



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday, 8 July 2021

Meeting Location: The Senate, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Roy Beggs MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr David Hilditch MLA
Mr Andrew Muir MLA
Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Mr Cathal Boylan MLA
Ms Órlaithí Flynn MLA

Apologies: Mr William Irwin MLA
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA

In Attendance: Ms Lucia Wilson (Assembly Clerk)
Ms Gillian Barker (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Ms Karen Barry (Clerical Supervisor)



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The meeting went into Open Session at 2.06 pm.

1. Apologies

None

2. Draft Minutes of 1 July 2021

Agreed: The draft minutes of the meeting of 1 July 2021 were signed and agreed to be published.

3. Declaration of Interest

None

4. Matters Arising

None

5. Correspondence

The following NIAO Official joined the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG NIAO;
Ms Catherine O'Hagan, Audit Manager and
Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer NIAO [remotely]



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NISRA Report on 2020/21 Sick Leave Absence in NICS

The Committee noted correspondence dated 29 June 2021 via Business Office regarding NISRA's Report on 2020/21 Sick Absence in NICS. The annual report provides a detailed analysis of sickness absence for staff in the Northern Ireland Civil Service over the 2020/2021 financial year – when the majority of staff will have been working from home. The report also contains analyses of trends over the last five years and highlights the absence figure for 2020/2021 as **9.8 days** (average days lost per staff year), which is a considerable decrease from 12.9 days in the previous year. The absence level for 2020/2021 is the lowest absence level recorded for over 22 years. However, this also cost the public purse £28 million in lost production.

Agreed: The Committee noted the Report and agreed to request further information regarding the conclusions coming out of the report.

Mid Ulster District Council – Broadband Investment

The Committee noted correspondence received on 2 July 2021 from Councillor Paul McLean, Mid Ulster District Council, regarding NIAO Broadband Investment Report and a motion on broadband investment, which was passed at the Council's June meeting.

'That in light of the recent NIAO Report into Broadband Investment in the North of Ireland, we welcome the findings of this report, a report which is strongly critical of achieving value for money in delivering broadband provision for citizens of the North. We further note the findings within the report and request that any financial clawback's due from BT should be immediately redirected into Broadband provision into rural areas with poorest broadband speeds.'

Agreed: The Committee noted Councillor McLean has also written to the Department for the Economy, and other relevant Governmental Department charged with the re-allocation of any monies.

The meeting remained in Open Session at 2.12 pm



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6. Ministerial Directions

The following NIAO Official joined the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG NIAO
Ms Catherine O'Hagan Audit Manager, and
Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer NIAO [remotely]

Mr Denis McMahon AO DAERA

The Committee noted correspondence dated 1 July 2021 from Mr Denis McMahon, AO DAERA regarding the Ministerial Direction *to provide short term support for the impact of COVID-19 on Lough Neagh inland fishermen*, which did not include the submission to the Minister. A copy of the submission has since been provided to the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

Agreed: The Committee noted Mr McMahon's rationale for the recommendations and noted some information in the submission is still redacted, in line with the right of Legal Privilege.

Ministerial Direction

The Committee noted correspondence from Mr Kieran Donnelly C&AG dated 2 July, regarding a '*Revised Ministerial Direction, DfC: Recognition Payment for Supporting People and Homelessness Sector Frontline Staff*'.

The Committee noted the Ministerial Direction is one that has already been considered by the Committee on recognition payments for supporting people and homelessness frontline staff. In the initial communication of the Ministerial Direction, the payment to these staff was limited to a gross payment of £569 with an estimated cost of £2.5 million. This payment is increased to £735 each and at a cost to the Department of £3.5 million, ensuring that the payment allows for tax and national insurance deductions. It is identical to payments made under a recognition scheme by the Minister for Health also under a Ministerial Direction.

Agreed: The Committee noted the relevant documents including sign off by the Minister for Communities, Deirdre Hargey MLA.



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The meeting remained in Open Session at 2.14 pm

7. Inquiry into Sports Sustainability Fund – Evidence Session

The following Officials joined the meeting:

Ms Tracy Meharg, AO DfC;
Mr Tony Murphy, Head of Sport, DfC;
Ms Antoinette McKeown, CE Sports NI;
Mr Ian Weir, Performance Governance Manager, Sports NI; and
Mr George Lucas, Chair Sports NI.

The following Officials were in attendance:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG NIAO;
Ms Catherine O’Hagan, Audit Manager; and
Mr Stuart Stevenson TOA

The Committee noted the relevant papers in their pack regarding the ‘Sports Sustainability Fund’ evidence session.

- NIAO Report – Sports Sustainability Fund;
- Biographies of the witnesses;
- Correspondence forward by the Committee for Communities on ‘Sports Sustainability Fund’;
- NIAO Suggested Questions, Restricted Paper, and
- NIAO Restricted Briefing paper.

Ms Tracy Meharg AO DfC and Ms Antoinette McKeown CE Sports NI made an opening statement which was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr David Hilditch MLA left the meeting at 2.36 pm

Mr Matthew O’Toole MLA left the meeting at 2.59 pm



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Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA re-joined the meeting at 3.03 pm

Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA left the meeting at 3.47 pm

Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA re-joined the meeting at 4.06 pm

Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA declared he was member of Woodvale Cricket Club

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request some further information.

The meeting was adjourned at 4.17 pm

The meeting reconvened at 4.25 pm

8. Inquiry into Sports Sustainability Fund – Discussion

The following NIAO Official joined the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG NIAO; and
Ms Catherine O'Hagan, Audit Manager.

The following NIAO Officials joined the meeting remotely:

Ms Rachael Curlett, Audit Manager
Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer NIAO

The Committee discussed the evidence session with the NIAO Officials who agreed to produce an Issues Paper for the meeting in September 2021.

The meeting remained in Closed Session at 4.40 pm



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9. Inquiry into Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy – Publishing & Press Release

The following NIAO Official joined the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG NIAO; and
Ms Catherine O'Hagan, Audit Manager.

The following NIAO Officials joined the meeting remotely:

Ms Rachael Curlett, Manager
Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer NIAO

The Committee noted the legal advice regarding KPMG's correspondence dated 6 & 20 May 2021 is not due until 16 July 2021. The Committee also noted an email dated 5 July from John Constable, Director of Renewable Energy Foundation, on behalf of Professor Hughes regarding his right of reply to KPMG's comments on Professor Hughes' published paper 'Economics on small wind generation in Northern Ireland'.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to defer publishing the Report into 'Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy' and all the relevant correspondence until 16 September to allow time to consider the legal advice, which will be available to the Committee, for consideration at its first meeting back after summer recess.

Draft Press Release

The Committee noted the draft press release regarding the report into 'Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy' and agreed to defer considering this to September, in line with the report.

The meeting remained in Closed Session at 4.46 pm



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10. Draft Forward Work Programme

The following officials remained in the meeting:

Mr Kieran Donnelly, CB C&AG;
Ms Catherine O'Hagan, Audit Manager; and
Mr Kyle Bingham, Assembly Support Officer NIAO, remotely

The Committee noted the draft Autumn forward work programme that includes the consideration of the Issues Paper on Sports Sustainability Report; and the first consideration of the report into 'Speeding Up the Justice System'.

The Committee also noted the draft Autumn forward work programme includes evidence sessions for its first two inquiries, 'Addiction Services in Northern Ireland and 'Closing the Gap – Social deprivation and links to Educational Attainment'.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue witness letters to both Mr Richard Pengelly, AO DoH and Mr Mark Browne, AO DE seeking dates for September and October 2021.

The meeting remained in Closed Session at 4.47 pm

11. Any Other Business

Letter to the Speaker on Primacy

The Committee noted that, in the consideration of wider Assembly business, clarification might be helpful with regard to the Primacy Convention and how it relates to PAC's consideration of NIAO Reports.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chair of PAC will write to the Speaker on this matter in the Autumn.



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Members Development Programme

The Committee noted that, under the Members Development Programme, CAMS propose holding an '*Effective Questioning Session*' for Committee Members, in September.

Agreed: Members agreed to contact CAMS individually if they wished to avail of the training.

12. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Public Accounts Committee will take place on Thursday 16 September, at 2.00 pm in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 4.49 pm.

Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA
Chairperson
Public Accounts Committee
8 July 2021