



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Northern Ireland Fiscal Council Bill: Clause-
by-clause Consideration and Initial
Consideration of Committee Report

11 March 2026

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Matthew O'Toole (Chairperson)
Ms Diane Forsythe (Deputy Chairperson)
Dr Steve Aiken
Mr Gerry Carroll
Miss Jemma Dolan
Miss Deirdre Hargey
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr Brian Kingston

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): We are going to do the formal clause-by-clause now. Members will have the opportunity to formally determine and set out their position on each of the proposed Bill clauses. If required, on any of the clauses on which there is disagreement, we will divide as necessary. All decisions taken today by the Committee will be final. If the Committee is not content with a clause, it can register its formal opposition to the Question that the clause stand part of the Bill. I assume members are content that this session is recorded by Hansard.

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): That will ensure that the clause is debated in its entirety at Consideration Stage. I advise members that it is anticipated that the Committee will conclude all formal deliberations at today's meeting and give initial consideration to the Bill report, time permitting.

The Committee Clerk: We will probably pass on that until next week.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Yes. We will now proceed formally through the clauses of the Bill and put the Questions formally. If there is no consensus on the Questions, I will ask members to vote by way of a show of hands, and the Committee Clerk will confirm the result of each vote. Members may want to make specific comment on particular clauses without registering full dissent. That can be done and will be included in the Bill report. Alternatively, members can wait until we do the formal signing-off of the Bill. You can include comments without registering formal opposition. We may well have Divisions, but I do not really want to have Divisions. I assume that we will not.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 1, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 2, put and agreed to.

Clause 3 (Budget assessment reports)

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): We had a discussion about an amendment to clause 3, and we decided not to proceed with that at this stage. It may be raised in other fora.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 3, put and agreed to.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): I will simply say, to be reflected in the Bill report, that I believe that clause 3 could be usefully enhanced and improved in one particular way in relation to economic analysis, but I am broadly content with the clause in relation to other matters. We can reflect that in the Bill report.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 4, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 5, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 6, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 7, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 8, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with clause 9, put and agreed to.

Question, That the Committee is content with schedules 1 and 2, put and agreed to.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Some of what we hoped or thought that we might include in the schedules has been reflected in what we hope will be an updated explanatory and financial memorandum (EFM). I want to put that on the record, because some of the discussion that we had on that clause will be reflected in the updated EFM. Is the Committee content with the explanatory and financial memorandum as drafted, subject to amendments to, first, clarify that the Finance Committee will be kept informed about the work of the Fiscal Council, including providing copies of reports, updates on membership or recruitment changes and other key information about the council's work; secondly, to establish a formal governance agreement once the council becomes statutory so that, after the Bill is enacted, the Department and the council will create a partnership agreement setting out governance arrangements, responsibilities and how the council can challenge or seek clarification from the Department when issues arise — subject to those and the other specific things that we saw in the EFM, are we content?

Members indicated assent.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): So, for the record, the Committee is content with the explanatory and financial memorandum as drafted, subject to the amendments detailed in correspondence received by the Committee on 9 March 2026.

As this is the end of our clause-by-clause consideration, we must now consider the long title of the Bill, which is a Bill to make provision for the establishment and functions of the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council; and for connected purposes.

Question, That the Committee is content with the long title, put and agreed to.

The Chairperson (Mr O'Toole): Following our deliberations, the section on today's clause-by-clause consideration will be added to the draft Committee report on the Bill. Any typographical or formatting errors will be fixed as normal before the report is published on the Committee web page. We will agree that next week. Some of what we discussed today will be included in the draft report. If any members have any amendments or anything else that they specifically wish to be included, they can shout now. Indeed, they can shout in the meantime if they want. That will be in the updated pack. Is everybody happy with that? OK. We will talk about it next week.

Thank you all. I put on record my thanks in particular to Fiona, who has had to do a lot of heavy lifting on this, as well as the Bill Clerk. I am sure that you will be glad to see the back of this very important and interesting Bill that we have talked about a lot.