



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

24 November 2021

Meeting Location: The Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings

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

Present by Video or Teleconference:
Mr Jim Allister MLA
Ms Jemma Dolan MLA
Mr Philip McGuigan MLA

Apologies: None

In Attendance: Mr Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
Ms Carla Campbell (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Mr Stephen Magee (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Heather Graham (Clerical Officer)



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Proceedings commenced at 2:00pm in public session.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Non-Domestic Rates Valuations (Coronavirus) Bill

The Chairperson advised the Committee that the Committee Stage for the Non-Domestic Rates Valuations (Coronavirus) Bill had commenced and would conclude no later than 25 January 2022.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the NI Fiscal Council to comment on the Bill and the implications for the tax base for Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek written and oral evidence from a number of stakeholders including: the Institute of Revenues, Rating and Valuation; NI Chamber of Commerce; Retail NI; Federation of Small Businesses NI; Hospitality Ulster; NI Hotels Federation; NILGA; and SOLACE and to hear oral evidence at an additional meeting on 6 December 2021. The Committee further agreed to seek oral and written responses from the Department at another additional meeting on 14 December 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Examiner of Statutory Rules and seek her views on the delegated powers in the Bill.

3.2 City Deals



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The Chairperson advised the Committee of a reference in a recent NI Fiscal Council report to £20m of unspent money relating to City Deals which may have been returned to Treasury.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance to seek: clarity on unspent funding; a breakdown of the actual and planned spending for the City Deals Programme; and confirmation on the governance of the programme including that the Department of Finance is the lead and the Permanent Secretary is the Senior Responsible Owner.

3.3 NI Fiscal Council

The Chairperson advised the Committee that, as agreed, he had met informally with the NI Fiscal Council on 23 November 2021.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 17 November 2021.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Oral Evidence – RHI Action Plan and NICS Reform

The Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (HOCS) and Department of Finance officials joined the meeting at 2:10pm.

- Jayne Brady, HOCS;
- Colum Boyle, Interim Permanent Secretary, Department of Finance;



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- Bill Pauley, Director, Strategic Policy and Reform Directorate, Department of Finance; and
- Jill Minne, Head of NICSHR and Strategic HR Director, Department of Finance.

The Committee noted a Ministerial briefing note on NI Civil Service reform and tabled Ministerial correspondence on the employment status of the previous and the current HOCS.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department and to HOCS seeking:

- an indication of which departments are not compliant with the whistle-blowing legislation, as indicated in the recent GIAFIS report;
- information on NI Civil Service's intended changes to inward secondment arrangements and confirmation that relevant incoming secondees would be subject to NI Civil Service rules;
- information on changes to NI Civil Service staffing levels compared with other UK jurisdictions, including numbers of agency staff and changes in numbers by grade since the previous Voluntary Exit Scheme; and
- information on staff turnover and the levels of out-sourcing of HR functions as compared to other UK jurisdictions.

Maolíosa McHugh left the meeting at 4:03pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department and HOCS to seek clarification on alternative project/programme governance models which may be adopted in preference to Prince 2 and applied to the management of the programme of NI Civil Service reform.

Maolíosa McHugh rejoined the meeting at 4:06pm

Jim Allister left the meeting at 4:08pm.



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7. Defamation Bill – Committee Stage – Oral Evidence

The witness joined the meeting at 4:09pm.

- Dr Mark Hanna, School of Law, Queen’s University Belfast.

The witness briefed Members on his response to the call for evidence on the Defamation Bill.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

The session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the witness for his evidence.

Maoliosa McHugh left the meeting at 4:44pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance and the Bill Sponsor seeking their views on the questions raised by respondents to the call for evidence.

Agreed: The Committee noted a Departmental response on the Bill and agreed to write to the shadow Civil Justice Council to seek its views on matters relating to the discretionary power of judges including in respect of the use of Alternative Dispute Resolution.

8. Written Briefing – SR 2021/299 General Register Office (Fees) Amendment Order

The Committee considered SR 2021/299 The General Register Office (Fees) Amendment Order (Northern Ireland) 2021.

Jim Wells expressed his strong objection to the rule.

Agreed: The Committee considered SR 2021/299 The General Register Office (Fees) Amendment Order (Northern Ireland) 2021 and agreed, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, that it had no objection to the Rule.



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9. Written Briefing – The Public Service Pensions (Valuations and Employer Cost Cap) (Amendment) Directions (NI) 2021.

The Committee noted The Public Service Pensions (Valuations and Employer Cost Cap) (Amendment) Directions (NI) 2021.

10. Correspondence

10.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

10.2 The Committee noted a response from the Minister of Finance advising where qualification of accounts has occurred for other departments.

Pat Catney left the meeting at 4:08pm.

10.3 The Committee considered a written Departmental briefing paper on the Department of Finance Annual Report and Accounts 2020-21.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance seeking a timeline for the Localised Restrictions Support Scheme legislation which is required to correct for ultra vires payments.

10.4 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Finance providing a table showing the level of over-payment, recovery, fraud and write-off for Covid support schemes.

10.5 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Finance providing an update on the outcome of a court case relating to a significant Land and Property Services fraud.

10.6 The Committee considered a response from the Department of Finance declining to provide information on disciplinary matters relating to Special Advisers.

Pat Catney rejoined the meeting at 4:50pm.



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Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to the Department: advising that it was for the Committee to determine its legitimate interests; repeating its request for information on disciplinary matters relating to Special Advisers; indicating that it will accept anonymised information on this occasion; and suggesting that agreement is sought from the Special Advisers to share this information in future.

10.7 The Committee considered a response from the Executive Office declining to provide information on the breakdown of the allocation of funding under the NDNA Unique Circumstances initiatives and the timing of the related allocations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to the Executive Office and to write to the Department of Finance seeking clarity on the status of the Unique Circumstances funding and asking both to provide the information requested.

10.8 The Committee noted a number of items of correspondence from the NI Fiscal Council setting out its views on the Spending Review and in respect of the publication of the Comprehensive Guide to NI Public Finances.

10.9 The Committee noted correspondence from the NI Assembly EU Affairs Manager informing Members of the first meeting of the Trade Specialised Committee on Level Playing Field for Open and Fair Competition and Sustainable Development.

10.10 The Committee noted a Memorandum of Reply including undertakings from the Department of Finance to the Public Accounts Committee on its Report on Generating Electricity from Renewable Energy.

10.11 The Committee noted correspondence from the Youth Assembly for Northern Ireland.

10.12 The Committee noted correspondence from HOCS regarding her appearance before the Committee.

10.13 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs providing information on a



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webinar being hosted by the Minister for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs on the draft Green Growth Strategy on 29 November 2021.

10.14 The Committee considered the composite information request.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the composite request was an accurate and complete record of the Committee's outstanding information requests.

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered a draft of its Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule a briefing from the NI Fiscal Commission on 19 January 2022 on its interim report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule oral evidence sessions from the Procurement Board and the Department of Finance on the Budget Bill in 2022.

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

12. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

13. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting of the Committee for Finance will be at 2pm on Wednesday 1 December 2021 in the Senate and on Starleaf.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:00pm.



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Dr Steve Aiken MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Finance
1 December 2021