



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday, 23 January 2025

Meeting Location: Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings

Present:

Daniel McCrossan, MLA

Cheryl Brownlee, MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Tom Buchanan, MLA

Colin Crawford, MLA

Diane Forsythe, MLA

Cathal Boylan, MLA

Colm Gildernew, MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Pádraig Delargy, MLA

Apologies:

David Honeyford, MLA

In Attendance: Peter McCallion (Committee Clerk)
Kirsten McClelland (Assistant Committee Clerk)
Laura Gourley (Clerical Supervisor)
Barbara Daly (Clerical Officer)
Michael Scholes (Research Officer) – item 7 only
Frank Geddis (Clerk Assistant) – item 9 only

The meeting opened in public session at 2.02 pm.

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from David Honeyford, MLA.

2. Draft minutes

Agreed: The draft minutes of the meeting on 16 January 2025 were agreed.

Pádraig Delargy joined the meeting at 2.04 pm.

Diane Forsythe joined the meeting at 2.04 pm.

3. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

4. Matters Arising

Members noted a response confirming the attendance of Ms Jayne Brady, Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service, and Mr Neil Gibson, Accounting Officer,

Department of Finance for the evidence session on the inquiry on Major Capital Projects: Follow Up Report, on 30 January 2025.

Members considered a response from Ian Snowden, Accounting Officer, Department for the Economy providing a response to questions raised following the evidence session on 21 November 2024, on Developing Skills for NI's future.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to the Northern Ireland Audit Office for inclusion in the final report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request sight of the Gateway Review of the Skills Framework which was completed in January 2024 and which was mentioned in the response.

Members noted a response confirming the attendance of Peter May, Accounting Officer, Department of Health, Gearóid Cassidy, Director of Primary Care and Dr Margaret O'Brien, Head of General Medical Services, Strategic Planning and Performance Group for the evidence session on the inquiry into Access to GP Services on 6 March.

Members noted a response confirming the attendance of the Royal College of General Practitioners and British Medical Association for the evidence session on the inquiry into Access to GP Services on 27 February.

Members considered the article referred to by David Honeyford at last week's meeting in respect of procurement arrangements for nursing homes in Northern Ireland. Members also considered a draft letter of response to the Department of Health.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue the letter of response to the Department of Health.

5. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson placed on record his thanks and appreciation to the Deputy Chairperson and Assistant Clerk for meeting with members of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly on Wednesday evening in preparation for their evidence session on Developing Skills for NI's future.

6. Correspondence

Members considered correspondence from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, Chris Quinn requesting a meeting with the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson to discuss NICCY priorities and the PAC forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue a response to the Commissioner, requesting that NICCY shares its programme of work with the Committee in order to inform an informal meeting with the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson.

Members noted correspondence from the Northern Ireland Audit Office enclosing the Annual Report and Accounts 2022-23 for Assembly and Members Contributory Pension Fund.

Members considered correspondence received from Margaret Ritchie on behalf of her constituent Dermott Nesbitt in relation to a planning matter. Members also considered a draft letter of response.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue the letter of response.

7. Inquiry into Developing the Skills for NI's Future – Oral briefing from RalSe

The following official joined the meeting at 2.12 pm:

Michael Scholes, RalSe Research Officer, Northern Ireland Assembly

The Chairperson welcomed Mr Scholes to the meeting.

Members were briefed on an overview of the current skills landscape in the Republic of Ireland.

The Chairperson thanked Mr Scholes for attending.

Mr Scholes left the meeting at 2.30 pm.

Agreed: The Committees agreed to commission a follow-up RalSe research paper seeking further detail on the position in the Republic of Ireland including an assessment of the extent of cross-departmental working in

that jurisdiction as well as measures designed to address SEN at work and the promotion of STEM and how this compares with Northern Ireland.

8. Inquiry into Child Poverty in NI – Memorandum of Reply

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials who joined the meeting at 3.31 pm:

Dorinnia Carville, Comptroller and Auditor General, Northern Ireland Audit Office;

Thomas Wilkinson, Director, Northern Ireland Audit Office;

Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer, NIAO.

Members considered the Memorandum of Reply. Members expressed some dissatisfaction in respect of the Department for Communities' response relating to Recommendation 2 and noted the related target implementation date of March 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to: give further consideration to the Memorandum of Reply; write to the Department seeking clarity on Recommendation 2 and the importance of targets and outcomes; and agreed to invite the relevant officials to brief the Committee on this matter in late April.

The Chairperson thanked NIAO officials for attending.

Officials left the meeting at 2:48 pm.

The meeting moved into closed session at 2.48 pm.

9. Briefing on Primacy and the role of Statutory Committees

The following officials joined the meeting at 2.49 pm:

Frank Geddis, Clerk Assistant, Northern Ireland Assembly;

Dorinnia Carville, Comptroller and Auditor General, Northern Ireland Audit Office

The Chairperson welcomed officials to the meeting.

Colm Gildernew left the meeting at 3.00 pm.

The Clerk Assistant briefed Members on Primacy and the role of Statutory Committees.

The Chairperson thanked officials for attending.

Officials left the meeting at 3.04 pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to draft a letter to Statutory Committee Chairpersons seeking their views on the guidance, for consideration at the next Committee meeting.

10. Inquiry into Major Capital Projects: Follow Up Report – Preparation Session

The following officials joined the meeting at 3.05 pm:

Dorinnia Carville, Comptroller and Auditor General, Northern Ireland Audit Office;

Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer, Northern Ireland Audit Office

Members considered a briefing paper prepared by the Clerk for the upcoming evidence session on the inquiry on Major Capital Projects: Follow Up Report, on 30 January 2025.

The Chairperson thanked officials for attending.

Officials left the meeting at 3.17 pm

Agreed: The Committee agreed that Committee staff would email Members summarising the allocation of questions.

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its Forward Work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to give further consideration to the work of the Patient and Client Council in respect of assessing patient views relating to access to GP services.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the committee staff would organise a card etc. to present to members of the Northern Ireland Youth Assembly as a thank you for their work and attendance next week.

12. Any Other Business

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Clerk should discuss with Assembly Communications: the production of a short video summarising the work of PAC; and google search issues in respect of PAC.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to organise a committee photograph on a sitting day so as to update the PAC website when the Clerk returns.

13. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting will take place in the Senate Chamber on Thursday 30 January 2025 at 2.00 pm.

The meeting was adjourned at 3.32 pm.

Daniel McCrossan MLA

Chairperson, Public Accounts Committee

30 January 2024