

**PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE  
END OF SESSION REPORT 2014-15**

**REMIT AND POWERS**

The Public Accounts Committee (PAC) is a Standing Committee established in accordance with Section 60(3) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and under Assembly Standing Order 56.

*“to consider accounts, and reports on accounts laid before the Assembly”.*

The Committee has the power to:

- consider accounts and reports on accounts laid before the Assembly;
- call for persons and papers;
- initiate inquiries and issue reports.

**MEMBERSHIP**

- The Committee has 11 members, including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, with a quorum of 5 members.
- The membership of the Committee since 23 May 2011 has been as follows:

Democratic Unionist Party	Mr Trevor Clarke <sup>8</sup>
	Mr Paul Girvan
	Mr Adrian McQuillan <sup>1</sup>
	Mr Jim Wells <sup>15</sup>
Sinn Fein	Ms Michaela Boyle <sup>3</sup> (Chairperson)
	Mr Phil Flanagan <sup>13</sup>
	Mr Conor Murphy <sup>16</sup>
Social Democratic and Labour Party	Mr John Dallat <sup>5</sup> (Deputy Chairperson)
	Ms Claire Hanna <sup>17</sup>
Ulster Unionist Party	Mr Roy Beggs <sup>14</sup>
	Mr Ross Hussey

- <sup>1</sup> With effect from 24 October 2011 Mr Adrian McQuillan replaced Mr Paul Frew
- <sup>2</sup> With effect from 23 January 2012 Mr Conor Murphy replaced Ms Jennifer McCann
- <sup>3</sup> With effect from 02 July 2012 Ms Michaela Boyle replaced Mr Paul Maskey as Chairperson
- <sup>4</sup> With effect from 02 July 2012 Mr Conor Murphy is no longer a Member of the Committee
- <sup>5</sup> With effect from 07 September 2012 Mr John Dallat replaced Mr Joe Byrne as Deputy Chairperson
- <sup>6</sup> With effect from 10 September 2012 Mr Seán Rogers was appointed as a Member
- <sup>7</sup> With effect from 10 September 2012 Mr Daithí McKay was appointed as a Member
- <sup>8</sup> With effect from 01 October 2012 Mr Trevor Clarke replaced Mr Alex Easton
- <sup>9</sup> With effect from 11 February 2013 Mr Sammy Douglas replaced Mr Sydney Anderson
- <sup>10</sup> With effect from 15 April 2013 Mr Chris Hazzard replaced Mr Mitchel McLaughlin
- <sup>11</sup> With effect from 07 May 2013 Mr David McIlveen replaced Mr Sammy Douglas
- <sup>12</sup> With effect from 16 September 2013 Mr Alex Easton replaced Mr David McIlveen
- <sup>13</sup> With effect from 6 October 2014 Mr Phil Flanagan replaced Mr Chris Hazzard
- <sup>14</sup> With effect from 6 October 2014 Mr Roy Beggs replaced Mr Michael Copeland

- <sup>15</sup> With effect from 18 May 2015 Mr Jim Wells replaced Mr Alex Easton
- <sup>16</sup> With effect from 14 September 2015 Mr Conor Murphy replaced Mr Daithí McKay
- <sup>17</sup> With effect from 7 September 2015 Ms Claire Hanna replaced Mr Seán Rogers

## **THE PAC PROCESS**

The Committee's work focuses primarily on the consideration of reports produced by the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) and his organisation, the Northern Ireland Audit Office. These can be annual financial reports on public accounts or reports on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness of public spending.

The Committee selects and examines Audit Office reports that are material to its remit, and can assist in developing lessons to improve accountability and financial governance mechanisms in the public sector.

It calls the Accounting Officers responsible for expenditure examined in each report to give oral evidence. Members scrutinise the report and the evidence, and produce recommendations, in a Committee report, for improved financial systems and controls.

The Treasury Officer of Accounts (TOA) attends all evidence sessions on behalf of the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP), answering Members' questions and supporting Accounting Officers.

Through the Minister for Finance and Personnel, the Executive member with central authority for financial matters, the relevant Department responds to the Committee's recommendations two months after publication of the report. This is called a memorandum of reply (MOR) which PAC regards as an integral part of the accountability cycle. The TOA co-ordinates this response and promotes good practice across Departments.

## **COMMITTEE ACTIVITIES, OUTPUTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS**

### **Reports**

This report covers the work of the Committee from 1 September 2014 to 31 August 2015 (Assembly year 2014-15). The Committee concluded six inquiries during this period. In chronological order, they were reported on as follows:

<b><u>Report Number</u></b>	<b><u>Issue Date</u></b>	<b><u>Report Title</u></b>
197/11-16	24/09/2014	<a href="#"><u>Report on Tackling Social Housing Tenancy Fraud in Northern Ireland</u></a>
202/11-16	10/12/2014	<a href="#"><u>Report on The Future Impact of Borrowing and Private Finance Commitments and Belfast Metropolitan College's Titanic Quarter PPP Project</u></a>
215/11-16	10/12/2014	<a href="#"><u>Report on Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service Trust Statement for the year ended 31 March 2013</u></a>
230/11-16	03/02/2015	<a href="#"><u>Report on Primary Care Prescribing</u></a>
246/11-16	21/04/2015	<a href="#"><u>Report on Managing and Protecting Funds Held in Court</u></a>
253/11-16	03/06/2015	<a href="#"><u>Report on the Cross-border Broadband Initiative: The Bytel project</u></a>

There are two inquiries still under consideration by the Committee which will be reported on in due course, these are:

- Inquiry into DSD: Advanced Land Purchases; and
- Inquiry into DRD: The effectiveness of Public Transport in Northern Ireland

### **Meetings held**

Throughout 2014-15, the Committee met on 30 occasions (all within Parliament Buildings) with 53 per cent of its time being spent in closed session due to the sensitive nature of the issues being considered.

The purpose of most closed sessions was to consider the approach to specific inquiries, enabling members to explore the facts and increase their understanding of the more complex findings in the reports. Considerable time was also spent considering and agreeing the draft reports of the Committee.

## **Summary of Inquiries**

PAC selects the reports it covers on the basis of public interest, the order of expenditure involved and the lessons that can be learned from the report.

### **Report on Tackling Social Housing Tenancy Fraud in Northern Ireland**

In this report, the Committee expresses its concern at the speed of the reaction of Northern Ireland social housing providers to the increased risk of tenancy fraud in Great Britain. The Committee argues that this is in part due to the failure of the Department of Social Development (the Department) to provide strong leadership in getting to grips with social housing tenancy fraud in Northern Ireland. However, the Committee takes some comfort from the range of measures that are now being proposed by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) and by the Northern Ireland Housing Associations to proactively tackle tenancy fraud. Up to now, NIHE and Housing Association work on tenancy fraud had largely been reactive and confined to dealing with abandoned properties.

The Committee was dismayed by the Department's assertion that it would take several years of survey work to determine the level of social housing tenancy fraud across Northern Ireland. The Committee considers that this is unacceptable, and it expects the Department to urgently establish a baseline figure for social housing tenancy fraud in Northern Ireland.

The Committee expressed surprise that although a number of cases of social housing tenancy fraud had been detected, there had been no prosecutions for social housing tenancy fraud in Northern Ireland. The Committee supports a robust response to cases of tenancy fraud, in particular in cases of sub-letting and providing false information in housing applications, and considers that the threat of prosecution is an important deterrent to potential fraudsters.

The Committee was concerned at the significant increase in the cost of providing temporary accommodation for homeless families from £5.2million in 2008 to £10.9million in 2013. These significant costs suggest that a proactive prevention and detection strategy could generate significant savings.

In the Committee's view, greater collaboration between a range of bodies will be the most effective means of tackling the issue of tenancy fraud. A key part of this will be to establish formal protocols between housing associations and utility companies. This data will open up a valuable source of information in the investigation of social housing tenancy fraud.

The Northern Ireland Tenancy Fraud Forum was established in November 2013. It has been tasked with reviewing the legislative position and the feasibility of establishing a single tenancy fraud investigatory team for social housing providers in Northern Ireland.

The Committee welcomes the steps now being taken by the Department, NIHE and housing associations to tackle social housing tenancy fraud. Given that most of the initiatives are only just beginning the Committee expects the Department to review progress after 12 months and provide a progress report to the Committee.

Of a total of 8 recommendations, 6 were accepted and 2 were partially accepted.

### **Report on the Future Impact of Borrowing and Private Finance Commitments and Belfast Metropolitan College's Titanic Quarter PPP Project**

A significant feature of the Belfast Metropolitan College's Titanic Quarter PPP project deal was that the public sector injected £20 million into the project, including £5 million to purchase the sub-lease for the Titanic Quarter site. The sale of the College's surplus properties at Brunswick Street and College Square East was intended to cover these capital contributions. However, proceeds from the sales of the properties in 2014 were £5.6 million leaving a shortfall in excess of £14 million.

In this report, the Committee acknowledges that the Belfast Metropolitan College's Titanic Quarter PPP Project has achieved many satisfactory outcomes however it expresses serious concerns over project management, governance, decision making and the procurement process. The Committee considers that the case for PPP as opposed to a traditional procurement route was marginal at best. Add to that the additional costs of consultancy, internal staff costs of the College and the Department, and in particular the significant shortfall in receipts from the sale of surplus properties – this was a costly project. In the Committee's view the project did not represent good value for money. On a more positive note, the Committee notes and commends the College's turnaround of its financial position and the positive assurances given in the most recent internal audit review.

The Committee considers that information on long term financial commitments could be better signposted and considers that there is scope for improving the information provided to the Assembly on borrowings and the use of PFI.

Currently the main reporting route for Northern Ireland's PFI commitments is through individual Departmental Resource Accounts and Annual Accounts of Arm's Length Bodies. Data on PFI projects is also submitted to HM Treasury and published on its website. However, the Committee is concerned that data provided by Departments has been incomplete, resulting in incorrect information being provided in response to Assembly members' questions.

The OFMDFM Accounting Officer's proposal to include up to date PFI information in the annual report on the Investment Strategy will improve the visibility of the PFI investment. However this must be at an adequate level of detail to give a full picture of committed/live projects and those in the pipeline.

Public bodies need to perform active benchmarking and market testing on PFI projects to confirm whether or not projects are delivering value for money. Business cases and the fact that PFI contracts are competitively tendered does not on its own provide assurance that value for money is being delivered.

Given that NI departments have to make annual savings each year, the private sector should be expected to contribute to this. However, in Northern Ireland, there is no strategic programme to review PFI contracts and maximise the opportunities to realise value for money savings.

The Committee notes in evidence provided by the department that many companies involved in PFI contracts are already signed up to the voluntary code but the Committee wishes to see wider application by departments and their private sector partners

Significant additional costs have been incurred on the Titanic Quarter PPP project outside the PPP agreement that must be factored into any valid assessment of the value for money of this project. Negotiations with ICL extended from a planned 12 months to 33 months and the value for money of the deal eroded significantly. There were significant unresolved issues with the bidder's proposals. The Committee is concerned that the extent of the unresolved issues and ICL's privileged development position on the Titanic Quarter site meant that it dictated the outcome and pace of the negotiations.

The College failed to adequately manage the consultancy contract for this project which put the project completion in jeopardy. The advisors appointed by the College were allowed to exceed the original budget of £300,000, incurring costs in the region of £2.2 million. In the Committee's view this is indicative of the inadequate governance; and poor financial and management controls operating at the College following the merger of BIFHE and Castlereagh colleges in 2007 and during the procurement phase of this project. The Committee also considers that this reflects on the inadequacies of the Department's oversight of the College and this project in particular

With the sale of the properties at Brunswick Street and College Square East it is important that the College now assesses the final value for money of the overall project. All costs must be factored into any realistic assessment of value for money of the project

Of a total of 9 recommendations: 6 were accepted, 2 were already implemented and one was in the process of being implemented.

## Report on the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service Trust Statement for the year ended 31 March 2013

In his report on the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) Trust Statement 2012-13 the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) highlighted that the value of unpaid financial penalties is significant and raised concerns about fine collection and enforcement measures and the system for dealing with fine defaulters.

The NICTS Trust Statement 2012-13 shows total debt for unrecovered financial penalties of £19 million, against which NICTS estimate that £6.5m will not be recovered. Included within the overall debt figure is £8.2 million relating to outstanding warrants issued because fine default has occurred, £5.1 million of which is estimated to be unrecoverable. It is vital that the justice system sends out the right message and it is essential, therefore, that NICTS makes every effort to fully recover financial penalties.

Despite the significant levels of outstanding debt, the Department of Justice has failed to coordinate a joined up approach to fine collection and, as a result, current governance arrangements are unacceptable. This has contributed to a number of failings including 6,682 paper warrants with a value of £1.1 million have gone missing and there is a significant suspected fraud. Going forward, it is vital that roles and responsibilities are well defined and accountability and reporting lines should be clear.

The costs associated with enforcing the current system are significant. While the Committee recognises that it is inevitable that there will be a cost associated with enforcing and collecting financial penalties, the costs associated with the current system are excessive. Reform is urgently required and should seek to remove PSNI from the process.

The C&AG's report on the NICTS Trust Statement 2012-13 has brought to light a number of unacceptable weaknesses and inefficiencies with the current system of fine enforcement and collection, which have the potential to have a detrimental impact on the credibility of the justice system. While the Committee is encouraged by the reforms being developed by the Department, it is disappointed that reform has not taken place sooner.

Of a total of 6 recommendations: 1 was accepted; 1 was partially accepted; 1 was already implemented and 3 were in the process of being implemented.

## Report on Primary Care Prescribing

Primary care prescribing costs £460 million each year - around 10 per cent of all health and social care expenditure. The overall volume of items prescribed has been increasing across all United Kingdom (UK) countries over recent years. Despite the rise in volume, prescribing costs per head of population fell in England, Scotland and Wales over the seven year period to 31 March 2014. By contrast the prescribing costs per head of population in NI were slightly higher in 2013 than in 2007.

The Committee acknowledges that, working with the HSC Board, GP practices have achieved savings in prescribing costs over the last four years through the prescribing of lower cost, generic versions of drugs, rather than more expensive brand name drugs. However, the Committee believes that there is scope to generate significant further savings without compromising patient care through GPs prescribing, where suitable, more lower cost versions of generic drugs.

Taking account of local data and information on the prescribing costs of other UK countries, the Department, in conjunction with the HSC Board, should undertake an exercise to establish the level of potential savings which more cost effective generic prescribing could generate. This could then be used to set a target prescribing cost for individual GP practices against which to benchmark prescribing performance and to identify areas where further improvement is necessary.

In the Committee's view, GPs have little incentive to consider the cost of their prescribing decisions since the cost falls to the HSC Board. The challenge for the HSC Board is to continue to: develop close working relationships with GPs in order to promote better prescribing; use benchmarking data to help GPs peer-review their prescribing practices; and encourage GPs to more fully explain their decision to prescribe a particular medication to patients.

It is unacceptable that the Department and community pharmacists have failed to reach agreement on the terms of a revised reimbursement contract. This must be resolved as a matter of urgency. Had the

Department been successful in agreeing implementation of the new contract (which is in place elsewhere in the UK) in 2006, £46 million would have been released to provide additional, patient-focused pharmaceutical services in the community.

Of a total of 9 recommendations, 7 were accepted and 2 were already implemented.

#### Report on Managing and Protecting Funds Held in Court

This report looks at the work of the Courts Funds Office (CFO). The CFO is a business unit within the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service (NICTS) which is an agency of the Department of Justice (the Department). The CFO provides a banking and investment service for the civil courts in Northern Ireland, looking after money when a child (minor) has been awarded damages as a result of civil legal action, and managing the financial affairs of people who have become mentally incapacitated (patients).

The CFO provides a service to some of the most vulnerable people in our society, managing their money at **the behest of the courts. As such, it should aspire to the highest standards of performance and customer care.** However the CFO has been a Cinderella service, stuck in the past and not providing value for money.

Modernisation has been delayed for too long. Despite a modernisation programme commencing in 2004 the programme is still not complete and legislative change has been delayed. The CFO appears too content to rely on long established models of investment for clients' funds. A more modern approach is needed to deliver returns while managing investment risk and reducing the administrative burden.

The CFO is operating an archaic service and it has failed to take the necessary steps to implement a client-focused approach. A radical overhaul is required and this should be undertaken by Courts Service as a matter of urgency to ensure that it provides an efficient, effective, open and transparent service to all of its clients.

Of a total of 6 recommendations, 2 were accepted, 2 were partially accepted, 1 was in the process of being implemented and 1 was already implemented.

#### Report on the Cross-Border Broadband Initiative – the Bytel Project.

The Bytel project aimed to provide high-speed broadband connectivity between Belfast, Craigavon, Armagh, Dundalk and Dublin. The project promoter was Bytel Ltd and the project received funding from the European Union (EU) Interreg III programme. The Special EU Programme Body (SEUPB) was accountable to the European Commission, the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government for managing and delivering this programme. Departmental responsibility for SEUPB lies with the Department of Finance and Personnel (DFP) in Northern Ireland and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in the Republic of Ireland. SEUPB appointed the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) in Northern Ireland and the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources (DCENR) in the Republic of Ireland as Joint Implementing Agents (JIAs) for the project

In October 2004, the JIAs offered funding of €4.3 million to Bytel against estimated total project costs of €12.4 million. Actual project costs were significantly lower. Bytel incurred eligible costs of only €0.9 million but was paid all of the €4.3 million assistance between December 2004 and December 2005. It is clear that grants were hugely overpaid.

It is only belatedly that the Department appears to have recognised the gravity of what has occurred. From 2006 onwards there were numerous warning signs that there were serious problems with the project. These signs were effectively ignored by DETI and, for far too long, the Department behaved as if nothing was wrong. The Committee is left with the impression that DETI hoped that silence and inaction would make these issues disappear.

Although DETI was aware of serious concerns with the project as early as 2006, it did not inform the Department of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources or SEUPB of these issues until early 2011. This delay was unacceptable. The failure to share information on a timely basis prevented these concerns from being addressed properly. A subsequent forensic review of the project concluded that 97%

of the €4.3 million grant paid to Bytel was irregular and the project was then withdrawn from the Interreg programme. Because of the delays in identifying and dealing with these concerns, €2 million of EU funding which should have been available to DETI was lost.

The Committee notes the assurances from both DETI and SEUPB that improvements in systems and processes in recent years should substantially reduce the risk of similar failings in future. Important as systems and processes are, it is vital that these work in practice. It is clear that this case only came under proper scrutiny because of the allegations made by whistleblowers.

The pressures within DETI to meet grant expenditure targets within tight deadlines overtook the need to ensure that grant claims were properly scrutinised. The Committee is convinced that DETI's main concern in approving grant claims for the project was to ensure that available EU funding was spent. The Department's primary responsibility was to scrutinise claims properly to ensure that they were valid. The Committee concludes that DETI failed fundamentally to meet this responsibility.

The excessive delay to commence a meaningful investigation was deplorable. Following more whistleblower allegations in 2008, DETI identified the main concerns with the project in early 2009. However, plans to undertake a PACE investigation (an investigation that would comply with the requirements of the Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order 1989) were inexplicably shelved. The Department was unable to offer any satisfactory explanation to the Committee for this investigation not proceeding. In 2011, when SEUPB had become aware of the problems with the project, a forensic review was finally commissioned. However, this review was not conducted under PACE requirements.

As a result of the mismanagement of the project, it delivered very poor value for money. The grant paid exceeded project costs. Bytel incurred eligible expenditure of €0.9 million on the project. On this basis, grant should have been restricted to €0.3 million (35% of costs) but assistance of €4.3 million was actually paid, representing an effective grant rate of 462%. This was a totally unacceptable outcome

The Memorandum of Reply is due to be received in September.

## **Recommendations**

In total this year, the Committee has made 46 recommendations to improve financial accountability to the taxpayer. It continues to monitor departmental progress in implementing them and, as previously stated, will receive updates 12 months after consideration of the MOR relating to each report or earlier if it is deemed more urgent.

## **Ministerial Directions**

When a Minister wishes to proceed with a course of expenditure against the advice of his or her Accounting Officer, a Ministerial Direction is notified to PAC. This means that the accountability line for this expenditure will be to the Minister rather than the Accounting Officer. For each of these Ministerial Directions, the Committee agreed that the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) would monitor the expenditure in line with current audit practices, and report any significant issues as required. The Committee considered the following Ministerial Directions.

### **[Areas of Natural Constraint Scheme and Transitional Support for Farmers in Disadvantaged Areas](#)**

At its meeting on 10 September 2014 the Committee considered correspondence from the C&AG, detailing the processing of £2.1million in payments to be made by the Department of Agriculture to Disadvantaged Areas.

The direction was sought by the Accounting Officer of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development as it had not been possible to establish that the payments represented Value for Money. The C&AG has

drawn this matter to the Committee's attention and the payments will be subject to the Audit Office's usual audit procedures in the course of their audit of DARD's Resource Accounts.

#### [Provision of Temporary Funding for Tier 2 Family Support Services in Greater Shankill and West Belfast \(the Integrated Services for Children and Young People Project \(ISCYP\)\)](#)

At its meeting on 10 September 2014, the Committee considered correspondence from the C&AG, this set out that £266,000 of funding would be provided to create space to allow new family support arrangements to become established and fully bedded in. This issue cuts across both the Departments of Health and Social Development and because of this cross-cutting the Department of Health sought and obtained Executive approval to provide the temporary funding on 8 August 2014. A Ministerial Direction was sought as the Department of Health Accounting Officer could not prove that the funding represented Value for Money.

The C&AG has drawn this matter to the Committee's attention and intends to monitor the expenditure as part of the normal audit processes. He will report any significant issues to the Committee as required

#### [DARD Headquarters move to Ballykelly](#)

At its meeting on 17 September 2014, the Committee considered correspondence from the C&AG which detailed that the Minister for Agriculture and Rural Development had presented an outline business case for the move to the Executive. The preferred option presented was a relocation to Ballykelly in two stages by 2020. The funding requirement will be £29.7million and £11.3million resource. The Executive agreed the Ministers proposal for relocation on 26 June 2014.

The business case considered only the option to relocate – this made it difficult to assess the Value for Money of the relocation. The Accounting Officer therefore sought a Ministerial Direction to go ahead with the relocation despite the lack of proof of Value for Money. The Minister provided the Ministerial Direction on the basis that the relocation was consistent with the Programme for Government commitment to relocate to a rural location and that the wider benefits outweigh the Value for Money concerns.

#### [Phase 2 of the Coleraine to Londonderry Track Renewal Project.](#)

At its meeting on 17 June 2015 the Committee considered correspondence from the C&AG which explained that the Minister for Regional Development had directed the Accounting Officer to proceed with Phase 2 of the Track Renewal Project despite the tendered cost of £46.4million being in excess of the independently assured estimate of £40.1million.

### **Committee Motions**

On 24<sup>th</sup> November 2014, the Committee's Take Note debate informed the Assembly of the recent work of the PAC since its previous debate a year earlier. The Hansard report can be accessed [here](#) and the reports debated can be accessed [here](#).

### **Additional work by the Committee**

#### **Continuous professional development**

In January 2015, a number of Members of the Committee attended a workshop on Refresher training on Effective Questioning organised by Politics Plus. The workshop was hosted by John Sturrock QC and provided valuable guidance and experience to Members to bring to bear in future PAC evidence sessions.

#### **Memorandum of Reply – Protocols with DFP**

A meeting took place between the Minister for Finance and Personnel and the Chair and Deputy Chair of the PAC on 28 April 2014 to discuss a number of issues including PAC correspondence on Memorandum of Replies (MORs). The meeting concluded with an agreement that further work was needed to review the existing protocols between the Department and PAC. It was agreed that the Clerk would work with DFP officials to devise a set of draft protocols which would address the following issues:

- PAC Correspondence on Memoranda of Reply

- The role of the Treasury Officer of Accounts (TOA)
- Attendance of the TOA at PAC meetings

A set of draft protocols were developed by the Clerk and DFP officials and these were then agreed by the Committee at its meeting on 3 February 2015. The Minister for Finance and Personnel also indicated that he was content with the new protocols and he then issued new guidance to Accounting Officers on the preparation of MORs. The protocols have been in use since then and have been operating effectively.

### **Strategic priorities 2014-2015**

Committee members reviewed their strategic priorities in January 2015 and agreed that the five strategic priorities agreed in January 2015 remained relevant for the remaining period of 2014-2015.

- Improving committee processes
- Promoting and sharing best practice
- Building committee capability
- Enhancing community profile
- Seeking to influence

During this session, the Committee undertook two specific pieces of work in relation to the following strategic priorities:

#### **Improving committee processes**

The Committee reviewed its committee processes, as part of its refresher training on effective questioning. The outcome of this review was to agree improvements to its preparation for inquiries and effective questioning techniques which the Committee will monitor and keep under review.

#### **Promoting and sharing best practice**

In line with its strategic priority of promoting and sharing best practice, the Committee visited the National Assembly of Wales in Cardiff and met with members of the Welsh Public Accounts Committee and members of the Jersey Assembly Public Accounts Committee. An area of joint interest was identified around the issue of the public appointments process. It was agreed that the feasibility of doing a joint piece of work should be explored. This piece of work would look at the public appointments process in the context of board effectiveness.

#### **Future work of the Committee**

In addition to concluding the inquiries into “DSD: Advanced Land Purchases” and “DRD: The Effectiveness of Public Transport in Northern Ireland”, the Committee will conduct further inquiries into “Health and Social Care Sector 2012-13 & 2013-14”, “Northern Ireland Events Company”, “Sustainability of Schools” and “Land Disposals in the NIHE” during the September to December 2015 session. Due to the Assembly Elections expected in May 2016, it is envisaged that at least one further inquiry will be planned for the first half of 2016.

In line with the Committee’s Strategic Priorities, the following actions have been agreed and shall be taken forward in the coming session:

- The Committee will schedule its annual Take Note debate for November 2015 which promotes best practice and lessons learnt.
- The Committee will take forward a joint piece of work on public appointments in the context of board effectiveness
- The Committee will continue to monitor and improve its internal processes to enhance its effectiveness.

**ANNEX A**

**Public Accounts Committee  
Expenditure for the period 1 September 2014 – 31 August 2015**

<b>Budget area</b>	<b>Details</b>	<b>Expenditure</b>
Committee Travel -	Committee members and staff travel and subsistence in relation to visits and meetings outside Parliament Buildings	£1,223.77
Printing of committee reports	Includes the cost of Committee reports on:  Report on Tackling Social Housing Tenancy Fraud in Northern Ireland  Report on the Future Impact of Borrowing and Private Finance Commitments and Belfast Metropolitan College's Titanic Quarter PPP Project  Report on the Northern Ireland Courts and Tribunals Service Trust Statement for the year-ended 31 March 2013  Report on Primary Care Prescribing  Report on Managing and Protecting Funds Held in Court  Report on the Cross-Border Broadband Initiative – the Bytel Project  Report on DRD: The Effectiveness of Public Transport in Northern Ireland	£2,851.48
Refreshments & Hospitality	Includes the cost of all refreshments and hospitality provided by the Committee; to include meetings, working lunches, seminars and any other such expenditure	£1,313.78
General expenses	Includes the cost of seminars (excluding refreshments and hospitality); room hire, witness expenses, gifts provided by the Committee during visits; and conference fees for Members.	£87.55
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>£5,476.58</b>