



COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

WEDNESDAY 25 MARCH 2020

Room 29, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Dr Steve Aiken OBE MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Paul Frew MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister MLA
Ms Jemma Dolan MLA
Mr Seán Lynch MLA

Apologies: Mr Pat Catney MLA, Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA, Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA, Mr Jim Wells MLA

In Attendance: Mr Jim McManus (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Neil Sedgewick (Clerical Supervisor)

The meeting commenced at 14.02pm in public session.

1. Apologies

As above.

A member declared the following interest:

Mr Jim Allister MLA declared an interest at Agenda Item 7 - Private Members Legislation: The Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill sponsor

2. Draft Minutes

The Committee considered the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 18 March 2020

Agreed: The Committee Agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 18 March 2020.

3. Matters Arising

The Committee considered the Department's request to defer the Committee's request for minutes and involvement of, and interaction with the NIO for the RHI tariffs as set out in the Regional Rates and Energy (No.2) Act until a later date.

Agreed: To defer the response but to request this information from the Department as soon as possible for circulation to Members.

4. Written Evidence: Department of Finance (DoF) Public Spending Directorate - Budget 2020-21 process

The Committee considered the written evidence provided by the DoF Public Spending Directorate.

Agreed: To forward the paper on Written Evidence to the House of Commons NI Affairs Committee from Esmond Birnie to RaISe for an analysis/response to the issues highlighted for consideration on or before 29 April and to forward the paper to other statutory committees to inform their budget scrutiny.

Agreed: To ask RaISe to review and clarify the terminology at page 25 of the template regarding 'non-block allocations' and, if possible, confirm that departmental Finance Divisions will understand the terminology.

Agreed: To check and clarify the resource figure for the Budget at page 33 of the Clerk's brief and email Committee members.

Agreed: To forward standardised scrutiny approach templates on the forthcoming Executive Budget 2020-2021 to the Department's Finance Division requesting a return date of 15th April for Committee Consideration on 22 April.

Agreed: To forward the completed templates to RaISe in order to inform the collated response from this Committee.

Agreed: To receive clarification on a number of issues raised in relation to the written briefing by the Public Spending Directorate including the allocation of the remainder of the £760m, the £4m of NI specific issues and the £85m for the Agenda for Change pay.

5. Written Evidence: Departmental Solicitor's Office - Overview and priorities

The Committee considered the written evidence on the overview and priorities from the Departmental Solicitor's Office (DSO).

Agreed: To review the correspondence previously received to check whether it contains the staff complement for DSO and, if so, to forward to members.

6. SL1 - The Pensions Increase (Review) Order 2020

The Committee considered the SL1 – The Pensions Increase (Review) Order 2020. This legislation fulfils the Department of Finance's obligation to provide, by Order, for an increase in the rates of Northern Ireland public service pensions in payment and deferred pensions of 1.7% with effect from 6 April 2020.

Agreed: That the Committee has considered Department of Finance's proposal for subordinate legislation The Pensions Increase (Review) Order 2020, and has no objection to the policy implications of the proposed legislation at this stage.

7. Private Members Legislation: The Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill

The Committee considered a number of issues relating to the Private Members Legislation: The Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill including the timeline and invitations for oral and written evidence.

The Committee considered a proposal from Dr. Steve Aiken MLA in relation to an extension to the timeline of committee scrutiny of the Bill.

Proposed: To table a motion in plenary to extend the Committee Stage of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill until Wednesday 2nd December 2020.

The Committee divided on Dr Aiken's proposal: Ayes 4; Noes; 1; Abstain 0.

AYES

Steve Aiken MLA
Paul Frew MLA
Jemma Dolan MLA
Séan Lynch MLA

NOES

Jim Allister MLA

- Agreed:* To table a motion in plenary to extend the Committee Stage of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill until Wednesday 2nd December 2020
- Agreed:* To prepare a draft motion to extend the Committee Stage of the Bill for meeting on 22 April 2020
- Agreed:* To invite the Minister of Finance, the Permanent Secretary and the Head of the Civil Service to give oral evidence
- Agreed:* To issue to identified consultees the draft letter calling for written evidence; to update to the Committee's webpage to reflect the agreed content for the legislation and to issue the newspaper advertisement calling for written evidence on the Bill

8. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's Business.

9. Correspondence

- i. The Committee considered correspondence from the National Crime Agency (NCA) seeking the Committee's view to the scheduled informal meeting on 12 May 2020 in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Agreed: To issue a holding reply to the NCA stating that the Committee will consider this matter again nearer the time

- ii. The Committee noted the absenteeism figures for NICS staff since the beginning of VES until present and includes a breakdown of staff absenteeism due to work related stress during this period.
- iii. The Committee considered issues raised by Bus & Coach NI and the response from the Minister of Finance in regards to the Coach and Tourism Industry - COVID-19 and support measures.

Agreed: To issue the response from the Minister of Finance to the Committee for the Economy and to Bus & Coach NI

- iv. The Committee noted the requests for information the Department of Finance arising from meetings of the Committee for Finance.
- v. The Committee noted Routine Papers - RHI Press Clippings issued 20 March 2020

10. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the Forward Work Programme for January-April 2020.

Agreed: To received written evidence from the Department on the Department of Finance Budget rather than oral evidence, on the understanding that any questions from members will be responded to by the Department within 24 hours of receipt.

Agreed: To write to the clerks of other statutory committees to suggest they take a similar approach in relation to departmental budgets.

Agreed: To schedule written evidence from the Public Spending Directorate on 29 April when the final budget position is clearer and to provisionally schedule oral evidence should the current position improve before then.

Agreed: To include the Ulster University's Economic Policy Centre Report – Public and Private Sector Pay as a substantive agenda item for a future meeting.

Agreed: To defer the planned informal briefing on 1 April 2020 by the Northern Ireland Assembly Communications Office.

Agreed: Not to hold a Committee meeting on 1 April 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Forward Work Programme.

11. Any Other Business

The Committee considered correspondence received regarding mortgage holidays for banking customers and the Clerk's briefing paper on the support available to business and personal banking customers.

Agreed: To circulate the Clerk's briefing paper on the support available to business and personal banking customers to all Members.

The Committee considered the processes and procedures that may be in place for health and safety of NICS staff during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Agreed: To seek clarification from the Permanent Secretary on the procedures and processes including provisions for vulnerable staff and the impact on staff pay.

12. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting will be on Wednesday 22nd April at 2pm in the Senate Chamber.

The meeting was adjourned at 15.02pm

Dr Steve Aiken, OBE MLA
Chairperson
Committee for Finance
22 April 2020