



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

11 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

Steve Aiken MLA

Eóin Tennyson MLA

Gerry Carroll MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Deirdre Hargey MLA

Apologies: Nicola Brogan MLA

In Attendance: Peter Hall Committee Clerk

Clairita Frazer Assistant Assembly Clerk

Heather Graham Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 2:05pm in public session.

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Declaration of Interests

None.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 The Committee noted correspondence from the Head of the Civil Service regarding her briefing session on 26 June 2024.

3.2 The Committee noted an invitation to the Committee Chairperson to attend the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council 2nd Annual Conference on 22 October 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chair would attend the conference in his capacity as Chairperson of the Committee.

3.3 The Committee noted an invitation from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to the Annual Report on the Implementation of Article 2 of the Windsor Framework.

3.4 The Committee noted a press release from the Department of Finance publicising visits by the Minister of Finance to two hotels which have benefitted from the Investment Fund.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request a written briefing from the Department of Finance on the fund with a view to considering an oral briefing and/or site visits at later dates. Clarification would also be sought on how the Department of Finance fits into the governance framework for the Fund.

3.5 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Finance providing Indicative timings for budget cycle for 2024/25.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the indicative timings to all Assembly Statutory Committees.

Members also noted details of an “urgent” budget information gathering exercise undertaken by the Department of Finance over the summer recess period.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request copies of the responses to this exercise. Members also agreed to request detail on the context of the exercise and how it may align with the draft Programme for Government.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request copies of responses to the October Monitoring exercise.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to ask the Minister of Finance for an early read-out of her engagement with the UK Chancellor in relation to budgetary matters.

3.6 The Committee noted the recent publication of the draft Programme for Government.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request a briefing from the Department of Finance on the draft Programme for Government to inform the Committee’s scrutiny of the draft document.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to other Statutory Committees to encourage them to seek budget linkage to their scrutiny of their respective departments’ PfG obligations.

4. Draft Minutes of Proceedings

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of 3 July 2024.

1. Matters Arising

5.1 Department of Finance – Interim Public Sector Transformation Board

The Committee noted copies of the detailed transformation proposals submitted by the Department of Finance to the Interim Public Sector Transformation Board. Members noted that proposals were submitted in the following areas; Integr8 Programme, LPS Strategic Asset Management Unit, Next Generation Citizen Services, NISRA Transforming Data Collection Analytics and Dissemination, Civil Service Workforce and Organisation of the Future and the Future of Records Management for NICS, pending an update oral briefing on 25 September 2024.

Deirdre Hargey joined the meeting at 2:23pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request an oral briefing from the Interim Public Sector Transformation Board.

5.2 Department of Finance - Scrutiny of the 2024-25 Budget.

The Committee noted a response from the Minister for Finance regarding Statutory Committee's scrutiny of the 2024-25 Budget including copies of templates provided to all departments to complete during a commissioning exercise, following the restoration of the Executive.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to copy the correspondence and attachments to Assembly Statutory Committees indicating that they may wish to request these templates from their departments going forward.

5.3 Department of Finance - Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation

The Committee noted a response from the Minister for Finance regarding Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to copy the correspondence to the Justice Committee and maintain a watching brief on this issue.

5.4 Department of Finance – Disciplinary Matters – Element of the Renewable Heat Inquiry

The Committee noted an update from the Department of Finance regarding the broad thematic areas to be addressed in the revised Civil Service Discipline policy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request a specific timeline on the actions outlined in the response.

5.5 Department of Finance - Non-Domestic RHI Business Case addendum

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Finance regarding clarification and supplementary information received by Department of Finance from the Department of the Economy on the Non-Domestic RHI business case addendum.

Members noted that figures for the revised tariff had been discussed during today's Economy Committee meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Clerk would contact the Clerk of the Economy Committee to obtain further detail on what was discussed during the Economy Committee meeting with a view to pursuing this further with the Department of Finance.

5.6 Department of Finance - Public Scrutiny Finance Training

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Finance on the scrutiny points from Module 4 of the Public Scrutiny Finance Training – In-Year Monitoring.

5.7 Department of Finance – Role in Budget Development

The Committee noted clarification from the Department of Finance on the role it played to develop the Budget when there was no Executive in place and the Northern Ireland Office was directing the Budget process.

5.8 Department of Finance – Use of ISNI Investing Activity Reports

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Finance regarding City and Growth Deal projects and the use of the ISNI Investing Activity Reports from the ISNI Delivery Tracking System.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request that the Department of Finance ensures that the City & Growth Deals quarterly update reports are sent to the Committee for consideration of further detailed oral briefings.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share the response from the Department of Finance to the Economy Committee which has an interest in this issue.

5.9 Member of the public - NICS Recruitment Process

Steve Aiken declared an interest in this item as it relates to a constituency matter.

The Committee noted correspondence from a member of the public regarding the recruitment process for the post of Administrative Officer in the Northern Ireland Civil Service.

5.10 Department of Finance AQW 13348 Pre-recorded Interview Process

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Finance regarding the high number of candidates who were unsuccessful in the pre-recorded interview process predominantly due to end user/candidate technical issues (sound or/and video) and not the NICS HR platform. Members voiced their concern with the high numbers outlined.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request a detailed written briefing on issues raised in the response with a view to considering an oral briefing on the issue.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Department of Finance's response to Daniel McCrossan MLA who asked the Assembly question on this matter.

5.11 Northern Ireland Fiscal Council – The NI Executive's 2024-25 Budget Supplementary Note

The Committee noted a supplementary report on the NI Executive's 2024-25 Budget published by the NI Fiscal Council.

5.12 Department of Finance – Joint Exchequer Committee Meetings

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Finance regarding Joint Exchequer Committee (JEC) meetings indicating that agenda, minutes and papers are confidential but a joint communique will issue after each meeting and this will be provided to the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request detail on what formal JEC meetings have taken place to date.

Phillip Brett left the meeting at 2:52pm.

5.13 Department of Finance – Monthly Outturn Written Briefings

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Finance regarding forecast outturn information and the provision of three tables to the Committee highlighting variance between the current and previous month's forecast, including detail around funding for the Northern Ireland Protocol / Winsor Framework.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request that the Department of Finance highlights anticipated peaks and troughs in departments' expenditure, for example, highlighting where a department will be making significant payments to stakeholders.

5.14 Department of Finance – Special EU Programme Board Accounts

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Finance which indicated that the SEUPB Accounts for 2022 had been laid on 3 July and that the 2023 Accounts are still being audited and certification is awaited before Ministerial agreement is sought to lay before the Assembly.

Steve Aiken left the meeting at 2:59pm.

5.15 Department of Finance – Follow-up Information from Head of the Civil Service Oral Briefing

The Committee noted correspondence from the Head of the Civil Service responding to a number of issues raised by the Committee during a briefing on 26 June. Issues included the Audit Regime for NICS Record-keeping policy which includes the NICS Records Management Policy and the NICS Records Management Governance Framework; the NICS Records Retention and Disposal Policy; The NICS Mobile Device Security Policy; Communication from HOCS to Grade 2s in the NICS regarding NICS Performance Management Arrangements; Timescales for Interaction between Assembly Committees and Departments; Detail of work associated with the Benchmarking exercise used to develop the new NICS Pay Strategy; Detail of the NICS Apprenticeship Policy; Statistics up to end of June 2024 for NICS Inward and Outward Secondments, Statistics up to end of May 2024 for unfilled vacancies across the NICS and Confirmation of dates of June Monitoring Round announcements.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request further information in respect of unfilled vacancies including information on a potential plan to address the high level across the NICS.

5.16 Minister of Finance – Engagement with UK Financial Services Bodies and Banks

The Committee noted a response from the Minister of Finance regarding the policy intent and objectives in relation to engagement with both Treasury and regulatory authorities in respect of banking matters.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request an update on the Minister's work in this regard at an appropriate time.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to explore the feasibility of oral evidence sessions with relevant stakeholders in the local banking sector as well as conducting research on the local financial services landscape.

5.17 Minister of Finance – Inquiry into Fiscal Inter-Governmental Relations

The Committee noted a response from the Minister of Finance regarding the dispute resolution process with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury relating to the funding for the Troubles Permanent Disablement Scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a further update on this issue in due course.

5.18 Department of Finance - RDEL, CDEL and FTC Bids from the Executive Office

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Finance regarding the Civil Contingencies Bunker, the creation of the role of Chief Scientific Advisor and a bid for the Centre of Government Transformation.

5.19 Northern Ireland Fiscal Council - Interim Fiscal Framework for NI and comments on June Monitoring

The Committee noted correspondence from the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council providing an update on the Interim Fiscal Framework for Northern Ireland and comments on June Monitoring.

5.20 Department of Finance - Interim Transformation Board Update

The Committee noted the latest update from the Department of Finance on the Interim Transformation Board, pending an update oral briefing on 25 September 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to receive the oral briefing on Legislative Provision for Deaths and Still-birth Registrations and consider the associated SL1 before any further business.

7. Legislative Provision for Deaths and Still-birth Registrations – Oral briefing from General Registrar Office Officials and

13. The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Registration of Deaths and Still-Births) (Extension) (No.3) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

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

The following officials joined the meeting at 3:18pm;

Dr Phillip Wales, Registrar General, Department of Finance; and

Aoife Rooney, Deputy Registrar General, Department of Finance.

The officials briefed the Committee on work to make permanent legislative provisions to enable both telephone and electronic registration of deaths or still-births and electronic transmission of documentation in these circumstances.

The Chairperson left the meeting at 3:21pm and the Deputy Chairperson assumed the Chair.

Officials also briefed Members on a proposed statutory rule to extend temporary provisions under the Coronavirus Act 2020 to allow for both telephone and electronic registration of deaths or still-births and electronic transmission of documentation in these circumstances.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session. A number of issues were discussed including, drafting capability within the Departmental Solicitors Office (DSO), the timeline of DSO advice regarding secondary legislation to enact legislative provision as well as the timeframe for the necessary primary legislation. Members also discussed the potential for the Deaths and Still-Births Bill to include provision for Baby-Loss Certification Scheme and consequences for the timeframe for primary legislation.

The Chairperson rejoined the meeting at 3:40pm and resumed the Chair.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request further information on what support is provided to those people registering deaths and still-births, particularly those whose first language is not English.

Gerry Carroll left the meeting at 3:49pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the proposed Statutory Rule to extend temporary provisions under the Coronavirus Act 2020 to allow for both telephone and electronic registration of deaths or still-births and electronic transmission of documentation in these circumstances.

The officials left the meeting at 3:51pm.

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

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Finance which addressed a number of issues including 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 Members, details of any plans to fill any vacancies; and information on the working group on Building Safety.

The Committee also noted a response from the Department of Finance regarding proposed Statutory Rule to amend the Building Regulations (NI) 2012 to introduce new fire safety proposals including comments on the proposed rule from the

Departmental Solicitors Office and clarity on the timescale and urgency of the proposed rule.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the proposed Statutory Rule to amend the Building Regulations (NI) 2012 to introduce new fire safety proposals.

Agreed: The Committee to seek an update once the further findings of the Grenfell Inquiry are published and considered by the Department and to seek an update on the work of the Task and Finish Group as well as the options agreed upon by the Ministers at an appropriate time.

8. Rating Policy - Oral briefing from Department of Finance Officials

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

The following officials joined the meeting at 3:55pm;

Sharon Magee, Interim Head of Land and Property Services, Department of Finance; and

Andrew McAvoy, Director of Rating Policy, Land and Property Services, Department of Finance.

The officials briefed the Committee on rating policy matters including next steps following the consultation on Non-Domestic and Domestic Rating Measures to support budget sustainability by raising additional revenue.

Gerry Carroll rejoined the meeting at 3:56pm.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session. A number of issues were discussed including the anticipated timeline for Executive consideration of the short, medium and long term rating policy proposals, anticipated secondary legislation and potential implications of any policy change.

Steve Aiken rejoined the meeting at 4:08pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request further information on the analysis carried out on those home owners who are current beneficiaries of support as a result of the maximum capital value cap and the cross jurisdiction comparison of non-domestic vacant property.

The Committee wished Sharon Magee the best of luck in her retirement and thanked her for all her work and constructive engagement with the Committee.

The officials left the meeting at 4:35pm.

9. Correspondence

Diane Forsythe declared an interest as a current Member of the Public Accounts Committee.

- i. The Committee noted a copy of the Special European Union Programme Board Annual Report and Accounts 2022.
- ii. The Committee noted a copy of the Department of Finance - Departmental Report and Accounts 2023-24.
- iii. The Committee noted a copy of the Department of Finance - Departmental Report and Accounts 2023-24 Superannuation and Other Allowances Pension Schemes.
- iv. The Committee noted a copy of the Department of Finance - Departmental Report and Accounts 2023-24 Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman.
- v. The Committee noted a copy of the Department of Finance - Departmental Report and Accounts 2023-24 – Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.
- vi. The Committee noted a copy of the UK Statistics Agency Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24.

vii. The Committee noted the Hansard transcript of the June monitoring and provisional outturn briefing which took place at the meeting of 3 July 2024.

viii. The Committee noted the Hansard transcript of the Department of Finance Business Plan briefing which took place at the meeting of 3 July 2024.

ix. The Committee noted correspondence between the Committee for Education and the Department of Finance regarding the end of the Shared Prosperity Fund in March 2025 and the establishment of a replacement scheme in the context of the Youth Start Consortium.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request that the Department of Finance keeps it fully informed of developments in relation to the end of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and replacement scheme.

x. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Finance to the Communities Committee regarding the Commissioner for Older People Report 'At the Centre of Government Planning: The Programme for Government and Preparing for an Ageing Population'.

xi. The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Finance providing a Summary of the Chancellor of the Exchequer's Statement to Parliament on 29 July 2024.

xii. The Committee noted an Urgent Written Ministerial Statement on the closure of the RHI Scheme made on 30 July 2024 by the Minister for the Economy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that further consideration of this matter would be scheduled when clarification from the Economy Committee Clerk was obtained as referenced in 5.5 above.

xiii. The Committee noted correspondence from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council in relation to increasing insurance premiums and the impact this is having across all parts of Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Committee for the Economy and to inform the Council of this decision. Members

also agreed to ask that the Economy Committee keep the Committee informed of its work in this regard.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request an update from the Department of Finance on the implications for the budget of increasing insurance premiums for the public sector/NICS.

xiv. The Committee noted a MLA Briefing on Racism and Hate in Northern Ireland received from the Equality Commission in advance of the Assembly recall on 8th August.

xv. The Committee noted a Memorandum of Reply from the Department of Finance to the Public Accounts Committee report “Mental Health Services in Northern Ireland”

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the report to the Committee for Health for its information.

xvi. The Committee noted a Written Ministerial Statement by the Minister for Finance announcing a cash advance from the Northern Ireland Consolidated Fund to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and further clarification from the Department of Finance on the reason for the advance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the further clarification from the Department of Finance to the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs for information.

xvii. The Committee noted the 21st Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

10. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the Forward Work Programme, as drafted.

Agreed: Notwithstanding agreements already reached during today’s meeting, the Committee also agreed to schedule a briefing on the Fiscal Framework (to include the

“urgent” budget information gathering exercise, October Monitoring and multi-year budget work), an update briefing on discussions with the UK Treasury, a briefing on the capacity of the Departmental Solicitor’s Office and an update briefing from the Minister of Finance.

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

9. Any Other Business

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider draft correspondence to the Minister of Finance and the Republic of Ireland’s Finance Minister regarding Northern Ireland receiving any part of payments made by Apple following the recent court decision.

10. Date and Time of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 18 September 2024 at 2:00pm Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:10pm.

Matthew O’Toole MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Finance

18 September 2024