



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

5 January 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 Jim Wells MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Mr Jim Allister 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)
Mr Stephen Magee (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Heather Graham (Clerical Officer)
Ms Barbara Love (Bill Clerk) – agenda item 1 only



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Proceedings commenced at 2:00pm in closed session.

1. Defamation Bill – Procedural Advice

The Committee noted procedural advice provided by the Bill Clerk in respect of the Committee Stage of the Defamation Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to give further consideration to the admissibility criteria for amendments to Bills.

Proceedings continued in open session from 2:11pm.

2. Apologies

There were no apologies.

3. Declaration of Interests

Matthew O'Toole declared an interest as the Chairperson of the All Party Group on press freedom and media sustainability.

There were no other declarations of interest.

4. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's business.

5. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Monday 13 December 2021.



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Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 15 December 2021.

6. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

7. Oral Evidence: Defamation Bill – Committee Stage

The Committee noted papers from the Bill Sponsor, the National Union of Journalists and the shadow Civil Justice Council.

The Bill Sponsor joined the meeting at 2:12pm.

- Mike Nesbitt MLA.

The Bill Sponsor briefed the Committee.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

The session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the Bill Sponsor for his evidence.

Members recorded their abhorrence in respect of the appalling abuse that an elected representative had received recently on social media.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chairperson should write to the Minister in respect of Departmental commentary which had suggested that the Bill Sponsor had been inactive in respect of the development of provisions within the Defamation Bill and asking if these remarks will be withdrawn.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Bill Sponsor seeking his commentary on possible amendments to the Bill including: a review clause; judicial discretion in respect of jury trials; and changes to the jurisdiction of the county court.



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Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Clerk should report back on guidance for Members in respect of the neutrality of backgrounds when Members are accessing committee meetings by videoconference.

8. Non-domestic Rates Valuations (Coronavirus) Bill – Committee Report

The Committee considered a draft of the report on the Committee Stage.

The Committee considered the Title Page, Table of Contents, Committee Membership and Powers and List of Abbreviations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the Title Page, Table of Contents, Committee Membership and Powers and List of Abbreviations, as drafted.

The Committee considered the Introduction section of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the Introduction section of the report, as drafted.

The Committee considered the Committee Approach and Acknowledgements sections of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the Committee Approach and Acknowledgements sections of the report, as drafted.

The Committee considered the Committee Deliberations section of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the Committee Deliberations section of the report, as drafted.

The Committee considered the Clause by Clause Scrutiny section of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the Clause by Clause Scrutiny section of the report, as drafted.

The Committee considered the list of Appendices in the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the list of Appendices in the report, as drafted.

The Committee considered the Executive Summary of the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the Executive Summary of the report, as drafted.



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Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Chairperson to approve an extract of the Minutes of Proceedings from today's meeting that covers the consideration and approval of the Committee report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Report on the Committee Stage of the Non-domestic Rates Valuations (Coronavirus) Bill to be published as its 5th report of this mandate.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that an electronic copy of the Bill Report should be sent to all organisations and individuals who provided evidence to the Committee on the Bill.

Jim Allister indicated that although he accepted that the report was an accurate record of Committee deliberations, he intended to oppose the Bill at plenary.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chairperson should include, in his formal remarks on the Bill, the Committee's concerns in respect of ongoing pandemic restrictions and the need for assurance that the £50m Barnett consequential would be directed to support businesses and that other targeted supports would be provided, as required.

The Committee noted with pleasure the receipt of an MBE by Mr Colin Neill who had kindly provided evidence to the Committee Stage of the Bill.

The Committee recorded its thanks to the Clerk and Committee staff for the speedy production of the Bill Report.

9. Subordinate Legislation – Decapitalisation Rate

The Committee considered the SL1: The draft Valuation for Rating (Decapitalisation Rate) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the policy objectives of the proposed rule and that it was also content for the Department to make the rule.

10. Subordinate Legislation – Rates Setting Date

The Committee considered the SL1: The Rates (Amendment) Regulations 2021



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Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the policy objectives of the proposed rule and that it was also content for the Department to make the rule.

11. Subordinate Legislation – Regional Rates

The Committee considered the SL1: The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the policy objectives of the proposed rule and that it was also content for the Department to make the rule.

12. Subordinate Legislation – Small Business Rates Relief

The Committee considered the SL1: The Rates (Small Business Hereditament Relief) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2022.

Members recorded their support for the continuation of this important relief.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the policy objectives of the proposed rule and that it was also content for the Department to make the rule.

13. Subordinate Legislation – Transfer of Housing Related Functions

The Committee considered the SL1: The Housing-Related Functions of the Department of Finance (Exercise by the Housing Executive) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the proposed rule and to write to the Department seeking clarity as to whether Housing Benefit Relief is to also transfer from Land and Property Services to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and to also seek clarity in respect of the impact on the transfer of the mutualisation of the Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

14. January Monitoring Round – written briefing



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The Committee noted the Department of Finance submission to the January Monitoring Round.

15. Correspondence

- 15.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence
- 15.2 The Committee noted correspondence between the Committee for Communities and the Department of Finance in respect of energy payment support schemes.
- 15.3 The Committee noted correspondence between the Committee for the Economy and the Department of Finance in respect of VAT on fuel and windfall taxes.
- 15.4 The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister in respect of his statement on the 2022-25 draft Budget.
- 15.5 The Committee considered Departmental correspondence relating to the RHI closure fund.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on Treasury's agreement in respect of the deferral of the RHI closure fund until the next mandate.

- 15.6 The Committee noted a further exchange between the Audit Committee and the Minister regarding the Assembly Commission's draft 2022-25 budget.
- 15.7 The Committee noted correspondence between the Committee for Communities and the Department of Finance in respect of the changing places consultation.
- 15.8 The Committee considered the NICS quarterly sickness absence statistics for July to September 2021.



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Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an explanation as to why NICS sickness absence levels have increased substantially over the previous 12 months.

15.9 The Committee noted correspondence from NISRA in respect of the Office for Statistics Regulations report on the census.

15.10 The Committee considered correspondence from the Minister in respect of an anticipated Legislative Consent Motion (LCM) relating to the Architects Act and flowing from the Grenfell Inquiry legislation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to arrange evidence sessions on the LCM with the Department and relevant stakeholders in February 2022.

15.11 The Committee considered Departmental correspondence relating to the Public Sector Transformation Fund, Voluntary Exit Scheme. The Committee noted that despite around £90m of expenditure to facilitate around 2.2k exits, the age and grade profile and staffing numbers of the NICS were largely unchanged.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department and seek clarity on the stated transformational objectives of the Voluntary Exit Scheme compared to the actual achievements and to determine the nature of the risks associated with the Voluntary Exit Scheme which were considered by the NICS Board.

15.12 The Committee considered Departmental correspondence relating to a consultation on the McCloud remedy and the closure of the Principal Civil Service Pension Scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department and seek clarity on the timescales by which the McCloud remedy payments will be paid to public sector pensioners. The Committee also agreed to seek the Department's estimate as to the consequent anticipated increase in public sector retirements over the coming years owing to the increase in final salary benefits that can be secured at age 60 rather than at State Pension Age.

15.13 The Committee noted a memorandum of reply to the PAC report entitled "Speeding up the Justice System".



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15.14 The Committee noted correspondence between the Department of Finance and the Committee for Communities on the development of a Disability Strategy.

15.15 The Committee considered correspondence from Paul Tweed on the Defamation Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Mr Tweed and confirm that he is content for his submission to be published in the Committee's report.

15.16 The Committee noted a report from FMB Velux on energy efficiency in homes.

15.17 The Committee noted a report from the NI Chamber of Commerce on Brexit.

15.18 The Committee noted a memorandum from the Committee for the Economy on the banking forum.

15.19 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.

16. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered a draft of its Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a summary Departmental oral briefing on the outworking of the January Monitoring Round on 26 January 2022.

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

17. Any Other Business

The Committee noted the reported provision of further pandemic supports for businesses through Land and Property Services.



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Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further details of the support provision including contact arrangements for MLAs in order to address related constituency issues.

There was no other business.

18. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting of the Committee for Finance will be at 2pm on Wednesday 12 January 2022 in the Senate and on Starleaf.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:03pm.

Dr Steve Aiken MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Finance
12 January 2022