



COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

WEDNESDAY 29 JANUARY 2020

Room 29, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Dr Steve Aiken OBE MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Paul Frew MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister MLA
Mr Pat Catney MLA
Ms Jemma Dolan MLA
Mr Seán Lynch MLA
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA
Mr Jim Wells MLA

Apologies: There were no apologies

In Attendance: Mr Jim McManus (Assembly Clerk)
Ms Kate McCullough (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Mr Neil Sedgewick (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Heather Graham (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 2.07pm in public session.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Draft Minutes

The Committee considered the minutes of Wednesday 22 January 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 22 January 2020.

3. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

4. Minister of Finance - Ministerial Priorities for the Mandate– Evidence Session

The Minister of Finance, Permanent Secretary and official joined the meeting at 2.09pm

Mr Conor Murphy MLA, Minister of Finance
Ms Sue Gray, Permanent Secretary to the Department of Finance
Ms Joanne McBurney, Public Spending Budget Director, Department of Finance

Matthew O'Toole declared an interest as a previous colleague of the Permanent Secretary.

The Minister provided the Committee with an update on Department of Finance issues and priorities.

The Minister recognised the importance of fostering a productive, open and transparent relationship with the Committee and reaffirmed his commitment to this during the mandate.

The Minister set out the key issues that the Department has responsibility for and the indicative timeframes for his priorities over the coming months. This included:

New Decade New Approach

The Minister provided members with an overview of the work that has commenced in respect of commitments falling to the Department following the 'New Decade, New Approach' agreement. This included an overview of the summary of ongoing discussions with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury in relation to financial commitments and the establishment of a Fiscal Council.

The Committee noted that the Department has initiated a cross-departmental costing exercise to gain an outline position of funding requirements to fulfil the commitments contained in the agreement with an expected completion period of 2 weeks.

Budget 2020-21/Comprehensive Spending Review

The Minister highlighted that the Budget for the 2020-2021 financial year will need to be progressed and indicated that it would be his intention to bring this forward to the Assembly over the coming weeks. This will be within a tight timeframe as HM Treasury has indicated that it will bring forward a Budget on 11th March 2020.

The Committee noted that the Treasury Budget will be followed by a Comprehensive Spending Review will be undertaken and upon its conclusion will enable the Department to initiate a multi-year budget.

Rating Policy

The Minister highlighted that, following the recent revaluation, it will be necessary for a Budget to be passed and enabling statutory rule to be affirmed by the Assembly to ensure that rates bills can be issued to ratepayers for the coming financial year.

The Minister recognised that the resultant revised valuations of non-domestic properties means that there are those who will see an increase in the cost of the rates but this needs to be considered in the context that there will be those who will see no change or a reduction.

The Committee noted that it is not the purpose of the exercise to raise additional revenue for the Executive but to rebalance the rates burden equitably. The Permanent Secretary acknowledged that this may have an impact upon the hospitality sector but encouraged the sector to engage with the Department by providing supporting information on the draft values published on 7 January 2020.

Other Issues

There was a wide-ranging discussion on other strands of work which included Civil Service Pay, effective use of Financial Transactions Capital, Corporation Tax and the outworking's of the imminent report arising from the Renewable Heat Incentive Inquiry.

Jim Wells left the meeting at 2.46pm

The oral evidence was followed by a question and answer session.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the Minister, Permanent Secretary and official for their attendance.

Agreed: To receive the Minister's First Day brief.

The Chairperson suspended the meeting at 3.35pm

The Chairperson resumed the meeting in public session at 3.45pm

Agreed: To encourage organisations which have written to the Committee to engage with the Department at an early stage on non-domestic rates to provide information on actual outturn figures.

5. Departmental Evidence Session - Pensions – Subordinate Legislation

The following officials joined the meeting at 3.45pm

Stephen Ball, Public Service Pensions Policy, Department of Finance
Emma Cocks, Public Service Pensions Policy, Department of Finance

Officials provided an overview on the need for the Statutory Rules to ensure the annual pension upgrade for public service pensions.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

Agreed: To receive oral evidence from the Pensions Division on its priorities and to include in the Forward Work Programme.

6. SR 2017/29 The Public Service Pensions Revaluation (Prices) Order (Northern Ireland) 2017

The Committee considered SR 2017/29 The Public Service Pensions Revaluation (Prices) Order (Northern Ireland) 2017.

Agreed: That the Committee for Finance has considered the SR 2017/29 The Public Service Pensions Revaluation (Prices) Order (Northern Ireland) 2017 and subject to the ESR's report has no objection to the rule.

Jim Allister left at 3.50pm

7. SR 2017/30 The Public Service Pensions Revaluation (Earnings) Order (Northern Ireland) 2017

The Committee considered SR 2017/30 The Public Service Pensions Revaluation (Earnings) Order (Northern Ireland) 2017.

Agreed: That the Committee for Finance has considered SR 2017/30 The Public Service Pensions Revaluation (Earnings) Order (Northern Ireland) 2017 and subject to the ESR's report has no objection to the rule.

8. SR 2017/63 The Pensions Increase (Modification) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017

The Committee considered SR 2017/63 The Pensions Increase (Modification) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017.

Agreed: That the Committee for Finance has considered SR 2017/63 The Pensions Increase (Modification) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017 and subject to the ESR's report has no objection to the rule.

9. SR 2018/62 The Public Service Pensions Revaluation Order (Northern Ireland) 2018

The Committee considered SR 2018/62 The Public Service Pensions Revaluation Order (Northern Ireland) 2018.

Agreed: That the Committee for Finance has considered SR 2018/62 The Public Service Pensions Revaluation Order (Northern Ireland) 2018 and subject to the ESR's report has no objection to the rule.

10. SR 2019/71 The Public Service Pensions Revaluation Order (Northern Ireland) 2019

The Committee considered SR 2019/71 The Public Service Pensions Revaluation Order (Northern Ireland) 2019.

Agreed: That the Committee for Finance has considered SR 2019/71 The Public Service Pensions Revaluation Order (Northern Ireland) 2019 and subject to the ESR's report has no objection to the rule.

11. SR 2019/60 The Public Service (Civil Servants and Others) Pensions (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019

The Committee considered SR 2019/60 The Public Service (Civil Servants and Others) Pensions (Amendment Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019.

Agreed: That the Committee for Finance has considered SR 2019/60 The Public Service (Civil Servants and Others) Pensions (Amendment Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2019 and subject to the ESR's report has no objection to the rule.

12. SR 2017/64 The Pensions Increase (Review) Order (Northern Ireland) 2017

The Committee noted the Statutory Rule.

13. SR 2018/63 The Pensions Increase (Review) Order (Northern Ireland) 2018

The Committee noted the Statutory Rule.

14. SR2019/70 The Pensions Increase (Review) Order (Northern Ireland) 2019

The Committee noted the Statutory Rule.

15. Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme (Amendment) Scheme (NI) 2019

The Committee noted the Statutory Rule.

Jim Allister returned to the meeting at 3.57pm

16. Research Request regarding matters of conscience for Registrars in relation to same sex marriage

The Committee considered this issue.

The Committee put to a vote the following proposal by Jim Allister:

"That the Committee for Finance commission research in respect of issues relating to Registrars having to conduct same sex marriages with regard to employment rights, human rights and religious beliefs and the impact thereon; what arrangements exist for protection of those and how are these matters addressed in other jurisdictions."

AYES

Jim Allister MLA
Paul Frew MLA
Steve Aiken MLA

NOES

Pat Catney MLA
Matthew O'Toole MLA
Séan Lynch MLA
Maolíosa McHugh MLA
Jemma Dolan MLA

17. Correspondence

The Committee considered:

Correspondence from two business people and an accompanying report relating to Non-Domestic Rates

Agreed: To return to the report when it considers non-domestic rates in detail.

Matthew O'Toole left the meeting at 4.13pm

The Committee noted correspondence and an accompanying briefing note from Queen's University Head of Public Engagement on the topic of UK Withdrawal, Statutory Instruments and devolved competence.

The Chairperson declared an interest as an acquaintance of the authors of the correspondence.

A request for the Clerk to participate in an interview on gender budgeting and budgetary processes.

Agreed: The Committee agreed for the Clerk to participate in the interview.

The Committee noted the followed:

Congratulatory letters to the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson from the Belfast Chamber Chief Executive along with its publication 'Belfast Manifesto' and a copy can be viewed in the Committee Office, Room 373.

Agreed: To invite the Chief Executive of Belfast Chamber to provide a written briefing on the 7 priorities identified for a better Belfast.

18. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's Business

19. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the updated Forward Work Programme for 22 January – 1 April 2020 to bring forward subordinate legislation scheduled for 12 February to 5 February 2020.

Agreed: To bring forward subordinate legislation scheduled for 12 February to the 5 February Committee meeting.

Agreed: To include SL1: The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020 on the agenda for the 5 February Committee meeting.

Agreed: To receive oral evidence from the Supply Officers in the Department.

20. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

21. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting will be on **Wednesday 5 February 2020** at **2pm** in **Room 29**.

The meeting was adjourned at 4.16pm

Dr Steve Aiken, OBE MLA
Chairperson
Committee for Finance
05 February 2020