



COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

WEDNESDAY, 24 FEBRUARY 2021

Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Dr Steve Aiken OBE MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Paul Frew MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Pat Catney MLA
Mr Jim Wells MLA

Present by Video-conference:
Mr Jim Allister MLA
Ms Jemma Dolan MLA
Mr Philip McGuigan MLA
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA

Apologies: Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA

In Attendance: Mr Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Phil Pateman (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Ms Kate McCullough (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Mr Neil Sedgewick (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Heather Graham (Clerical Officer)
Dr Rachel Keyes (Research Officer, RaISe) – agenda item 6 only
Mr Colin Pidgeon (Research Officer, RaISe) – agenda item 6 only
Mr Chris Rothwell (Researcher Officer, RaISe) – agenda item 6 only

The meeting commenced in open session at 2:03pm.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

Notice was not received from any Member to delegate authority to vote under Temporary Standing Order 115(6).

2. Declaration of Interests

The Chairperson declared an interest in respect of an item of correspondence due to be considered later in the agenda, stating his opposition to the Arc21 incinerator.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Budget debates

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Supply Resolution debate was scheduled for Monday, 1 March and the 2nd Stage of the Budget Bill (NI) 2021 was scheduled for Tuesday, 2 March 2021. Members noted that the Chairperson was to contribute to both of the debates in order to reflect the Committee's scrutiny of these important matters.

3.2 Commissioner for Standards

The Chairperson drew Members' attention to a letter from the Northern Ireland Assembly Commissioner for Standards seeking information considered by the Committee at its first meeting of this mandate on 22 January 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to the Commissioner for Standards and to provide the information requested.

Mr Catney joined the meeting at 2:05pm.

Ms Dolan joined the meeting at 2:06pm.

3.3 Social Media

The Chairperson suggested to Members that, as is the practice in a number of other statutory committees, a short twitter summary video be produced after each Committee meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chairperson would publish Committee meeting updates on Twitter with the assistance of Assembly Communications.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 17 February 2021.

5. Matters Arising

Invitation to Representatives of the Banking Sector

The Chairperson referred to a previous suggestion put forward by Mr Catney in respect of recent speculation relating to the future operations of Ulster Bank and the Bank of Ireland in Northern Ireland.

Members expressed concern in respect of the potential impact of job losses on back office roles and noted the current work being undertaken by the Committee for the Economy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Committee for the Economy to seek clarity as to its planned engagement with the banking sector and to suggest an informal concurrent meeting of Members of both committees with appropriate banking sector representatives.

6. RaISe Oral Briefing – Budget Update

Assembly Research Officers joined the meeting at 2:14pm.

Dr Rachel Keyes

Colin Pidgeon

Chris Rothwell

The Committee noted the briefing paper from Assembly Research on the Spring Supplementary Estimates.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to commission RaISe to provide an update to its paper on departmental bids to reflect final allocations of the 2020-21 financial year and to provide an analysis, where possible, of successful and unsuccessful bids during this period and in previous years.

7. Written Briefing - Statutory Committees - 2021-22 Draft Budget

The Committee noted responses from Assembly statutory committees in respect of the their departments' anticipated allocations relating to the 2021-22 Draft Budget.

The Committee noted with concern the absence of a response by the Executive Office.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chairperson should highlight the issues raised by statutory committees in his contributions during the planned budget debates next week.

8. Oral Evidence - Construction Employers' Federation - 2021-22 Draft Budget

The witnesses joined the meeting at 3:21pm.

Mark Spence, Managing Director, Construction Employers' Federation

David Fry, Director of External Affairs, Construction Employers' Federation

The Committee noted the submission on the draft Budget 2021-22 from the Construction Employers' Federation.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

Mr Allister joined the meeting at 3:41pm.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence

9. Oral Evidence - Department of Finance – draft Budget Bill 2021

The officials joined the meeting at 3:52pm.

Joanne McBurney, Acting Budget Director, Department of Finance

Jonathan McAdams, Head of Supply Division, Department of Finance

Roisin Kelly, Supply Officer, Department of Finance

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Committee noted the Chairperson's letter to the Speaker regarding Accelerated Passage; the Department of Finance SSE position paper; and a tabled response from the Department in respect of Committee queries.

Mr McHugh left the meeting at 4:37pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Executive Office to request a copy of the Government Actuary's Department report on the anticipated costs of the Victims' Pensions Scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance to seek further clarity of the provisions for the Legal Service Agency Northern Ireland as referenced in the SSEs and to request a reconciliation of the SSE headroom for the 2020-21 financial year.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it did not require, at this time, further oral evidence on the use of the sole authority of the Budget Act for spending.

The Committee noted the position in respect of the Minister's intention to seek the suspension of Standing Orders in order to secure the passage of the Budget Bill in less than 10 days.

Mr McHugh rejoined the meeting at 4:41pm.

10. Correspondence

10.1 The Committee noted the correspondence index.

10.2 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Finance regarding monitoring round transaction types that do not require details to be specified by departments.

10.3 The Committee considered a response from the Department of Finance regarding further allocations to the Department of Education to support a teachers' pay deal.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write again to the Department for Finance to seek confirmation that the payment meets Treasury rules as per the Committee's previous request.

10.4 The Committee noted a response sent to the Committee for Communities from the Minister of Finance regarding future funding arrangements and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

10.5 The Committee considered a response from the Minister regarding Public Sector Reform and declining the Committee's request for the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to undertake a further review.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to the OECD, for its information.

10.6 The Committee considered a response from the Department of Finance regarding the Department's role in supporting the outcomes in the draft Programme for Government.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department again seeking clarity on its policy input to digital infrastructure and economic growth.

10.7 The Committee considered responses from the Departments of Finance and the Economy regarding covid support schemes for driving schools.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the responses to ABBA driving school, for its information.

10.8 The Committee noted the Minister's response to Arc21 regarding Green Growth which highlights a number of relevant initiatives.

10.9 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Finance providing an update on the Procurement Board.

10.10 The Committee noted a response from the Minister of Finance regarding the treatment of interest relating to the Reform and Reinvestment Initiative.

10.11 The Committee consider a copy of a written Ministerial statement regarding Connect2 Regional Hubs.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an oral briefing from the Department on the Reform of Property Management Programme.

10.12 The Committee considered a response from the Minister for the Economy regarding reduced requirements and allocations in the January Monitoring Round relating to the Presbyterian Mutual Society.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to the Committee for the Economy and to write to the Department for Finance seeking an update and asking it to set out the financial risk, if any, that is associated with the insolvency of the Presbyterian Mutual Society.

10.13 The Committee consider a copy of a letter to the Minister of Finance from the Committee for Communities regarding financial support for people within the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable category.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to ShieldUsNI to seek its assessment of the number of Clinically Extremely Vulnerable people it believes require additional support.

10.14 The Committee noted correspondence from the Audit Committee to the Minister of Finance regarding the draft Budget 2021-22 and relevant bodies.

10.15 The Committee noted correspondence from the Audit Committee to the Minister of Finance regarding public sector pay progression.

10.16 The Committee noted correspondence from the Audit Committee to the Minister of Finance regarding the use of Enterprise Shared Services.

10.17 The Committee considered a response from the Executive Office on the commissioning of expert opinion to advise on matters arising from the Northern Ireland Protocol.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to give further consideration with the Committee for the Executive Office to RaISe's selection of expert opinion on the Northern Ireland Protocol.

10.18 The Committee considered information on EU exit structures provided by the Assembly's EU Affairs Manager.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an oral briefing from the Assembly's EU Affairs Manager.

10.19 The Committee noted a copy of a letter from the Committee for Justice to the Minister of Finance regarding the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill.

10.20 The Committee noted details of the Northern Ireland Audit Office reports over which the Public Accounts Committee has primacy.

10.21 The Committee considered a request from the Committee for Infrastructure on monies returned by departments in the monitoring rounds.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Department of Finance for a response to the Committee for Infrastructure.

10.22 The Committee noted a response from the Office of the Speaker regarding issues in respect of the Assembly's video conferencing facilities.

10.23 The Committee noted correspondence from the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists (RCSLT) regarding the decision to remove 'Communication Difficulties' as an answer to one of the census questions.

The Committee noted that Ms Dolan had corresponded with the Department of Finance on the issue and had received a response which had been shared with RCSLT.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an update oral briefing from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) on the census, after Easter.

10.24 The Committee considered a copy of the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB) Annual Report and Accounts 2019.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to SEUPB seeking an update on the review of Simplified Cost Options (SCOs) and the payment of “at risk” INTERREG VA claims.

10.25 The Committee considered the composite information request.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the composite information request was an accurate record of information sought by the Committee

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to receive oral evidence on the Public Procurement Common Framework from the Construction Employers’ Federation and Social Enterprise (NI) and to receive an oral briefing from the Department regarding an SL1 on energy performance certificates.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek oral briefings from the Department on its Business Plan; and from stakeholders on: business rates reform, fiscal governance matters and the fiscal balance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a joint briefing from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) and the Equality Commission in respect of the potential for legislation relating to gender identity.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to undertake external meetings in Connect2 regional hubs West of the Bann in order to meet with relevant stakeholders, when permissible.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Forward Work Programme, as amended.

12. Any Other Business

The Chairperson informed Members that he was unable to attend the planned meeting with the House of Lords European Union Select Committee to discuss matters relating to the Northern Ireland Protocol.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chairperson should write to the House of Lords European Union Select Committee to offer his apologies.

13. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting of the Committee will be held on Wednesday, 3 March 2021 at 2:00pm in the Senate Chamber and on Starleaf.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:08pm.

Dr Steve Aiken MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Finance
3 March, 2021