



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

15 December 2021

Meeting Location: The Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings

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

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Mr Jim Allister MLA
Mr Pat Catney MLA
Ms Jemma Dolan MLA
Mr Maolíosa McHugh MLA
Mr Matthew O'Toole MLA

Apologies: None

In Attendance: Mr Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
Ms Carla Campbell (Assistant Assembly Clerk)
Ms Marion Johnston (Clerical Officer)
Ms Heather Graham (Clerical Officer)



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Proceedings commenced at 2:02pm in public session.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to adopt a revised agenda.

Maolíosa McHugh joined the meeting at 2:03pm.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Declaration of Interests

There were no declarations of interest.

3. Oral Evidence – Minister of Finance – Budget and Other Policy Challenges

The Minister of Finance and officials joined the meeting at 2:04pm.

- Conor Murphy MLA, Minister of Finance.
- Colum Boyle, Interim Permanent Secretary, Department of Finance.
- Joanne McBurney, Director of Public Spending, Department of Finance.

The Minister of Finance briefed the Committee.

Matthew O'Toole joined the meeting at 2:06pm.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

The evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the Minister and officials for their oral evidence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance seeking information on the NI Civil Service Board and its role in signing-off the adapted RHI disciplinary process.



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Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to statutory committees asking them to take evidence on the draft 2022-25 Budget and to respond to the Committee in this regard before 18 February 2022. The Committee also agreed to publish a summary report on the feedback from statutory committees and schedule a plenary debate in late February following the 2nd Stage Budget Bill debate.

4. Chairperson's Business

4.1 Fiscal Commission

The Chairperson informed Members that the Fiscal Commission has published its interim report and will be providing the Committee with a briefing on its findings in January 2022.

The Chairperson referred to the Commission's report and a reference to Treasury correspondence that indicated that the Executive had not demonstrated that its finances were on a sustainable footing for the long term. As a consequence, it appeared that Treasury might not have engaged with the Fiscal Commission as readily as similar commissions in Scotland and Wales.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Finance and the Chief Secretary of the Treasury seeking sight of the relevant correspondence and asking the latter for clarity as to how long-term financial sustainability may be demonstrated by the Executive.

5. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Monday 6 December 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on Wednesday 8 December 2021.



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6. Matters Arising

The Clerk provided advice to the Committee in respect of defamation and absolute privilege.

Some Members indicated in no uncertain terms the critical importance of absolute privilege in exercising their mandate and in terms of scrutinising public interest matters. Those Members indicated that they would not accept any contrived limit on the use of absolute privilege in support of scrutiny.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Chairperson to raise related issues at the Chairperson's Liaison Group.

7. Oral Evidence: Defamation Bill – Committee Stage

The officials joined the meeting at 3:59pm.

- Michael Foster, Head of Civil Law Reform Division, Department of Finance.
- Martin Tyrell, Principal Legal Officer, Civil Law Reform, Department of Finance.

The officials briefed the Committee.

Matthew O'Toole declared an interest as Chairperson of the All Party Group on Media Sustainability and Press Freedom.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

The session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their evidence.

8. Correspondence

8.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence



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- 8.2 The Committee considered a response from the Minister of Finance on the super parity issue in respect of amendments to the Parental Leave (Leave and Pay) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share the super parity response with statutory committees and indicate the risk of the Executive being required to meet the costs of the rest of the UK in respect of super parity issues was limited.

- 8.3 Members considered a copy of a response from the Department of Finance to the Committee for Communities in relation to the Private Tenancies Bill and responsibility for fire prevention measures.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance seeking an update on the review of building regulations following the passage of legislation in England in respect of the Grenfell Tower disaster.

Members indicated the importance of the development of a clear organigram showing lines of responsibility for the NI Civil Service reform process.

- 8.4 Members noted a response from the Department of Finance to the Audit Committee in relation to its comments on the NI Assembly Commission 2022-25 draft budget.

Jim Allister left the meeting at 4:47pm.

- 8.5 Members noted the Land and Property Services Trust Statement for 2020-21.

- 8.6 Members noted the Special EU Programmes Body Annual Report 2020.

- 8.7 Members noted further commentary from Mr Sam McBride on his appearance before the Committee.

- 8.8 The Committee considered the composite information request.



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

9. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered a draft of its Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed its Forward Work Programme, as drafted.

10. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

11. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting of the Committee for Finance will be at 2pm on Wednesday 5 January 2022 in the Senate and on Starleaf.

Proceedings continued in closed session from 4:49pm.

12. Non-domestic Rates Valuations (Coronavirus) Bill – Committee Deliberations

The Committee noted tabled Departmental correspondence and deliberated on the Non-domestic Rates Valuations (Coronavirus) Bill.

Proceedings continued in public session from 4:58pm.



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13. Non-domestic Rates Valuations (Coronavirus) Bill – Formal Clause by Clause Scrutiny

The officials joined the meeting at 4:59pm.

- Ian Snowden, Chief Executive of Land and Property Services, Department of Finance.
- Andrew McAvoy, Rating Policy, Land and Property Services, Department of Finance.

The Committee also noted advice from the Examiner of Statutory Rules in respect of the delegated powers associated with the Bill.

Jim Wells left the meeting at 5:02pm.

The session was reported by Hansard.

The Committee commenced its formal clause by clause consideration of the Non-domestic Rates Valuations (Coronavirus) Bill.

Clause 1

The Committee considered Clause 1.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with Clause 1, as drafted.

Clause 2 and Short Title

The Committee considered Clause 2 including the Short Title.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with Clause 2 including the Short Title, as drafted.

Long Title

The Committee considered the Long Title.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the Long Title, as drafted.



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The Chairperson advised Members that the formal clause by clause scrutiny of the Non-domestic Rates Valuations (Coronavirus) Bill had concluded.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to instruct the Clerk to draft a report on the Committee Stage of the Bill, for its consideration.

The Chairperson wished Members, witnesses and Committee staff a Happy Christmas.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:24pm.

Dr Steve Aiken MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Finance
5 January 2022