



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

2 February 2022

Meeting Location: The Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings

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

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Mr Keith Buchanan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Apologies: None

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

In Attendance by Video or Teleconference:

Ms Heather Graham (Clerical Officer)
Ms Rachel Keyes (Research Officer) – item 6 only

The meeting commenced at 2:01pm in closed session

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it would not suspend proceedings in the event of a plenary vote as all Members had issued their proxy.

Proceedings continued at 2:02pm in open session

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

Jemma Dolan delegated her vote to Maolíosa McHugh, under Temporary Standing Order 115(6), in the event of her early departure.

2. Declaration of Interests

Steve Aiken declared an interest indicating that Correspondence item 13.10 referred to a constituency issue.

There were no other declarations of interest at this time.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 North West 200 and Ulster Grand Prix

The Chairperson highlighted a funding uncertainty associated with the organisation of the North West 200 and the Ulster Grand Prix.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister for the Economy and the Minister of Finance to ask for clarity on the funding position for these two events.

3.2 Estimates Memoranda

The Chairperson indicated his thanks to the Department of Finance for the production of an Estimates Memorandum for the 2022 Spring Supplementary Estimates in order to help assist Members in their understanding.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to other Assembly statutory committees seeking their commentary on their Estimates Memoranda, if received and seeking their views on their department's spending for 2021-22.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 26 January 2022.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Public Finance Scrutiny Unit – Covid Spending

An Assembly research officer joined the meeting at 2:06pm.

- Rachel Keyes, Research Officer, Assembly Research and Information Service (RaISe).

The Committee noted the tabled RaISe report on covid spending.

The research officer briefed the Committee on their report.

Jim Wells joined the meeting at 2:26pm.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked the research officer for their briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share the report with other statutory committees.

Proceedings were suspended at 2:30pm owing to technical issues

Proceedings resumed at 2:40pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek further information from RaISe on how Northern Ireland compares with other devolved administrations in respect of covid allocation and expenditure, and also seek information on the time required to produce the RaISe report.

7. Oral briefing – Procurement Board Update

Departmental officials joined the meeting at 2:41pm.

- Sharon Smyth, Director of Policy, Construction and Procurement Delivery, Department of Finance.
- Michael Watson, Deputy Director of Policy, Construction and Procurement Delivery, Department of Finance.

The Committee noted a Procurement Board update paper and correspondence forward by the Committee for the Economy in relation to covid variations to contracts.

The officials briefed the Committee.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Matthew O'Toole commented on confirmation that the Northern Ireland Protocol does not affect public procurement in Northern Ireland and noted a possibility of disadvantage for Northern Ireland firms in the Republic of Ireland and Great Britain owing to the removal of European Union rules on below threshold tenders.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it had no further commentary on the Public Procurement Common Framework.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance seeking case studies of good public procurement practice.

8. Oral briefing - Legislative Consent Motion - Architects Act 1997

Departmental officials joined the meeting at 3:37pm.

- Michael Watson, Deputy Director of Policy, Construction and Procurement Delivery, Department of Finance.
- Michael McLornan, Principal Officer, Construction and Procurement Delivery, Department of Finance.

The Committee noted related previous correspondence.

The officials briefed the Committee.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to await a response from the Royal Society of Ulster Architects in respect of the Legislative Consent Motion and the prospective role of the Architects Registration Board.

9. Oral Briefing – The Building (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2022

Departmental officials joined the meeting at 4:05pm.

- Billy Black, Acting Head of Building Standards Branch, Department of Finance.
- Damian Fairley, Acting Head of Building Regulations Unit 1, Department of Finance.

The Committee noted the SL1 on the Building (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2022.

The officials briefed the Committee.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their briefing.

Agreed: The Committee noted that the statutory rule was an interim measure which was expected to be updated following relevant developments in England and Wales. On this basis, the Committee agreed that it was content with the policy intention and for the Department to make the rule.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance seeking: clarity in relation to fire safety regulations for internal walls; an update in respect of further changes to fire safety regulations following developments in England and Wales; and confirmation that 7000 new houses per annum in Northern Ireland will require radon protection measures.

10. Written Briefing – SR2022-17 Making and Levying of Different Rates

The Committee noted SR2022-17 The Rates (Making and Levying of Different Rates) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2022.

Agreed: The Committee considered SR2022-17 The Rates (Making and Levying of Different Rates) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2022 and agreed that, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, it had no objection to the rule.

11. Written Briefing – SR2022-13 Rates Setting Dates

The Committee noted SR2022-13 The Rates (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2022.

Agreed: The Committee considered SR2022-13 The Rates (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2022 and agreed that, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, it had no objection to the rule.

12. Written Briefing – SL1 Death Certification and Registration.

The Committee considered the Department of Finance proposal to make a Statutory Rule: Extension of Coronavirus Act Provisions – Death Certification and Registration. The Committee noted that concerns had been expressed by the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Health in respect of the continued waiving of the requirement for a

medical practitioner to notify the coroner where a death is by natural causes and the doctor had not seen the deceased within the previous 28 days.

Jim Wells left the meeting at 4:32pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Health and the Minister of Justice copying the Department of Finance in order to explore their concerns.

13. Correspondence

13.1 Correspondence Index

The Committee noted the index of the 9 received items and 1 tabled item of correspondence.

13.2 RHI Disciplinary Process

The Committee considered a Ministerial response to Committee queries regarding the RHI disciplinary process. The Committee noted that it is awaiting a related response from HOCS in respect of the review of NICS part of the adapted RHI disciplinary process.

Matthew O'Toole left the meeting at 4:38pm.

Members recorded their dissatisfaction in relation to the RHI Disciplinary process and gave consideration to the compilation and publication of relevant information and to bringing a related Committee motion.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence and await further related responses from HOCS.

Jim Wells rejoined the meeting at 4:40pm.

13.3 Queen's Jubilee tree planting

The Committee considered a Ministerial response to the Committee's queries in relation to the planting of a tree in the Stormont Estate for the Queen's Platinum Jubilee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance seeking sight of the original request and the Department's reply and also seeking information on the Terms of Reference of the review of the Stormont Estate policy.

13.4 SIB Secondments

The Committee considered a Ministerial response in respect of 59 Strategic Investment Board secondments to the NICS and wider public sector.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance seeking the grades, salary bands and overall costs of Strategic Investment Board secondees.

13.5 NI Investment Fund

The Committee noted Departmental correspondence providing further information setting out the Financial Transaction Capital used or to be used by the NI Investment Fund.

13.6 Crown Estate

The Committee noted a Departmental response advising the Committee that the Crown Estate raises around £1.7m pa but that its management is a reserved matter.

13.7 RHI Closure

The Committee considered a Departmental response on the closure of the RHI scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for the Economy seeking clarity on the RHI scheme closure policy.

13.8 Draft Budget 22-25

The Committee noted a response from the Committee for the Economy providing papers setting out the Department for the Economy 2022-25 budget pressures.

13.9 Non-ACM Cladding Claims

The Committee noted a response from the Department for Communities to Committee queries regarding 11 non-ACM cladding cases.

13.10 Omicron Hospitality Payments

The Committee considered correspondence from a concerned owner of a soft play business indicating that he is not eligible for the current covid hospitality payments.

Steve Aiken and Maolíosa McHugh made Declarations of Interest as they had been lobbied on this subject.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance seeking clarity as to whether soft play business will receive support.

13.11 2nd LCM Public Sector Pensions

The Committee noted tabled correspondence from the Department replying to Committee queries regarding the 2nd LCM on public sector pensions.

13.12 Composite Information Request

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

14. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered a draft of its Forward Work Programme.

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

15. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

16. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting of the Committee for Finance will be at 2pm on Wednesday 9 February 2022 in the Senate and on Starleaf.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:51pm.

Dr Steve Aiken MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Finance
9 February 2022