



COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

WEDNESDAY 6 MAY 2020

Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Dr Steve Aiken OBE MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Paul Frew MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Allister MLA
Mr Pat Catney MLA
Mr Seán Lynch MLA
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA
Mr Jim Wells MLA

Present by teleconference:

Ms Jemma Dolan MLA

Apologies:

In Attendance: Mr Jim McManus (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Neil Sedgewick (Clerical Supervisor)

The meeting commenced at 2:30pm in public session.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Draft Minutes

The Committee considered the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 29 April 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 29 April 2020.

3. Matters Arising

The Committee noted a letter from the Minister of Justice to Jim Allister answering an AQW in relation to a contract for occupational clothing, special work-wear and accessories for Forensic Science NI.

4. Oral Evidence:

The following official joined the meeting at 2.32pm

- Mr David Sterling, Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service
- Mr David Hughes, Head of RHI Inquiry Team, Department of Finance

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

Issues considered included: ministerial preferences for codes rather than legislation; the Terms of Reference for the Executive sub-group on the RHI Inquiry Report; and the number and hierarchy of Special Advisers in the Executive Office.

Agreed: To provide the Committee with a copy of the Terms of Reference for the RHI Sub-group established to look at the implications of the RHI recommendations.

Agreed: To provide the Committee with the number of NICS staff who were dismissed due to a breach of communication (including failure to use official systems); and/or improper use of official systems over the last 5 years with specific reasons for each dismissal.

Agreed: To provide clarity that the First Minister and deputy First Minister preference is for codes and guidance rather than legislation.

The official left the meeting at 3:24pm

5. Written Evidence: The Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Committee considered the written evidence received in its Call for Evidence on the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed for the Chairperson and Bill Sponsor to meet prior to the meeting of 6 May 2020 to discuss a handling plan for the Committee Stage of the Functioning of Government Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to adopt the Handling Plan for the Committee Stage of the Functioning of Government Bill and actions to be taken.

Agreed: To schedule oral evidence from DoF, Strategic Policy & Reform Division; the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission; Former Commissioner for Public Appointments, Felicity Houston; and author and journalist, Sam McBride.

Agreed: To receive written evidence from the Institute of Government, London.

6. Research: The Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill

The Committee considered a research paper from the Research and Information Services on the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

Agreed: To receive a briefing from the RaISe Researcher who drafted the paper.

7. SL1 – The Rates (Coronavirus Emergency Relief) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

The following official joined the meeting at 3.29pm

- Mr Alan Bronte, Director of Rating Policy Division

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Committee considered the SL1 – The Rates (Coronavirus Emergency Relief) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020. The Rule is to make provision to provide emergency rate relief in order to help business ratepayers who are facing financial impacts arising from the serious public health issues caused by Covid-19. The draft Rule will intervene for a three-month period in order to provide 100% rate relief for businesses. This emergency policy intervention will apply to all business properties with the exception of public bodies and utility providers/statutory undertakers.

Agreed: Members agreed that questions concerning matters that are not directly related to the provisions in the Statutory Rule should be emailed to the Clerk for a written response from the official.

Agreed: That the Committee for Finance has considered Department of Finance's proposal for subordinate legislation The Rates (Coronavirus Emergency

Relief) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 and has no objection to the policy implications of the proposed legislation at this stage

8. SL1 – The Rates (Small Business Hereditament Relief) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Committee considered the SL1 - to the purpose of the draft Rule is to extend the Small Business Rate Relief Scheme up to 31 March 2021.

Agreed: That the Committee for Finance has considered Department of Finance's proposal for subordinate legislation - The Rates (Small Business Hereditament Relief) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 and has no objection to the policy implications of the proposed legislation at this stage.

The official left the meeting at 3.42pm

9. Chairperson's Business

The Committee considered The Permanent Secretary suggestion for 10th June 2020 to provide oral evidence to the Committee on the Minister's First Day brief.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Permanent Secretary to provide oral evidence on 10 June 2020 to the Committee on the Minister's First Day brief.

10. Correspondence

- i. Departmental monthly outturn and forecast outturn the summary of the 2019-2020 forecast outturn returns received from departments.

Agreed: To forward to RaISe for information.

- ii. Committee for Infrastructure has raised concerns regarding the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on the taxi industry and asks that the Committee for Finance considers initiating a scheme to offer financial assistance to the industry.

Agreed: To inform the Committee for Infrastructure that the initiation of any scheme relating to the taxi industry is a matter for the Minister for Infrastructure rather than for the Committee for Finance and suggesting that the Committee write to the Minister for Infrastructure asking her to raise the matter with her Executive colleagues.

- iii. The Department's clarification from Land and Property Services regarding the process they have in place to ensure conveyancing can take place in the Covid-19 pandemic.
- iv. The responses from the Minister to the Law Society of Northern Ireland on the 14 and 29 April 2020.

Agreed: To inform the Law Society that the Committee has received both responses and to forward the response to the Committee to the Law Society of Northern Ireland.

Agreed: To bring the responses in relation to the Land and Property Services for consideration at the next Committee meeting.

- v. The Department's response to the issues raised in relation to the financial pressures on the logistic sector.

Agreed: To forward the response to the Committee for Infrastructure.

The Committee noted the following correspondence:

- vi. Departmental response to Committee's request for the name of the property mentioned in the Department's budget for 2020-21
- vii. Departmental response to why ILEX Urban Regeneration was included in the Whole Government Accounts (Designation of Bodies) Order (NI) SR2020/43
- viii. Departmental response to Accounting Officers Training
- ix. Departmental response to the Committee's request to ask if a meeting took place in Northern regarding the level of RHI non domestic tariffs in regional rates and energy (No. 2) Act and if so to provide actual or draft minutes
- x. Letter from the Committee for the Economy to the Finance Minister regarding the Postgraduate Medical School at Magee project
- xi. Committee for Infrastructure has written to the Department of Finance in support of the Minister for Infrastructure's bid for financial support in its vital role in the Covid-19 response.
- xii. Committee for Infrastructure has written to the Department of Finance regarding reversing the deficit caused to the Department of Infrastructure.
- xiii. CO3 – Covid-19 and the Charity Sector in Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted the Information Request to the Department and the routine papers issued on the 1st and 7th of May 2020.

11. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the Forward Work Programme for April – July 2020

The Committee considered Department's indication it will bring the Vote on Account and Budget (No.2) Bill to the Committee for the meeting on 20th May 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to receive oral evidence from officials on the Vote on Account and Budget (No.2) Bill on 20th May 2020 and to add to the Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Forward Work Programme.

12. Any Other Business

The Clerk informed the Committee that the Bank Holiday may affect the delivery of the papers for the meeting of 13 May 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed, if necessary, that meeting papers for next week's Committee meeting may issue on Monday 11 May 2020.

Members considered correspondence from National Crime Agency (NCA) suggesting that the briefing on 12 May 2020 could be with the Chairperson through secure Video Conferencing and held in the NCA Belfast Office.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to inform NCA the Chairperson would not be attending the briefing on 12 May 2020 and to ask the NCA to provide a suitable date and accommodation for all members of the Committee to attend.

13. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting will be on Wednesday 13 May 2020 at 2.30pm in the Senate Chamber.

The meeting was adjourned at 3.45pm

Dr Steve Aiken, OBE MLA
Chairperson
Committee for Finance
13 May 2020