service Commissioner UK.

The Committee noted the following papers:

- NIAO Report on 'Capacity and Capability in NICS';
- Restricted Issues Paper regarding the evidence session of 4 February 2021, Sue Gray, Accounting Officer Department for Finance;
- Biographies of Ms Toner and Mr Watmore;
- Correspondence dated 4 February 2021 regarding Digital Skills & Capacity Research Report; and
- NIAO suggested areas of questions for the evidence session.

The meeting remained in Closed Session at 3.10 pm

9. Draft Forward Work Programme

The following officials remained in the meeting:

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

The Committee noted the draft forward work programme to Easter 2021.

The Clerk discussed the potential for additional evidence sessions regarding PAC's 6th inquiry into Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy and scheduling the 7th inquiry into Speeding Up Justice; avoidable delay in the criminal justice system.

Agreed: The Committee noted the draft forward work programme.



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10. Any Other Business

The Committee noted that its report on Impact Review on Special Educational Needs had been published on 25 February and the relevant media coverage.

11. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Public Accounts Committee will take place on Thursday 4th March 2021 at 2.00 pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 3.18 pm.

**Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA
Chairperson
Public Accounts Committee
25 February 2021**