



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Audit Committee

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Draft Budget 2022-25: Northern Ireland
Assembly Commission

24 November 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Daniel McCrossan (Chairperson)

Mr William Irwin (Deputy Chairperson)

Witnesses:

Mrs Lesley Hogg Northern Ireland Assembly

Ms Paula McClintock Northern Ireland Assembly

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): We welcome Mrs Lesley Hogg, Clerk/Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Assembly, and Ms Paula McClintock, head of finance in the Northern Ireland Assembly. I advise the witnesses that the session is being reported by Hansard and that the transcript will be published on the Committee web page.

Do you have opening remarks, or are you content to move straight to questions?

Mrs Lesley Hogg (Northern Ireland Assembly): Chair, I did not plan to make any opening remarks, further to our last meeting. I am happy to go straight to questions, if that suits.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): That is fine. Thank you very much. I appreciate that, and thank you for being with us.

I will start the questions. You mentioned that, in order to avoid slippage, there were tight controls over the timetables of capital projects. What are those controls?

Mrs Hogg: We work on very clear plans, from project initiation to procurement and right through to execution. We also carry out reviews and look at the lessons learned from previous projects that we have completed, and we build those learnings into future plans.

The big projects are those such as broadcasting etc. We have done quite a bit of work on that, and we have some external expertise because of the specialised nature of that project. That is also the case with our corporate systems project. We have that additional expertise to help us work through the process and to make sure that we complete the preparations efficiently and execute the projects on time and on budget.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK, that is helpful. Obviously, funds were allocated for the upgrading of the television system throughout the Building. What is the most recent update on that?

Mrs Hogg: It has just gone out to tender, Chair. It is in progress at the minute.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. What led to the delays in that process? We have been having discussions about it for some time.

Mrs Hogg: We have had so many other projects and issues to deal with because of COVID, such as making sure that we have the infrastructure available for remote participation in Committees and plenary sittings and to support Members etc. There has been quite a lot of work associated with that. We have also lost a number of staff in the IS office over the past number of months, and, over the past few years, we have had a number of resignations in that business area. It has been very difficult to replace those staff.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): Why has that been happening?

Mrs Hogg: Frankly, it is a salary issue. The market is very buoyant for IT staff, and, with our current pay structures, it is very difficult for us to compete with the private sector and even with some other public bodies. It is a pay issue.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. I appreciate that.

I have noticed, and I know this following briefings from you, that works have been carried out on the estate to what is officially described as the "Speaker's residence", if I am correct. What stage are those works at?

Mrs Hogg: That is no longer our responsibility. We have not used the Speaker's residence for quite a number of years. The Department of Finance has taken over use of that residence, so any works must be undertaken by the Department of Finance, I assume.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. I assume that that building houses Department of Finance offices. That is grand. Thank you.

Briefly, I would like to raise access to the estate. Obviously, we have security on the main gates and entrances to the estate. There was previously a pass system for MLAs. Is that to be reinstated? The pass used to be on the windscreen of vehicles.

Mrs Hogg: Yes, there are two elements. There is security before getting access to the estate itself, which is managed by the Department of Finance, and then there is access to the upper car park. When accessing the estate, you should be asked to show your pass or some form of identification at that stage. Getting access to our upper car park is managed on a visual basis by the ushers at the gate. That is because we found that passes were sometimes being transferred between cars and did not relate to the Members themselves. That is why Members are now permitted on sight.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. That clears that up.

William, do you have any questions?

Mr Irwin: None, no.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): We will write to you about this, but can you give us an idea at this stage about what extent efficiencies can be delivered to offset the pressures that you face in this budget period?

Mrs Hogg: As we retender different contracts etc, we always look for efficiencies. For example, we will retender our in-house catering contract next year, and we are already considering ways to improve its efficiency and to reduce its cost. We will also retender for a number of broadcasting projects. You will see in our capital plan that all our broadcasting infrastructure needs to be upgraded, and, again, we will be looking to try to automate as much of that as possible and therefore achieve efficiencies that way.

We are constantly looking for opportunities to make efficiencies. As posts become vacant, we review them in order to determine whether the job can be done differently or more efficiently etc. We are very mindful of that and are continuously looking to achieve efficiencies where possible. We have our

corporate systems project, which is in the capital plan, and we hope to see some efficiencies arising from that once it is implemented.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): What is the current cost of the subsidy to the canteen from the Commission?

Mrs Hogg: It fluctuates from year to year, Chair, because of the nature of the contract. Basically, we pay for the wages etc of the staff, and we pay for and provide the equipment. We then get a certain return on the sales generated. The higher the sales generated, the more of a return that we get, and that offsets the cost.

You wrote, Chair, to the Commission regarding that, and we sent through the relevant figures for the past few years. We are in the fourth year of the contract. It depends on footfall, and we have had a difficult trading period, first because the Assembly did not sit for three years, meaning that footfall in the Building was much less because of the lack of activity and events and so on that would normally be associated with Members. We resumed business only in January 2020, and then, by March, we had COVID, and the Building was vacated other than by those who had to come in to it to support Assembly business.

It has been a very difficult period, Chair, simply because there has not been the footfall through the catering outlets that there would normally be. The opportunities to reduce the cost of the catering contract have therefore been fewer than they would be if the Building and the Assembly were fully functional and open for engagement activities.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): OK. Thank you. Have you anything further to add or raise with us?

Mrs Hogg: No, not at this time, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr McCrossan): We have no further questions. Thank you very much for being with us today and for taking questions and giving us some insight into the difficulties and challenges that exist.

Mrs Hogg: Thank you, Chair.