



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Public Accounts Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

Thursday, 9 October 2025

Meeting Location: Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings

Present: Daniel McCrossan, MLA (Chairperson)
Diane Forsythe, MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Stephen Dunne, MLA
Tom Buchanan, MLA
Colm Gildernew MLA
Cathal Boylan, MLA
David Honeyford, MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Pádraig Delargy, MLA

Apologies: Jon Burrows, MLA

In Attendance: Lucia Wilson (Committee Clerk)

Kirsten McClelland (Assistant Committee Clerk)

Karen Barry (Clerical Supervisor)

Yannie Mahood (Clerical Officer)

The meeting opened in public session at 2.05 pm.

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from, Jon Burrows, MLA.

2. Draft minutes

Agreed: Members agreed the draft minutes of the meeting on 2 October 2025.

3. Declaration of Interests

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

Diane Forsythe, MLA declared an interest as APS to the Education Minister.

Stephen Dunne, MLA declared an interest as APS to the Communities Minister.

Cathal Boylan, MLA declared an interest as a member of the Board of Governors of Clea Primary School, Keady.

Colm Gildernew, MLA declared an interest as Chair of the Communities Committee, in respect of bringing forward a Private Members Bill relating to Homelessness, as Chair of the All Party Group on Housing and as owner of a private rental property.

Pádraig Delargy, MLA declared an interest as Chair of the All Party Group on Mental Health, a member of the Board of Governors of Holy Child Primary School, Creggan, and former teacher, and in respect of the Mobuoy waste site being within his constituency.

David Honeyford, MLA declared an interest as a member of the Board of Governors of Dromara Primary School.

4. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed members of an invitation to attend the Joseph Rowntree Foundation roundtable event on a poverty free future for Northern Ireland.

Agreed: Colm Gildernew, MLA agreed to represent the Committee at the event alongside in his capacity as Chair of the Committee for Communities.

5. Matters Arising

Members noted correspondence from the Infrastructure Committee regarding some joint work being undertaken with the Agriculture Committee on the A5.

Agreed: Members agreed to write to the Agriculture Committee to note that the Public Accounts Committee is leading on the A5 case study as part of its Major Capital Projects inquiry and in line with Primacy.

6. Correspondence

7. Mental Health Services in Northern Ireland: Memorandum of Reply

The following officials joined the meeting at 2.10pm.

Dorinnia Carville, Comptroller and Auditor General;

Members considered the update to the memorandum of reply in respect of its report into Mental Health Services in Northern Ireland.

Members expressed concern at the lack of progress being made against the recommendations within the report.

Agreed: Members agreed to invite the DoH Accounting Officer and officials to attend PAC to address the lack of progress in implementing the recommendations from the Committee's report on Mental Health.

The meeting moved into closed session at 2.18 pm.

8. Homelessness in Northern Ireland: Briefing Session

The following officials joined the meeting at 2.18pm.

Dorinnia Carville, Comptroller and Auditor General;

Tomas Wilkinson, Director, Northern Ireland Audit Office;

Barry Mitchell, Audit Manager, Northern Ireland Audit Office.

Members received a briefing on the NIAO report on Homelessness in Northern Ireland ahead of commencement of the inquiry.

The Clerk briefed members on a proposed Terms of Reference process to be followed.

Agreed: Members agreed to bring forward a Terms of Reference for the inquiry for consideration on 16 October 2025.

9. Managing the Schools' Estate: Final Consideration of Draft Report

The following officials joined the meeting at 2.56pm.

Dorinnia Carville, Comptroller and Auditor General.

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 the first formal consideration for the report 'Managing the Schools' Estate', at last week's meeting, 2 October 2025.

The Committee noted this is the final consideration for the report 'Managing the Schools' Estate' and agreed the title of the report is Managing the Schools' Estate'.

The Committee was presented with the agreed amendments as follows:

Agreed: The Committee agreed the amended section title: A comprehensive estate management strategy, and a clearly prioritised framework, to manage the schools' estate are urgently needed

- Agreed:** The Committee agreed the amended recommendation: The Committee recommends that the Department develops and publishes a comprehensive estate management strategy by the Department's planned date of early 2026, together with an associated, annual delivery plan and prioritisation framework. This should be underpinned by estate management guidance, which should be updated within 12 months of the strategy being published. The Strategy should have a clear focus on educational outcomes, with associated delivery plans, and guidance reviewed and updated periodically.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed the amended section title: The already substantial maintenance backlog is growing and must be urgently addressed.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed the amended recommendation: The Committee recommends that the Department and the EA's plan to bring the statutory remedial backlog (£29 million) under control within two financial years is submitted to the Minister within six months. The risks and implications of the plan should be clearly outlined and have appropriately assigned governance responsibilities.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed the amended recommendation: The Department and the EA should develop clear plans to address the overall maintenance backlog and establish a preventative maintenance programme within 12 months, including targets for the reduction of backlogs. Progress and impact should be monitored, measured and reported to the appropriate oversight group.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed the renumbering of recommendations to account for an additional recommendation added (Recommendation 6)/
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed the amended section title: The opportunity to maximise the potential benefits of delegated maintenance and enhanced school autonomy must be prioritised.

- Agreed:** The Committee agreed the amended section title: Inadequate Special Educational Needs (SEN) estate provision is a significant and growing issue that must be addressed urgently.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed the amended recommendation: The Committee recommends that, within eighteen months, the Department and the EA, in association with schools, develop clear plans for ensuring that current SEN provision is fit for purpose in advance of a targeted capital investment plan to expand the SEN provision across the schools' estate.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed the amended paragraph: An unquantified, but nonetheless significant, proportion of children are learning in buildings that are not fit for purpose, impacting their learning experiences and ultimately limiting their educational outcomes. This is clearly unacceptable. The Committee is worried about the impact of poor conditions on pupil well-being and educational outcomes and notes the absence of any formal assessments by the Department. This should be addressed in the strategy, as the lack of outcomes data represents a significant gap in understanding and undermines efforts to make the case for investment.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed the amended section title: The risks and potential benefits of transitioning PFI/PPP assets need to be planned for and addressed.
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed the amended section title: Better planning is required for the management of vacant school properties
- Agreed:** The Committee agreed the amended paragraph: The Committee heard that some vacant sites are earmarked for future educational use (including special educational needs (SEN) facilities) and that local communities are expressing interest in repurposing these sites for alternative uses, such as sports facilities. There is a lack of comprehensive and up-to-date information on vacant school properties. This represents a missed opportunity to identify and support the effective management of these properties to make more responsive

decisions that could generate revenue, reduce security and maintenance costs, and support wider community development.

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

Members considered the draft press release for the 'Managing the Schools' Estate' Report.

Agreed: Agreed the draft press release

Agreed: The Committee noted the 'Managing the Schools' Estate' Report will be published on Thursday 16 October 2025.

The Chair thanked officials for attending.

Witnesses left the meeting at 3.09 pm.

10. Forward Work Programme

The following officials joined the meeting at 3.09 pm.

Dorinnia Carville, Comptroller and Auditor General.

Members were briefed on the Northern Ireland Audit Office report on Restricted Procedures in Northern Ireland.

Members were briefed on the scheduling of upcoming reports from the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

Agreed: Members agreed to retain Primacy over the report on Restricted Procedures in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: Members agreed to consider a draft letter to the Department of Health regarding Restricted Procedures at its meeting on 16 October 2025.

Members considered the list of reports currently held under Primacy of the Public Accounts Committee.

Agreed: Members agreed to release the report on Ambulance Handover Times from Primacy.

Agreed: Members agreed to seek further advice from the Northern Ireland Audit Office on holding a joint inquiry into two related reports.

Agreed: Members agreed the eleventh inquiry of the Public Accounts Committee will be Road Openings By Utilities.

Agreed: Members agreed to provide an update on reports currently held under PAC Primacy to the Committee Clerks.

Agreed: Daniel McCrossan, MLA, Cathal Boylan, MLA and David Honeyford, MLA, Tom Buchanan, MLA and Jon Burrows, MLA confirmed that they will attend the BIMR PAC Conference in November 2025.

11. Any Other Business

Members noted the release of a statement on the future of the Mental Health Strategy in Northern Ireland.

12. Date, Time, and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting will take place in the Senate Chamber on Thursday 16 October 2025 at 2.00 pm.

The meeting was adjourned at 3.48 pm.

Daniel McCrossan

Chairperson, Public Accounts Committee

16 October 2025