



COMMITTEE FOR FINANCE

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

WEDNESDAY, 7 July 2021

Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Dr Steve Aiken OBE MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Keith Buchanan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Jim Wells MLA

Present by Video-conference:
Mr Jim Allister MLA
Mr Pat Catney MLA
Ms Jemma Dolan MLA
Mr Philip McGuigan MLA
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA

Apologies: None

In Attendance: Mr Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
Ms Angela McParland (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Mr Stephen Magee (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Heather Graham (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced in open session at 2:01pm.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

No Member delegated authority to vote under Temporary Standing Order 115(6).

2. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Northern Ireland Affairs Committee

The Chairperson informed Members that the informal meeting with the chairperson of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee (NIAC) did not take place as scheduled. The Chairperson advised that owing to recent comments made by the NIAC chairperson and an ongoing legal action relating to the NI Protocol, he felt that he was unable to attend or chair the relevant meeting. The Chairperson advised that a further informal meeting may be rescheduled for a future date.

Mr Maoliosa McHugh joined the meeting at 2:05pm

3.2 Freedom of Information (FoI) Requests During Recess

The Chairperson reminded Members that it is usual practice for committees to delegate authority to the chairperson and deputy chairperson, during periods of recess, to submit views on the releasing or withholding of information in respect of any non-routine/contentious Freedom of Information (FoI) requests received. The Committee would be advised of: any such requests; the views expressed by the Chairperson and/or Deputy Chairperson; and the response issued by the FoI Unit, at the first available meeting following the recess period. The Committee had agreed to this delegation of authority in the previous mandate at the appropriate meetings ahead of each recess.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to continue with this practice in respect of FoI requests during recess.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 29 June 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 30 June 2021.

5. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

6. Committee Report: An Independent Fiscal Council for Northern Ireland

Members noted a response from the interim Northern Ireland Fiscal Council on its work programme indicating that it is developing a Memorandum of Understanding with the Department and that a report on the budget for 2021-22 will be produced during the budget consultation period.

The Committee considered its draft report on an independent Fiscal Council for Northern Ireland, as amended following the meeting on 29 June 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chairperson should approve the relevant excerpt from the minutes of 7 July 2021 and this should be added to the appendices of the report along with the relevant excerpt from the minutes of 29 June 2021 and the latest correspondence from the interim Northern Ireland Fiscal Council.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to make further clarifying modifications to recommendations in respect of the Public Appointments process and confirmatory committee hearings.

The Committee discussed but did not agree amendments relating to the development of Memoranda of Understanding between the Fiscal Council and the Department for Work and Pensions within the draft report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the report as amended and was content that this was the full and final version of the report by the Committee and that it be published as such.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share the report with the Minister and the interim Northern Ireland Fiscal Council and to publish a link to the report and to advise accordingly: witnesses who provided evidence; statutory committees; the Audit Committee; the Public Accounts Committee; and the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

The Chairperson recorded his thanks to the Clerk and the Committee staff.

Mr Jim Allister left the meeting at 2:15pm

7. SR 2021/185 The Business Tenancies (Coronavirus) (Restriction on Forfeiture Relevant Period) (Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations 2021

The Committee considered SR 2021/185 The Business Tenancies (Coronavirus) (Restriction on Forfeiture Relevant Period) (Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations 2021 and noted a written briefing from the Department on the Rule.

Agreed: That the Committee for Finance has considered the statutory rule: SR 2021/185 The Business Tenancies (Coronavirus) (Restriction on Forfeiture Relevant Period) (Northern Ireland) (No. 2) Regulations 2021 and has no objection to the rule.

8. Written Briefing: Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) - SR 2021/127: The Official Statistics (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021

The Committee noted the affirmed statutory rule: SR 2021/127: The Official Statistics (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021.

9. Oral Evidence: Department of Finance – 2020-21 Outturn and June Monitoring Round

The following officials joined the meeting at 2.30pm.

- Joanne McBurney, Budget Director, Public Spending Directorate; and
- Jeff McGuinness, Acting Head of Central Expenditure Division.

The following official joined the meeting at 2.50pm.

- Anne Scott, Public Spending Directorate.

The Committee noted: the Investing Capital Activity report for June; a Departmental response on hard-charging; a Northern Ireland Office (NIO) response on New Deal for NI funding; and a Departmental response on the Monitoring Round.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share the response on hard-charging with the Northern Ireland Audit office (NIAO) and to ask it to comment on the reasoning for not adopting hard charging, namely: single year budgets; accountancy challenges and apparently an expectation that this would create an obligation on building fabric investment.

10. Oral Briefing: Financial Services Union (FSU) – Banking Issues

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 3.07pm.

- Sharon McAuley, President, FSU;
- Brian McDowell, Head of Communications and Public Affairs, FSU; and
- John O'Connell, General Secretary, FSU.

The Committee noted briefing papers from FSU and from UK Finance.

The Chairperson declared an interest in respect of previous involvement and discussions with the banking sector

Mr Maoliosa McHugh declared an interest as a founding member of a credit union

Ms Jemma Dolan left the meeting at 4:07pm

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their evidence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister: indicating its support for a banking forum to be established in order to discuss the future of the sector in Northern Ireland; suggesting that studies are undertaken to assess the impact on communities of the closure and loss of all banking services; and calling for his support to ask the sector to stop all bank branch closures until the pandemic concludes.

11. Correspondence

11.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

11.2 The Committee considered a NISRA publication on sickness absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service in 2020-21.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share the NISRA publication on NICS sickness absence with the Committee for Justice and to write to the Minister for Justice seeking her

commentary on the high-level of long term sickness absence rates for prison grade staff.

11.3 The Committee noted a response from the Department on recent NICS competitions in respect of Administrative Officer (AO); Staff Officer (SO); and Deputy Principal (DP) grades. The Committee noted that the Department had again declined to provide information on the outworkings of the recent AO; SO and DP competitions indicating that they are to remain open (from May/December 2019) until October 2022 as a consequence of the pandemic. The Committee noted that it expects to receive further information in a forthcoming oral briefing from NICS HR.

11.4 The Committee considered Ministerial correspondence advising of a review of NICS recruitment indicating that recommendations and a revised policy framework will be available by the end of summer 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a briefing from the Department on the recommendations from the recruitment review as part of the NICS HR briefing following summer recess.

11.5 The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for the Economy highlighting issues in respect of vacancies in the Department for the Economy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Ministerial correspondence on the review of NICS recruitment and on the AO, SO and DP competitions to the Committee for the Economy.

11.6 The Committee noted a further Departmental update on the consultation on changes to the NICS Injury Benefits Scheme.

11.7 The Committee considered a Departmental response clarifying, in respect of the building fire safety programme, that there may be high-rise buildings requiring cladding replacement that may or may not be known to their landlords and residents and that the Department is to undertake a scoping exercise in order to determine the affected buildings over 18m in height. The Minister is to then seek support from the Executive to fund the cladding replacement. It appeared that the Department is still seeking clarity on which department will have policy responsibility for this going forward.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask that it expedite the scoping exercise and provide the Committee with an urgent update on its findings. The Committee also agreed to write to the Department to emphasise the importance of the Department remaining fully cognisant of the outworking of the Grenfell Inquiry.

11.8 The Committee considered Departmental correspondence advising of a consultation on changing building regulations guidance which will introduce a requirement for Changing Places Toilets (CPTs) in some public buildings.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a summary of responses and to also ask the Department to clarify why the change to guidance will not require the facilities to be maintained after 12 months following installation.

11.9 The Committee noted Ministerial correspondence relating to the Ministerial statement regarding scoring of social value in procurement.

11.10 The Committee noted a Northern Ireland Audit Office report into the Executive Budget Process.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the interim Northern Ireland Fiscal Council.

11.11 The Committee noted correspondence from the Public Accounts Committee indicating that it is to retain primacy in respect of the NIAO report into the budget process.

11.12 The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Department for Communities to the Committee for Communities responding to queries in a RaISE paper on the High Street Taskforce.

11.13 The Committee considered a Departmental response to the Committee's queries regarding costs of the Victims' Pension Scheme which included the Strategic Business Case. The Committee noted that this indicated that operations costs are estimated as over £40m over 6 years.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share the Strategic Business Case with the Committee for Justice and the Committee for the Executive Office.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Department and ask for an explanation as to the breakdown of the supporting costs including the costs of the President and the Board.

11.14 The Committee noted a Departmental response on the use of gender budgeting.

11.15 The Committee considered the composite information request.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that, notwithstanding recently received responses, the composite request was an accurate and complete record of the Committee's outstanding information requests.

11.16 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for the Economy regarding the Committee Stage of the Parental Bereavement (Leave and Pay) Bill.

11.17 The Committee considered a response from the Department regarding Ministerial Directions. The Department indicated that it had no plans to publish Ministerial Directions which do not refer to the constraints of Managing Public Money NI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity as to why Ministerial Directions would be sought for reasons not relating to the constraints of Managing Public Money NI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the NIAO to ask for its understanding of proper process in regards to the issuing and publication of Ministerial Directions.

12. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered a draft of its forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed its forward work programme.

13. Any Other Business

The Chairperson recorded his thanks to Members and staff for their diligence in concluding the present session of the Assembly.

14. Date, Time and Place of the Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Committee for Finance will be at 2pm on Wednesday 1 September 2021 in the Senate and on Starleaf.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:43pm.

Dr Steve Aiken MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Finance
1 September 2021