



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Finance

Minutes of Proceedings

20 March 2024

Meeting Location: Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings Belfast

Present: Matthew O'Toole MLA (Chairperson)
Diane Forsythe MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Eóin Tennyson MLA
Phillip Brett MLA
Paul Frew MLA
Gerry Carroll MLA
Deirdre Hargey MLA

Apologies: Nicola Brogan MLA
Steve Aiken MLA

In Attendance: Peter Hall Committee Clerk
Charmaine McBride Assistant Committee Clerk
Stephen Magee Clerical Supervisor

The meeting commenced at 2:05 pm in public session

1. Apologies

As above.

The Chairperson expressed his condolences to Mr Aiken on the death of his Father-in Law, on behalf of the Committee.

2. Declaration of Interests

None.

3. Chairperson's business

3.1 Informal Meeting – Construction Employers Federation

The Committee noted a report on an informal meeting attended by the Chairperson and Committee Clerk with Construction Employer's Federation which took place on 14 March 2024.

3.2 The Budget Bill

The Committee noted that the Budget Bill received Royal Assent on Thursday 14 March and became law on that day.

3.3 Westminster Bill – Economic Activity of Public Bodies (Overseas Matters)

The Committee noted that the Legislative Consent Motion (LCM) process had been initiated in respect of a Westminster Bill on Economic Activity of Public Bodies.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek confirmation from the Department on the current position of a potential LCM, level of engagement with officials and associated applicability to this jurisdiction given that procurement features heavily in the Bill.

Deirdre Hargey joined the meeting at 2:10pm.

4. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Minutes of Proceedings from the meeting of 13 March 2024.

5. Matters arising

5.1 RalSe Public Finance Scrutiny Points

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Public Finance Scrutiny Points to the Department of Finance for response.

5.2 Interest received by the NI Consolidated Fund

The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding interest received by the Consolidated Fund.

5.3 Interparliamentary Forum and Scrutiny of Common Frameworks

The Committee noted correspondence from Baroness Drake Chair, House of Lords Constitution Committee regarding Scrutiny of Common Frameworks.

5.4 Follow-up Information from Land and Property Services (LPS)

The Committee noted follow-up information on a number of issues as requested during the LPS Briefing on 28 February 2024.

5.5 Follow-up Information – Orchard House Refurbishment

The Committee noted an update on the refurbishment of Orchard House.

5.6 Follow-up Information – Written Ministerial Statement

The Committee noted comments from the Department of Finance in the context of future statements regarding additional clarity.

6. SR 2024/45 The Public Service Pensions Revaluation Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Committee considered SR 2024/45 The Public Service Pensions Revaluation Order (Northern Ireland) 2024.

Members noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules had not drawn any matters to this Committee's attention.

Agreed The Committee for Finance has considered SR 45/2024 The Public Service Pensions Revaluation Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 and has no objection to the Rule.

7. SL1: The Pensions Increase (Review) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Committee considered a proposed statutory rule which will provide for an increase of 6.7% per cent from 8 April 2024 for all official pensions, except for those which have been in payment for less than a year, which will receive a pro-rata increase.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content to note the proposed Statutory Rule to make provision for the annual increase of official pensions.

8. SL1 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Registration of Deaths and Still-Births) (Extension) (No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 & SR 2024/57 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Registration of Deaths and Still-Births) (Extension) (No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024.

The Committee considered a proposed statutory rule to extend the expiry date of the temporary provisions in the Coronavirus Act 2020 in relation to death and still-birth registration until 24 September 2024.

Members noted that the General Registrar Office would use this time to advance separate legislation to make these provisions permanent.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

The Committee noted that the formal Statutory Rule had been laid on 19 March 2024.

Members were content to approve the rule on the basis that no further extension would be necessary.

Agreed The Committee for Finance has considered SR 2024/57 The Coronavirus Act 2020 (Registration of Deaths and Still-Births (Extension) (No.2) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024 and would recommend its approval to the Assembly, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

9. SL1: The Rates (Exemption for Automatic Telling Machines in Rural Areas) Regulations (NI) 2024

The Committee considered additional information provided by the Department of Finance on a proposed statutory rule to reinstate a micro-policy within the rating system which applies a rates exemption to automatic telling machines in a designated rural area.

Some Members expressed their concern that a number of recipients of this exemption are banks, however a majority of Members indicated that this proposal has merit going forward.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

10. SL1: The Rates (Temporary Rebate) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Committee considered additional information provided by the Department of Finance on a proposed statutory rule to reinstate the “Back in Business” scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the proposal for the Statutory Rule.

11. Monthly Outturn – Written Briefing from the Department of Finance

The Committee considered a written briefing from the Department of Finance with a full analysis of 2023-24 Outturn and Forecast Outturn for Round 11 February.

The Committee welcomed this written briefing and the Department's commitment to provide further reports going forward.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that given the importance of this information, the Department should, in future, highlight specific variations in figures provided and the reasons for such variations.

Agreed Members agreed that the oral briefing on the Spring Supplementary Estimates should be reported by Hansard.

12. Spring Supplementary Estimates – Oral Briefing from the Department of Finance

The following officials joined the meeting at 2:34pm.

- Joanne McBurney, Head of Public Spending Directorate, Department of Finance; and
- Barry Armstrong, Head of Supply Division, Department of Finance.

The officials briefed the Committee further on the Spring Supplementary Estimates (SSE's).

The Committee noted that the Plenary Debate on the SSE's was scheduled for Tuesday 9 April 2024.

The oral briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek additional information from the Department of Finance on a number of issues including information on the 17 employer liability cases currently pending for the Department of Finance and their effect on the wider budget process, additional costs for the Department of Communities' legal cases and an overall figure for Shared Island income in 2023/24.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

The officials left the meeting at 3:31pm.

13. Correspondence

- i. The Committee considered the Department of Finance Memorandum of Reply to the Public Accounts Committee Report “Review of the Northern Ireland Budget Process”.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Finance for an update on the current position with; Shared Prosperity Fund, Levelling Up Fund and Committee Ownership Fund.

- ii. The Committee considered the Quarterly Sickness Absence in the Northern Ireland Civil Service for the period October 2023 – December 2023.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request further comparative figures from NISRA across a longer time series to identify any differentials pre and post pandemic.

- iii. The Committee noted copy correspondence from the Committee for Health to the Minister of Finance regarding the Junior Doctors pay dispute;
- iv. The Committee noted correspondence from a member of the public regarding regulation of the Northern Ireland University sector; and
- v. The Committee considered correspondence from the Minister of Finance regarding amending the law on Marriage and Civil Partnership.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a briefing from the Department on the Minister’s plans for legislative amendments.

14. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a number of briefings which have been confirmed for the coming weeks.

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

The Committee noted that the scheduled Strategic Planning meeting would take place at the normal Committee time in Parliament Buildings.

15. Any Other Business.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Finance seeking the most up to position in relation to timings and process for agreeing the Budget for 2024/25.

16. Date and Time of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 10 April 2024 at 2:00pm in Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:46pm.

Matthew O'Toole MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Finance

10 April 2024