



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

6 March 2024

Meeting Location: Room 21 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

Apologies:

Steve Aiken MLA

In Attendance:

Peter Hall Committee Clerk

Clairita Frazer Assistant Committee Clerk

Stephen Magee Clerical Supervisor

The meeting commenced at 2:05 pm in public session

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Declaration of Interests

None.

Agreed: Members agreed to consider agenda item 3 **Chairperson's Business** and agenda item 5 **Matters Arising** after the scheduled oral briefings.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of 28 February 2024.

4. SL1: The Rates (Temporary Rebate) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Committee considered a proposed statutory rule to reinstate the 'Back in Business' scheme, which would allow any new business, which occupies a long-term vacant property valued as a retail unit, to pay rates at the Vacant Rating level for a two-year period.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek clarification from the Department of Finance on a number of issues related to this proposed Statutory Rule, including confirmation that it was not possible to avail of the "Back in Business Scheme" at the same time as being in receipt of any other rates relief, information on recipients most likely to benefit from this scheme and any data to support this information. Members also agreed to ask if officials had examined potential adjustments to this scheme in the context of the recent consultations on additional revenue raising.

5. SL1: The Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Committee considered a proposed statutory rule to reinstate a micro-policy within the rating system which applies a rates exemption to ATMs in a designated rural area.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek clarification from the Department of Finance on recipients most likely to benefit from this rates exemption.

6. SL1: The Public Service Pensions Revaluation Order (NI) 2024

The Committee considered a proposed statutory rule which will specify the change in the general level of prices or earnings used by career average revalued earnings public service pension schemes for the purpose of revaluing active members' pension benefits.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

7. SL1: The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Registration of Deaths and Still-Births) (Extension) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Committee considered a proposed statutory rule to 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.

Some Members recorded their discontent that these provisions were being extended again rather than using a permanent legislative vehicle.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

8. SR 2024/29: The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Registration of Deaths and Still-Births (Extension) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Committee considered SR 2024/29 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Registration of Deaths and Still-Births (Extension) 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.

Members noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules has not yet formally reported on the rule.

Agreed The Committee for Finance has considered SR 2024/29 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Registration of Deaths and Still-Births (Extension) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 and subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules recommends that it is approved by the Assembly.

9. SR 2024/28 The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (NI) 2024

The Committee considered SR 2024/28 The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (NI) 2024 which would set out in legislation the Regional Rate for domestic and non-domestic property for the 2024/25 rating year.

Members noted the Examiner of Statutory Rules' comments in respect of the rule.

Some Members recorded their opposition to the Statutory Rule.

The question was put that the Committee is content with SR 2024/28 The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (NI) 2024.

The Committee divided: Ayes 6; Noes 1; Abstain 1

AYES: Diane Forsythe, Philip Brett, Nicola Brogan, Paul Frew, Deidre Hargey and Eóin Tennyson.

NOES: Gerry Carroll.

ABSTENTIONS: Matthew O'Toole.

Agreed The Committee for Finance has considered SR 2024/28 The Rates (Regional Rates) Order (NI) 2024 and recommends that it is affirmed by the Assembly.

The Committee noted that the next 2 agenda items would be taken concurrently and that the same Departmental officials would brief on both items.

Agreed Members agreed that the oral briefings on the Procurement Regulations and on the Trade (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) Bill should be reported by Hansard.

10. The Procurement Regulations – Oral Briefing from the Department of Finance

11. The Trade (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) Bill – Oral Briefing from the Department of Finance

The following officials joined the meeting at 2:27pm.

Michael Watson Procurement Policy & Performance, Central Procurement Directorate, Department of Finance; and

Paul Browne Procurement Policy and Performance, Central Procurement Directorate, Department of Finance.

The officials briefed the Committee on the Procurement Regulations following from the Procurement Act 2023 and a Legislative Consent Motion flowing from the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership Bill.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to await further communication from the Minister of Finance relating to both matters.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

The officials left the meeting at 2:55pm.

12. Department of Finance – First Day Brief – McCloud Judgement – Oral Briefing from the Department of Finance

Matthew O'Toole declared an interest as a member of the UK Civil Service Pension Scheme.

The following officials joined the meeting at 2:56pm.

Colette Heaney Director, Pensions Division, Department of Finance; and

Stephen Ball Deputy Director, Pensions Division, Department of Finance.

The officials briefed the Committee on the Department of Finance's implementation of the McCloud Judgement, remedy implementation and financial implications.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

Philip Brett left the meeting at 3:08pm

The officials left the meeting at 3:10pm.

13. Northern Ireland Fiscal Council – Oral Briefing

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 3:12pm:

Sir Robert Chote, Chair, Northern Ireland Fiscal Council; and

Jonathan McAdams, Chief of Staff, Northern Ireland Fiscal Council.

The witnesses briefed the Committee on a number of issues including views on the Restoration of the Executive Restoration Package Settlement and legislation for an Independent Fiscal Council.

Phillip Brett rejoined the meeting at 3:12pm

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 4:04pm.

The Committee noted an update from the Department of Finance on the development of the Fiscal Council Bill.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their attendance.

The witnesses left the meeting at 4:06pm.

Nicola Brogan left the meeting at 4:06pm.

14. Chairperson's Business

14.1 Written Ministerial Statement – Cash Advance from Northern Ireland (NI) Consolidated Fund

Members noted a copy of the Written Ministerial Statement on a cash advance from the NI Consolidated Fund to the Department of Finance Pension Scheme.

14.2 Written Ministerial Statement on Executive Agreement on Regional Rate Setting 2024/25 Rating Year

Members noted correspondence from the Minister of Finance and copy of the Written Ministerial Statement on Executive Agreement on Regional Rate Setting 2024/25 Rating Year.

The Chairperson reiterated that should Written Ministerial Statements reference percentages, a figure should be inserted to that effect and that there should be clarity on what inflation measure has been used to inform that statement. This issue has previously been highlighted to the Department.

Nicola Brogan rejoined the meeting at 4:10pm.

14.3 Interparliamentary Forum

Members noted a draft Joint Statement of the 5th meeting of the Interparliamentary Forum which took place on Thursday 29 February 2024. The Chairperson reflected on the Forum meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Committee Clerk would attend the Interparliamentary Finance Committee Forum meeting to take place on Thursday 21 March at Westminster.

14.4 Executive Restoration Package: Breakdown of £708m

The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister of Finance providing further detail on the amounts contained within the financial package which accompanied the return of the Executive.

The Deputy Chairperson updated the Committee on an informal meeting held with the Minister of Finance to discuss the Executive Restoration Package.

15. Matters Arising

15.1 Briefing from the Department of Finance on the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund (NICF)

Members noted information from the Department about the NICF.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share this information with other Statutory Committees, subject to the Department's permission.

15.2 Residential Properties at Victoria Square, Belfast

Members noted correspondence from the Committee for Justice regarding an item of correspondence from an individual about residential properties at Victoria Square, Belfast.

The Chairperson declared an interest as he has held a number of meetings in connection with this matter in his capacity as a constituency MLA.

The Committee noted that Department of Finance officials have advised that Civil Law Reform Colleagues received an email from Department of Justice, in which it was suggested that the Committee should note that, in light of the ongoing litigation, this matter is Sub Judice. Officials also confirmed that there is a Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs lead.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the correspondent with an update on the matter.

16. Correspondence

- i. The Committee considered Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland Delivery Tracking System – Department of Finance February 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an update from the Department of Finance on the Orchard House refurbishment project which is due for completion in March 2024.

- ii. The Committee considered correspondence from the Clerk of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) regarding an Inquiry into the Northern Ireland Audit Office Report on Public Procurement.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Committee Clerk would liaise with the Clerk to the PAC in relation to the PAC Inquiry and recommendations in due course.

The Committee noted the following:

- iii. Copy correspondence to the Minister of Finance regarding Progressive Wealth Tax.

17. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a number of briefings which have been confirmed for the coming weeks.

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

18. Any Other Business.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance seeking an update on the recent Chancellor's Spring Statement and consequences for the

Northern Ireland Budget/block grant, including any consequential and further clarification on whether the 124% Fiscal Floor will be applied.

19. Date and Time of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 13 March 2024 at 1:30pm in the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:30pm.

Matthew O'Toole MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Finance

13 March 2024