



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

16 February 2022

Meeting Location: Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings

Present: Dr Steve Aiken OBE MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Keith Buchanan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister MLA
Mr Maoliosa McHugh MLA
Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA
Mr Jim Wells MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Ms Jemma Dolan MLA
Mr Philip McGuigan MLA

Apologies: Mr Pat Catney MLA

In Attendance: Mr Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
Ms Carla Campbell (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Ms Angela McParland (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Mr Stephen Magee (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Heather Graham (Clerical Officer)
Mr Christopher Rothwell (Research Officer) - item 6 only

The meeting commenced at 2:00pm in public session

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

Pat Catney delegated his vote to Matthew O'Toole, under Temporary Standing Order 115(6).

2. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest at this time.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Newly Appointed Permanent Secretaries

The Chairperson briefed the Committee on the appointment of a new Permanent Secretary for the Department of Finance and for the Department for Communities. The Chairperson advised that it is understood that a further appointment is under consideration for the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Mr Colum Boyle, the outgoing interim Permanent Secretary for the Department of Finance, offering the Committee's thanks and congratulations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an informal meeting between Mr Gibson the incoming Permanent Secretary, when in post, and the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson.

3.2 NI Screen

The Chairperson noted that Sir David Sterling has been appointed as Chairperson of NI Screen.

3.3 2022-25 Budget Debate

The Chairperson noted that the Committee had previously commissioned other statutory committees to scrutinise the impact of the draft 2022-25 Budget on their respective departments. The Chairperson advised that the responses will be considered at the next Committee meeting, on 23 February 2022, when the Committee will agree a compilation report setting out the information collated. It was noted that, although the relevant consultation process has been paused, it is currently anticipated that the Minister will answer the debate.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek to defer its motion on the 2022-25 Budget Plenary debate to Monday 7 March 2022 in order to allow other MLAs time to consider the compilation report.

3.4 Informal Meeting with the Minister

The Committee noted that the Chairperson and the Deputy Chairperson met informally with the Minister in respect of his oral statement of Tuesday 15 February 2022.

Matthew O'Toole joined the meeting at 2:04pm

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 9 February 2022.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Oral Presentation: SSE's, Vote on Account - Research and Information Service (RaISe)

Jim Wells joined the meeting at 2:11pm

The Committee noted the RaISe Public Finance Scrutiny Unit (PFSU) paper '2021-2022 Spring Supplementary Estimates: Key Points' and related correspondence from the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, the Committee for the Economy and the Committee for Justice.

The Research Officer presented his paper to the Committee.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked the Research Officer for his presentation.

The Committee adopted a revised order of agenda items

7. Written Briefing: SL1 The Public Service (Civil Servants and Others) Pensions (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2022

The Committee noted the SL1: The Public Service (Civil Servants and Others) Pensions (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2022.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the policy intention and for the Department to make the rule.

8. Written Briefing: SR 2022/29 The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus: Hospitality) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2022

The Committee noted SR 2022/29 The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus: Hospitality) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2022 and accompanying Departmental correspondence.

Jim Allister joined the meeting at 2:18pm

The Chairperson and Jemma Dolan declared an interest in respect of communications with constituents who had written asking for omicron support to be extended to hotel supply chain providers. Ms Dolan indicated that she would circulate a response which she had received from the Minister of Finance.

Matthew O'Toole declared an interest as a Member of the Committee for the Economy which had also considered correspondence from catering suppliers and commercial cinemas etc. whose income had been adversely affected by omicron regulations or by associated reduced footfall.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Finance and the Minister for the Economy asking if unspent resources could be redirected to support hospitality supply chain businesses and others which had been adversely affected by the omicron regulations or associated reduced footfall.

Agreed: The Committee considered SR 2022/29 The Financial Assistance (Coronavirus: Hospitality) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2022 and, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, agreed that it had no objection to the rule.

9. Oral Evidence: Spring Supplementary Estimates (SSEs), Vote on Account, Budget Bill - (DoF)

The following Departmental officials joined the meeting at 2.22pm:

- Joanne McBurney, Budget Director, Public Spending Directorate;
- Barry Armstrong, Head of Supply Division; and
- Roisin Kelly, Supply Officer.

The Committee noted Departmental correspondence on the sole authority of the Budget Act and the Minister's oral statement of 15 February 2022.

The officials briefed the Committee.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance seeking:

- clarity on the approximate £400m associated with the National Insurance Levy and whether, without an agreed budget, this additional accruing resource can be spent by the Department of Health in 2022-2023;

- clarity on the previous timelines for the triggering and use of Section 59 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 in the period the Assembly was suspended in 2017 etc. and the facility to progressively increase the use of funds from the Consolidated Fund in line with previous year's spending;
- clarification from the Department setting out its views of the potential effects a non-functioning Executive may have on the Budget (No.2) Bill 2022;
- clarity on Ministers' ability to spend in 2022-23 in the absence of an Executive or an agreed budget;
- information on the level of headroom in the SSEs for 2020-21; and
- a copy of the Minister's letter to the Executive / other Ministers on headroom and seeking proposals for additional budget allocations in 2021-22.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Departmental correspondence relating to sole authority of the Budget Act to the Committee for the Executive Office.

10. Accelerated Passage for the Budget Bill 2022

The Committee deliberated on accelerated passage for the Budget Bill 2022.

Mr Wells recorded some dissatisfaction in respect of the operation of the Budget Bill process.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that there had been appropriate consultation in respect of public expenditure covered by the Budget Bill 2022; that it should proceed by accelerated passage and that the Chairperson should write to the Speaker to this effect.

11. Oral Briefing: SL1 The Building (Prescribed Fees) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2022 - DoF

The following Departmental officials joined the meeting at 3.01pm:

- Billy Black, Acting Head of Building Standards Branch; and
- John Saulters, Head of Legislation and Energy Unit, Building Standards Branch.

Matthew O'Toole left the meeting at 3:02pm

The Committee noted the SL1 The Building (Prescribed Fees) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2022.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the policy intention and for the Department to make the rule.

12. Correspondence

12.1 The Committee noted the index of the 8 received items.

- 12.2 The Committee noted a Departmental response to Committee queries regarding Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) staffing levels since the Voluntary Exit Scheme (VES) of 2014. The Committee noted, as indicated in the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report on capability and capacity, that the VES had left the NICS with gaps in its capability and capacity. The Committee noted also that the VES had delivered a limited reduction in staff numbers and salary costs which will likely return to pre-VES levels soon. The Committee therefore noted the limited effectiveness of the VES in respect of delivering transformative change.
- 12.3 The Committee noted a response from the Comptroller and Auditor General to the Committee's letter suggesting that NIAO revisits its previous review of the VES.
- 12.4 The Committee noted a response from the Public Accounts Committee to the Committee's letter suggesting that NIAO revisits its previous review of the VES.
- 12.5 The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister of Finance giving confirmation that the new Permanent Secretary for the Department of Finance will be Neil Gibson.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking confirmation that all of the recent Permanent Secretary appointees either are or will become members of the NICS.

- 12.6 The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for the Executive Office seeking commentary on the draft Investment Strategy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond indicating that:

- the draft Investment Strategy, though welcome, should have preceded the 2022-25 Draft Budget and been used to craft capital expenditure in the latter;
- the Investment Strategy should also have been linked to a new Programme for Government;
- it was difficult to scrutinise its overall impact on a strategic financial level without input from other committees and there was little time for this in the closing weeks of the mandate; and
- there was insufficient detail within the draft Investment Strategy.

- 12.7 The Committee noted notification of an extension of the call for views to Monday 7 March 2022 by the Executive Office (TEO), the Department of Justice (DoJ) and the Department of Health (DoH) in respect of:
- A Domestic and Sexual Abuse Strategy; and
 - An Equally Safe Strategy: a Strategy to tackle Violence Against Women and Girls.

- 12.8 The Committee considered a copy of correspondence between the Committee for Education and the Minister of Finance regarding the Period Products (Free Provision) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Finance and the Minister of Education seeking clarity as to which department will have responsibility for delivering on this legislation; what the costs will be; and which department will cover these costs?

The Chairperson declared an interest as having corresponded with the Reserve Forces and Cadets Association for Northern Ireland (RFCA NI).

- 12.9 The Committee noted correspondence from the RFCA NI regarding charitable rates exemptions.

12.10 Composite Information Request

Agreed: The Committee agreed that 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 its Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to receive a short additional oral briefing at its next meeting, 23 February 2022, on Nearly Zero Energy Building guidance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to cancel its meeting of 2 March 2022 owing to the pressure of related plenary business.

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

14. Any Other Business

Jim Allister referred to statements from the Minister in respect of a potential cost overrun for the Casement Park project and seeking clarity regarding the need for Executive approval for the completion of the project.

Maolíosa McHugh and Philip McGuigan declared an interest as members of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA).

The Chairperson declared an interest as a former employee of Dublin City University and having undertaken funding work with the GAA in that role.

There was an exchange of views regarding the sub-regional stadia projects and the reported rising costs for the Casement Park project.

Jim Wells expressed the view that the sub-regional stadia projects were of cross-community value.

Maoliosa McHugh and Philip McGuigan recorded their objection to the suggestion that the GAA and the Casement Park project were not cross-community projects and were in some way sectarian.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister seeking:

- clarity on the budget cost for the Casement Park project and the extent of any projected cost overrun;
- clarification as to whether any cost overrun will be met by the Executive and the quantum of such an overrun which can be met under Ministerial discretion and the quantum which requires Executive sign-off;
- an explanation as to why the projected cost overrun wouldn't be met by the GAA, if this is indeed the case, either in total or in part.
- clarification as to why the sub-regional stadia project which is reported to be costed at around £36m requires Executive sign-off, while reportedly an uncoded and substantial Casement Park project cost overrun doesn't require Executive sign-off.

There was no other business.

15. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting of the Committee for Finance will be at 2pm on Wednesday 23 February 2022 in the Senate and on Starleaf.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:37pm.

Dr Steve Aiken MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Finance
23 February 2022