



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

3 November 2021

Meeting Location: The Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings

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

Present by Video or Teleconference:
Ms Jemma Dolan MLA

Apologies: Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA

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 2:02pm in closed session.

The Deputy Chairperson chaired proceedings.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to adopt a revised agenda.

1. RHI Disciplinary Process

The Committee considered correspondence from the Minister seeking an undertaking in respect of the disclosure of information relating to the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) disciplinary process.

Pat Catney joined the meeting at 2:04pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister indicating that it had not previously disclosed confidential information relating to this matter and informing the Minister that any information provided will be treated as restricted and related briefings will be considered in closed session on the understanding of full disclosure.

The Committee noted a response from the Minister for Finance in relation to briefings on the RHI Action Plan and other matters.

The Committee noted a response from the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (HOCS) in relation to briefings on the RHI Action Plan and other matters.

2. Financial Reporting (Departments and Pubic Bodies) Bill

The Committee discussed issues in relation to potential amendments to the Financial Reporting (Departments and Public Bodies) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to provide drafting instructions to the Bill Office in respect of potential amendment(s). The amendment(s) would be designed to provide for Estimates memoranda which would address concerns in respect of specifying what may prove to be extraneous detail in legislation while at the same time



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meeting the Committee's needs for transparency and understand-ability in the Estimates.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share the related Northern Ireland Fiscal Council response and any draft amendments with the Department of Finance prior to the formal clause by clause session on 10 November 2021.

Proceedings continued in open session from 2:12pm

3. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

Maoliosa McHugh delegated authority to vote on his behalf to Philip McGuigan under Temporary Standing Order 115(6).

Jemma Dolan delegated authority to vote on her behalf to Philip McGuigan under Temporary Standing Order 115(6), in the event of an early departure.

4. Declaration of Interests

Matthew O'Toole declared an interest as he is the chairperson of the All Party Group on Press Freedom and Media Sustainability.

Steve Aiken joined the meeting and chaired proceedings from 2:14pm.

5. Chairperson's Business

5.1 Informal Ministerial Meeting

The Committee noted that the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson had met informally with the Minister on Monday 1 November 2021 to discuss his statement on October Monitoring and also noted that the Department of Finance will brief the Committee in detail on the statement at next week's meeting.

5.2 Assembly Connects Business



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The Chairperson informed Members that he has received an invitation to an Assembly Connects Business dinner on Wednesday 10 November 2021 in the Great Hall, Parliament Buildings, hosted by the Speaker. He advised Members that he was regrettably unavailable to attend.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Deputy Chairperson to attend on behalf of the Committee, diary permitting.

5.3 United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP 26)

The Chairperson congratulated Philip McGuigan on his 200km+ cycle journey to attend COP 26 in Glasgow.

6. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 20 October 2021.

7. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

8. Oral Evidence – Accelerated Passage for the Non-Domestic Rates (Coronavirus) Valuation Bill – Department of Finance

Departmental officials joined the meeting at 2:18pm.

Ian Snowden, Chief Executive of Land and Property Services, Department of Finance; and

Sharon Magee, Director of Rating Policy, Land and Property Services, Department of Finance.

The Committee noted Departmental papers relating to the Bill and correspondence on overpayments relating to covid support schemes.

The oral evidence session was recorded by Hansard.



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Jim Allister joined the meeting at 2:30pm.

Matthew O'Toole left the meeting at 3:17pm and delegated authority to vote on his behalf to Pat Catney under Temporary Standing Order 115(6).

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Finance calling upon him to raise awareness of the implications of the Bill with businesses and local government and seeking: an explanation of the estimated £250m adverse impact on business rates income; confirmation on the availability of the £50m Barnett consequential and confirmation also that this sum will be ring-fenced by a future Executive; further information on how business rates revaluation will take account of business success or failure during the pandemic; and links to general information for businesses on Reval2023.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Federation of Small Businesses and the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce in order to seek their views on the impact of the Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance and the Department for the Economy in relation to Covid-19 business support scheme overpayments - seeking a table setting out the level of overpayment, recovery and write-off.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for the Economy in relation to the Small Business Support Scheme and the application of the good faith principle to the write-off of payments made in error.

9. Oral Evidence – Committee Stage of the Defamation Bill – Dr Andrew Scott

The witness joined the meeting at 3:38pm.

- Dr Andrew Scott, London School of Economics.

The Committee noted papers relating to the Bill.

The evidence session was recorded by Hansard.



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Jemma Dolan left the meeting at 3:50pm.

Jim Wells left the meeting at 3:57pm

The Chairperson thanked the witness for his evidence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Dr Scott asking him to detail his amendments in writing in respect of the use of a jurisdictional bar to prosecution where prompt corrections are issued and in respect of how legislation might dissuade strategic law suits against public participation (so-called SLAPPs).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to publish all responses to the call for evidence as they are received and to extend the call for evidence for a few weeks.

10. Correspondence

10.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

10.2 The Committee considered a response from the Department regarding financial support for travel agents experiencing difficulties as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, advising that the Department for the Economy is responsible for this policy area.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for the Economy to seek an update on the uptake of the one-off grant payments offered under the Travel Agents (Coronavirus) Financial Assistance Scheme and further information on any current covid support schemes available to travel agents in Northern Ireland.

10.3 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for the Economy to the Minister for Finance highlighting airport issues including the conversion of the NI Domestic Aviation Kickstart Scheme to a Route Development Scheme and the ongoing Union Connectivity Review.



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10.4 The Committee considered a Departmental summary of the spending review and a written Ministerial statement providing more details of the budget for the Spending Review period 2022-25.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity on a number of issues in relation to the Spending Review including:

- as to whether the resource allocations include the projected increase associated with the change to National Insurance;
- as to whether the Fresh Start capital allocation will be used to cover the costs of the Strule campus and whether any of this money has been lost to the Executive.
- further information on the capital funding packages and the profiled expenditure of Financial Transaction Capital;
- further information in respect of the New Decade New Approach Transformation allocation; and
- further information on the profile of the student loan impairment costs.

10.5 The Committee noted a Departmental response to the Committee's request for clarity as to how the Minister would intend to undertake the budget development process and other associated legislative work in the absence of a functioning Executive.

10.6 The Committee considered Departmental correspondence including the August 2021 Spending Outturn and Forecast Outturn for September.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share this correspondence with the Assembly Research and Information Service.

10.7 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs to the Minister for Finance seeking commentary on the potential financial consequences of the Climate Change Bills including the likelihood of Barnett consequentials.

Steve Aiken declared an interest as co-sponsor of the Climate Change Bill.

Philip McGuigan declared an interest as co-sponsor of the Climate Change Bill and as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.



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- 10.8 The Committee noted notice of a Departmental consultation on proposals to amend the Building (Prescribed Fees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1997.
- 10.9 The Committee noted a Departmental response to Committee queries in respect of data incompatibility issues linked to the sharing of data by the UK with the EU.
- 10.10 The Committee noted results of the latest Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce and Industry and BDO Quarterly Economic Survey (QES).
- 10.11 The Committee noted the Annual Report of the Registrar General 2020 providing information on births, adoptions, deaths and marriages in NI.
- 10.12 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 its Forward Work Programme.

12. Any Other Business

There was no other business.



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13. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting of the Committee for Finance will be at 2pm on Wednesday 10 November 2021 in the Senate and on Starleaf.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:38pm.

Dr Steve Aiken MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Finance
10 November 2021