



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

8 May 2024

Meeting Location: Room 21, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Matthew O'Toole MLA (Chairperson)
Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Eóin Tennyson MLA
Paul Frew MLA
Steve Aiken MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Gerry Carroll MLA
Nicola Brogan MLA

Apologies: Phillip Brett MLA
Deirdre Hargey MLA

In Attendance: Peter Hall Committee Clerk
Clairita Frazer Assistant Assembly Clerk
Heather Graham Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 2:00pm in public session.

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Declaration of Interests

None.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) Record Keeping and Minute Taking.

Paul Frew declared an interest as the serving Minister for the Economy from June to July 2021.

Steve Aiken declared an interest as the Chairperson of the Committee for Finance from January 2020 to March 2022.

The Committee discussed the implications of evidence being given during the COVID Inquiry, particularly in respect of record keeping and minute taking. In the context of ongoing Committee scrutiny of RHI Inquiry recommendations, Members discussed the Department of Finance's assessment of implementation of recommendations as provided to Committee in March 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request an update from the Department of Finance on its assessment of compliance with post RHI Inquiry recommendations, as considered during the Committee meeting on 10 April 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Committee Clerk would investigate if a suitable slot could be found in the forward work programme to schedule a briefing from the Head of the Civil Service before summer recess.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of 1 May 2024.

5. Matters arising

5.1. Department of Finance – Rural ATMs

The Committee noted additional information provided by the Department of Finance in relation to rural ATMs.

The Committee noted with concern the more general decline of banking institutions and ATMs in rural areas.

5.2 Department of Finance – Changes in Excess Deaths Methodology

The Committee noted additional information provided by the Department of Finance on the new approach to the measurement of excess deaths by place of death.

Members also noted a correction to a Committee briefing paper on the use of the Coronavirus Act 2020 in the GRO and the methodology for recording excess deaths.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that NISRA would consider the points raised by Members and provide a further response to a technical issue identified.

5.3 Department of Finance – Land Registration Employer Liability Cases

The Committee noted clarification on land registration employer liability cases, as requested following the Committee meeting on 17 April. Members voiced their disappointment with the response provided by the Department of Finance given potential implications of liabilities in the Department Resource Accounts.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek further information and detail of the Land Registry employer liability cases either under restriction or in closed session.

5.4 Department of Finance – Marriage and Civil Partnership Reform

The Committee noted additional information from the Department of Finance on the potential sanctions/tariffs and enforcement of the minimum age of marriage in any legislative reform. Members noted that research in this area would be forthcoming in the coming weeks.

5.5 Department of Finance – Shared Island Funding 2024-25 & Organisations accessing Shared Prosperity, Levelling UP and Community Ownership Funds

The Committee noted additional information on a number of issues relating to Shared Island funding in 2024-25 and a detailed breakdown of organisations which have accessed Shared Prosperity, Levelling Up and Community Ownership Funds.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek detail on the governance and accountability framework on Shared Island framework; including information on who is responsible for scrutiny etc.

5.6 Department of Finance – Use of temporary promotions in the Northern Ireland Civil Service

The Committee noted an update on departmental plans to address this issue and information on engagement between Trade Unions and the Department of Finance in relation to this issue.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that this issue would be discussed during any future briefing from the Head of the Civil Service.

Gerry Carroll left the meeting at 2:30pm

5.7 Previous Engagement with Treasury Officials

The Committee noted information on previous engagement between Treasury Officials and the Northern Ireland Assembly, in particular information on an evidence session during the Transitional Assembly in 2006.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities for a view on the Finance Committee receiving evidence from the UK Treasury on the Executive Restoration Package Settlement.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Finance to seek an update and detail on her engagement with the UK Treasury.

5.8 Non-Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) Pay Claims

The Committee noted an update on its request for information on outstanding pay claims, including those for non-NICS staff where the Department of Finance has a locus, pending a formal response in due course.

6. SL1 The Public Service Pensions (Exercise of Powers, Compensation and Information) (Amendment) Directions (Northern Ireland) 2024

Steve Aiken declared an interest as the Chair of the Northern Ireland Assembly Pension Trust.

The Committee noted the above directions.

7. & 8. SL1s – The Deaths and Still-Births (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 and The Deaths and Still-Births (Electronic Communications) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024.

The Committee considered additional information in relation to two proposed statutory rules to make permanent legislative provisions to allow for changes to civil registration legislation to enable electronic transfer of documents and registration of deaths and still births by telephone.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the explanation provided and there was no reason to delay these proposed rules further. Members are content to make permanent legislative provisions to allow for changes to civil registration legislation to enable electronic transfer of documents and registration of deaths and still births by telephone.

9. Draft Executive Budget 2024-25 – Oral Briefing from the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre

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

Gerry Carroll re-joined the meeting at 2:39pm.

The following witness joined the meeting at 2:39pm.

Gareth Hetherington, Director, Ulster University Economic Policy Centre

Members were briefed on potential key priorities for the Executive's Budget for 2024-25.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session. A number of issues were discussed during the session including; multi-year budgets, Programme for Government, impact of the voluntary and community sector, necessary capital investment, reform of public services, skills interventions, policy interventions to stimulate economic growth and welfare mitigation.

Diane Forsythe highlighted her work with the All-Party Group on Voluntary and Community Sector in the context of discussions.

During discussions, Gareth Hetherington declared an interest as a Trustee of Positive Futures.

The Committee noted that the Ulster University Economic Policy Centre had been asked by the Minister of Finance to conduct research on the potential for uniform business rates. Members noted that a briefing on this research could be scheduled in due course.

The Chairperson thanked Gareth for his attendance.

Gareth Hetherington left the meeting at 3:47pm.

10. EU Issues: Replacement Funding Streams and PEACE PLUS Programme – Oral Briefing from Department of Finance and Special European Union Programme Board representatives.

The following officials joined the meeting at 3:48pm.

Tony Simpson, Deputy Secretary, Strategic Policy and Reform Directorate, Department of Finance;

Dominic McCullough, Director, Strategic Funding Division, Department of Finance; and

Laura McDonald, Deputy Director, Strategic Funding Division, Department of Finance.

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

The officials updated the Committee on the Department of Finance engagement with the UK Government on new funding streams to replace those no longer coming from the European Union.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session. A number of issues were discussed during the session including; development of the Shared Prosperity Fund, challenges to engagement with Whitehall, the quantum of EU funding lost and consequences of this for particular sectors, the governance of the Shared Prosperity Fund Group and barriers to accessing funding streams.

Steve Aiken left the meeting at 4:00pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request information on a high-level breakdown of funding to devolved regions under new funding streams compared to what was allocated under European Structural and Regional Development Funds.

The following officials joined the meeting at 4:10pm.

Gina McIntyre, Chief Executive Officer, Special European Union Programme Board (SEUPB); and

Paul Beattie, Managing Authority Director, Special European Union Programme Board.

The officials briefed the Committee on SEUPB's work to manage and deliver the EU Funding Programme in Northern Ireland.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session. A number of issues were discussed during the session including the six thematic areas in the PEACE

PLUS Programme, feedback received on PEACE PLUS from local councils and change maker funds.

Nicola Brogan left the meeting at 4:18pm.

Diane Forsythe indicated that she would write to separately to the SEUPB in relation to issues experienced by community groups accessing funds through local councils.

Due to anticipated quorum difficulties, Members agreed to pause the oral briefing to consider the Draft Forward Work Programme next and defer consideration of Correspondence until next week's meeting.

11. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the Forward Work Programme, as agreed, noting briefings that have been scheduled on budget scrutiny.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that Committee meetings scheduled for 15 and 22 May would start at the earlier time of 1pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that information and views on budget scrutiny should be sought from other Statutory Committees on the Draft Executive Budget 2024-25, including any Hansard reports of scrutiny sessions performed by Statutory committees regarding the 2024-25 Draft Executive Budget.

10. EU Issues: Replacement Funding Streams and PEACE PLUS Programme – Oral Briefing from Department of Finance and Special European Union Programme Board representatives. (continued)

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance and briefing.

The officials left the meeting at 4:32pm.

12. Any Other Business.

None.

13. Date and Time of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 15 May 2024 at 1:00pm in Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

Gerry Carroll left the meeting at 4:33pm and due to loss of quorum the meeting was adjourned at 4:33pm.

Matthew O'Toole MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Finance

15 May 2024