



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

3 July 2024

Meeting Location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Matthew O'Toole MLA (Chairperson)

Paul Frew MLA

Deirdre Hargey MLA

Eóin Tennyson MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Apologies: Phillip Brett MLA

Gerry Carroll MLA

Nicola Brogan MLA

Steve Aiken MLA

In Attendance: Peter Hall Committee Clerk

Clairita Frazer Assistant Assembly Clerk

Stephen Magee Clerical Supervisor

Heather Graham Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 1:09pm in public session.

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Declaration of Interests

None.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Freedom of Information requests

Agreed: The Committee agreed to delegate authority to the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, during the forthcoming summer recess, to submit views on the releasing or withholding of information in any non-routine or contentious Freedom of Information requests received by the Committee; and that any such views expressed would be brought to the attention of the Committee at the first meeting after summer recess.

3.2 Correspondence received during summer recess

Agreed: The Committee agreed that correspondence received over the summer recess would be considered at the Committee's first meeting of the new session in September but any urgent matters would be dealt with via correspondence, should the need arise.

3.3 Minister of Finance – Future Primary Legislation

The Committee considered correspondence from the Minister of Finance in relation to a Financial Provisions Bill and Fiscal Council Bill and noted that briefings on both Bills had been indicatively scheduled for September.

Members welcomed the Minister's support for the move of spending under Sole Authority being legislated for under the Financial Provisions Bill as referenced during the Second Stage debate for the Budget Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the information on a future Financial Provisions Bill to relevant Statutory Committees.

Agreed: In relation to the Fiscal Council Bill, the Committee agreed to commence work over the summer recess period to prepare for pre-legislative scrutiny in September and also to forward the legislative instructions for the Bill to the Fiscal Council for its information.

3.4 Department of Finance – Transformation Bids 2024-25

The Committee noted that copies of the Department of Finance's Bids for Transformation Funding had been emailed to Members. Copies would also be in the meeting pack for the first meeting in September when further consideration could be given in advance of an update briefing on the Public Sector Transformation Board scheduled for 25 September.

4. Draft Minutes of Proceedings

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of 26 June 2024.

5. Matters arising

5.1 Department of Finance – Consultation on Non-Domestic and Domestic Rating Measures

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Finance regarding the Consultation on Non-Domestic and Domestic Rating Measures to support budget sustainability by raising additional revenue and work to clawback some Covid-related grants. Members also noted that an oral briefing on the consultation had been indicatively scheduled for 11 September.

5.2 Department of Finance – Special European Union Programme Body (SEUPB) Matters

The Committee considered a response from the Department of Finance regarding the SEUPB 2022 and 2023 Draft Accounts and excess expenditure incurred by SEUPB in those years.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request that it is kept informed about developments in this regard over the summer recess period and that a written update was provided for the first scheduled meeting on 11 September.

5.3 Department of Finance – Joint Exchequer Committee (JEC) meetings.

The Committee considered a response from the Department of Finance regarding details of the extent of meetings of the JEC.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request a written update from the Department of Finance each time a meeting of the JEC takes place.

5.4 Committee for Education – June Monitoring Bids

The Committee noted a response from the Committee for Education in relation to the Department of Education's June Monitoring Bids.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to create a "ready reckoner" tool for other Statutory Committees' use with appropriately referenced information, guidance, legislation and procedures which govern the Budget cycle. Relevant templates and documentation would also be included in order to provide greater transparency and to facilitate improved scrutiny going forward.

5.5 Pivotal – Features of an effective Programme for Government (PfG)

The Committee noted an infographic issued by Pivotal on the PfG.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider Correspondence and Draft Forward Work Programme.

11. Correspondence

- i. The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for the Economy on the production of Estimates Memoranda and the provision of evidence in respect of the outworking of the anticipated NICS-wide internal spending review, later in 2024

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance asking why Main Estimates memoranda was not commissioned from departments and to recommend that, in order to assist Committee scrutiny of departmental budgets, the memoranda should be commissioned going forward.

- ii. The Committee noted the 20th Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

12. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the Forward Work Programme, as drafted.

Members also considered a draft Forward Work Programme for Committee meetings in September 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to delay its scheduled strategy session until later in October to allow for scheduled update briefings from the Department of Finance on a number of key matters.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule briefings with relevant stakeholders to begin pre-legislative scrutiny of the Fiscal Council Bill.

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

The Committee adjourned at 1:34pm.

The Committee reconvened in open session at 1:40pm.

6. Department of Finance – Legislative Provision for Death and Still-birth Registrations – Oral Briefing from General Registrar (GRO) Officials:

The Committee considered an update in relation to legislative provision to enable both telephone and electronic registration of deaths and still-births. Members noted that the oral briefing scheduled for today could not proceed due to unavailability of the Chief Executive of Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (and Registrar General). Members also noted that the wording of proposed primary

legislation and a timetable for the passage of the required legislation would not be available for today's meeting.

Some Members expressed their disappointment with the update presented by the Department of Finance.

The Committee noted that the Permanent Secretary had made himself available to answer any questions that Members had in this regard.

Neil Gibson, Permanent Secretary of the Department of Finance joined the meeting at 1:53pm.

Members asked the Permanent Secretary a number of questions in relation to the matter including the anticipated timeline for legislative provisions to be put in place and the extent of instructions to the Office of Legislative Council (OLC).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request a copy of the legislative instructions to OLC as well as a chronology of Departmental activity and work in respect of this issue, including liaison with OLC and the Departmental Solicitors Office.

Consideration of this agenda item finished at 2:04pm.

7. Department of Finance - Business Plan 2024-25 – Oral briefing from the Department of Finance.

Agreed: Members agreed that the briefing should be reported by Hansard.

The following officials joined the meeting at 2:05pm;

Neil Gibson, Permanent Secretary, Department of Finance (DoF); and

Stewart Barnes, Finance and Corporate Services Director, DoF.

The Committee was briefed on the Department of Finance's Business Plan for 2024-25 which sets out the Department's priorities and targets for the coming year. The briefing was followed by a question and answer session. A number of issues were discussed including announcements in relation to the June Monitoring Round, potential for the Department of Finance to advise other departments on the provision of timely information to statutory Committees, transformation and sustainability

strands of work within the Department of Finance, climate change considerations, use of Financial Transactions Capital and community wealth building in other jurisdictions.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chairperson passed on best wishes to Stewart Barnes on this forthcoming retirement.

The officials left the meeting at 2:54pm.

8. Department of Finance - June Monitoring Round & Provisional Outturn – Oral Briefing from the Department of Finance.

Agreed: Members agreed that the briefing should be reported by Hansard.

The following officials joined the meeting at 2:55pm;

Joanne McBurney, Budget Director and Head of Public Spending
Directorate, Department of Finance (DoF);

Maryanne Smith, Head of Central Expenditure Division (CED), DoF; and

Cris Farmer, Head of In-year Monitoring, CED, DoF.

Deirdre Hargey left the meeting at 2:56pm

The Committee was briefed on the June Monitoring Round and the first Provisional and Forecast Outturn for 2023-24.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session. A number of issues were discussed including engagement with UK Treasury following the general election, future funding allocations and use of Financial Transactions Capital.

Members also discussed with officials how the presentation of outturn data could be changed to assist Committee scrutiny of the information provided.

On behalf of the Committee, the Chairperson thanked the officials for their continued in engagement with Members, particularly over the past number of weeks.

The officials left the meeting at 3:16pm.

Members noted that the next 2 agenda items would be considered concurrently and that officials would brief Members on both.

9. Department of Finance - Building Regulations (Energy Efficiency, Post-Grenfell Safety Measures and Disabled Access for Public Buildings) – Oral Briefing from the Department of Finance

10. Subordinate Legislation SL1 - The Building (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024

The following officials joined the meeting at 3:17pm;

John Burke, Head of Building Standards Branch, Department of Finance (DoF);

Billy Black, Principal Professional and Technical Officer, DoF; and

Damien Fairley, Senior Professional and Technical Officer, DoF.

Deirdre Hargey rejoined the meeting at 3:19pm.

The Committee was briefed on the current Building Regulations including on Energy Efficiency, Post-Grenfell Safety Measures and Disabled Access for Public Buildings. Officials also briefed Members on a proposed statutory rule: The Building (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024. Members noted a number of proposed amendments to the current Building Regulations to take account of fire safety requirements.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session, issues discussed included the wider review of departmental responsibilities in relation to Building Regulations and control, implications of the Grenfell Inquiry Report, cost and benefit analysis of the proposed fire safety proposals and Departmental Solicitors Office (DSO) comments on the proposed statutory rule.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request a diagram setting out the functions of both the Department of Finance and Department of Communities with regard to

Building Regulations; a list of current Northern Ireland Building Regulations Advisory Committee (NIBRAC) Members as well as details of any plans to fill any vacancies; and information on the working group on Building Safety – the terms of reference, scope and current work and objectives (and information on any predecessor groups).

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it would require further information before agreeing that it was content with the SL1 discussed, and agreed to request a copy of comments from DSO as well as confirmation that DSO were content with the SL1 as currently drafted; and clarity from the Department on the timescale and urgency for implementation of this proposed amendment to the Building Regulations.

The officials left the meeting at 3:52pm.

13. Any Other Business

Members discussed the written answer given to an Assembly Question (AQW 13348) and noted the high number of candidates who were unsuccessful in pre-recorded interview process predominantly due to end user/candidate technical issues (sound or/and video) and not the NICSHR platform

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an explanation for the high number of candidates (427) identified in June 23 - June 24 and information on what action is being taken to address the high numbers identified.

Members expressed their thanks to the Committee Clerk and team for their work over the last Assembly session and wished everyone a relaxing summer break.

14. Date and Time of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 11 September 2024 at 2:00pm in Room 21, Parliament Buildings. Members noted that should the Senate Chamber be available for Committee meetings from September, the likely location of the meeting may change.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:59pm.

Matthew O'Toole MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Finance

11 September 2024