

COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

WEDNESDAY, 12 MAY 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 Angela McParland (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Mr Stephen Magee (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Heather Graham (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced in open session at 2:01pm.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

No notice was received from any Member to delegate authority to vote under Temporary Standing Order 115(6).

2. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Department of Finance 2021-22 Public Expenditure Covid Exercise

The Chairperson advised Members that it is understood that the Department is co-ordinating a 2021-22 covid budgeting exercise, in which each department has been asked to provide updates on their covid related capital and resource requirements.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek further details on this 2021-22 public expenditure covid exercise, ahead of the briefing on the Main Estimates which is scheduled for later in May.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 5 May 2021.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Oral Evidence: Scottish Fiscal Commission (SFC) - Fiscal Council for Northern Ireland

The witnesses joined the meeting at 2:03pm.

Dame Susan Rice, Chairperson, SFC;
John Ireland, Chief Executive, SFC; and
Claire Murdoch, Head of Social Security and Public Funding, SFC.

The Committee noted: a written submission from SFC; the 2021 SFC forecast report; and the 2020 SFC data needs statement.

Mr Matthew O'Toole joined the meeting at 2.04pm

Mr Paul Frew joined the meeting at 2.17pm

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to SFC suggesting continued engagement as the Committee develops its understanding of issues relating to the Fiscal Council for Northern Ireland. The Committee also agreed to seek further information on SFC's operating costs.

7. Oral Evidence: Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) and Ulster University (UU) – Fiscal Council for Northern Ireland

The witnesses joined the meeting at 3.03pm.

Seamus McAleavey, Chief Executive, NICVA; and
Dr Esmond Birnie, Senior Economist, UU.

The Committee noted: covering information from NICVA; an explanatory note from Dr Birnie; and a copy of the 2013 PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) report 'Fiscal powers: A review of the fiscal powers of the Northern Ireland Assembly'.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

8. Oral Evidence: Land and Property Services (LPS) - Covid Recovery, Repayment Issues, Business Rates Reform

The Departmental officials joined the meeting at 4.30pm.

Mr Ian Snowden, Chief Executive, LPS, DoF; and
Mr Alan Brontë, Director of Rating Policy Division, LPS, DoF.

The Committee noted tabled Ministerial correspondence providing an update on Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS) overpayments.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking: sight of the report of the 2019 rates review; details of its plans to review the ability of the non-domestic sector to pay business rates in 2022-23 given the impact of pandemic-related business closures; clarity as to whether a business rates revaluation will be brought forward to coincide with similar revaluations in other jurisdictions of the UK; and details of its thinking in respect of a wider reform of domestic and non-domestic rates.

9. Subordinate Legislation: SR 2021/116 The Rates (Coronavirus) (Emergency Relief) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

The Committee noted papers relating to SR 2021/116 The Rates (Coronavirus) (Emergency Relief) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021.

Agreed: That the Committee for Finance has considered the statutory rule SR 2021/116 The Rates (Coronavirus) (Emergency Relief) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 and, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, has no objection to the rule.

10. Subordinate Legislation: SR 2021/119 The Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021

The Committee noted papers relating to SR 2021/119 The Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021.

Agreed: That the Committee for Finance has considered the statutory rule SR 2021/119 The Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 and, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, recommends that it be affirmed by the Assembly.

11. Primary Legislation – pre-introduction Financial Reporting (Departments and Public Bodies) (NI) Bill 2021

The Committee considered in-confidence correspondence from the Minister providing a copy of the Financial Reporting (Departments and Public Bodies) (NI) Bill 2021 which subject to Executive consideration, may be introduced later in May.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek to schedule a pre-2nd Stage Departmental briefing on 26 May 2021 and subject to the passage of the Bill, a Bill Office briefing on the Committee Stage shortly thereafter.

12. Correspondence

12.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

12.2 The Committee noted a Departmental briefing paper to the All Party Group on Climate Change in respect of Nearly Zero Energy Buildings and related changes to building regulations.

12.3 The Committee noted a response from the Department for the Economy (DfE) regarding the shortfall for members of the Presbyterian Mutual Society (PMS).

12.4 The Committee considered a Departmental response on the note on departments' accruing resources for the year 2020-21.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share the Department's response, providing additional granularity and commentary on accruing resources for 2020-21, with the relevant statutory committees.

12.5 The Committee considered correspondence from the Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy to the Chairperson of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (NIAC) on future meetings with the NIAC on the Northern Ireland Protocol. The Economy Committee Chairperson suggested that further engagement continues on the basis of written correspondence rather than a formal meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence and await further correspondence from the NIAC.

12.6 The Committee noted a response from the Department for the Economy to the Committee for the Economy on a press report relating to the UK Government's Guaranteed Loan Scheme.

12.7 The Committee noted correspondence from the Construction Employers' Federation (CEF) sharing its response to the call for evidence by the Strategic Investment Board on a new Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland.

12.8 The Committee noted a response from the Department to the Committee's request for further information on public sector pensions following the NIC-ICTU briefing. The Department appeared to indicate that public sector pension revaluation may be undertaken in the autumn and that the relevant Westminster Bill may be introduced in July with the LCM following soon after.

12.9 The Committee considered a response from the Department on businesses with non-rateable offices indicating that its schemes are all linked to rate-able offices and that the Department for the Economy schemes may be able to support the business which raised the query.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to the business owner who raised the query.

12.10 The Committee noted a response from the Department for the Economy indicating that payments have commenced in respect of the Limited Companies Directors' Support Scheme and the Large Tourism and Hospitality Business Support Scheme.

12.11 The Committee noted a Departmental response on the Public Procurement Common Framework (PPCF) and in respect of the procurement Green Paper etc.

12.12 The Committee noted a letter of thanks to the Committee Chairperson from the outgoing Permanent Secretary.

12.13 The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister notifying the Committee of the intention to launch open recruitment exercises to fill two key Grade 3 roles in the Department of Finance.

12.14 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 a draft of the forward work programme

Agreed: The Committee agreed its forward work programme.

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 19 May 2021 at 2:00pm in the Senate Chamber and on Starleaf.

The Committee went into closed session at 5.12pm

16. Northern Ireland Protocol – Expert Advice

The Committee considered an Assembly Research and Information Service (RaISe) paper on NI Protocol experts and a related tabled list of external experts.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to permit Members a further 24 hours to provide an additional limited selection of other experts that are perhaps not included in the relevant RaISe paper. The Committee also agreed to invite expert evidence on the NI Protocol from this augmented list.

The meeting was adjourned at 5.16pm.

Dr Steve Aiken MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Finance
19 May 2021