



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

10 April 2024

Meeting Location: Room 21, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

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

Apologies: Phillip Brett MLA
Paul Frew MLA

In Attendance: Peter Hall Committee Clerk
Clairita Frazer Assistant Committee Clerk
Stephen Magee Clerical Supervisor

The meeting commenced at 2:03pm in public session

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Declaration of Interests

None.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of 20 March 2024.

Steve Aiken thanked Committee Members for their condolences following the recent death of his father-in-law.

4. Chairperson's Business

4.1 Ministerial Written Statement – Treasury Funding 2024-25

The Committee noted a Ministerial Written Statement on Treasury Funding for 2024-25, which was laid on 26 March 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an update from officials at next week's meeting, on progress to establish the fiscal floor at 124% as part of the uplift from Barnett consequentials.

4.2 Northern Ireland Council for Voluntary Action (NICVA) Request to brief the Committee

The Committee noted a request from NICVA to brief Members on issues relevant to the Committee's remit.

Agreed. The Committee agreed to schedule a briefing from NICVA once a draft Executive Budget for 2024-25 has been announced to allow the Committee to hear views on its impact.

4.3 Invitation to visit Re-Gen Waste

The Committee noted an invitation for the Committee to visit Re-Gen Waste – a waste processing plant in Newry.

Agreed: Members agreed to contact Re-Gen directly, should they wish to avail of this opportunity.

4.4 Trade (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) Bill

The Committee noted correspondence from the Clerk of the Senedd to the Clerk of the Northern Ireland Assembly regarding the Trade (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to alert the Procedures Committee to the particular circumstances of this legislative consent given that Committee's current work in relation to Legislative Consent Motions.

4.5 Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill

The Committee noted correspondence from the Clerk of the Scottish Parliament to the Clerk of the Northern Ireland Assembly regarding legislative consent for the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to press the Department of Finance to provide urgent confirmation of the current position in relation to a potential Legislative Consent Motion, level of engagement with officials and associated applicability to this jurisdiction.

The Chairperson declared an interest as a parent of a child attending a primary school impacted by the next item.

4.6 Shared and Integrated education: Fresh Start funding

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an explanation for the conflicting dates given in written Assembly questions from the Finance and Education Ministers, in respect of the UK Government's decision to remove the ring-fenced from Shared and Integrated education: Fresh Start funding. Members also agreed to seek absolute clarity from the Department of Finance on where exactly the previously ring-fenced monies would be reallocated.

5. Matters arising

The Chairperson declared an interest in connection with this next item given his previous involvement in the matter as a constituency MLA for the area concerned.

Steve Aiken declared an interest in connection with this next item as he had raised the matter directly with the Department of Finance and the Chairperson on behalf of some constituents.

5.1. Victoria Square Apartments

The Committee noted that an informal meeting had taken place on 21 March 2024, with the Minister of Finance, Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson regarding the Victoria Square Apartments.

The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister of Finance regarding the payment of rates on the Victoria Square Apartments, correspondence from the Committee for Infrastructure regarding departmental responsibilities in respect of any potential amendment to the Limitation Order which sets out the Limitation Period for claims made under the Defective Premises Order and a further response from the Minister of Finance clarifying the different Departmental responsibilities in relation to amending the Limitation Order as previously referenced.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to copy both items of correspondence from the Minister of Finance to relevant statutory Committees; The Executive Office, Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Communities and Infrastructure, to an individual who previously corresponded on this matter as well as to Ulster Garden Villages.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Communities Committee to stress the urgency of completing the necessary Transfer of Functions Order and in turn progressing the legislation to amend the Limitation period for claims under the Defective Premises Order.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that given the relevance of issues raised during consideration of this matter, the scheduling for the requested Departmental briefing on Building Regulations and associated matters would be expedited.

5.2 NISRA Response

Members noted a response from NISRA regarding the measurement of excess deaths by place of death.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that this would be considered again at next week's meeting.

5.3 Spring Supplementary Estimates and Vote on Account

Members noted a copy of the Spring Supplementary Estimates 2023-24 and Vote on Account 2024-25 which were formally laid in the Assembly Business Office on 20 March 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Department of Finance why bound copies of the Spring Supplementary Estimates document were not provided and for an assurance that this will be remedied going forward.

5.4 Examiner of Statutory Rules 5th Report

Members noted a copy of the Examiner of Statutory Rules 5th Report.

Deirdre Hargey joined the meeting at 2:35pm.

5.5 Interparliamentary Forum and Scrutiny of Common Frameworks

Members considered copy correspondence from the Secretary of State for Levelling up, Housing & Communities to the Chair of the House of Lords Constitution Committee regarding scrutiny of Common Frameworks.

The Committee noted that an oral briefing session on the current position of Common Frameworks from a Department of Finance perspective had been requested.

5.6 Correspondence from the Interparliamentary Finance Committee Forum to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury

Members noted copy correspondence from the Interparliamentary Finance Committee Forum to the Chief Secretary to the Treasury regarding the Treasury's lack of engagement with devolved administrations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee to alert it to the difficulties this Committee is experiencing trying to obtain a response from Treasury to correspondence seeking access to and engagement with Treasury officials.

The Committee noted that it would discuss the potential for it to host a future meeting of the Interparliamentary Finance Committee Forum at its strategic planning session on 24 April 2024.

5.7 Hansard transcript of Ministerial Briefing.

Members noted copy of a Hansard transcript of the Ministerial briefing which took place on Wednesday 13 March 2024.

5.8 Hansard transcript of SSEs Briefing

Members noted copy of a Hansard transcript of the Spring Supplementary Estimates briefing which took place on 20 March 2024.

6. SR 2024/57 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Registration of Deaths and Still-Births) (Extension) (No.2) Order (Northern Ireland 2024

The Committee considered SR 2024/57 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Registration of Deaths and Still-Births (Extension) (No 2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 which would extend provisions which allowed for temporary changes to civil registration legislation

allowing for electronic transfer of documents and registration of deaths and still births by telephone, until 24 September 2024.

Members noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules had not drawn any matters on the rule to the attention of the Committee

Agreed: The Committee for Finance has considered SR 57/2024 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Registration of Deaths and Still-Births) (Extension) (No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 and recommends that it be approved by the Assembly.

7. SR 2024/77 The Pensions Increase (Review) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Committee noted SR 2024/77 The Pensions Increase (Review) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024.

8. Northern Ireland Civil Service HR Reform & Transformation – Oral Briefing from Department of Finance

The following officials joined the meeting at 2:43pm

- Jill Minne, Director, People & Organisational Development, Department of Finance and
- Catherine Shannon, Strategic HR Director, Department of Finance

The officials briefed the Committee on the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) People Strategy and Renewal, how the Strategic HR function in the NICS has evolved, HR Transformation, Skills, Talent and Succession Planning, NICS Pay Strategy and HR Reform Priorities for 2024/25.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session. A number of issues were raised during the session including; staff movements at Permanent Secretary level, the hybrid working policy within the NICS, HR IT systems, Diversity and Inclusion Programmes in the NICS and family-friendly policies to address barriers to employment.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek additional information from the Department of Finance on a number of issues including detail on: the tenure of permanent

secretaries in the last 5 years; business areas and specific posts in the NICS which cannot avail of the hybrid working policy; difficulties experienced by NICS job applicants as a result of recent IT failures as well as any potential legal challenges due to these issues; monitoring and impact of Diversity and Inclusion programmes including Apprenticeships etc.; and the current status of any childcare scheme utilised within the NICS as well as any further family-friendly policies.

Steve Aiken declared an interest as he had met with a number of constituents employed as Prison Officers who had experienced difficulties accessing and utilising NICS Occupational Health Services.

The Committee noted that the Strategic HR Director and Steve Aiken would discuss difficulties experienced by Prison Officers when accessing and utilising NICS Occupational Health Services.

Eoin Tennyson left the meeting at 3:46pm.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

The officials left the meeting at 3:52pm.

Eoin Tennyson rejoined the meeting at 3:53pm.

9. Department of Finance Budget Pressures – Oral Briefing from Department of Finance

The following officials joined the meeting at 3:55pm

Stewart Barnes, Finance Director, Department of Finance and

Seanin Ferguson, Finance Division, Department of Finance;

The officials briefed the Committee on the challenging resource and capital pressures within specific business areas in the Department of Finance going forward.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session. A number of issues were discussed during the session including the implications of stopping projects and of a reduction in services specifically challenges in respect of NOVA and Integr8,

increasing charges for shared services provided by the Department of Finance, vacancy management, Estate rationalisation, Departmental contracts involving Fujitsu, efficiencies as a result of transformation within the Department and budget provision for an independent Fiscal Council.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek additional information from the Department of Finance on a number of issues including specific costs, implications and challenges should NOVA and Integr8 be paused or stopped should no additional funding be provided and existing baseline funding released, information on new projects that could not be taken forward due to budgetary constraints and detail of funding arrangements and budget for an independent Fiscal Council when legislation to establish this is complete.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

The officials left the meeting at 4:26pm.

10. Correspondence

- i. The Committee considered the PAC Report on Excess Votes (Northern Ireland) 2022-23 and late accounts/corrections from prior years

Agreed The Committee agreed to copy the Report to the Justice Committee and Education Committee for information.

- ii. The Committee noted a formal referral from the Public Accounts Committee regarding the PAC Report “Review of the Northern Ireland Budget Process”.
- iii. The Committee noted copy correspondence from the Committee for Communities to the Department of Finance requesting a response to issues raised in anonymous correspondence relating to recruitment, retention and the use of the temporary promotions in the Department for Communities and the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request sight of the Minister’s response to the Committee for Communities.

- iv. The Committee noted copy correspondence from the Committee for Justice to the Minister of Finance regarding the Department of Justice budget position.
- v. The Committee considered the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee Report “The funding and delivery of public services in Northern Ireland”.

Agreed: The Committee referenced its earlier agreement in respect of writing to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and agreed to bring this report forward to the Committee’s Strategic Planning session on 24 April 2024.

- vi. The Committee noted the ISNI Delivery Tracking System Investing Activity Report for March 2024.
- vii. The Committee noted a press release from the Construction Employers Federation calling for action from the Northern Ireland Executive on governance and funding model of NI Water.

11. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted that briefings on the Budget 2024-25 may need to be scheduled for forthcoming meetings at short-notice, dependent on Executive agreement to same.

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

12. Any Other Business.

The Chairperson raised an issue about the 24hour embargo on Written Ministerial Statements and queried the rationale for its use.

13. Date and Time of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 17 April 2024 at 2.00pm in Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:39pm.

Matthew O'Toole MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Finance

17 April 2024