



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

13 March 2024

Meeting Location: Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings Belfast

Present: Matthew O'Toole MLA (Chairperson)
Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Eóin Tennyson MLA
Phillip Brett MLA
Paul Frew MLA
Gerry Carroll MLA
Nicola Brogan MLA
Deirdre Hargey MLA
Steve Aiken MLA

Apologies: None

In Attendance: Peter Hall Committee Clerk
Clairita Frazer Assistant Committee Clerk

Stephen Magee Clerical Supervisor

The meeting commenced at 1:31 pm in public session

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Declaration of Interests

None.

Agreed: Members agreed to proceed with the oral briefings before other agenda items as previously scheduled.

3. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) – Oral Briefing on Methodology used to record excess deaths & Use of Coronavirus Act as a legislative vehicle

The following officials joined the meeting at 1.33pm

Philip Wales, General Registrar & Chief Executive, NISRA;

Becci Riley, Assistant Registrar General; and

Deborah Lyness, Senior Principal Statistician, Vital Statistics Branch.

The officials briefed the Committee on the methodology and measurement of excess deaths and on the continuing use of the Coronavirus Act 2020 as a legislative vehicle by the General Register Office for Northern Ireland.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

Gerry Carroll joined the meeting at 1:34pm

Steve Aiken left the meeting at 1:53pm

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek further information on how the figure for deaths in private homes had been impacted by the new modelling, particularly in light of the fact that it is the figure with the largest percentage increase under the new methodology for measuring excess deaths.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

The officials left the meeting at 1:55pm.

4. Chairperson's Business

The Committee noted information provided by the Department of Finance on Public Expenditure and Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund.

5. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of 6 March 2024.

6. Matters arising

6.1. Revised Ministerial Statement

Members noted a revised Ministerial Statement on the 2023-24 Final Plan, laid in the Assembly on 6 March 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to continue this agenda item after the Ministerial Briefing.

Agreed Members agreed that the Ministerial briefing on Priorities and Budget Update should be reported by Hansard.

Steve Aiken rejoined the meeting at 1:58pm.

7. Minister of Finance – Oral Briefing on Priorities and Budget Update

Dr Caoimhe Archibald MLA, Minister for Finance, joined the meeting at 2.00pm accompanied by the following officials;

Neil Gibson, Permanent Secretary, Department of Finance; and

Joanne McBurney, Head of Public Spending Directorate, Department of Finance.

The Committee noted copy correspondence from the Chief Secretary of the Treasury to the Minister of Finance regarding revenue raising to meet the conditions of the Northern Ireland Executive Restoration Package Settlement.

The Minister and officials briefed the Committee on early Ministerial challenges and actions, the budget process going forward and the Northern Ireland Executive Restoration Package Settlement.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session. A number of issues were raised during the session including the 2024-25 Budget, the sustainability plan and potential revenue raising measures related to the Executive Restoration Package Settlement, Fiscal Framework and Powers and further engagement with HM Treasury, and issues around defective apartments in the Victoria Square development.

Steve Aiken left the meeting at 2:52pm due to a family bereavement. The Chairperson expressed his condolences to Mr Aiken on behalf of the Committee.

During discussions, the Chairperson declared an interest as the Chairperson of the Assembly All-Party Group on Press Freedom and Media Sustainability.

The Chairperson thanked the Minister and officials for their attendance.

The Minister and officials left the meeting at 3:36pm.

Deirdre Hargey left the meeting at 3:36pm.

6. Matters arising (continued)

6.2 Correspondence from the Assembly Audit Committee

Members noted copy of correspondence from the Assembly Audit Committee to the Minister of Finance regarding Budget positions for 2024-25 for the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO), Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and the Northern Ireland Assembly Commission.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Audit Committee reflecting on today's discussions with the Minister about the NIAO Budget and the need for small bodies such as NIAO and Northern Ireland Utility Regulator to have sustainable finances.

6.3 Correspondence from the Minister of Finance regarding the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) Budget 2024-25.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Minister's correspondence to the Northern Ireland Assembly Audit Committee, given its role in agreeing the Budget for the NIAO.

6.4 Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) Reform Element of the Renewable Heat Inquiry (RHI)

The Committee noted an update from the Department of Finance on the NICS Reform Element of the RHI Inquiry.

6.5 Historic Buildings Rates Exemption

The Committee noted clarification provided by the Department of Finance on the cost of Historic Buildings Rates Exemption to the Block Grant.

6.6 Fujitsu

The Committee noted an update from the Department of Finance on discussions with Fujitsu around the procurement fallout from issues around the Horizon System scandal and its wider impact.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to copy this update to the Justice Committee particularly in light of a potential extension to Northern Ireland of legislation to quash convictions of those sub-postmasters as a result of the scandal.

Deirdre Hargey rejoined the meeting at 3:43pm.

6.7 Lay Observer

The Committee noted an update by the Department of Finance on when the Lay Observer's role of Legal Services Oversight Commissioner will be enacted through secondary legislation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the update would be shared with the Lay Observer.

6.8 Victoria Square Residential Tower

The Chairperson declared an interest as he has met with parties connected to this matter in his capacity as a constituency MLA.

The Committee noted correspondence from the Infrastructure Committee and further correspondence from residents enclosing a response from the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Minister relating to legislation to extend the Limitation period for bringing claims under the Defective Premises (NI) Order 1975.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Finance to seek absolute clarity on what role the Department of Finance would have in relation to changing the Limitations Order with respect to the Defective Premises Order and what role the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Development, as current owners of the Order would play. Members would also ask for information on what discussions there have been between officials in both Departments in an effort to resolve this matter. Members also agreed to seek clarification from the Minister of Finance on the issues around rates continuing to be payable on these properties.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to also write to the Head of the Civil Service asking that the necessary work is co-ordinated as soon as possible in an effort to expedite resolution of the matter.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 3:48pm.

8. Correspondence

i. NI Public Services Ombudsman Report 2022-23

The Committee noted the Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman Report 2022-23.

Agreed: The Committee agreed forward the report to the Assembly Audit Committee.

ii. Press Release from the Construction Employer's Federation regarding the Executive's Capital Budget

The Committee noted a Press Release from the Construction Employer's Federation (CEF) regarding the Executive's Capital Budget.

The Committee also noted that an informal virtual meeting with CEF had been arranged for Thursday 14 March 2024 at 10am.

iii. Department of Finance Press Release on Appointment of Special Advisers.

The Committee noted a Department of Finance Press Release on Appointment of Special Advisers.

9. Draft Forward Work Programme

Agreed: The Committee agreed to hold a Strategic Planning Session on Wednesday 24 April 2024.

It was noted that the Plenary Debate on the Spring Supplementary Estimates (SSEs) was scheduled for Tuesday 9 April 2024 and that a briefing on the SSEs is scheduled for the Committee meeting on 20 March 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an update on discussions with HM Treasury in relation to the NI Executive Restoration Package Settlement.

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

10. Any Other Business.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider escalating the Chairperson's correspondence to the Chief Secretary of the Treasury regarding the NI Executive Restoration Package Settlement and seeking briefing from Treasury officials, should a reply not be received in the coming week.

Phillip Brett rejoined the meeting at 3:57pm.

11. Date and Time of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 20 March 2024 at 2.00pm in the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

Members indicated their preference for meetings of the Committee to be held in the Senate Chamber, when its renovation is complete.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:00pm.

Matthew O'Toole MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Finance

20 March 2024