



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Public Accounts Committee

## Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday, 29 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  
David Hilditch MLA

**Present by Video or Teleconference:**

Mr Cathal Boylan MLA  
Ms Órlaithí Flynn MLA  
Mr Andrew Muir MLA  
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA  
Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA

**Apologies:** None

**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 2.04 pm in Open Session

**1. Apologies**

None

**2. Draft Minutes of 22 April 2021**

**Agreed:** The draft minutes of the meeting of 22 April 2021 were signed and agreed to be published.

**3. Declaration of Interest**

None

**4. Matters Arising**

None

**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.



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### **Construction Employers Federation**

The Committee noted correspondence dated 16 April 2021 from the Construction Employers Federation to the Department for Infrastructure regarding the Review of the 2011 Planning Act, in which they welcome their involvement in the Ministerial Planning Engagement Partnership.

The Committee noted CEF's response to the Department including comments on improving the Pre Application Discussion; the need to include a matrix check list in the Pre Application Community Consultation; and that they look forward to the introduction of an online portal for planning applications in Northern Ireland which is going live in 2022.

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

### **Anonymous Email**

The Committee noted an anonymous email dated 21 April 2021 received via Andrew Muir MLA regarding concerns raised over DfE Energy Division. The email also included a list of various Assembly Written Questions on this matter.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the correspondence and agreed to forward it to the Audit Office and the Committee for Economy.

The meeting remained in Open Session at 2.07 pm

## **6. NIAO Main Estimates 2021 - 2022**

The following Officials remained in the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG NIAO;  
Mr Rodney Allen, Chief Operating Officer, NIAO; and



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Mr Kyle Bingham Assembly Support Officer, NIAO remotely

The Committee noted the Audit Committee has requested comments from PAC on 'NIAO Main Estimate for 2021/22', which is the agreed protocol between NIAO and the Audit Committee to have due regard to the advice of the Department of Finance and PAC.

The Clerk's Memo dated 26 April 2021, outlined the process regarding the Main Estimates 2021 - 2022 which have been prepared in line with the Budget and agreed with the Assembly Audit Committee for 2021-22.

The Committee noted that the Main Estimates as presented reflected this agreed budget position; and noted there are no material changes with the Main Estimate for 2021/2022 as presented today.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Audit Committee to confirm that the Committee was content with the Main Estimates 2021 - 2022

*The meeting remained in Open Session at 2.10 pm*

### **7. Memorandum of Reply – Impact Review Special Educational Needs**

The following Officials remained in the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly CB C&AG NIAO;

Mr Rodney Allen, Chief Operating Officer, NIAO;

Ms Colette Kane, Director, NIAO remotely, and

Mr Kyle Bingham Assembly Support Officer, NIAO remotely

The Committee noted the Memorandum of Reply dated 20 April 2021, regarding PAC's Report 'Impact Review of Special Educational Needs'. The MOR was laid in the Business Office on 20 April 2021.



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The Committee noted the substantive response from the Department for each recommendation and welcomed that each of the 7 recommendations have ALL been accepted by the Department.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to request an update from the Department on the progress of implementing the MOR for 6 months' time.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to publish a press release on this matter next week, to highlight all of their 7 recommendations have been accepted by the Department. Also that PAC will be requesting an update from the Department in 6 months' time.

**Agreed:** A draft Press Release to be considered at next week's meeting.

*The meeting remained in Open Session at 2.13 pm*

### **8. Ministerial Direction**

The following Departmental Officials joined the meeting:

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

The Committee noted the back log of Ministerial Directions and agreed to address 3 or 4 at one time each week to help alleviate this back log.

#### **Ministerial Direction DoF – Helicopter Emergency Medical Service**

The Committee noted correspondence dated 1 April 2021, from Mr Kieran Donnelly, C&AG regarding a Ministerial Direction from DoH – Helicopter Emergency Medical Service; and correspondence dated 29 March 2021, from Mr Richard Pengelly, Permanent Secretary of the Department of Health outlining the Ministerial Direction in respect of a decision to make a payment of £1 million to the Air Ambulance Service.



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The Committee noted the background to the Ministerial Direction and that the Helicopter Emergency Medical Service is funded by a partnership model between the NI Ambulance Service (NIAS) and the Air Ambulance NI charity.

The Committee noted that the C&AG has provided relevant information from the Minister to underpin the decision to make a payment of £1m to AANI.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the Ministerial Direction at a cost of £1 million.

### **Ministerial Direction: DoF ‘Additional Financial Assistance Schemes to make use of the remaining 2020-21 Covid-19 Funding’.**

The Committee noted correspondence dated 14 April 2021, from Mr Kieran Donnelly, C&AG regarding a Ministerial Direction from DoH – ‘Additional Financial Assistance Schemes to make use of the remaining 2021-21 COVID Funding’.

The Committee noted correspondence from Ms Sue Gray AO DoF, who wrote to C&AG on 30 March 2021, to advise she had received a Ministerial Direction from the Finance Minister in relation to three additional finance schemes. The schemes were to make use of the remaining 2020-21 COVID-19 funding.

1. A scheme to provide a one-off grant for businesses occupying premises with a Net Annual Value over £51,000 which were not able to access grant funding during the first lockdown. **The estimated cost of this proposal is £56.3 million.**
2. A scheme to provide a one-off grant to industrial businesses in premises with a total Net Annual Value between £15,001 and £51,000 which were unable to access either the £10,000 or £25,000 grants during 2020. **The estimated cost of this proposal is £27.9 million.**
3. A top-up payment to businesses which received either the £10,000 Small Business Grant or £25,000 Grant for Retail Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure in 2020, but which have been unable to access the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) or Coronavirus Restrictions Business Support Scheme (CRBSS) Part B. **The estimated cost of this proposal is £93.7m.**

**The total estimated cost of the three schemes is £177.9m.**



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The Committee noted the background information from the C&AG on this Ministerial Direction.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the Ministerial Direction at a total of £177.9 million.

*The meeting went into Closed Session at 2.22 pm*

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

The Committee noted the amendments now incorporated into the draft report, 'Inquiry into Capacity and Capability in the NICS', as agreed at its meeting on 15 April 2021.

The Committee considered the following paragraphs that have been revised and brought back to the Committee for agreement:

Paragraph 12 was Read and Agreed as amended

Paragraph 15 was Read and Agreed as amended

Paragraph 29 was Read and Agreed as amended

Paragraph 40 was Read and Agreed

Paragraph 67 was Read and Agreed

Paragraph 68 was Read and Agreed as amended

Paragraph 79 was Read and Agreed

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to incorporate these amendments into the final Report, and that this concluded the Final Consideration Stage of the report 'Inquiry into Capacity and Capability in the NICS'.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the Report is Ordered to Print.

**Agreed:** The Committee proposed to publish the report on 20 May 2021 and noted a draft press release will be brought to the Committee prior to it being published.



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*The Committee remained in Closed session at 2.34 pm*

### **10. 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 July 2021 and that next week will be the first consideration of the DVA Report. The Committee agreed there was now sufficient evidence gathered to draft the report into 'Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy'.

The Committee discussed with the C&AG further inquiries to schedule into the Forward Work Programme through to the Summer and expressed an interest in the work the Audit Office are currently completing regarding COVID related expenditure.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that there was sufficient evidence to start drafting the report into 'Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy'.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to schedule a briefing from the Audit Office on COVID related expenditure once this work has been completed by NIAO.

*The meeting remained in Closed Session at 2.40 pm*

*The C&AG and Audit Team left the meeting at this point.*





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### **11. Review of the governance and accountability arrangements for the Northern Ireland Audit Office and the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman**

The Committee further discussed correspondence dated 12 March 2021 from the Chair of the Audit Committee regarding a 'Review of the Governance and Accountability arrangements for the NIAO and NIPSO'. The Committee noted an explanatory Memo from the Clerk, dated 26 April 2021 and a dissertation 'A Comparative Assessment' by Clare Rice, dated 11 September 2014.

The Committee agreed its response should to be as comprehensive as possible. However, as this PAC Committee, has only been sitting since January 2020, and in addition, was suspended for a number of months due to COVID, Members agreed it was premature to provide a full response at this time.

The Committee acknowledged their current relationship with the Audit Office is very productive; and noted they are about to commence their seventh report.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed a more inclusive response for the Audit Committee would be better served towards the end of the mandate.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Audit Committee to offer a more comprehensive response at the end of the mandate.

### **12. Any Other Business**

None

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

The next meeting of the Public Accounts Committee will take place on Thursday 6 May 2021, at 2.00 pm in The Senate, Parliament Buildings.



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*The meeting adjourned at 2.55 pm.*

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