

COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

WEDNESDAY, 21 APRIL 2021

Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Dr Steve Aiken OBE MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Paul Frew MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister MLA
Mr Pat Catney MLA
Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA
Mr Jim Wells MLA

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

Apologies: None

In Attendance: Mr Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
Ms Kate McCullough (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Ms Angela McParland (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Mr Neil Sedgewick (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Heather Graham (Clerical Officer)
Mr Aidan Stennett (Assembly Research – item 8 only)

The meeting commenced in open session at 2:02pm.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

The Committee noted that no notice had been received from any Member to delegate authority to vote under Temporary Standing Order 115(6) on any issue in the event of them not being present for all or part of the proceedings.

2. Declaration of Interests

The Chairperson declared an interest in respect of Correspondence Item 12.2 regarding the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) Human Resources grievance policy, owing to work he had previously carried out on behalf of the correspondent.

The Chairperson, Deputy Chairperson, Jim Allister, Pat Catney, Jemma Dolan, Philip McGuigan and Matthew O'Toole recorded declarations of interest in respect of Item 6, oral evidence from the Northern Ireland Committee - Irish Congress of Trade Unions on public sector pensions, as all Members will be in receipt of a pension associated with their role as an MLA.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Attempted car bombing near Dungiven

The Chairperson conveyed the Committee's abhorrence of a reported attempted terrorist attack on an officer of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) and her young daughter.

3.2 Her Majesty the Queen's 95th Birthday

The Chairperson paid respects in regards to Her Majesty the Queen's 95th Birthday, on behalf of the Committee, whilst acknowledging that it is a period of mourning for Her Majesty for the late Duke of Edinburgh.

3.3 Ministerial Statement

The Chairperson advised that the Minister, during his statement on Tuesday 20 April 2021, suggested that the Committee recall Land and Property Services (LPS) to give evidence on recovery and repayment issues relating to Covid-19 business support schemes.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek to bring forward the scheduled oral briefing from LPS on post-pandemic recovery and rates reform to 12 May 2021 and to include in the briefing, repayment issues relating to Covid-19 business support schemes.

Mr Maoliosa McHugh joined the meeting at 2.05pm.

3.4 Informal meeting with the Minister

The Chairperson brought to the Committee's attention a verbal invitation he had received from the Minister for the Committee to be represented at an Innovation Lab workshop on social value with Social Enterprise Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that a representative of the Committee should attend the Innovation Lab workshop, diaries permitting.

Mr Wells joined the meeting at 2:07pm

3.5 Informal Meeting - Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

The Chairperson reminded Members that, as the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson had been unavailable, the Clerk had attended the meeting of Thursday 15 April 2021 with the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and Assembly statutory committee chairpersons. The Chairperson referred to the note of the meeting, provided by the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, which had been shared with Members. The Committee discussed the low turnout of Unionist representatives at the meeting. The

Chairperson noted that the meeting may be reconvened in early June, following the upcoming court hearing related to the NI Protocol.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 14 April 2021.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Oral Evidence: Northern Ireland Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (NIC-ICTU) - Public Sector Pensions

The witnesses joined the meeting at 2:07pm

Alison Millar, General Secretary of the Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA), Chair of NIC-ICTU, and Temporary Chair of the Pension Collective Consultation Working Group (CCWG);

Jim Quinn, Union Representative, Fire Brigades Union; and

Nuala O'Donnell, Union Representative, Irish National Teachers' Organisation, representing the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council.

Mr Frew joined the meeting at 2.08pm.

The following witness joined the meeting at 2:16pm

Dessie Lowry, Union Representative, Royal College of Nursing;

The Committee noted: a NIC-ICTU briefing paper and previous NIC-ICTU consultation submission; and related correspondence from the Police Federation and the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council.

Mr Wells declared an interest as the Chairperson of the Trustees of the Northern Ireland Assembly Members' Pension Scheme.

Mr O'Toole declared an interest as a member of the GB civil service pension scheme.

The Chairperson declared an interest stating he is entitled to a Ministry of Defence pension.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department in order to seek further information on the public sector pension revaluation process and related timescales as well as the expected timescales for the forthcoming Legislative Consent Memorandum (LCM).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to NIC-ICTU to ascertain the specific features of Northern Ireland public sector pensions which form the basis of its concerns for the LCM and for which it is seeking reassurance from the Department.

7. Oral Briefing: Department of Finance - Reform of Property Management Programme

The official joined the meeting at 2:58pm.

Derek Kennedy, Senior Responsible Owner of the Reform of Property Management Programme, Department of Finance

The Committee noted a 2017 Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report entitled 'Managing the Central Government Office Estate' and a copy of the 2012 Executive Asset Management Strategy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that, as a Departmental written submission had not been provided, it would defer the oral briefing until next week or until receipt of an acceptable written briefing provided in advance.

8. Oral Presentation: Assembly Research and Information Service (RaISe) – UK Internal Market Act 2020

The Assembly Research Officer joined the meeting at 3:15pm.

Aidan Stennett, Research Officer, RaISe, Northern Ireland Assembly

The Committee noted the RaISe paper entitled 'Internal Market Act 2020 and the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland'; and a Departmental response regarding the UK Government's recovery loan scheme.

The Chairperson and Mr Allister declared an interest as applicants in a related Northern Ireland Protocol judicial review.

The Chairperson thanked the Research Officer for his presentation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to pursue additional research with RaISe in regards to gaining clarity on differing scenarios on the movement of goods from Northern Ireland to countries with which either the UK or the European Union had trade agreements

Mr O'Toole left the meeting at 3.43pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department to set out the process it has adopted and the measures it is taking in order to ensure that legislation and policy are compliant both with Section 46 of the UK Internal Market Act 2020 and the NI Protocol.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Department of Finance, the Department for the Economy and The Executive Office seeking responses to the scrutiny questions included in the RaISe paper and asking the departments to copy the Committee for the Economy and the Committee for the Executive Office into the responses.

9. Written Briefing: SL1 The Rates (Small Business Hereditament Relief) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

The Committee noted papers relating to The Rates (Small Business Hereditament Relief) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it had no objection to the proposed legislation and was content for the Department to make the Rule.

10. Oral Evidence: SL1 The Official Statistics (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021

An official joined the meeting at 3.48pm to speak to the paper relating to The Official Statistics (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021.

Dr Tracy Power, Director of Analysis, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Committee noted the papers relating to this subordinate legislation.

Mr O'Toole returned to the meeting at 3.51pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it had no objection to the proposed legislation and was content for the Department to make the Rule.

11. Written Briefing - Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (Amendment) Scheme (NI) 2021

The Committee considered: correspondence from the Department on its proposal to introduce an Amendment Scheme to the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (Northern Ireland) (PCSPS) under powers conferred by the Superannuation (Northern Ireland) Order 1972; and a copy of the Amendment Scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the Amendment Scheme, on the basis that the changes were purely technical in nature and conferred no disbenefit on pensioners.

12. Correspondence

12.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

The Deputy Chairperson assumed the chairpersonship of the meeting at 4.00pm.

12.2 The Committee noted further responses from a former NICS employee regarding HR issues.

The Chairperson resumed chairpersonship of the meeting at 4.01pm.

12.3 The Committee noted a copy of a response to the Committee for the Economy regarding financial support to students.

12.4 The Committee considered a copy of the provisionally agreed Public Procurement Common Framework (PPCF) and associated Ministerial correspondence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department indicating that it had no additional queries at this time but reiterating that it continued to keep a watching brief on the important matters relating to public procurement.

12.5 The Committee noted an update from the Assembly European Union Affairs Manager on the progress of Common Frameworks.

12.6 The Committee considered a Departmental response to the Committee on the content of the proposed Building Fire Safety Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write again to the Department seeking clarity as to whether an ambitious programme of reform similar to that proposed by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is under consideration for Northern Ireland; why the initial correspondence indicated that the programme was “urgently required”; and the scope and timeline for associated NI legislation.

12.7 The Committee noted a revised copy of the 2019-20 Land and Property Services Trust Statement which was originally laid on 8 March 2021 but was subsequently found to include an error.

12.8 The Committee noted a Departmental response to the Committee regarding the use of red diesel for pleasure boats in Northern Ireland stating that the Department has contacted Treasury counterparts on this issue and will forward the response once received.

12.9 The Committee considered a briefing paper prepared for the Committee by the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) regarding the use of social clauses in public procurement contracts and the promotion of the ‘Buy Social’ approach.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to receive an oral briefing from SIB on social value in procurement on 9 June 2021.

12.10 The Committee considered correspondence from AJ Watson Ltd regarding the absence of covid-19 support for businesses operating outside of a rateable premises.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Department for urgent comment.

12.11 The Committee noted, and expressed concern over, a copy of a letter from the Non-Executive Chair of the Northern Ireland Committee for UK Finance, received by the Committee for the Economy regarding bank branch closures. The Committee noted that the Clerk is liaising with the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy on the possibility of a joint informal briefing session with the banking sector.

12.12 The Committee considered a copy of correspondence from the Committee for Infrastructure to the Department of Finance regarding the sale of Portavoe Reservoir by NI Water. Members expressed concerns in respect of the sale.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department to copy its response to the Committee for Infrastructure.

12.13 The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from The Executive Office regarding the Shared Prosperity Fund.

12.14 The Committee noted a copy of a response from the Minister of Finance to the Committee for Infrastructure regarding decarbonising road transport in Northern Ireland.

12.15 The Committee considered the composite information request.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that, notwithstanding recently received responses, the composite request was an accurate and complete record of the Committee's outstanding information requests.

13. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to reschedule the Departmental briefings on the Main Estimates and the Budget (No.2) Bill, as necessary.

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

14. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

15. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting of the Committee will be held on Wednesday 28 April 2021 at 2:00pm in the Senate Chamber and on Starleaf.

The meeting was adjourned at 4.18pm.

**Dr Steve Aiken MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Finance
28 April 2021**