



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

19 June 2024

Meeting Location: Room 21, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Matthew O'Toole MLA (Chairperson)

Phillip Brett MLA

Paul Frew MLA

Deirdre Hargey MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Eóin Tennyson MLA

Gerry Carroll MLA

Nicola Brogan MLA

Steve Aiken MLA

Apologies: Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

In Attendance: Peter Hall Committee Clerk

Clairita Frazer Assistant Assembly Clerk

Stephen Magee Clerical Supervisor

Heather Graham Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 2:01pm in public session.

1. Apologies

As above.

2. Declaration of Interests

None.

3. Chairperson's Business

3.1 Outstanding confirmation of Head of the Civil Service (HoCS) Oral Briefing

Members discussed the continued absence of approval from the First Minister and deputy First Minister for HoCS to attend next week's Committee meeting.

Agreed: If confirmation of the HoCS attendance at the next Committee meeting is not forthcoming within 24 hours, the Committee agreed to write to the First Minister and deputy First Minister to convey the Committee's disappointment and ask for an explanation for why approval had not been granted. Should the letter issue, Members also agreed to explore means by which HoCS could be compelled to attend Committee should this approval not be forthcoming.

3.2 UK Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation Taskforce

The Chairperson alerted Members to the contents of Written Ministerial Answer (AQW 13369/22-27) relating to the prevalence of Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs).

The Chairperson declared an interest as the Chairperson of the All-Party Group on Press Freedom and Media Sustainability.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to both the Minister of Justice and Minister of Finance seeking their views on the anomaly whereby officials from the

Department of Justice sit on the UK SLAPPs Taskforce despite the Department of Finance's policy interest in SLAPPs as they relate to Defamation, as well as any potential consequences or impact of this anomaly on policy development and legislative change.

4. Draft Minutes of Proceedings

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of 12 June 2024.

5. Matters arising

5.1 Department of Finance – Legislation Update: Bills

The Committee considered an update from the Department of Finance on the Fiscal Council Bill and proposed Financial Provisions Bill.

Members indicated that they would expect the Department to alert them to any slippage in the anticipated timeframe for the Fiscal Council Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule a briefing detailing the content of the Financial Provisions Bill after summer recess.

5.2 Department of Finance – Secondary Legislation Update

The Committee considered an update in respect of statutory rules to make permanent legislative provision to allow for changes to civil registration legislation to enable electronic transfer of documents and registration of deaths and still births by telephone.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department of Finance regarding a delay in making this permanent provision via secondary legislation due to an issue identified in the enabling powers for the change. Members voiced their disappointment at the situation outlined by the Department.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule an oral briefing with Departmental officials at the meeting on 3 July 2024. At this briefing, Members would request full details of and timescale for, the primary legislation required to make permanent

legislative provision as outlined as well as the technical reasons why secondary legislation was not a feasible option to take these changes forward.

Members noted that a full schedule of all secondary legislation coming forward from the Department of Finance would be provided shortly.

5.3 Department of Finance – Interim Fiscal Framework (IFF) Update

The Committee noted an update from the Department in relation to the resourcing support for the work to establish a final Fiscal Framework. Members noted that the Department would provide regular updates as appropriate.

5.4 Department of Finance – Civil Law Reform: Singapore Convention

The Committee noted a response from the Department in relation to any potential interaction between the Singapore Convention 2019 and the Windsor Framework.

5.5 Department of Finance – Centrally held budgetary items and other items escribed as “ear-marked”

The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding timescales and parameters for the dispersal of centrally held budgetary items and other items being held at the centre described as “ear-marked”.

5.6 Department of Finance – Disciplinary Matters Element of the Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) Inquiry

The Committee considered an update from the Department regarding the Civil Service Disciplinary Policy and changes to the Code of Conduct and Code of Ethics. Members voiced their concern with the lack of detail provided by the Department.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write again to the Department of Finance to seek an indication of the broad thematic areas to be addressed in the revised Discipline policy.

5.7 Department of Finance – Queries on Business Case addendum seeking approval to revise Non-Domestic RHI Tariffs

The Committee considered a response from the Department of Finance in relation to queries raised with the Department for the Economy in relation to the business case

addendum which sought to revise the small and medium biomass tariffs for the Non-Domestic RHI Scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek copies of clarification and supplementary information received by Department of Finance from the Department of the Economy as well as any additional detail which can be shared with the Committee in this regard.

5.8 Department of Finance – Advice to Minister of Finance regarding Pre-Election period

The Committee noted information from the Department on advice given to the Minister of Finance on the appropriateness or otherwise of progressing work or making announcements in the pre-election period.

5.9 Department of Finance – Banking Hubs

The Committee considered information from the Department in relation to Banking Hubs.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to bring this matter back to the meeting next week and also to revisit this issue again after summer recess as part of wider work on banking issues.

5.10 Department of Finance – Public Sector Transformation Board

The Committee noted an update from the Department in relation to briefing on the Public Sector Transformation Board, pending an updated paper and oral briefing at next week's meeting.

The Committee moved into closed session at 2:38pm
Deirdre Hargey and Phillip Brett left the meeting at 2:38pm

6. RalSe Budget and Public Finance Training – Module 4 - In-Year Monitoring: supporting Assembly scrutiny during Execution stage of Budget cycle

Nathan Mulholland, a Research Officer from the Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service (RalSe) joined the meeting at 2:40pm.

Nicola Brogan and Gerry Carroll joined the meeting at 2:41pm.

Deirdre Hargey rejoined the meeting at 2:44pm.

Gerry Carroll left the meeting at 2:52pm.

The Committee was briefed on Module 4 of the RalSe Budget and Public Finance Training – In-Year Monitoring: supporting Assembly scrutiny during Execution stage of Budget cycle.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session

The Research officer left the meeting at 3:23pm.

The Committee moved into public session at 3:23pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward relevant scrutiny points highlighted in the module to the Department of Finance in advance of the oral briefing on June Monitoring scheduled for 3 July.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek detail on any particular variance to the role played by the Department of Finance in developing the Budget when there was no Executive in place and the Northern Ireland Office was directing the Budget process.

The Committee agreed to consider correspondence next.

7. Correspondence

- i. The Committee noted a response from the Department of Finance to the Committee for Communities regarding The Pensions (Extension of Automatic Enrolment) Bill.

- ii. The Committee noted copy correspondence from the Committee for the Economy to the Finance and Economy Ministers regarding a suggested VAT reduction pilot programme and alternative business rates models and rural rates relief.
- iii. The Committee noted the 18th Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.
- iv. The Committee considered correspondence from the Northern Ireland Federation of Housing Associations regarding the Social Housing Development Programme (SHDP) Budget 2024/25.

Agreed: The Committee acknowledged the concerns outlined by the Federation in relation to the impact of the SHDP budget; however, Members reflected on the primacy of the Communities Committee with respect to the scrutiny of this budget, and the Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Communities Committee for its consideration.

- v. The Committee noted correspondence from Hospitality Ulster requesting an opportunity to brief the Committee.

Agreed: Members noted the issues raised by Hospitality Ulster, as reflected in their previous evidence to the Economy Committee. Members also acknowledged the Department of the Economy's lead with respect to this sector. However, Members agreed that it would be appropriate for the Committee to consider the exploration of the wider perspectives involved in this issue with a range of stakeholders from affected sectors, after Summer Recess.

8. Main Estimates 2024-2025 Statement of Excesses, and Budget (No.2) Bill – Oral Briefing from the Department

The following officials joined the meeting at 3:29pm;

Joanne McBurney, Deputy Secretary Public spending Directorate,
Department of Finance;

Patrick Neeson, Head of Supply Division, Public spending Directorate,
Department of Finance; and

Angela Ross, Principal, Supply, Public spending Directorate, Department of Finance.

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

The officials briefed the Committee on the Main Estimates 2024-2025 Statement of Excesses and Budget No.2 Bill.

Members noted information provided by the Department in relation to the 65% provision within the Vote on Account and in relation to consequences of the Budget (No.2) Bill not progressing via Accelerated Passage.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session. A number of issues were discussed including the timing and extent of the June Monitoring Round, implications of a delay in the allocation of additional funding under the June Monitoring Round, accelerated passage for the Budget (No.2) Bill and views on the timing of the June Monitoring Round in light of Westminster election.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the First Minister and deputy First Minister to explore the rationale for not confirming a meeting of the Executive to approve the June Monitoring Round, as well as seeking their view of the appropriateness of an announcement set against a backdrop of pre-election guidance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Head of the Civil Service to seek a view on how civil servants' administration of a monitoring round in the pre-election period might be viewed in light of NICS pre-election guidance.

The officials left the meeting at 4:11pm.

9. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the Forward Work Programme, as drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to start the Committee meeting on 3 July at the earlier time of 1pm in room 30 to facilitate an oral briefing on permanent legislative provision 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 seek agenda items for September meetings from the Department of Finance in order to proactively schedule briefings for meetings after summer recess. Members also agreed to hold a full prioritising session in the Autumn.

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

10. Any Other Business

None.

11. Date and Time of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 26 June 2024 at 2:00pm in Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:15pm.

Matthew O'Toole MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Finance

26 June 2024