

COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

WEDNESDAY, 28 APRIL 2021

Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Dr Steve Aiken OBE MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Paul Frew MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister MLA
Mr Jim Wells MLA

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

Apologies: None

In Attendance: Mr Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
Ms Angela McParland (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Mr Neil Sedgewick (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Heather Graham (Clerical Officer)

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

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

Ms Jemma Dolan indicated that she anticipated being absent later in the meeting for a period of time and, if so, would delegate authority for her vote, on any issue for that part of the proceedings, to Mr Maolíosa McHugh, under Temporary Standing Order 115(6).

2. Declaration of Interests

The Chairperson declared an interest in respect of correspondence to the Committee from the Ulster Unionist Party, in respect of agenda item 6, oral evidence by the Department on Final Budget 2021 – 2022.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Victims' Pension Scheme

The Chairperson welcomed recent press reports that applications for the Victims' Pension Scheme are to open from 30 June 2021. The Chairperson noted that the Government Actuary Department (GAD) report suggested the processing of applications could take several years but if this is shortened then the short-term cost of the Scheme can increase by around £30m pa.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to discuss the likely financial profile for the Scheme with officials during today's oral evidence.

3.2 Revised Agenda

The Chairperson advised Members of a tabled revised agenda for today's meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to the revised agenda.

3.3 Fiscal Council

The Chairperson suggested the Committee schedule a short closed session for next week's meeting, to allow for consideration of its approach to evidence-taking and further engagement in regards to the Fiscal Council for Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to hold a closed session at next week's meeting, to enable discussion around its plans for further evidence taking and engagement, in regards to the Fiscal Council for Northern Ireland.

Mr Paul Frew joined the meeting at 2.03pm.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes, subject to an agreed amendment, of the meeting held on Wednesday 21 April 2021.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Oral Evidence: Department of Finance – Final Budget 2021 - 2022

The officials joined the meeting at 2:05pm.

Joanne McBurney, Budget Director, Department of Finance; and

Jeff McGuinness, Head of Central Expenditure Division, Department of Finance.

The Committee noted: a final budget brief; Departmental correspondence on ‘top slicing’; a Departmental response on the Victims’ Pension Scheme; Monthly Outturn and Forecast Outturn data for February to March; correspondence from the Committee for the Economy on the Community Renewal Fund; and correspondence from the Ulster Unionist Party on ring-fencing the Health budget.

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: confirmation of the baseline resources figures; information on the capital allocations to Northern Ireland Water in 2020-21 and 2021-22; information on capital and resource allocations to Translink; breakdown of the labour market intervention support; info on delegated expenditure limits for departments; and an estimate of shortfall owing to the loss of European Union funding.

The Committee agreed to write again to the Northern Ireland Office (NIO) seeking: further clarity on the New Deal for Northern Ireland funding; the rationale for decision-making; whether money to devolved departments will be paid to the Department of Finance via the Northern Ireland block; whether it will be hypothecated; and how the NIO will determine that it has been spent as required in order to ensure accountability of expenditure.

7. Oral Evidence: Department of Finance - Impact of Budget 2021-22 on Departmental Spending

The officials joined the meeting at 2:50pm.

Stewart Barnes, Finance and Corporate Services Director, Finance and Corporate Services, Department of Finance; and

Janis Marynowski, Head of Financial Management Branch, Department of Finance.

The Committee noted a written brief from the Department.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

8. Oral Evidence: Dr Muiris MacCarthaigh, Queen’s University Belfast (QUB) - Public Sector Reform

The witness joined the meeting at 3:08pm.

Dr Muiris MacCarthaigh, QUB.

The Committee noted a written submission from Dr MacCarthaigh.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witness for his evidence.

9. Oral Briefing: Reform of Property Management Programme

The officials joined the meeting at 3:52pm.

Mr Pat Catney left the meeting at 3.55pm and delegated his vote to Mr Matthew O’Toole under Temporary Standing Order 115(6).

Derek Kennedy, Senior Responsible Owner of the Reform Management Programme, Department of Finance; and

Patrick McMeekin, Strategic Adviser, Strategic Investment Board.

The Committee noted a Departmental briefing paper and a State of the Estate Report 2012.

The Chairperson left the meeting at 4.10pm and the Deputy Chair assumed Chairmanship of the meeting.

Mr Allister left the meeting at 4.28pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking: an update on the disposal of the £54m of freehold and leasehold assets; sight of the refreshed Investment Strategy; an update on the findings of the Department’s surveys on remote working; and an update on the Department’s development of cost models for services to departments and Arm’s Length Bodies, including the greater use of hard-charging.

10. SL1: The Whole of Government Accounts (Designation of Bodies) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021

The Committee noted papers relating to The Whole of Government Accounts (Designation of Bodies) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it had no objection to the proposed legislation and was content for the Department to make the Rule.

11. Oral Briefing: SR 2021/110: The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (NI) 2021

The official joined the meeting at 4:34pm.

Alan Bronte, Director of Rating Policy Division, Land and Property Services,
Department of Finance

The Committee noted papers relating to SR 2021/110: The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (NI) 2021.

Agreed: That the Committee for Finance has considered the statutory rule: SR 2021/110: The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 and, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, recommends that it be affirmed by the Assembly.

12. Correspondence

12.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

12.2 The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from Include Youth to the Minister for Finance highlighting the funding gap between the end of PEACE IV and the start of PEACE PLUS.

12.3 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for the Economy that provided a copy of a letter sent to the Minister for the Economy, and copied to the Minister for Finance, the Minister for Education and the Minister for Health, that addressed funding challenges for Include Youth's Essential Skills programme due to Lottery funding ending.

12.4 The Committee noted a response from the Committee for the Economy declining to involve this Committee in its engagement with UK Finance but suggesting a concurrent meeting, with it and the Committee for the Executive Office, to review the High Street Task Force, post-covid recovery, and the role of the banks, to be held on 16 June 2021. The Committee to await an invitation from the Committee for the Executive Office.

12.5 The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for Health regarding concerns raised by Lemonade Wigs Ltd on Land & Property Services (LPS) requesting monies from future covid support payment. The Committee was provided with copies of correspondence from Lemonade Wigs Ltd and correspondence sent to the Department of Finance and LPS.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to raise the issues with LPS at the briefing on 12 May 2021.

12.6 The Committee noted a copy of a Memorandum of Reply from the Department of Education in respect of the Public Accounts Committee report on Special Educational Needs, expected to be taken forward by either the Public Accounts Committee or the Committee for Education.

12.7 The Committee noted correspondence from the Audit Committee on the RaISe paper ‘Public Audit Governance: The Role of the Accounting Officer’, forwarded by that Committee to the Minister along with a series of questions. The Committee awaits publication of the related Audit Committee report, expected in the autumn.

12.8 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.

12.9 Following discussion by Members, the Committee considered the following motion:

“The Committee to write to each department to ask for detail of any funds set aside to commemorate the centenary of the founding of Northern Ireland and the area of business from which the funds had been re-directed.”

The Committee divided:

Ayes	Noes	Abstained
Mr Paul Frew	Mr Pat Catney [by delegation of vote to Mr Matthew O’Toole]	None
Mr Jim Wells	Ms Jemma Dolan	
	Mr Philip McGuigan	
	Mr Maoliosa McHugh	
	Mr Matthew O’Toole	

The motion was negatived.

Mr Matthew O’Toole wished it to be noted that: he had no objection to raising the relevant query with the Department of Finance but felt that the Committee contacting each of the departments would be excessive.

13. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

Members discussed limiting the number of oral briefings and oral evidence sessions to be held at each meeting, in order to ensure continued effective scrutiny by Members.

Mr Jim Wells left the meeting at 4.54pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the briefings from NIPSA and HR Connect be rescheduled to the autumn when both organisations would be free to comment on the PAC/NIAO report on Capability and Capacity in the NI Civil Service.

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

14. Any Other Business

The Interim Chairperson advised Members of an additional, single channel, and fully virtual, meeting facility which is shortly to be brought on stream at the Assembly and of an additional meeting room within Parliament Buildings currently being equipped for use by the autumn.

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

The meeting was adjourned at 4.55pm.

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