



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Audit Committee

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Budget 2021-22:
Northern Ireland Assembly Commission

7 October 2020

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

Audit Committee

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Daniel McCrossan (Chairperson)
Ms Joanne Bunting (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister
Mr Alan Chambers
Ms Emma Rogan

Witnesses:

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| Mrs Lesley Hogg | Northern Ireland Assembly |
| Mr Richard Stewart | Northern Ireland Assembly |

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I welcome the chief executive of the Assembly, Lesley Hogg, and the director of corporate services, Richard Stewart. You are most welcome to the Committee. I ask you to make a short opening statement. We have a lot on today, so, if you could keep it as brief and to the point as possible and we go straight to questions, that would be good, if that is OK with you both.

Mrs Lesley Hogg (Northern Ireland Assembly): Thank you, Chair, I am happy to keep it brief.

The best way to begin is by noting that the Assembly Commission sees the budget for 2021-22 as a restart. The Commission's underlying role of providing to the Assembly the services that are required has continued unabated during this year, even if it has happened in a slightly different manner than before.

It is hoped that, next year, we will see the restart of many of the plans that were in place for 2020-21, such as outreach and engagement activities, and the investments that were planned. As a result, the Commission's proposed budget for 2021-22 is also something of a restart. For that reason, the budget presented for 2021-22 is largely the same as the original budget for 2020-21. Naturally, it has been amended by the expenditure that could arise from the determination published by the Commission in August this year. That was discussed when we met the Committee in September. Apart from that, the Commission seeks a running-cost budget that mirrors the amounts for 2020-21.

There are a few issues that are important to bring to the Committee's attention about next year's budget. First, the timetable for preparing the Commission's budget means that it is possible that changes will need to be made on the basis of the prevailing circumstances between now and the consideration of the overall Budget for the Northern Ireland block grant by the Assembly in around January or shortly thereafter. To that end, the Commission will review the figures presented today over the next six to eight weeks. There is unlikely to be any significant change, but, if there is, we will report it to the Committee. Secondly, the budget for next year is based on an underlying assumption that the

operating environment will return more or less to normal by next year. If that is not the case, it seems likely that, once again, changes to the budget will be required.

As far as the budget numbers are concerned, the requirement for resource DEL is now £49.037 million. In the briefing in March this year, I went over the expenditure categories in the budget in detail. The budget is largely unaltered for next year apart from the addition of £4.235 million for the costs that could arise from the 2020 determination and a small technical change to remove notional costs from the figures. The split is set out in annex A. The planned investment in capital DEL is £1.385 million, and that is set out in annex B.

Chair, it was not that long ago that we considered the Commission's budget for 2020-21, and we also recently looked at the impact of the 2020 determination. As I mentioned in my introductory remarks, this is really a restart project for 2021-22 that largely takes the figures for this financial year and applies them to the next financial year.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to present the Commission's budget proposals for 2021-22. Richard and I are happy to answer any questions that the Committee has.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Thank you very much, Lesley and Richard, for being here, for keeping your comments brief — we appreciate that — and for outlining the challenges that lie ahead.

As noted last week in my absence, the determination will have an impact on the budget, and we are conscious of that. I know that members will have comments. I have no specific questions at this point, but I will come in later. I will open it up to other members to ask specific questions.

Ms Bunting: Chairman, if I may, I have a couple of questions. Lesley, there is £1 million set aside for capital pressures. Can you give us some information on that and advise us about the upgrades to the security system? Forgive me, but I am not clear what a "UAG" is. The audio system for the Assembly Chamber is valued at half a million pounds. The translation system? Could you clarify that for me? Lastly, given the current staffing issue, is any consideration being given, in the context of budgets and value for money, to the interim redeployment of front-facing staff in the Assembly, bearing in mind that the Building is closed to the public and that Committee staff face a backlog of a number of months as a result of lockdown? Maybe redeploying those staff would assist Committee staff and help Committees to redeem some of their lost time. That is me done, Chairman.

Mrs Hogg: When we refer to it as a "pressure", that is just because there is no recurring capital there, so any capital expenditure that we want has to be put forward for each year. It is not that there is an additional pressure. The total is set out in annex B, and, this year, our indicative capital budget is £1.385 million.

You mentioned the replacement of the security management system, and that is the likes of our cameras and the underlying software for the Building. We had hoped to progress that further in the current year, so it would have been in our budget for last year. With the Assembly getting up and running again and with COVID, that project has been delayed. It is just the replacement of the infrastructure and software for the security of the Building.

You mentioned the UAG. That connects into the Assembly systems remotely through your tablet when you are out of the Building.

Ms Bunting: What does it stand for, please, Lesley?

Mr Richard Stewart (Northern Ireland Assembly): I have no idea what UAG stands for. It is what our IS Office calls it: the UAG. As Lesley said, it is simply a mechanism that allows us to access all the files and storage on our servers in the Building, typically, on your tablets.

Ms Bunting: That is great. I am glad that I am not the only one who did not know.

Mrs Hogg: There are lots of technical terms.

You also mentioned the audio system in the Chamber. It is extremely old. I think that, when we were here in March, we talked about how a lot of our broadcasting infrastructure was in need of replacement. Again, because of the timing, rather than wait to do everything in a big bang, potentially, at the end of the mandate, we would like to progress some of this on a staged basis. Our plan is to

upgrade the audio element next summer during recess, and then we would look at the cameras and so on the following year. At this stage, that is a very indicative figure. That project is only in the early stages; therefore, we do not have a refinement for the figure until we go through the project and look at the procurement options and the best way to implement it.

You also mentioned the front-line staff. Most of the available front-line staff have already been redeployed to support other business areas because of the pressures. If there are any vacant posts, they have not been filled at this point.

Ms Bunting: Most but not all have been redeployed.

Mrs Hogg: There is still some work going on. Not all the front-line staff are only public-facing. They deal with other matters in the background, so there is still ongoing work there, albeit fairly minimal.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I would like to supplement Joanne's point. I know, Lesley, that you touched on the audio systems in the Chamber, and I welcome the update on that. I noticed that, at Westminster and in other Chambers, elected Members can speak remotely via teleconferencing — StarLeaf, if you like. Has consideration been given to that for the Assembly? Has the Commission raised that mechanism directly with you? I speak from experience. I was at home for two weeks and could have been engaging in the Assembly. As the COVID crisis continues and we see more and more people going into isolation, it is important that we try to keep Assembly business functioning as normally as possible. Has consideration been given to that engagement from home into the Chamber, as has been happening at Westminster?

Mrs Hogg: That would be a matter for the Committee on Procedures, and it would require changes to Standing Orders. If such changes were envisaged and brought forward, we would implement whatever solution was required to facilitate them. At the minute, we have not been requested to look at that.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): That is interesting.

We have discussed at previous meetings the upgrades for the TV screens and the telephone system around the Building. They are hugely out of date. I think that they predate me, which is not great. Where are we with those plans? I understood that those things would happen over the summer, but they have not happened yet.

Mrs Hogg: The telephone system project is well under way. We are piloting it at the minute, during October, so it will be completed in the next couple of months.

The television screen replacement has been deferred until next year. You will understand that changing so many working practices and getting the technology set up for remote working during COVID took a lot of time for our IS department; therefore, the TV replacement has been pushed into next year. However, you are right that they are long overdue. I think, as we explained before, from a prudence point of view, the Commission did not want to proceed with the upgrade of the TV screens while the Assembly was not meeting.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Thank you very much. There are adaptations to the Building for disabled access — I think we have had conversations on that previously at the Committee — that were in the budget for this year, so what is the situation with those? Changing the Chamber is about making it much more disabled-friendly to meet the needs of those who may require it.

Mrs Hogg: You will see in the capital budget that there is £50,000, which is to do with evacuation, and we had that in last year. Again, that project has been deferred into next year, and it is really about looking at emergency evacuation and some work that might need to be done to our lifts to facilitate that.

Nothing further has been planned for the Chamber at the minute. Obviously, certain parts of the Chamber are accessible, but the time to look at that is when we are doing any bigger upgrade to equipment.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. Thank you.

Mr Allister: I have a couple of points to make. Is there any money in capital spend that has been set aside for roof repairs?

Mrs Hogg: Not specifically, but we have an ongoing cycle of repair and maintenance. We are not aware of any significant repairs that are required to be done at the minute, unless you are familiar with some.

Mr Allister: Yes, I was on the third floor yesterday, and I noticed areas where there was obvious water ingress. It is only a few years since we had the roof done. What is the problem?

Mrs Hogg: There have been a few ongoing defects following the work that was done on the roof, and we continue to work through those with the contractor.

Mr Allister: Are there legal proceedings?

Mr Stewart: No, it has not got to the stage of legal proceedings —.

Mr Allister: If you look, you can see that, where the various railings have been, for some reason, drilled into the parapet or whatever you call that, it is cracking where each stanchion is. I am no engineer, but that struck me as an odd way to establish that rail, as it invites water ingress. Is that what is causing the water to come down?

Mr Stewart: Will I take that one?

Mrs Hogg: Do you want to comment?

Mr Stewart: Yes, that is the biggest issue that we are in discussions with the designers and the contractor about.

Mr Allister: That is a massive issue. There are hundreds of those stanchions.

Mr Stewart: I would not go as far as saying "hundreds", but it is certainly most pronounced at the back of the Building.

Mr Allister: In places, that is showing through the ceiling with water staining: is that right?

Mr Stewart: Yes. I think that, at the back of the Building there is a secondary issue, which is not related to the roof project, to do with the lift void that is just outside the door when it gets to the fourth floor. However, yes, those railings are the issue that we are in discussions with the contractor about.

Mr Allister: Who is responsible for the botching of the railings?

Mr Stewart: I think that the Commission would say that that would be a matter for the designer or the contractor. We paid for a proper job, and we take the view that it needs to be fixed.

Mr Allister: How many years has it been now — four or five?

Mr Stewart: Since 2014-15, yes.

Mr Allister: Has it gone to arbitration, or are there any proceedings issued? How are we bringing it to a head?

Mr Stewart: No, we have not got to the point of proceedings or arbitration. It is going through discussions with the designer and the contractor.

Mr Allister: If it ends up that we have to pick up the tab, is that provided for in any of this budget?

Mr Stewart: I think that, before we get to the point of picking up the tab, we might well enter into litigation.

Mr Allister: It struck me that it has the potential to be a big issue.

Mr Stewart: Yes, it is certainly an issue that we would like the designer or the contractor to resolve.

Mr Allister: Joanne asked whether the £1.25 million for the audio and camera services has anything to do with the provision of translation services. What is the clear answer to that?

Mrs Hogg: No. An updated table was sent through. Half a million pounds is shown in the updated table, but there is nothing in there for translation systems. Again, until such time as the Committee on Procedures and the Assembly change Standing Orders, we do not really know the scope of the services that would be required. At the point at which that is determined, we will again seek the appropriate funding to implement that.

Mr Allister: If that happened mid-year, how would you do it?

Mrs Hogg: It is likely to be a significant project. Even if it was agreed mid-year, it is unlikely that we would be able to complete much of the capital works in the first year by the time that it was scoped to go through a procurement exercise. We would have to recruit staff as well, so that would be a big project.

Mr Allister: Thank you.

Mr Chambers: I have just a very small point to make. In the security hut on the way out of the Building, the staff have to come out to manually press a button outside to let you out. There are no security issues really involved in letting people out. Would it be possible to substitute it with some sort of remote control from within the Building so that they do not have to come out in inclement weather to press a button?

Mrs Hogg: I am not sure whether that has been considered at all.

Mr Stewart: It has certainly been talked about over the years, but it has not been implemented. We can certainly look at it, but it is maybe a question of what the value for money in that might be.

Mr Chambers: It is just that, in an age where everything is remote, it seems a bit manual that they have to come out in the rain and inclement weather to do that. Maybe you would have a look at it.

Mr Stewart: Yes.

Ms Bunting: Chairman, there is an auto-barrier at the other side that lifts when you drive up.

Mr Allister: It opens.

Mr Stewart: There is, and that one is a salutary tale. It is meant to open, which it does when it works, but, even though the technology for it has been around for years, an engineer is out relatively frequently to fix it.

Mrs Hogg: The control room can operate the barrier when there is nobody at the security facility, but we can certainly look at what would be required to automate it from the security facility.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): I have a slight point to make on security that is not budgetary — well, it is nothing major. Prior to the collapse of the institutions we had identity stickers on our car that recognised us as Members so that we just got in. Now, security are nearly in the window on top of me to see who I am. It is not helpful for them or for us. Is there any way of reinstating something that clearly identifies Members so that we can just get in?

Mrs Hogg: We moved away from the sticker method simply because sometimes we found that other people were perhaps using Members' stickers. I do not know whether it was Members' cars or else Members maybe were in other vehicles that did not have the stickers, so now Members are allowed in on the basis of sight rather than sticker.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. It is not a major issue.

Mrs Hogg: That is why. We found that other people were using Members' stickers to get their car into the Building.

Ms Rogan: Can I have a bit more information about electronic access control to Parliament Buildings. Is that for staff? Will you elaborate on that?

Mrs Hogg: You will be aware that there is no real security around the Building through electronic access when going through internal doors. It has been considered over a number of years whether there should be some automation of doors etc to restrict certain parts of the Building to the public and keep certain parts to Members, staff and badge holders. That would be a partial electronic access control system that would allow a public area around the Great Hall etc, but the rest of the Building would be closed off and you would need some sort of pass to get through it.

Over the last couple of years, we have tried to increase the number of visitors to the Building. We have the Members' Dining Room and the portraits on the first floor etc. A few years ago we automated a lot of the doors for disability access, and that has been very good from that point of view. However, the doors are then very inviting. For example, if you come out of the Speaker's Corner shop, the doors down to the deputy First Minister's offices automatically open in front of you. Sometimes, members of the public come out of the shop, the doors open and they walk round the corridor. At times, we find members of the public roaming around. Similarly, if they come to the back of the Great Hall, the doors open. At the minute, we are reliant purely on the ushers to try to keep track of visitors in the Building, which is difficult. The idea is that we would restrict access and that you would need a pass to get through certain doors such as those in the back corridor or some of the other corridors and even upstairs through the lifts.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Are Members content? I have no further questions. Lesley and Richard, thank you very much for coming before us today and sharing that important information with us. Keep up your good work and thank the staff of the Assembly for the huge amount of work that they do in supporting each of us in the role that we have to play here. These are not easy times, and I know that there is a lot of anxiety about the spread of the infection. I just want to put firmly on record our thanks to you and your team in the Assembly for the great work that you do.

Mrs Hogg: Thank you. That is much appreciated.