



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

17 April 2024

Meeting Location: Room 21, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present:

Matthew O'Toole MLA (Chairperson)

Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Eóin Tennyson MLA

Gerry Carroll MLA

Nicola Brogan MLA

Deirdre Hargey MLA

Steve Aiken MLA

Phillip Brett MLA

Paul Frew MLA

Apologies: None

In Attendance:

Peter Hall Committee Clerk

Heather Graham Clerical Officer

Suzanne Patton Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 2:02pm in public session

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Declaration of Interests

None.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Ministerial Written Statement – 2023-24 Final Plan – Further Allocations

The Committee noted a Ministerial Written Statement regarding Executive agreement to make further budget allocations in 2023-24.

3.2 Northern Ireland Competition Forum

The Committee noted an invitation to a Northern Ireland Competition Forum seminar entitled: "Digital Regulation: What it means for businesses and consumers in Northern Ireland"

Agreed. The Committee agreed that any Member wishing to attend the seminar would contact the Forum directly.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of 10 April 2024.

Deirdre Hargey joined the meeting at 2:08pm

5. Matters arising

5.1. Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA)

The Committee noted follow-up information from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency regarding the measurement of excess deaths by place of death.

Agreed: The Committee welcomed the response from NISRA and agreed to request sight of any response from the Office of National Statistics in relation to this new approach. Members also agreed, that in the interests of transparency, they would be supportive of NISRA continuing to produce weekly deaths statistics based on the simple five-year average method alongside those statistics based on the new approach and modelling.

5.2 Correspondence from the Northern Ireland Assembly Audit Committee

The Committee noted copy correspondence from the Northern Ireland Assembly Audit Committee to the Finance Minister regarding the 2024-25 Draft Budgets for the Northern Ireland Audit Office, Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman and Northern Ireland Assembly Commission.

5.3 Spring Supplementary Estimates (SSEs) briefing

The Committee noted additional information from the Department of Finance on employer liability cases and Shared Island income in 2023-24.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request detail on the nature and value of the compensation claims currently pending against Land and Property Service.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek information from the Department of Finance on what Shared Island funding it is expecting in the 2024-25 financial year and the Department's understanding of what accounting mechanism will be used to draw down and allocate such funds, as well as the Department's perspective on how money channelled through the Northern Ireland Office is accounted for.

5.4 Shared Prosperity Fund, Levelling up Fund and Community Ownership Fund

The Committee noted an update from the Department of Finance on the current position with funds being drawn down from Shared Prosperity Fund, Levelling Up Fund and Community Ownership Fund.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request a detailed breakdown of which organisations have accessed these funds as well as the amounts they have received from them.

5.5. Research and Information Service (RaiSe) Budget and Public Finance scrutiny

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Finance to the scrutiny points highlighted during recent RaiSe training on Budget and Public Finance.

5.6 Correspondence to the Committee for Communities

The Committee noted a response from the Finance Minister to the Committee for Communities regarding recruitment, retention and the use of the temporary promotions in the Department for Communities and the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS).

The Committee Clerk declared an interest as the Vice-Chair of the Northern Ireland Assembly NIPSA Branch Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an update from the Department of Finance on its plans to address the issue of such a high proportion of NICS staff being temporarily promoted and information on the extent of engagement between Trade Unions and the Department in relation to this issue.

5.7 Department of Finance – Embargoed Statements

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Finance regarding the rationale for embargoing Ministerial Statements.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek further information from the Department of Finance on the Executive Office guidance regarding these embargos and to ask the Executive Office Committee if it has considered this matter.

5.8 Spring Supplementary Estimates

The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding the provision of hard copies of the Spring Supplementary Estimates.

Members noted that the Committee would be provided with hard copies of such documents which had previously been provided to the Committee.

5.9 Public Bodies Bill – Review of Arm’s Length Bodies

The Committee noted an update from the Department of Finance on a potential Public Bodies Bill – Review of Arm’s Length Bodies (ALBs).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider relevant recommendations from the Renewable Heat Inquiry in the context of reviewing ALBs.

5.10 Legislative Consent for the Trade (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) Bill

The Committee noted an update from the Department of Finance indicating that the Trade (Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership) Bill would proceed without legislative consent in Northern Ireland.

5.11 Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters Bill)

The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister of Finance regarding Legislative Consent for the Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider this issue further at next week’s meeting.

6. SR 2024/87 The Rates (Temporary Rebate) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Committee considered SR 2024/87 The Rates (Temporary Rebate) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 which would reinstate the ‘Back in Business’ scheme for the period up to 31st March 2025.

Members noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules had not drawn any matters on the rule to the attention of the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee for Finance has considered SR 87/2024 The Rates (Temporary Rebate) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 and recommends that it be affirmed by the Assembly.

7. SR 2024/88 The Rates (Exemption of ATMs in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Committee considered SR 2024/88 The Rates (Exemption of ATMs in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 which would restore the rates exemption for separate entries in the Valuation List associated with automatic telling machines (ATMs) in a designated rural area.

Members noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules had not drawn any matters on the rule to the attention of the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request further information from the Department of Finance on a number of issues related to rural ATMs, including statistics on the numbers of rural ATMs over the last 5 years, current location and operators of rural ATMs and if the Department has considered ways to publicise the availability of a rates rebate for rural ATMs. Members also agreed to request information on how many current recipients of the rates rebate for rural ATMs charge for use of those ATMs.

Agreed: The Committee for Finance has considered SR 88/2024 The Rates (Exemption of ATMs in Rural Areas) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 and recommends that it be affirmed by the Assembly.

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 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 to request information from the Department of Finance on the reasons why England was unable to bring forward powers to enable remote registration of deaths and still-births and had to revert to in-person registration in March 2022.

9. Marriage and Civil Partnership Reform – Oral Briefing from Department of Finance

The following officials joined the meeting at 2:42pm.

Michael Foster, Head of Civil Law Reform Division, Department of Finance

Dr Martin Tyrrell, Departmental official, The Executive Office.

The officials briefed the Committee on potential amendments to marriage law to include belief marriage and amendments to the law on marriage and civil partnership to increase the minimum age to 18.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session. A number of issues were raised during the session including; the timetable for a Bill to address the reforms discussed, statistics on belief marriages and marriage between the age of 16 and 18, scope of a potential Bill, status of independent celebrants and potential sanctions or tariffs being considered as part of any reform.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek additional information from the Department of Finance on potential sanctions or tariffs within equivalent GB Legislation relating to the minimum age of marriage. The Committee also agreed to request that the Department keeps it informed on progress with the timeframe, parameters and extent of legislation to bring forward reform in this area.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

The officials left the meeting at 3:19pm.

10. Final Forecast Outturn 2023-24 – Oral Briefing from Department of Finance

The following officials joined the meeting at 3:20pm

Joanne McBurney, Budget Director, Head of Public Spending, Department of Finance

Maryann Smith Head of Central Expenditure Division, Department of Finance;
and

Cris Farmer Head of In-year Monitoring, Central Expenditure Directorate,
Department of Finance

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

The officials briefed the Committee on Final Forecast Outturn figures; including Non Ring-Fenced DEL, Ring-Fenced Resource DEL, Capital DEL and Ring-Fenced Financial Transactions Capital.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session. A number of issues were discussed during the session including further budget allocations made in 2023-24, the current position relating to Executive agreement to a Draft Budget for 2024-25, including the challenging budget position going forward, how depreciation and certain impairments are reflected within ring-fenced resource DEL forecast variance and the rationale for variances in certain Departmental budgets.

Gerry Carroll declared an interest as a former recipient of Student Loans.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

The officials left the meeting at 3:59pm.

11. Correspondence

- i. The Committee noted an urgent Written Ministerial Statement from the Economy Minister regarding Further Education Lecturers' Pay Dispute and current pay offer.

- ii. The Committee considered correspondence from the Public Accounts Committee regarding an Inquiry into the Northern Ireland Audit Office Report on “Major Capital Projects: Follow-up Report”.

Agreed The Committee agreed to request that the Public Accounts Committee keep it informed of work in this regard.

Steve Aiken left the meeting at 4:05pm.

12. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted that briefings on the Draft Budget 2024-25 would be scheduled as soon as Executive agreement had been reached.

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

13. Any Other Business.

None.

14. Date and Time of next meeting

The next Committee meeting, incorporating a strategic planning session, will be held on Wednesday 24 April 2024 at 2.00pm in Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:07pm.

Matthew O’Toole MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Finance

24 April 2024