



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Committee for Finance

## Minutes of Proceedings

**29 May 2024**

**Meeting Location:** Room 21, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

**Present:**

Matthew O'Toole MLA (Chairperson)

Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Nicola Brogan MLA

Deirdre Hargey MLA

Eóin Tennyson MLA

Steve Aiken MLA

Paul Frew MLA

**Present by Video or Teleconference:**

Gerry Carroll MLA

**Apologies:** Phillip Brett MLA

**In Attendance:**

Peter Hall Committee Clerk

Clairita Frazer Assistant Assembly Clerk

Stephen Magee Clerical Supervisor

Heather Graham Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 2:07pm in public session.

The Chairperson welcomed Deirdre Hargey back to Committee after her recent interim role as Minister of the Economy.

### **1. Apologies**

As above.

### **2. Declaration of Interests**

None.

### **3. Chairperson's Business**

#### **3.1 Written Ministerial Statement – The Executive Legislation Programme 2024**

The Committee considered a Written Ministerial Statement on the Executive Legislation Programme for 2024 which was laid by the First and deputy First Minister on 22 May 2024 and the items referenced therein relating to the Committee's remit.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek an update from the Department of Finance on the detail and timeframe for the legislation referenced relevant to the Department's remit.

Members also discussed the position in relation to secondary legislation from the Department of Finance, particularly those Statutory Rules to make permanent legislative provisions to allow for changes to civil registration legislation enabling electronic transfer of documents and registration of deaths and still births by telephone. Members voiced concern about any delay in relation to these rules as the necessary legislation needed to be in place by September 2024.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek an urgent update from the Department of Finance on when the aforementioned rules would be laid and a schedule of expected secondary legislation going forward.

### **3.2 Levelling Up' Funds and Officials' Appearance before Devolved Administration Committees**

The Committee considered an update provided on its correspondence to Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities and Minister for Intergovernmental Relations, issued following a departmental briefing on "Levelling Up" funding and in an effort to secure a briefing from UK Departmental officials.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the correspondence would be re-issued appropriately in the post General Election period.

In the course of discussions, some Members voiced concern that a manifesto pledge to introduce national service for school leavers could potentially be funded through "Levelling Up" funds.

### **3.3 Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) General Election Guidance**

The Committee noted that the NICS General Election Guidance had now been published and would be considered at next week's meeting.

## **4. Draft Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of 22 May 2024.

Steve Aiken recorded his thanks to the Committee Clerk for facilitating last week's remote attendance for Members who were participating in a Commonwealth Parliamentary Association visit to St Helena.

## **5. Matters arising**

### **5.1 Department of Finance – The Executive Office Resource (RDEL), Capital (CDEL) and Financial Transaction Capital (FTC) Bids**

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department of Finance providing copies of the RDEL, CDEL and FTC Bids from the Executive Office.

**Agreed:** The Committee indicated an interest in a number of bids made by the Executive Office and the outcome of same. Members agreed to seek an update and clarification from the Department of Finance on items including; “Civil Contingencies Bunker”, Centre of Government Transformation, and Chief Scientific Advisor & team – research.

## **5.2 Department of Finance – Interim Fiscal Framework**

The Committee considered a written briefing from the Department of Finance on the Interim Fiscal Framework signed by the Minister on 21 May 2024.

**Agreed.** The Committee agreed to seek updates on the Interim Fiscal Framework at regular intervals.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to request an update from the Department of Finance on the Public Sector Transformation Board in particular; its timescale, membership and scope.

## **5.3 Urgent Written Ministerial Statement – Minister of Education – Early Learning and Childcare Measures 2024/25**

The Committee considered an Urgent Ministerial Statement laid by the Minister of Education on Thursday 23 May 2024 on Early Learning and Childcare Measures 2024/25.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek an update from the Department of Finance on timescales and parameters for the dispersal of centrally held budgetary items and other items being held at the centre described as “ear-marked”, as referenced in the Minister of Finance’s Budget 2024-25 statement.

## **5.4 Hansard Transcript – Legislative Consent Motion on the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill**

The Committee noted the Hansard transcript of the Senedd debate on the Legislative Consent Motion on the Data Protection and Digital Information Bill.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the transcript to the Windsor Framework Committee for its information regarding potential relevance to the Framework.

Steve Aiken declared an interest as a Member of the Windsor Framework Scrutiny Committee.

### **5.5 Hansard Transcript – NI Fiscal Council briefing on the draft Executive Budget 2024-25**

The Committee noted the Hansard transcript of the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council briefing on the draft Executive Budget 2024-25 on 15 May 2024.

### **5.6 Hansard Transcript – Nevin Economic Research Institute (NERI)/Pivotal Joint briefing on the draft Executive Budget 2024-25**

The Committee noted the Hansard transcript of the NERI/Pivotal Joint briefing on the draft Executive Budget 2024-25 which took place at the Committee meeting on 15 May 2024.

### **5.7 Draft Executive Budget 2024-25**

Diane Forsythe placed on record an acknowledgement that the Department of Finance was the only Department which adequately briefed its scrutiny Committee on the Draft Executive Budget 2024-25.

The Chairperson expressed his thanks to the Deputy Chair for speaking on behalf of the Committee in the plenary debate on the Draft Executive Budget 2024-25.

**Agreed:** In light of events, the Committee agreed to write to both the Minister of Finance and the Chairpersons Liaison Group to highlight both the lack of opportunity for Statutory Committees to scrutinise their departments' 'post-allocation' budget position prior to the Vote on the Budget and the apparent fact that departments are not sharing the agreed bid templates with their scrutiny Committees.

## **6. SR 2024-114 The Government Resources and Accounts (Northern Ireland) Act 2001 (Estimates and Accounts) (Designation of Bodies) Order 2024**

The Committee considered a statutory rule to provide a list of designate bodies for inclusion in departmental Estimates and accounts for the year ending 31 March

2025. Members noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules had not yet reported on this Rule.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it has considered SR 114/2024 The Government Resources and Accounts (Northern Ireland) Act 2001 (Estimates and Accounts) (Designation of Bodies) Order 2024 and subject to the Examiner's report, has no objection to the Rule.

## **7. Civil Law Reform – Oral Briefing from Department Solicitors Office**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the briefing should be reported by Hansard.

The following witness joined the meeting at 2:31pm;

**Michael Foster**, Head of Civil Law Reform; and

**Martin Tyrrell**, Policy Adviser, Civil Law Reform

The witnesses briefed the Committee on Civil Law Reform work, Gender Recognition and Defamation.

The Chairperson declared an interest as a Member of the previous Committee which scrutinised the Private Members Bill on Defamation and as a participant in a court action flowing from the Defamation Act.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session. A number of issues were discussed including the timescale for legislation to amend the law on marriage and civil partnership, the statutory review of the Defamation Act, the current position in relation to gender recognition, online defamation, Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation (SLAPPs), no-fault divorce legislation, civil registration in Irish and the current resource and expertise within the Civil Law Reform Division, Departmental Solicitors Office.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek an update on whether there is any potential interaction between the Singapore Convention 2019 and the Windsor Framework.

The witness left the meeting at 3:14pm.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to schedule a briefing in the autumn, on the Queens University Report: Gender Recognition Act 2004 Evaluation and Policy Options.

## **8. Correspondence**

There were no items of correspondence.

## **9. Draft Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered the Forward Work Programme, as drafted.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to postpone a briefing on the Department of Finance Business Plan until 19 June 2024, schedule a briefing on the Main Estimates and Budget No.2 Bill on 19 June 2024 and to postpone a briefing on Building Regulations until 26 June 2024.

The Committee noted that a date for the briefing from the Head of the Civil Service would be confirmed during week commencing 3 June.

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

## **10. Any Other Business.**

None.

## **11. Date and Time of next meeting**

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 5 June 2024 at 2:00pm in Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:17pm.

**Matthew O'Toole MLA**

**Chairperson, Committee for Finance**

**5 June 2024**