

## **COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE**

### **MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS**

WEDNESDAY, 10 MARCH 2021

Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr Paul Frew MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Jim Allister MLA  
Mr Pat Catney MLA  
Mr Jim Wells MLA

Present by Video-conference:  
Ms Jemma Dolan MLA  
Mr Philip McGuigan MLA  
Mr Maolíosá McHugh MLA  
Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA

Apologies: Dr Steve Aiken OBE MLA (Chairperson)

In Attendance: Mr Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)  
Mr Phil Pateman (Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk)  
Ms Kate McCullough (Assistant Assembly Clerk)  
Mr Neil Sedgewick (Clerical Supervisor)  
Ms Heather Graham (Clerical Officer)

*The meeting commenced in open session at 2:01pm with the Deputy Chairperson assuming the role of acting Chairperson.*

#### **1. Apologies**

Apologies were as indicated above. The acting Chairperson recorded the Committee's best wishes to the Chairperson for his speedy recovery.

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**

There were no declarations of interest.

*Mr McGuigan joined the meeting at 2:03pm.*

### **3. Chairperson's Business**

#### **3.1 Ministerial Statement**

The acting Chairperson advised Members of correspondence from the Minister of Finance relating to his statement to the Assembly in respect of the British Irish Council meeting on digital inclusion.

### **4. Draft Minutes**

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 3 March 2021.

### **5. Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

### **6. Oral Briefing: Social Enterprise NI – Public Procurement Common Framework**

The witnesses joined the meeting at 2:04pm.

Colin Jess, Director, Social Enterprise NI

John McMullan, Chairperson, Social Enterprise NI

The Committee noted the submission from Social Enterprise NI and correspondence from the Department of Finance providing an update on the Public Procurement Common Framework.

*Mr O'Toole joined the meeting at 2:07pm.*

*Mr Catney declared an interest stating that a close family member is employed by the social enterprise Helping Hands, in Lisburn.*

The acting Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed that the Clerk should prepare a draft response to the Department of Finance on the Public Procurement Common Framework for consideration at its meeting of 24 March 2021.

*Mr O'Toole left the meeting at 2:40pm.*

## **7. Oral Evidence – Department of Finance –2021-22 Draft Budget Public Consultation**

The Departmental officials joined the meeting at 2:43pm.

Joanne McBurney, Acting Budget Director

Jeff McGuinness, Head of Central Expenditure Division

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Finance on the Chancellor's 2021-22 Budget statement and correspondence from the Scottish Parliament's Finance and Constitution Committee relating to budget scrutiny.

*Mr Allister joined the meeting at 2:45pm.*

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The acting Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) to seek clarity on the "New deal for Northern Ireland" and to establish how the £400m of associated support will be bid for by the Executive and allocated so as to ensure that it coordinates and complements the Northern Ireland Executive's policies and whether similar arrangements are in place for Scotland and Wales.

Mr Allister and Mr Wells recorded their opposition to the issuing of this correspondence.

*Mr O'Toole joined the meeting at 3:40pm.*

The Committee considered a draft interim response to the Minister of Finance in respect of the 2021-22 Draft Budget.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to revise the draft response in order to: include a reference to the absence of provision to establish a JobStart scheme; seek clarity on the impact of labour market interventions during the pandemic; and to stress the importance of aligning the budget to the Programme for Government.

The Committee considered a motion to further revise the draft interim response to the Minister of Finance to express the Committee's disappointment that the draft Budget lacked explicit provision for funding to support the marking of the centenary of the foundation of Northern Ireland.

The Committee divided.

**Ayes:** Jim Allister, Pat Catney, Paul Frew and Jim Wells.

**Noes:** Jemma Dolan, Philip McGuigan and Maolíosa McHugh.

**Abstained:** Matthew O'Toole.

The motion was carried.

## **8. Oral Evidence – Department of Finance – Feedback from Public Sector Pension Consultation**

The Departmental officials joined the meeting at 3:44pm.

Grace Nesbitt, Director of Pensions Division;

Blathnaid Smyth, Assistant Director of Public Service Pensions; and

Stephen Ball, Public Service Pensions Policy and Legislation Branch

The Committee noted: the Department of Finance's briefing paper; published responses to the consultation; and a leaflet on the changes to public sector pensions.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Committee noted that it had sought related evidence from the Northern Ireland Public Sector Alliance (NIPSA), the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU), British Medical Association (BMA), Northern Ireland Teachers' Council (NITC), the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) and the Police Federation for Northern Ireland.

*Mr Wells declared an interest stating that he is the Chairperson of the Trustees of the Northern Ireland Assembly Members' Pension Scheme.*

*Mr Catney declared an interest stating that he is a trustee of the Northern Ireland Assembly Members' Pension Scheme.*

*The acting Chairperson declared an interest on behalf of the remaining members of the Committee stating that they are members of the Northern Ireland Assembly Members' Pension Scheme.*

## **9. Written briefing: Draft Statutory Rule (SR) The Energy Performance of Buildings (Certificates and Inspections) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021**

Members considered the statutory rule which has been laid in draft by the Department: The Energy Performance of Buildings (Certificates and Inspections) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021.

Mr Wells commented that he was supportive of the principle of improved energy efficiency of buildings but noted the associated costs to acquire a certificate.

*Agreed:* That the Committee for Finance considered the SR - The Energy Performance of Buildings (Certificates and Inspections) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 and recommends that it be affirmed by the Assembly.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to revise the agenda and consider an additional item relating to an SL1 to extend covid business rent forfeiture measures.

## **10. Written briefing - SL1: The Business Tenancies (Coronavirus) (Restriction on Forfeiture: Relevant Period) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2021**

The Committee noted a proposed statutory rule which extends the provision whereby a right of re-entry or forfeiture, under a relevant business tenancy, for non-payment of rent may not be enforced, by action or otherwise, until 30 June 2021.

*Agreed:* The Committee considered the Department of Finance's proposal for subordinate legislation: The Business Tenancies (Coronavirus) (Restriction on Forfeiture: Relevant Period) (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2021 and agreed that it had no objection to the policy content and that it was content for the Department to make the rule.

## **11. Correspondence**

11.1 The Committee noted the correspondence index.

11.2 The Committee noted correspondence setting out the Department of Finance's legislative programme for the remainder of the mandate.

11.3 The Committee noted a response from the Department in respect of Committee queries regarding incorrect single farm payments and historic liabilities.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write again to the Department of Finance seeking an estimate of the number of cases and the resulting possible liability where DAERA had disregarded the recommendations of the independent tribunal leading to the disallowance of single farm payments.

11.4 The Committee considered further correspondence from Abba Driving School in respect of its ineligibility for support under the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme (LRSS).

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Department of Finance for further comment.

11.5 The Committee noted a Departmental response regarding the 2021-22 draft Budget allocation for the Department of Finance.

11.6. The Committee noted a response from the Department of Finance to the Committee regarding the timing of the introduction of SR 2021/30 and the setting and making of district rates.

11.7 The Committee considered the response from the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy regarding engagement with the banking sector.

The Committee recorded its concern in respect of recent developments in the banking sector and the impact on the provision of banking services in local communities.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to seek an informal meeting with representatives from the banking sector where possible and to circulate to Committee Members relevant information on the All Party Group on Fair Banking and Finance, upon receipt from Mr Catney.

11.8 The Committee noted responses from the Departments of Finance to the Committee for the Economy regarding financial support for Donaghadee Golf Club.

11.9 The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds to the Finance Minister seeking budget cover in 2021-22 for its 5 Point Plan for Green Recovery including green jobs etc..

11.10 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Finance to the Justice Committee regarding the Damages (Return on Investment) Bill.

11.11 The Committee noted a copy of correspondence sent to the Minister of Finance from the Committee for Communities regarding special recognition payments for those working within the community and voluntary sector.

Mr Wells noted that numerous groups could be considered to be entitled to receive special recognition payments.

11.12 The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Committee for Infrastructure sent to the Department of Finance highlighting issues raised during a briefing with the Construction Employers' Federation on one year budgets and procurement concerns.

11.13 The Committee noted a copy of the latest Investing Activity Report for the Department of Finance for February 2021.

11.14 The Committee noted the Land and Property Service's (LPS) Trust Statement for 2019-20.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to seek an oral briefing from LPS on the statement and wider issues relating to business rate collection and reform.

11.15 The Committee considered the composite information request.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed that the composite information request was an accurate and complete record of information sought by the Committee.

## **12. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

## **13. Any Other Business**

There was no other business.

#### **14. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting**

The next meeting of the Committee will be held on Wednesday, 24 March 2021 at 2:00pm in the Senate Chamber and on Starleaf.

*The meeting was adjourned at 4:41pm.*

**Mr Paul Frew MLA  
Deputy Chairperson, Committee for Finance  
24 March, 2021**