



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for Finance

## Minutes of Proceedings

4 June 2025

**Meeting Location:** Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings

<b>Present:</b>	Matthew O'Toole MLA (Chairperson)
	Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
	Steve Aiken MLA
	Gerry Carroll MLA
	Jemma Dolan MLA
	Deirdre Hargey MLA
	Eoin Tennyson MLA
<b>Apologies:</b>	Phillip Brett MLA
	Paul Frew MLA
<b>Virtual:</b>	None
<b>In Attendance:</b>	Peter Hall Committee Clerk
	Clairita Frazer Assistant Assembly Clerk

Tom Armstrong Assistant Assembly Clerk

Stephen Magee Clerical Supervisor

Heather Graham Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 2:17pm in public session.

## **1. Apologies**

As above.

## **2. Declaration of Interests**

Steve Aiken declared an interest in relation to the first item of Chairpersons Business given a constituency interest in this regard.

## **3. Chairperson's Business**

### **3.1. Department of Finance – Civil Partnerships converted to marriages.**

The Committee considered correspondence from the General Registrar regarding the conversion of civil partnerships to marriages. Members noted that the issue had been discussed in the media that morning therefore there was no need to discuss the issue in closed session.

The Committee also considered a statement from the Department of Finance in relation to the issue.

Deirdre Hargey joined the meeting at 2:19pm.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek detail from the Department of Finance on how this situation had arisen and why checks conducted did not identify the mistake. Members also agreed to ask what learning has been identified going forward. The Committee also agreed to request that the Department provides an update in due course.

### **3.2. Minister of Finance – Divorce Law Consultation**

The Committee considered correspondence from the Minister of Finance regarding a forthcoming departmental consultation on the current law on divorce and the dissolution of civil partnerships.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to schedule a briefing at an opportune time, which may be when the consultation responses have been analysed. Members also agreed to consider the potential for research on “no-fault divorces” in England and Wales.

### **3.3. Fermanagh and Omagh District Council – Central Government Policy and Financial Support**

Jemma Dolan declared an interest given her constituency is Fermanagh South Tyrone.

The Committee considered correspondence from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council regarding research and data analysis with a focus on policy interventions and the associated resource modelling.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to obtain written briefing on the specifics of the research relating to the remit of the Department of Finance before considering the issue further.

### **3.4. Northern Ireland Fiscal Council – Launch of report on Sustainability of Funding for NI Water**

The Committee considered an invitation to the launch of the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council’s Sustainability Report with a special focus on water on 10<sup>th</sup> June 2025.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to circulate the invitation to other Statutory Committees.

### **3.5. NI Assembly Youth Assembly**

The Committee noted a copy of the NI Youth Assembly’s May Newsletter.

### **3.6. Informal meeting with Hospitality Ulster**

The Chairperson reflected on an informal meeting with Hospitality Ulster which took place prior to the Committee meeting.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Finance in relation to various issues raised around VAT and rural hospitality venues. Members also agreed to write to the Committee for the Economy regarding its consideration of a Unite the Union campaign concerning abuse of workers in the hospitality sector.

### **3.7. Interparliamentary Forum (on Intergovernmental Relations) meeting**

The Chairperson indicated to Members that both he and the Chairperson of the Executive Office Committee had received an invitation to the next meeting of the Interparliamentary Forum on Intergovernmental Relations.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that both the Chairperson and Committee Clerk would attend the meeting, and that feedback would be provided to Members in due course.

## **4. Draft Minutes of Proceedings**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of the 28<sup>th</sup> May 2025.

**The Chairperson indicated that the published running order for today's meeting would change to facilitate agreed timings for oral briefing sessions.**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to move into closed session at 2:32pm to receive legal advice from the Examiner of Statutory Rules on delegated powers within the Deaths, Still-Births and Baby Loss Bill.

## **6. Deaths, Still-Births and Baby Loss Bill – Delegated Powers – Oral Briefing from the Examiner of Statutory Rules**

The Examiner of Statutory Rules joined the meeting at 2:32pm and provided legal advice in relation to the Delegated Powers within the Deaths, Still-Births and Baby Loss Bill.

Eoin Tennyson joined the meeting at 2:39pm.

The Examiner of Statutory Rules remained at Committee for the next agenda item.

**The Committee remained in closed session.**

## **7. SR 2025-91 The Rate Relief (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025**

The Committee considered SR 2025-91 The Rate Relief (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 which would amend both the Rate Relief (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 and the Rate Relief Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017 to ensure continued compatibility of the Rate Rebate Scheme with Universal Credit migration. The Examiner provided advice in relation to the technical aspects of the Rule.

The Committee returned to open session at 3:02pm.

The Examiner of Statutory Rules left the meeting at 3:02pm.

The Chairperson reflected on the Examiner of Statutory Rules' advice in relation to the Rule and considered its position on the Rule.

**Agreed:** The Committee considered SR 2025-91 The Rate Relief (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and had no objection to the Rule.

The Committee suspended at 3:03pm and reconvened at 3:09pm.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to move to the oral briefing on the Deaths, Still-Births and Baby Loss Bill.

## **9. Deaths, Still-Births and Baby Loss Bill – Oral Briefing from the Forget Me Not Group**

The Committee noted background information in relation to the Forget Me Not Liaison Group.

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 3:10pm:

Grace Coutts	Chairperson, Forget Me Not Group;
Kelly Barnes	Treasurer, Forget Me Not Group;
Suzi Gourley	Treasurer, Forget Me Not Group; and
Claire Gray	Forget Me Not Group Member.

The witnesses briefed the Committee on the work of the Liaison Group and on their lived experience and testimony of baby loss. The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

A number of issues were discussed including; the process and application for the baby loss scheme, language used, the importance of retrospective applications, the potential for a central register and awareness raising.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their attendance and engagement with the Committee. The witnesses left the meeting at 3:50pm.

The Committee suspended at 3:50pm and reconvened at 3:56pm.

Members reflected on the value of the oral evidence from the Forget Me Not Group and paid tribute to the Group for their engagement and openness with the Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance with a copy of the Hansard transcript of the evidence to highlight the issues raised by the Group, urging the Department to engage with the Group and other similar relevant persons during the forthcoming consultation on a Baby Loss Certificate Scheme.

The Committee considered a response from Belfast City Council regarding the Call for Evidence on the Deaths, Still-Births and Baby Loss Bill. Members noted that the Council is content with the Bill, however the Council has brought two related suggestions to the Committee in relation to the provision of both a long form death certificate and marriage certificate free of charge in prescribed circumstances.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the Council's correspondence to the Department of Finance for its assessment of the potential for allowing suggested provisions in prescribed circumstances.

## **5. Matters Arising**

**The Chairperson indicated that Matters Arising would be considered out of the published order.**

### **5.4- 5.7 Legislative Consent Motions and Data (Use of Access) Bill – Legislative Consent Motion (LCM)**

Members considered a response from the Assembly Speaker in relation to the LCM, noting the Speaker's disappointment with the Department of Finance's handling of the matter. Members also noted that the Speaker's pledge to raise the issue with the Executive.

The Committee also noted an extract from proceedings in the Commons Chamber, in particular an exchange between the Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms and Robin Swann MP, in relation to a legislative consent motion from the NI Assembly.

The Clerk updated Members on the current position in relation to the LCM.

The Committee considered a number of papers relating to Legislative Consent Motions, including research and a report from the Committee for Procedures on its Inquiry into Legislative Consent Motions.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Minister for Data Protection and Telecoms regarding consent from the NI Assembly.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to schedule an urgent oral briefing with the Department of Finance Permanent Secretary.

The Committee asked the Clerk to consult with the Assembly Business Office in relation to the agreed approach to the LCM.

### **5.1. Minister of Finance – Strategic Review of Rating**

The Committee considered correspondence from the Minister of Finance regarding the Terms of Reference for the Reviews of the Small Business Rate Relief and Non-Domestic Vacant Rating.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to schedule an update briefing from the Department of Finance at an opportune time during the review process.

### **5.2. UK Finance – Banking and Financial Services Landscape Inquiry**

The Committee considered follow-up information provided by UK Finance, following its oral evidence session with the Committee on 9<sup>th</sup> April. Members noted a copy of the Access to Cash Sourcebook and copy of the Financial Conduct Authority's Branch and ATMs Closures or Conversion Finalised Guidance. Members noted that a response in respect of Lisnaskea would be provided shortly. Members also noted that responses from banks continue to be received following the oral evidence session on 9<sup>th</sup> April.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to add the information to the Banking and Financial Services Landscape Inquiry report.

### **5.3. Advice NI – Extending the remit of the Department for Communities Bereavement Service**

The Committee noted correspondence to the Minister of Finance from Advice NI and Marie Curie regarding potential extension of the remit of the Bereavement Service. Members noted that a reply could be expected in due course.

**5.8. Hansard Transcript Data (Use and Access) Bill – Legislative Consent Motion (LCM)**

The Committee noted a transcript of the oral evidence session with the Department of Finance regarding the Data (Use and Access) Bill LCM.

**8. SL1 – The Public Service (Civil Service and Others) Pension (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 & Consultation response on Scheme Yield Member Contributions**

Steve Aiken declared an interest as the Chairperson of the NI Assembly Pension Fund.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department of Finance regarding the outcome of a consultation on adjustments to NICS employee contributions to meet the required scheme yield as well as a copy of the consultation report.

Members also considered a policy proposal from the Department of Finance to enable the Department of Finance to increase employee contribution bands to meet the required Employee Contribution Scheme Yield.

Some Members voiced their concern regarding the impact of increased contributions on NICS staff considering comments made during the consultation process by unions. Members also queried whether this approach could set a precedent for funding payments to be made in respect of the McCloud Judgement or the Holiday Pay issue.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to request that Department of Finance officials attend Committee next week to answer these and other queries and that copies of the full consultation responses from NIPSA and PCS are provided in advance of the briefing.

## 10. Correspondence

- i. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Finance on Public Sector Pay Guidance.
- ii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Finance on a consultation on Equality and Disability Action Plans.
- iii. The Committee noted a report from the Executive Office – Period Product Report by the NI Executive.
- iv. The Committee noted a Hansard Transcript of the oral briefing from the Department of Finance on the Main Estimates and Budget No.2 Bill.
- v. The Committee noted a Hansard Transcript of the oral briefing from the Financial Conduct Authority.
- vi. The Committee considered a Call for Evidence from the Assembly & Executive Review Committee (AERC) on Cross-Cutting Executive Strategies.

Matthew O'Toole declared an interest as a Member of the AERC.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to make a response to the AERC in due course.

## 11. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the Forward Work Programme, as drafted.

The Committee noted that an oral briefing on City & Growth Deals had been confirmed for next week's meeting.

Members also noted arrangements for next week's visit and external meeting at Studio Ulster.

The Committee noted that the Clerk would explore if an oral briefing from the Permanent Secretary could take place on Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> June 2025.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the Forward Work Programme should be published on the Committee webpages.

## **12. Any Other Business**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to ask the Department for its assessment of the potential for the NI Executive to receive Barnett Consequentials as a result of Rachel Reeves announcement for £15bn of funding for transport projects in England.

## **13. Date and Time of next meeting**

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> June 2025 at 2.00pm in Studio Ulster, Belfast Harbour Estate.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:37pm.

**Matthew O'Toole**

**Chairperson, Committee for Finance**

**11<sup>th</sup> June 2025**