Northern Ireland Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday, 17 October 2024

Meeting Location: Room 21, Parliament Buildings

Present:

Daniel McCrossan, MLA

Diane Forsyth, MLA

Tom Buchanan, MLA

John Stewart, MLA

David Honeyford, MLA

Colm Gildernew, MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Pádraig Delargy, MLA.

Cathal Boylan, MLA

Apologies: Cheryl Brownlee, MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

In Attendance: Lucia Wilson (Committee Clerk)

Kirsten McClelland (Assistant Committee Clerk)

Oliver Bellew (Clerical Supervisor)

Barbara Daly (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 2.08 pm in closed session.

The Chairperson advised members of the requirement to declare interests in any items of business on the agenda, and discussed the substantive items of business to be considered.

The meeting moved into public session at 2.10 pm.

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Cheryl Brownlee, MLA (Deputy Chairperson).

2. Draft minutes

Agreed: The draft minutes of the meeting on 10 October 2024 were agreed.

3. Declaration of Interests

The Chairperson reminded members of their requirement to register their interests under Standing Order 69(5).

4. Matters Arising

5. Chairperson's Business

The Chair updated members on his attendance as Keynote Speaker at the CIPFA Northern Ireland conference. The event was well attended and provided a worthwhile opportunity for engagement between the committee and financial services sector.

Agreed: Members agreed to write a letter of thanks to CIPFA for the opportunity to present to the conference.

6. Correspondence

Members noted correspondence from Ian Snowden, Permanent Secretary of the Department for the Economy accepting the Committee's invitation to give evidence in respect of the upcoming inquiry into 'Developing the Skills for Northern Ireland's Future'.

The meeting moved into closed session at 2.14 pm.

7. Inquiry into Public Procurement in Northern Ireland – CoPE Responses

The following officials from the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) joined the meeting at 2.14 pm.

Dorinnia Carville, Comptroller and Auditor General, NIAO

Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer, NIAO

The Committee received a briefing on the issues identified in written evidence requested from CoPE's following the evidence session on 16 May 2024.

Tom Buchanan, MLA joined the meeting at 2.47 pm.

Pádraig Delargy, MLA joined the meeting at 2.48 pm as a result of technical difficulties with the remote meeting facility.

Agreed: Members agreed to note the evidence and forward it to the Northern Ireland Audit Office for inclusion in the final report.

8. Final Consideration of Report 'Child Poverty in Northern Ireland'

The following officials from the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) joined the meeting at 2.49 pm.

Dorinnia Carville, Comptroller and Auditor General, NIAO

Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer, NIAO

The Committee noted the draft report is classified as RESTRICTED for Members' attention and therefore should not be published more widely.

The Committee noted it had a first formal consideration of the 'Child Poverty in Northern Ireland' report at last week's meeting, 10 October 2024.

The Committee noted this is the final consideration for the report 'Child Poverty in Northern Ireland' and agreed the title of the report is 'Child Poverty in Northern Ireland'.

The Committee was presented with the agreed amendments as follows:

Paragraph 8: Read and Agreed.

Section Title: 'A new anti-poverty strategy must be fully costed: Agreed.

Agreed: The Committee agreed an amendment to paragraph 8.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the amended Section Title: 'A new anti-poverty strategy must be fully costed. Paras 68 – 79

Agreed: The Committee agreed to order the report to be published.

The Committee considered the draft press release regarding its third report 'Child Poverty in Northern Ireland'.

Agreed: The Committee agreed amendments to the draft press release which will be brought back for final approval on 24 October 2024.

Agreed: The Committee noted the Child Poverty in Northern Ireland report will be published on Thursday 7 November 2024.

The Committee discussed the proposed launch event for the Child Poverty in Northern Ireland report on 7 November 2024.

Agreed: Members agreed the format for the event.

Agreed: Members agreed to issue invitations to the event.

9. Committee Procedures and Practices

The following officials from the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) joined the meeting at 3.28 pm.

Dorinnia Carville, Comptroller and Auditor General, NIAO

Seamus Wade, Director, NIAO

Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer, NIAO

The Committee received a briefing on primacy of the Public Accounts Committee and reviewed the list of outstanding NIAO reports.

David Honeyford, MLA left the meeting at 3.52 pm.

David Honeyford, MLA re-joined the meeting at 3.53 pm.

Diane Forsythe, MLA left the meeting at 4.11 pm.

Agreed: Members agreed to release the following reports to the relevant statutory Committees,

The Judicial Review Process in Northern Ireland (Justice Committee)

Tackling the Public Health Impacts of Smoking and Vaping (Health Committee)

Budgeting and Accountability (Finance Committee)

Continuous improvement arrangements in Policing (Justice Committee)

Public Bodies' Response to Misrepresented Soil Analysis (Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee and Infrastructure Committee)

Members noted the publication of the second NIAO report into the Northern Ireland Non-Domestic RHI Scheme.

Agreed: Members agreed to write to the Department of Finance expressing concern that a significant number of recommendations in the RHI report are still to be fully implemented.

Members reflected on recent inquiries and effective questioning training and noted the role and responsibilities of an Accounting Officer in giving evidence to Committees. Members discussed how this can be applied in preparation for future inquiries.

The Chair thanked officials for their attendance.

Officials left the meeting at 4.14 pm.

10. Forward Work Programme

The Committee was briefed on the annual PAC Network meeting and CAPAC annual conference.

The Committee considered the draft programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that a delegation from NIA PAC should attend this event on 28 and 29 November.

Agreed: The Clerk will seek further clarification on the number of delegates that can attend per jurisdiction.

The Committee was briefed on the draft Forward Work programme.

Agreed: Members agreed to invite the Department of Education to attend the Committee to provide evidence in its fifth inquiry, 'Developing the Skills for Northern Ireland's Future'.

11. Any Other Business

The Chair thanked John Stewart, MLA for his contributions to the Committee in advance of a proposed change to Committee membership.

12. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The Chairperson thanked officials for their attendance and advised members that the next meeting is scheduled for Thursday 24 October 2024 at 2.00 pm.

The meeting was adjourned at 4.26 pm.

Daniel McCrossan MLA

Chairperson, Public Accounts Committee

17 October 2024