



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

18 September 2024

Meeting Location: Room 21, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Matthew O'Toole MLA (Chairperson)

Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Phillip Brett MLA

Paul Frew MLA

Eóin Tennyson MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Steve Aiken MLA

Nicola Brogan MLA

Gerry Carroll MLA

Deirdre Hargey MLA

Apologies: None

In Attendance: Peter Hall Committee Clerk

Clairita Frazer Assistant Assembly Clerk

Heather Graham Clerical Officer

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

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Declaration of Interests

None.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 The Committee noted the Public Income and Expenditure Account 2023-24 – Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund.

3.2 The Committee considered the urgent Ministerial Oral Statement on the pausing of City and Growth Deals Funding Commitment by the British Government made on Monday 16 September 2024. Members also considered an urgent update from the Department of Finance on City and Growth Deals.

Deirdre Hargey joined the meeting at 2:09pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Finance, Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Secretary of State for Northern to reflect the Committee's position on the developments around the pausing of the City and Growth Deals Funding Commitment.

3.3 The Committee discussed the Department of Finance's role in relation to commissioning budget information from other Departments.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request that the Department informs it as a matter of course when information is commissioned from other departments in relation to Budgetary Matters, including details of what has been commissioned, with a view to sharing this information with other Statutory Committees and the Northern Ireland Assembly Audit Committee as appropriate.

4. Draft Minutes of Proceedings

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of 11 September 2024.

5. Matters Arising

5.1 Committee for the Executive Office – draft Programme for Government

The Committee noted correspondence from the Executive Office Committee regarding its scrutiny of the draft Programme for Government.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence from the Executive Office Committee pending a briefing from the Department of Finance on the draft Programme for Government which would also cover wider departmental responsibility and other relevant issues.

The Committee also noted that its correspondence to other Committees had been issued, this was to encourage other Committees to seek briefings on how departmental responsibilities in the draft Programme for Government are linked to specific budgets to assist with overarching budget scrutiny.

5.2 Scottish Government - Programme for Government 2024-25

The Committee noted a copy of the Scottish Government's Programme for Government 2024-25. Members discussed the detail on budget and the 4-year legislative programme with associated figures and targets.

5.3 & 5.4 Draft correspondence regarding the Apple Settlement

The Committee considered draft correspondence in relation to the European Union Court of Justice's decision regarding Apple's payment to the Irish Government of €13bn in unpaid taxes.

Agreed: The Committee agreed write initially to the Minister of Finance asking for detail of any discussions around the transfer of these funds to the Irish exchequer, as well as the timescale and any early indication of how the funds might be used.

Paul Frew left the meeting at 2:32pm.

5.5 Department of Finance – September update on Interim Public Sector Transformation Board

The Committee noted an update provided by the Department of Finance concerning the work of the Interim Public Sector Transformation Board and details of the transformation proposals selected by the Board to move forward, pending an oral briefing at next week's meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request clarification on whether the proposals going forward were already in progress before being selected by the Transformation Board to move forward, along with a brief summary of each project's expected purpose and aims, along with value of each project.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to forward the update provided to other relevant Statutory Committees, with a view to sharing further information received from the Department of Finance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to move into closed session for the next agenda item at 2:38pm.

6. Registration of Deaths and Still-Births Bill – Written Briefing

The Committee discussed consideration of options which could allow for legislative provision for Baby Loss Certifications within the Registration of Deaths and Still-Births Bill.

Paul Frew rejoined the meeting at 2:45pm.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 2:50pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to move back into public session at 2:58pm.

Phillip Brett rejoined the meeting at 2:58pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance asking for clarification on what is possible within the existing draft Bill, including if there is potential to widen the draft Bill to allow for legislative provision for Baby Loss Certificates as well as any further detail around logistics and resources of making such provision. Confirmation would also be sought in respect of what options were possible in order to legislate for this provision in Westminster.

7. Financial Provisions Bill – 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 3:00pm;

Patrick Neeson – Supply Division, Public Spending Directorate, Department of Finance;

Ian Fleming – Supply Division, Public Spending Directorate, Department of Finance; and

Sarah Gibson – Supply Division, Public Spending Directorate, Department of Finance.

The officials briefed the Committee on the proposed provisions in the Financial Provisions Bill that Departments require for routine financial matters for which it would not be practical to have specific legislation.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session. A number of issues were discussed including the timescale for introduction of the Bill, implications of increasing

the limit on advances from the Consolidated Fund and the extent of Mineral & Petroleum Accounts.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek further information from the Department of Finance in relation to points raised regarding legislative provision for Mineral & Petroleum Accounts.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to circulate the Department of Finance's briefing paper to relevant Statutory Committees and the Northern Ireland Assembly Audit Committee indicating that their opinion will be sought on areas specific to their remit during the Committee Stage for the Bill.

The officials left the meeting at 3:42pm.

8. Budget Update - Oral briefing from Department of Finance Officials

The following officials joined the meeting at 3:43pm;

Joanne McBurney, Head of Public Spending Directorate, Department of Finance; and

Jeff McGuinness, Head of Budget Sustainability, Department of Finance.

The officials briefed the Committee on matters related to the Budget, October Monitoring Round, and an urgent information gathering exercise conducted by the Department of Finance over the summer recess period. Members were also briefed on the Minister of Finance's discussions with the Chancellor and Ministerial communication with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. Officials also provided further information in relation to developments concerning the pausing of City and Growth Deals Funding Commitment.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session. A number of issues were discussed including the Minister's engagement surrounding City and Growth Deals,

the Budget Sustainability Plan, actions to address the scale of Departmental Budget over commitments and potential for multi-year Budgets.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request further detail from the Department of Finance on any advances pending from the Consolidated Fund. Members also agreed to schedule a briefing from the Department of Finance's Cash Management Branch.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 4:26pm.

Gerry Carroll left the meeting at 4:38pm.

Members noted that officials would provide the Committee with a copy of the Budget Sustainability Plan when it had been agreed by the Executive and before publication.

Jeff McGuinness (Departmental official) left the meeting at 4:47pm.

9. Forecast Outturn Data – June/July 2024 – Written Briefing from the Department of Finance

The Committee noted a written briefing from the Department of Finance regarding June and July public expenditure and forecast outturn information from Departments, information on Departmental actions to address over commitments in both June and July and explanations for variances in outturn and forecast outturn figures for May through to July.

Members voiced their appreciation for the clear format in which the data had been presented to the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share the Forecast Outturn data with other Statutory Committees and the Northern Ireland Assembly Audit Committee to assist their budget scrutiny.

Joanne McBurney (Departmental official) left the meeting at 4:51pm.

10. Correspondence

i. The Committee noted a statistical publication from the NISRA on sickness absence in the NI Civil Service 2023/24.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request an oral briefing from the Department of Finance in order to explore a number of issues discussed.

ii. The Committee noted the Financial Reporting Advisory Board – Annual Report 2023-24.

iii. The Committee noted a report from Pivotal – The first 7 months of the restored Northern Ireland Executive.

iv. The Committee noted a Departmental Guide on the Department of Finance published by the Northern Ireland Audit Office.

v. The Committee noted the 22nd Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

Steve Aiken left the meeting at 5:00pm.

11. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the Forward Work Programme, as drafted.

Agreed: Members agreed to begin the Committee meetings on 25 September and 2 October at the earlier time of 1pm.

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

12. Any Other Business

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Finance asking for her assessment of Departmental actions to address the budgetary over commitments

identified as part of the information gathering exercise conducted by the Department of Finance over the summer recess period.

13. Date and Time of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 25 September 2024 at 1:00pm Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:04pm.

Matthew O'Toole MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Finance

25 September 2024