



**Northern Ireland
Assembly**

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

THURSDAY, 14TH JANUARY 2021, THE SENATE,
PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

Present: Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Órlaithí Flynn MLA – attended remotely
Mr Harry Harvey MLA
Mr Andrew Muir MLA – attended remotely
Mr Matthew O’Toole MLA

Apologies: Mr Cathal Boylan MLA
Mr David Hilditch MLA

In Attendance: Ms Lucia Wilson, Assembly Clerk
Ms Gillian Barker, Assistant Assembly Clerk
Ms Karen Barry, Clerical Supervisor
Mr Darren Weir, Clerical Officer

The meeting began in Open Session at 2.13 pm

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Mr Cathal Boylan MLA and Mr David Hilditch MLA

2. Minutes of the meeting 17th December 2020

Agreed: The draft minutes of the meeting on 17th December 2020 were agreed and to be published.

3. Declaration of Interests

There was no additional declaration of interests that hadn’t been declared by Members in previous meetings.

4. Matters Arising

None

5. Correspondence

Mr Kieran Donnelly, C&AG, and Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer NIAO joined the meeting.

- i. The Committee noted correspondence dated 16 December 2020 from CAPAC and the conference date of 17 March 2021, which is a Public Holiday in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to contact the Clerk if they wish to participate in the CAPAC Conference.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the CAPAC survey would be completed by the Clerk and returned.

- ii. The Committee noted correspondence dated 17 December 2020 from the Justice Committee regarding Legal Services Agency's (LSA) Annual Accounts which have been qualified for a considerable number of years.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to discuss this further under Agenda Item 8, draft Forward Work Programme.

- iii. The Committee noted correspondence dated 18 December 2020 from Sue Gray, AO, DoF regarding follow-up information on the inquiry into 'Capacity and Capability in the NICS'.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask Ms Gray to attend the Committee on 4 February, in closed session, to discuss issues arising out of the previous evidence session on NIAO's report into Capacity and Capability and her follow-up correspondence dated of 18 December 2020.

- iv. The Committee noted correspondence dated 18 December 2020 from Mike Brennan, AO, DfE confirming witnesses for evidence session on 'Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy' on 28 January 2021.

- v. The Committee noted correspondence dated 21 December 2020 from Tracy Meharg, AO, DfC that there would be a delay in receiving the requested information.

Agreed: The Committee noted the information will be with the Committee by 20 January 2021.

- vi. The Committee discussed correspondence dated 6 January 2021 from Sue Gray, AO, DoF regarding Ms Gray seeking consent with BT for inclusion of Table 1 BT Original Tender submission in PAC's forthcoming report into 'LandWeb and Digital Transformation'. In her letter Ms Gray informed the Committee that BT has requested the application of the 'commercial interests' exemption be applied and that it would also not be in the public interest to publish this table. Ms Gray supports this exemption.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Ms Gray to outline her reasons for supporting the exemption.

Agreed: The Committee agreed PAC's Report into 'LandWeb and Digital Transformation' will be published next Thursday 21 January 2021 and that Table 1 BT Original Tender will be omitted from the report on the grounds that it is commercially sensitive.

- vii. The Committee noted 'restricted' correspondence dated 6 January 2021 from Sara Long, Chief Executive, EA regarding the timetable for the HR current investigation and completion of the final report. Ms Long CE EA was not able to give an exact date on when the investigation will be concluded.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Ms Long CE EA to request an indicative timescale for the completion of the investigation.

- viii. The Committee noted correspondence dated 7 January 2021 from Katrina Godfrey, AO, DfI regarding further information on the Ministerial Direction for the funding of Derry City Airport. Ms Godfrey provided information on the rationale for requesting a ministerial direction; the aspects of value for money of this funding and plans for the airport after March 2021.

Agreed: The Committee noted Ms Godfrey's response.

- ix. The Committee noted correspondence from Katrina Godfrey, AO, DfI congratulating the Chair, Mr William Humphrey MLA on his New Year's Honour award.
- x. The Committee noted correspondence dated 7 January 2021 from Treasury Officer of Accounts regarding additional information on the Annual Theft and Fraud Report 2018 – 19.

Agreed: The Committee noted they will revisit this when the 2019/2020 Annual Theft and Fraud report is published.

- xi. The Committee noted correspondence dated 8 January 2021 from Treasury Officer of Accounts Mr Stuart Stevenson, congratulating the Chair, Mr William Humphrey MLA on his New Year's Honour award.
- xii. The Committee noted correspondence dated 8 January 2021 from Pivotal – Report on New Decade New Approach One Year On.

Mr Roy Beggs MLA joined the meeting at 2,32 pm

The meeting remained in Open Session at 2.34 pm

6. Ministerial Direction: Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme (NSESS)

Mr Kieran Donnelly, C&AG, and Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer NIAO remained in the meeting.

Mr Patrick Barr, Director NIAO joined the meeting remotely.

The Committee considered the Ministerial Direction: ‘Newly Self-Employed Support Scheme (NSESS)’. Mr Donnelly, C&AG, informed the Committee that the DfE Permanent Secretary, Mr Mike Brennan had written to him on 21 December 2020 to advise that Mr Brennan had sought a ministerial direction from the DfE Minister, Diane Dodds MLA.

The Committee noted the background information to support the Ministerial Direction, outlining how the current COVID 19 crisis has placed a significant strain on these newly registered businesses across Northern Ireland; and the lack of support for these businesses from Westminster.

The Committee noted the relevant correspondence including the letter of Ministerial Direction dated 2 December 2020, issued by DfE Minister Diane Dodds, MLA.

Agreed: The Committee noted the Ministerial Direction.

The meeting went into Closed Session at 2.41 pm

7. Inquiry on ‘LandWeb and Digital Transformation’: Consideration of draft press release.

The Committee discussed the draft Press Release regarding the LandWeb and Digital Transformation Report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Press Release which will be published with the report on Thursday 21 January 2021.

The meeting remained in Closed Session at 2.44 pm

8. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee discussed the draft forward work programme January–March 2021 and agreed amendments to the programme.

The Committee agreed to discuss current and forthcoming NIAO reports at a future meeting in regard to primacy, and how the Committee could release reports.

The Committee noted the current pressures on Departments and Officials regarding COVID 19 specifically the recent updated COVID regulations, and noted this difficult situation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the draft Forward Work Programme to the end of March 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider current and forthcoming NIAO reports in regard to primacy, and how reports could be released.

9. Any Other Business

None

10. Date, time and place of next meeting

The next meeting of the Public Accounts Committee will take place on Thursday 21st January 2021 at 2.00 p.m. in The Assembly Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 2.58 pm.

Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA
Chairperson
Public Accounts Committee

14th January 2021

Signed